In Pursuit of a Public:
Following Khaleeji Women in the Blogosphere

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Amna Al-Arfaj

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Introduction

Arab and Muslim women have often been Orientalised, Othered, and portrayed as exotic, oppressed, and in need of saving in a large portion of dominant Western discourses and media (see Said 1979, Abu Lughod 2002). However, the actual experiences and sentiments of many of these women have largely gone unrecognized by dominant Western media. This is particularly evident in Western media's portrayal of women living in the Arab Gulf (Khaleeji) states. Often Western media speak 'for' Khaleeji women instead of allowing them to speak for themselves, as has been the case for many subaltern groups[1]. This historically marginalized population has often been ignored, silenced, or pushed to the side, not only in Western media, but also within their own hyper-patriarchal communities (see Abu Lughod 2001 and Skalli 2006). There has been a general lack of acknowledgement of their contributions in prevailing publics on the ground, which is in part due to a lack of access to mainstream publics. The dominance and normalization of patriarchal religious and cultural discourses in the region has contributed to Khaleeji women's exclusion from mainstream publics, as well as the lack of reliable information regarding Khaleeji women's diverse experiences and views in dominant Western media.

Over the past two decades, with the growth and popularity of the internet and World Wide Web (in addition to other innovative communication technologies), new kinds of spaces and networks have been created for/by those with access to computers and the internet. While at first the internet was mostly designed and used by a more

[1] Here I am referencing Gayatri Spivak's (1988) work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

Western audience, it has expanded across the globe, gaining a more diverse usership, including Arab/Muslim women (Wheeler 2006). Obviously internet accessibility is limited by income, geography, literacy, and other factors, and as such, any study on virtual spaces and networks must consider these limitations. The internet is only beginning to provide spaces for marginalized populations.

I seek to understand how the internet may offer a potential site for providing alternative public spheres/spaces. I propose that the possibility to remain anonymous on the internet can provide a way for those excluded from mainstream publics to speak-out about particular issues (social, political, and 'personal'). The internet can provide a space for like-minded individuals (as well as those who oppose them) to voice their concerns on a range of issues which may not be acceptable in public spaces on the ground. Some of these issues include (contentious) politics, issues around gender and sexuality, conceptions of love, marriage, and familial roles, feminist agendas, alternative norms, and so on. I will attempt to illustrate this through a close look at the Khaleeji blogosphere; specifically through the blogs of two Khaleeji women- "Glitter" from Kuwait, and "Silly Bahraini Girl" from Bahrain. While analyzing these blogs I ask: Does the internet provide a way for Arab/Muslim women to openly discuss 'taboo' issues, and does it offer a way for them to participate in politics and fully engage with often contentious subject matter?

In order to address these questions (and many more), I must provide some background on how "the" public sphere has been conceptualized. Chapter 1 provides an extensive review of literature of the public sphere. I discuss theoretical conceptions of the

public sphere, how it is materialized as public space, as well as how it has been conceptualized and expressed in the virtual realm. In the last section of the chapter, I focus on how the internet might allow for the creation of virtual Arab publics, and more specifically how Arab women are able to use the internet to participate in matters of 'publicity.'

Chapter 2 contextualizes ways in which Khaleeji women participate in existing publics on the ground in the Arab Gulf states, first by outlining pertinent underlying socio-cultural discourses which shape many of their views and experiences. I also provide examples of how Khaleeji women have participated in existing mainstream and alternative media, within the Middle East and the Gulf more specifically, illustrating some of the ways in which they have made significant advancements in numerous existing publics.

In Chapter 3, I address issues of internet access in the Arab Gulf states (and Arabian Peninsula more broadly), as it is important to acknowledge those who are excluded from participating in potential virtual publics. I present internet trends, including internet access rates, rural/urban differentiation, and adult literacy rates by gender. I also investigate ways these trends are influencing potential participants in virtual publics.

Finally, in my last chapter, I explore the Khaleeji blogosphere, analyzing two specific Khaleeji women's blogs[2]. It is through this empirical study that I hope to illustrate how the internet provides the potential for creating counter and alternative

[2] This research was conducted at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities in 2009-2010, with approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

publics. Through my analysis of each blog, I examine the role of anonymity in providing spaces to participate in such publics, as well as the numerous ways these bloggers engage with socio-cultural norms in their societies.

Chapter 1:

LOCATING PUBLICS IN VIRTUAL SPACE

There is a significant amount of literature discussing "the" public sphere and the benefits that are provided to those with access to it. However, it should be evident from the material reviewed below that those able to fully engage in publicity in one over-arching public are privileged elites, and that the exclusion of others (by not acknowledging their voices or direct participation) is unavoidable. First let us grapple with some of the different basic definitions and conceptions of "the public."

Lynn Staeheli and Don Mitchell (2007) investigate these different understandings of the public (specifically public *space*). They reiterate Jeffery Weintraub's 1995 study on publicity which is conceptualized in four ways, each of which describing the relationship between 'public' and 'private'. The first is the liberal-economistic model, where the public realm is related to the state and its administrative functions, whereas the private realm is related to the economy. The second is the republican-virtue model that views the public as pertaining to the community, polity, and citizens, whereas the private sphere is related to the household and property. The third model is rooted in practices of sociability where the public is seen as a symbolic display of self-representation, and the private is considered where individuals choose not to display aspects of themselves in public. Finally, there is the Marxist-feminist model, where public refers to the state and economy and anything domestic/familial is considered private. In each of these discourses, the public is located differently, which makes it especially difficult to engage

with literature on the public as it does not have one coherent meaning throughout each of the discourses listed above. The authors conclude that those involved in debates around publicity and public space are positioned differently in regards to social power. They state, "For those people or social groups who are marginalized, finding space to be seen or heard, or simply *be* is vital to their ability to develop a political subjectivity and a sense of worthiness as a citizen; this is important for themselves as political subjects and to their struggles to gain recognition from the state and the political community" (Staeheli and Mitchell 2007, 809, emphasis theirs). It is this need for recognition and representation that I am particularly interested in; it is a crucial aspect of citizenship as well as full participation in 'the' public sphere.

In order to identify the potential of virtual alternative public spheres/spaces for Khaleeji women, I must delve into the expansive literature on the public sphere, in an attempt to better understand concepts of the public, public sphere, and publicity. I offer a brief discussion of some of the most well-known works on 'the' public sphere, with special attention paid to feminist critiques. I will begin with a close look at the Habermasian concept of the bourgeois public sphere, following with critiques and alternatives to Habermas's public sphere. This is followed by a brief review of some of the existing literature on online public spheres. Lastly, I will examine some of the currently existing literature on online Arab public spheres.

This chapter offers three different lenses on the public sphere: 1) theoretical perspectives of the public sphere, 2) public space as the spatial analog of the public sphere, and 3) virtual publics.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE PUBLIC SPHERE:
Publics and Counterpublics

I begin by reviewing literature on the public sphere, starting with theories of the public sphere. I will first focus on Habermas's idealized conception of the bourgeois public sphere, followed by his critics, and alternative conceptions of publics. I end this section with literature that highlight the material aspect of the public sphere, namely with Don Mitchell's work on public space.

Considered as one of the most important works on 'the' public sphere, is Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which was initially published in German in 1962 and translated into English in 1989. Habermas lays out a brief genealogy of the meaning of the public sphere providing a historical/sociological account of the changing meanings and conceptions of the public, and publicity throughout time, with special attention paid to the emergence, transformation and eventual demise of the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas argues that the liberal public sphere took shape at a particular historical moment, in 18th century Europe, as the capitalist market economy was developing, and a new social order was emerging.

Prior to the rise of the state, in monarchial and feudal societies, the public was unevenly 'represented' by the king (backed by his court) who presented himself as a form of higher power to his subjects, the 'public.' Representation only went one direction. The bourgeoisie arose alongside the modern state, where the public authority became associated with the state and anything state-related, replacing the absolute power of the ruler. Habermas defines the bourgeois public sphere as "the sphere of private people

come together [to form] a public" where the bourgeois soon "claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor." (27) The bourgeois public sphere was considered a space of critical discussion and debate, 'open to all,' where their 'public reason' could be used to check the powers of the state. The bourgeoisie "occupied a central position within the public" as it was composed of the literate class and those who could engage in public matters (23). Participants would meet to discuss these issues in coffee houses (England), salons (France), and table-societies (Germany). These spaces began as centers of criticism, where they first discussed and debated literature and art, and later turned to economic and political matters. These spaces were technically 'open' to anyone able to participate, or "all private people, persons who- insofar as they were propertied and educated- as readers, listeners, and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion." (37)

Printed material also played a pivotal role in spreading ideas and engaging in affairs of the political-economy. Habermas argued that the most important element of the bourgeois public sphere was "public opinion," which consisted of the critical reflections of a public "competent to form its own judgments." (90) The aim of public opinion was to "rationalize politics in the name of morality." (102) The eventual demise of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas argues, came from the proliferation of mass media, which took the place of 'public' discussion. He argues that Europe went from a culture of debating to a culture of consumption; the growth of commercial mass media turned the

critical public into a passive consumer public, to the point that there is no longer literary public debate taking place, and that one relies only on the consumption of mass media.

Following the publication of this work, Habermas received great attention, but also criticism of his theory on the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere. Much of the critique focuses around the exclusivity of the bourgeois public sphere, contrary to Habermas's praise for its openness. A book extending beyond Habermas's work on the public sphere, is *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (2004) edited by Nick Crossley and John M. Roberts. The aim of their book is to 'deepen and extend the Habermasian project,' by engaging with Habermas's theory, and to consider other theories and frameworks exploring and problematizing concepts of the public sphere.

First Crossley and Roberts outline two main claims made in Habermas's *Structural Transformation*: 1) that social changes in the 18th and 19th centuries gave rise to an effective bourgeois public sphere in Britain, France, and Germany; and 2) that conditions which undermine this public space in the 20th and 21st centuries are "riven with contradictions and conflicting tendencies and characteristics," where democracies "fall short of adequacy even when measured against the yardstick of their own ideals and values." (2) Crossly and Roberts go on to describe the merits of the rise of the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere, how it "fostered a critical rationality" where "the chief operative force was that of a better argument" and that it was relatively powerful, serving as "an effective steering force in both society and polity." (4)

After engaging with some of Habermas's main arguments, Crossley and Roberts outline some of the problems and critiques (both practical and theoretical) of his work.

First, Habermas implies that the bourgeois public sphere is founded upon free and equal access, upon willing consent between participants and idealizing rational discussion, and "ignoring the 'extent to which its institutions were founded on sectionalism, exclusiveness, and repression.'" (11) The second critique they provide is that Habermas's colonization thesis[3] simplifies complex media practices by glorifying the 'golden age' of media production, with little acknowledgment of manipulated media bias at the time. The last critique that Crossley and Roberts put forth is the fact that the bourgeois public sphere disparages the emancipatory potential of any counterpublic spheres, as Habermas often equated 'public' with 'males', and refused to examine the exclusion of women and other marginalized social groups who were often associated with the 'private' realm, and therefore kept from discussing 'public' issues.

One of the most noted feminist critic of Habermas's work is Nancy Fraser, who in her much cited article *Rethinking the Public Sphere* (1990), critiques Habermas's narrow conception of the public sphere. Fraser calls for the need of a critical social theory of the limits of democracy in late capitalist societies. She argues that the "socialist vision became institutionalized in an authoritarian statist form instead of in a participatory democratic form,"
which jeopardizes the idea of social democracy (56). While Fraser feels that Habermas's work on the public sphere is "indispensible to critical theory and to democratic political science," she feels that his analysis of the public sphere needs a critical interrogation and reconstruction in order to address the limits of actually existing democracy (57). Fraser

[3] Habermas describes colonization of the lifeworld through cultural fragmentation and the disruption of socialization through the spread of bureaucracies and markets. See Dews (1999) for more.

also critiques Habermas's inability to provide a new model of the public sphere in place of the bourgeois/liberal model, which she deems is no longer feasible. In order to fill this gap, Fraser offers an alternative, post-bourgeois conception of the public sphere which draws from an alternative account of public engagement.

First Fraser takes on Habermas's idealized conception of the bourgeois public sphere which she claims was never realized in practice. She points to a number of significant exclusions of access and participation in the bourgeois public sphere, including the formal exclusion of women, lower classes, people of color, and gays and lesbians. The power base was that of bourgeois men whose participation in public affairs was clearly separated from the private affairs associated with women and lower social strata. A main role of the bourgeois public sphere was to discuss topics of concern by "everyone" involved (property-owning white men), thereby considered of 'public' concern (economic/political, etc.). However by excluding women and other groups from participating, any issues of concern which might be considered 'private' due to their association with women/other (domestic, familial, etc.) were excluded from discussion.

Apart from the bourgeois public sphere, existed a number of other publics, including those with members of women and lower classes. Fraser argues that "it is precisely because [Habermas] fails to examine these other public spheres that he ends up idealizing the liberal public sphere." (61) Indeed, Fraser goes on to argue that women were excluded from the bourgeois public sphere as it was based on a class and gender-biased notion of publicity, "one which accepts at face value the bourgeois public's claim to be *the* public" (61, emphasis hers).

Counterpublics emerged, which "contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech." (61) As an example, Fraser provides Mary Ryan's account of elite North American women's associations, and the participation of less privileged women in working class protests. 'Subaltern counterpublics,' Fraser proposes, also existed and are described as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses," which allow them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their interests, needs, and identities (67). Central to her argument, Fraser argues that "the ideal of participatory parity is better achieved by a multiplicity of publics than by a single public." (70) These counterpublics act as an alternative to dominant publics, and provide a space to both interact with and remain separate from the hegemonic public sphere, allowing individuals left outside of mainstream publics a place to participate, voice their concerns, and challenge what might be perceived as 'public' or 'private' and creating counter-discourses. The presence of women and other marginalized groups in counterpublics challenges the public/private divide and important 'private' issues often left out of 'public' debate are finally addressed and made public. Fraser concludes with the reiteration that a new theory of 'the' public sphere should expose the limits of the form of democracy predicated in Western capitalist states.

Continuing on with the concept of counterpublics, I will now turn to the work of Robert Asen (2000) and Michael Warner (2002). Asen begins by providing a brief literature review of previous works on the conceptual models of the public sphere which he claims, have moved toward multiplicity and counterpublics, the latter of which he

states is situated within the multiplicity model. Scholars adhering to conceptions of a multiplicity of publics ultimately reject the notion of Habermas's singular, overarching public sphere. Instead, these academics find there to be multiple forms of publics, which are needed in order to bypass the exclusivity of one public in stratified societies. As noted previously in Fraser's work, counterpublics are developed as "explicitly articulated alternatives to wider publics that exclude the interests of potential participants" and reconnect communicative flows of a multiple public sphere (Asen 2000, 425). Asen claims that counterpublics illuminate differential power relations among diverse publics in order to reconfigure power more widely and that they are considered alternatives to wider publics that exclude the interests of potential participants.

While Asen offers some of the advantages of counterpublics, he also points out some drawbacks, cautioning against the reduction of complex issues (as 'good' or 'bad'), and pointing out the danger of a binary opposition of a 'mainstream' public and a corollary counterpublic. In order to avoid this from happening, Asen argues that we must emphasize the many different relations which take place among multiple publics, even if some maintain a counterpublic status. He argues that we must "draw attention to communicative processes of recognition and articulation of exclusion and resolve to overcome it." (427) By doing this, collectives are able to emerge from this recognition.

Warner (2002), in a similar fashion as Asen, argues for the need to recognize those excluded, particularly focusing on the frequent dismissal of gays and lesbians from participating in certain publics and public space. Warner goes beyond the political when envisioning the meaning of publicity, and explores the agency of culture, rather than

politics. This provides an additional way of conceiving of the public sphere, providing a way for non-political performance to act as an alternative way of changing the world rather than through direct engagement in politics. I find that Warner's work is especially imperative for people who may be excluded from formal politics, and that focusing on alternative meanings of publicity and agency is necessary in order to be more inclusive, and to recognize each group's wants and needs, whether they are explicitly or implicitly political.

In her later work *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere* (2007), Nancy Fraser builds on her previous arguments, calling for the need of transnational public spheres. Adding to her prior critique of Habermas, Fraser continues to critically assess his work, arguing against his notion that a public sphere should correspond with a sovereign power of territorial nation- as conceived under a Westphalian framework. She argues, "hegemony increasingly operates through a post-Westphalian model of disaggregated sovereignty" and that "public spheres are increasingly transnational or post-national." (16) One example that Fraser provides (in addition to recognizing the world-capitalist system of transnational corporations, and transnational foundations and associations) is the denationalizing of communicative infrastructure such as instantaneous electronic, broadband and satellite information technologies, "which permit direct transnational communication, bypassing state controls." (18) The internet plays an especially significant role here, as Fraser recognizes the communicative value of the virtual. She states, "The 'where' of communication once theorized as the Westphalian-national territory, is now deterritorialized cyberspace. The 'how' of communication once

theorized as Westphalian-national print media, now encompasses a vast translinguistic nexus of disjoint and overlapping visual cultures" and the addressee of communication is no longer the sovereign territorial state, but is now "an amorphous mix of public and private transnational powers." (19)

Although full citizenship participation and rights are crucial to those belonging to a public associated with a territorial nation-state, it is important to go beyond this notion of belonging. Fraser argues her main point with fervor stating that "public opinion is legitimate if and only if it results from a communicative process in which all potentially affected can participate as peers, *regardless of political citizenship*" (22, emphasis hers). In her concluding remarks, Fraser reiterates the need for envisioning "new transnational public powers, which can be held accountable to new democratic transnational circuits of public opinion." (24)

Following Fraser's argument regarding communication across territorial boundaries and transnational publics, I will now turn my attention to Nira Yuval-Davis and Marcel Stoetzler's (2002) work on imagined boundaries and borders. Their main focus is on the ways the "paradoxical relation of women to the nation affects their imaginings of borders and boundaries" which they argue need to be taken just as seriously as feminist understandings of 'situated knowledge' (329). Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler are especially concerned with the ways in which women embody and cross collectivity boundaries and territorial borders, how they imagine these borders and boundaries, and the role that women play in peace activism across these borders and boundaries.

While Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler agree that any construction of boundaries involves an act of imagination and that a gendered dimension of imagining boundaries and borders does exist, they claim that there is no such thing as 'the female imagination.' They assert that "women often feel freer to cooperate with other women across ethnic and national conflict boundaries due to their positioning in peace movements" for three reasons: The first is that nowhere are women drafted and forced to fight wars they do not approve of. The second reason is that some women prefer to organize autonomously within anti-war movements as part of their greater feminist convictions. And lastly, they reason that many women's anti-war groups fight against the patriarchal social system which is dominated by male machismo and violence (340). They conclude that women embody borders and boundaries, and the possibility of crossing and transcending them, both relevant in the present as a 'global war against terrorism' is dividing the globe.

It should be clear as I have made my way through much of the theoretical literature on the public sphere, that exclusivity is a major issue, especially given Habermas's idealized conception of one over-arching bourgeois public sphere. Additionally, I have addressed the issue that we need to re-conceptualize the concept of 'the' public sphere, whether it be in the form of multiple publics, counterpublics, or alternative publics which transcend national territories and allow for participation beyond those traditionally associated with the public, namely property-owning white Western men. The importance of this exclusivity in regards to full participation and rights of membership is important in any conception of the public sphere and more specifically, citizenship.

Women have historically been denied formal citizenship status and rights, and today, many women are still denied full civil rights depending on their location and positionality. The construct of the public-private divide/dichotomy, Lister (1997a) argues, is the foundation for the masculine construction of citizenship. The construct associates public with males (said-independent, rational, concerned with public interest) and private is associated with females (said- dependent/emotional/preoccupied with private/domestic concerns). Lister argues that this public/private divide must be considered as a "shifting political construction under constant renegotiation which reflects both historical and cultural contexts as well as the relative power of different social groups." (124) The public-private distinction, Lister continues, must be rearticulated by de-gendering it; acknowledging the ways the two sides interact with one another and the need to recognize its fluid and political nature.

Keeping the public/private divide in mind, I further examine Lister's (1997b) work on citizenship, where she addresses the exclusivity of citizenship and political participation, working towards a feminist synthesis of rights and participation through the notion of human agency. Lister considers citizenship's exclusionary tendencies which she argues create non or partial citizens who can be characterized as those being excluded from citizenship both "without" and "within" communities and nations (see below). Both of which are especially relevant for women.

An example of exclusionary tensions from "without," Lister argues, includes migrants and asylum seekers, many of whom are women, and are often construed as economic dependants. Increasing migration and transnationalism rely on the importance

of the state and access to formal citizenship which often require a kind of cultural assimilation as a precondition to gaining formal citizenship. Lister also questions the equal status of existing minority groups, arguing that the multicultural model of citizenship (different from the assimilation model) can be problematic as it may ignore differences within a cultural group such as gender, sexuality, class, age, etc., as well as imposed restrictions within minority groups themselves.

Lister argues that exclusionary tensions from 'within' citizenship communities/nations such as gendered patterns of exclusion often interact with other elements of social division such as race, class, age, sexuality, disability, and so on. She notes, a false universalism of the category 'woman' has been challenged by Black and other minority groups of women where their individual identities and interests have often been ignored, marginalized, or pushed aside by more dominant women's groups. In order to counter this false universalism, Lister (among others) calls for a 'differentiated universalism' which creates a new universalism acknowledging difference and challenging exclusionary inequalities and making a move towards transversal politics where participants rooted in their own identities are willing to shift their views and engage with others, creating a mixing of publics.

Both the bourgeois conception of the public sphere and citizenship have relied on the public/private division as a means of excluding women and other marginalized groups from fully participating and reaping benefits associated with each. Alternative/counterpublics challenge this exclusivity and also insert alternative ways of bringing about and doing publics, providing new places of inclusion for people to address

issues often left out of mainstream publics or challenging norms by creating counter-discourses. Some Khaleeji women, as I will discuss later, are using blogs (among other things) as a means of challenging the public/private divide, often discussing 'private' subject matter directly and indirectly defying hegemonic norms in order to benefit themselves.

So far I have discussed the public sphere as a theoretical concept, slowly moving towards a more tangible understanding through Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler's (2002) work on women's groups crossing and transcending imagined borders and boundaries, and Lister's (1997) work on citizenship. Now I will move into a more material conception of the public, examining Don Mitchell's work on public space and Kurt Iveson's work on publics and the city.

SPACE AS A SPATIAL ANALOG OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE:

Mitchell's (1995) study of the People's Park, in Berkeley, California focuses on conceptions of public space and how physical spaces can be just as exclusionary as the public sphere of deliberation. In this case study, Mitchell explains how the park was previously used by the homeless and activists as "a vision of space marked by free interaction and the absence of coercion by powerful institutions," and later was only to be used by "an appropriate public" who were allowed in this space (115). He remarks that Habermas's abstract concept of the public sphere is very different from public space which is 'material' and "constitutes an actual site, a place, a ground within and from which political activity flows." (117) Mitchell notes that through use, public spaces

become spaces of representation as well as places of exclusion, and that the homeless while nearly always are in public spaces, are rarely counted as part of 'the public.'

In a way similar to Habermas, Mitchell ponders the end of public space, and questions, "Have we created a society that expects and desires only private interactions, private communications and private politics, that reserves public spaces solely for commodified recreation and spectacle[4]?" (121) While Mitchell acknowledges scholars who believe that "modern communication technology now provides the primary site for discursive public activity," he argues that "A fully electronic public space renders marginalized groups such as the homeless even more invisible to the working of politics." (122 and 123) While I agree with Mitchell that these new communication technologies do exclude many marginalized groups who do not have regular access to these technologies (See Chapter 3), I also argue that for those who are often marginalized and excluded from participation and recognition in material public space (such as many Arab and Muslim women), these new technologies offer a way to cross the private/public divide.

Drawing on Mitchell's argument advocating the importance of public space, Iveson (2007) focuses on public spaces within the city. He offers two conceptions of 'public space'- the topographical approach which accounts for the physical space one could find on a city map, and the procedural approach which he defines as any space "which is put to use at a given time for collective action and debate." (3) Similar to Mitchell's study, Iveson discusses the topological approach of public space to be any particular place in the city which is (or should be) open to 'the public.' These spaces are

[4] Here Mitchell is referring to the past importance of public space in cities used as places to congregate in protest, which he apparently believes is no longer realistic.

important because they are a space for one to both address the 'general' public, and at the same time, provide a space for the 'general' public to gather and protest/debate. With great concern, Mitchell notes that these public spaces are quickly becoming inaccessible and more exclusive as many public spaces in the city continue to become more and more regulated. Iveson a la Mitchell advocates the importance of these material spaces because they offer a physical space to gather and protest, which, he argues, the internet cannot offer.

Iveson also notes that much like the idea of a multiplicity of public spheres, different publics are created for different reasons. He calls for the need to explore the ways in which different publics can be represented in "a variety of public spaces." (13) Iveson argues these different kinds of public spaces should not be used to represent each type of public, but through public action, the varieties of public space can be used to represent multiple publics, so that the importance of physical public space can continue to be used for 'the people.'

Thus far, I have focused on reviewing literature theorizing the public sphere and public space, whereas for the remainder of this paper, I will focus my attention on the virtual public sphere, and whether or not the ideas discussed so far are also relevant for the internet.

VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERES:

While I am sure that there is much more work being done on the potential of the internet as a public sphere, I will review some of the literature that I have been able to access. The most important point that I want to make here is that I propose that the

internet offers potential for a multiplicity of publics; while some might be more mainstream, there is also the chance for counterpublics and alternative publics to form. The internet provides 'public' space (blogging sites, online forums, networks, wikis, etc.) for anyone with access to the technology to engage in issues of publicity as well as matters which might be considered more personal or 'private.' The neglect of 'private' discourses is widely fought against in feminist literature, as women are often associated with the domestic and familial domains, which in the past have been strictly separated from the public sphere. While I am sure that not all virtual spaces will be used as spaces to form some kind of public in the sense of a Habermasian public sphere, the potential for multiple publics to form is what I find most important and exciting.

I will now review three papers addressing the potential of the internet as sites of public spheres which will provide a background before focusing on particular spaces on the internet; mainly blogging sites in this case.

Virtual publics are unique for a number of reasons. The internet offers a portal to vast amounts of information and applications. Anyone with access to the World Wide Web (barring state regulation, etc.) can access any website available (which are not password protected), forming a truly transnational spectrum of websites and applications which offer an expanding menu of languages, and cover all kinds of subject-matter. Because the internet is so vast, and offers so many different kinds of spaces, with the ability to connect people across different parts of the world, it becomes public. It offers many free-access spaces like public forums, wikis, blogs, and so on, which provide ways for "ordinary" people to engage across territorial borders and boundaries, and discuss

issues that are not directly filtered through formal media. This also creates the potential for people with different backgrounds to connect on shared interests and issues which they find important, creating the potential of new channels of solidarity which may be more difficult to form through other channels of communication.

For those who are burdened with state and self-censorship, the anonymity that the internet may provide allows people to discuss topics which they may not have the ability to discuss in other spaces, due to strict state regulation, and/or because of cultural reasons, and the need to protect personal reputations. In each case, they are able to express themselves and engage with a larger audience (since anyone can connect to any public world wide web site), discussing issues of political and societal importance, which may be frowned upon and even endanger their personal safety without the use of a pseudonym (that is not to say that everyone uses pseudonyms or that everyone who uses them does so for noble reasons). Each of these reasons presents new ways for people to form alternative publics and express their needs and concerns apart from dominant and mainstream publics that limit their participation on the ground in various ways.

Papacharissi (2002) offers promising accounts of how the internet has the potential of providing spaces to form virtual publics, but he also cautions us in how far this potential will go. Papacharissi argues that the internet and related technologies can augment ways for personal expression and promote citizen activity, and that the explosion of online political groups and activism reflects this. However, he argues, these public spaces online are mostly dominated by elites, much like Habermas's bourgeois public sphere. In acknowledgement of the limited access and participation of people in

these spaces, Papacharissi remarks, “the fact that online technologies are only accessible to and used by a small fraction of the population contributes to an electronic public sphere that is exclusive, elitist, and far from ideal.” (14)

He calls for the need of equal and universal access to the internet. Although access does not guarantee increased political activity, it does offer the chance for people to engage in these virtual publics. Papacharissi also believes that the anonymity of the internet can assist one to overcome identity boundaries and communicate more freely and openly promoting a more enlightened exchange of ideas; similarly to the women engaging across imagined borders and boundaries discussed earlier. Another argument for promoting the internet as a tool for engaging in public discourses is the fact that it enables a forum for people from diverse backgrounds to connect, discuss, and debate important issues across the globe. Granted, as Papacharissi admits, some are skeptical of disparate groups getting along, and that these online spaces could also lead to fragmentation and will likely adapt to the current dominant political culture. There is also a worry that the internet will increasingly move towards commercialization similarly to Habermas’s belief in the demise of the bourgeois public sphere which occurred through commercialized mass media. However, for now, alternative spaces to engage seem promising, especially for marginal groups unable to participate in dominant publics.

Dahlberg (2006) also discusses computer-mediated communication, and the potential of forming virtual publics. Dahlberg examines the claim that “the internet’s interactive spaces are enhancing and extending the public sphere of rational-critical discourse,” and he agrees that the internet does allow for a vibrant exchange of positions

and that rational critique does take place (10). However, Dahlberg also puts forth a number of factors limiting the expansion of online public spheres, related to Habermas's six arguments of what a public entails. These include "the increasing colonization of cyberspace by state and corporate interests, a deficit of reflexivity, a lack of respectful listening to others, the difficulty of verifying identity claims and information put forward, the exclusion of many from online political fora, and the domination of discourse by certain individuals and groups." (1) While each of these arguments may be correct, I believe that we should not overlook the virtual publics that have emerged, and that continue to form as access rates to the internet grow.

Barton (2005) discusses some of the virtual spaces which can be used for online publics, including the role that blogs, wikis, and online discussion boards play in enabling rational-critical debate to take place, and the fostering of public discussion. Quoting Habermas, Barton argues that writing is essential to the formation of a critical public sphere, and that the internet provides spaces for 'private' people to come together and engage. Barton claims that blogs, discussion boards, and wikis offer a way for people to easily and cheaply publish their writing online, and in some cases provide sites for collaboration and consensus-building.

All three of these papers discuss the potential that the internet has in providing alternative virtual publics, but they also point out barriers, and caution against becoming too eager in believing the internet is the answer to creating one unified world-wide public sphere. I find their conceptions of potential virtual publics too narrow, as they seem to be reduced to exclusionary mainstream conceptions of public (similar to Habermas's

bourgeois public sphere), and do not provide more inclusive notions of publicity. However, I believe that by opening up one's conception of public and publicity to include both notions of cultural and political agency (similar to Warren's argument earlier), and by extending one's conception of 'public' to include important 'private' discourses often associated with women and other marginalized groups, new spaces for alternative publics can emerge and be recognized.

Blogs and online forums are potential sites for public engagement, and they will now be my focus of attention. Barlow's (2007) book on the rise of the blogosphere in the United States is beneficial in that it draws on Habermas's theory, but also provides new ways of understanding the potential for online publics. Barlow argues that we should not make the mistake of thinking that the recent explosion of blogs is only due to a function of technology, but that "blogs are simply *allowed* by technology" and that they are tied to developments of public engagement going back to the 18th century (x, emphasis his). Siding with Habermas, Barlow believes that the proliferation of commercial and news media was close to squeezing out 'the' public sphere. But, with the invention and use of the internet (and other technologies), Barlow argues, there is a new movement toward public/citizen journalism which enables one to once again engage in matters of publicity, often bypassing state and corporate control. Barlow, among others, believes in the power of the blogosphere as a tool for awakening people to engage in 'public' affairs.

Russell and Echchaibi (2009) discuss the role of international blogging as sites of identity, politics, and networked publics and they assert that blogs have become a significant part of the transnational media environment. They state, "To many, the spread

of the American blogging model around the world- including its norms and practices, and modes of operation- effectively represents the spread of democracy." (2) Yet, they also point out that bloggers across the world who are writing for local and national audiences seem to be developing in ways quite distinct from the US model, and that one should not assume that blogging is taken up in similar ways that it is in the US. Russell and Echchaibi also advocate Nancy Fraser's argument, relaying it to the international blogosphere. Fraser describes "a landscape of smaller 'subaltern' public spheres that push back against dominant deliberations," and Russell and Echchaibi believe that these, "[seem] to be a more viable way to envision a positive network-era reality." (8)

Blogging can also be understood as "a medium [which is] accessible to all those with Internet access, as new interfaces make it very user friendly" and that the ability to post comments left on blogs often reveals the diverse opinions and backgrounds of readers and commentators (Siapera 2009, 39). Furthermore, issues that are confronted on blogs often contribute to blurring the lines between what is considered public and private (Siapera 2009).

Virtual Arab Public Spheres

In this last section, I will focus my attention on the literature written on the potential of online public spheres in the Arab world, specifically focusing on the role of blogs and other internet forums. Marc Lynch (2007) reminds us that blogging remains the activity of a tiny elite (across the globe), and that Arab bloggers are especially obscure, since many Arabs are without access to the internet, and even more are without the ability to read and write. Lynch is also hesitant to believe that blogs are likely to induce

political/social change on the ground. However, he does admit that bloggers in the region have had "a discernible impact [on social and political fronts] in a wide range of Arab countries" and that they can act as "catalysts for previously unlikely political mobilization" and facilitate new forms of political activism (2).

Lynch believes that blogs could "allow ordinary Arabs to re-engage with politics, hone their analytical and argumentative skills, and escape the state-driven red lines which even the most independent of Arab media are forced to acknowledge." (3) He argues that the greatest impact of blogs in the Middle East is their potential contribution to revitalizing and transforming Arab public spheres through new forms of public argument and discourse and through an expanded range of voices, especially women and youth. States make this difficult however, through internet filtering and taking repressive security measures which reinforce self-censorship.

Even so, Lynch argues, blogs have the ability to create ways of enhancing political accountability and transparency, and the potential to rebuild transnational Arab identity, especially for disengaged youth. Lynch provides several examples of how blogs have enabled Arabs to participate in political discussions and come together in solidarity in order to organize and affect political and social change in the region. One example he offers is how Kuwaiti bloggers participated in the Orange Movement, an anti-corruption movement, which exposed a Kuwaiti parliamentary candidate from buying votes in the 2006 Kuwaiti elections. In Egypt, through the Kefaya movement, bloggers have publicized the mistreatment of ordinary Egyptians in local police stations. Another example Lynch provides is how Bahraini bloggers and online forums played a direct role

in a human rights campaign, exposing human rights violations by the state. In each of these cases, anonymity has played a vital role for many bloggers, especially for those using pseudonyms in order to provide controversial opinions while maintaining their safety, in the light of state threats of arrest and torture of some bloggers. These threats are real for many bloggers, especially those with highly contentious political views incongruent with state and popular discourse. Arrest and torture of bloggers has been reported in many countries in the region and such cases have been well documented and protested in Egypt, Bahrain, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria (Lynch 2007).

Lynch relays the potential of some blogs in the region to act as counterpublics which may act as "incubator[s] of new ideas and new identities which [evolve] alongside and slowly [reshape] the mainstream public from below." (5) At the same time however, he cautions that observers of Arab blogs need to be wary of drawing inferences about public opinion from some blogs as they are likely "highly unrepresentative of public opinion in their countries" and they are often "dissidents rather than barometers of local opinion." (7)

Three models of political blogging are identified by Lynch- activists (who are directly involved in political movements), bridge-bloggers (who primarily address Western audiences and attempt to explain their societies), and public-sphere bloggers (who are deeply engaged with public arguments about domestic politics, often Arab or Islamic). Lynch points out that a national focus of the blogosphere could potentially provide free, critical domestic media which is critically lacking in Arab media. In an optimistic manner, Lynch hopes that "Arab regimes could recognize the value of blogs in

contributing to a more engaged public sphere and learn to tolerate online political criticism." (29) This may eventually occur since internet access in these countries is sure to increase (and is already at a great rate, see Chapter 3), given that the internet is considered central to economic growth desired by most Arab regimes. Greater access rates will afford more people access to online publics, where they can engage with alternative discourses, which may filter down and influence politics on the ground, as has already begun to happen in some cases. Lynch reiterates his main point, stating, "Whether these blogs can live up to Habermasian ideals of rational-critical discourse is beside the point. The key contribution of Arab public-sphere bloggers is as the leading edge of a new engagement with politics by Arab citizens." (21)

Mona Eltahawy (2008) is optimistic about the potential of Arab blogs and social-networking sites like Facebook, as she believes these spaces give voice to marginalized populations in the region. She argues that these spaces are allowing and evoking bold discussions, are used to help mobilize people for street activism, and are places of establishing grassroots organizations and communities which she hopes will eventually translate into a real presence in society. The reason for this optimism is due to greater participation of many Arab youth in these online public spaces, who seem to be engaging in issues of publicity more than ever. Eltahawy believes that bloggers are instrumental in mobilizing activist efforts, as many have blogged about police brutality and getting neglected stories into the headlines of mainstream media, and they continue to learn new ways to out-maneuver the state, creating new venues for maintaining alternative discourses. She also argues that the internet has given young people a space which "does

not exist" in the "real world." (77) She concludes her article on an optimistic note stating, "I am confident that Generation Facebook is planting the seeds of an opposition movement that gives Egyptians, and by extension the whole region, an alternative to the state and the mosque." (77)

In her work on women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Skalli (2006) notes that the use of the internet is beginning to affect social and gender relationships in the region. She argues that the internet "promises to be enabling and empowering educated women in politically and religiously constrained environments" in a number of ways (51). Skalli argues that the internet permits access to information and knowledge outside the mechanisms of censorship, increases the volume of women's voices, initiatives, and activities from local to international scales without reliance on traditional media forms, and that it encourages women to develop new ways of building contacts and alliances.

Deborah Wheeler's (2006) work in Kuwait and other parts of the region also focuses on the role of youth in participating in these online spaces, as well as on the potential these sites have for women and girls. She cites an argument made by the assistant director-general for culture at the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that with internet access, women in the Arab world and beyond can use the internet and other new communication technologies to "present their autonomous voices in the service of their own culturally diverse and regionally specific forms of liberation." (105-106) It is important to remember that there is no universal category "woman" and that the diversity of views and experiences of women

across the world is very different, thus their perceptions of 'liberation' are likely culturally, regionally, and locally specific as well[5]. Even so, the internet can be used as a forum to connect the diverse views and experiences of women across the world. For example, it can be used to expand women's leadership skills through conferences like "Women on the Web," which was first held in Beirut in 2003. Wheeler quotes a conference organizer who discusses how keeping the conference women-only encourages participation, making women feel more comfortable about discussing social taboos. The organizer also explains how the conference can allow a platform for building women's solidarity in the region. She states, "'We want to start a 'web' family by connecting women from different countries through the Internet. Imagine all these women from Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, or Egypt being able to exchange information and communicate… The group could bring a new face to Middle Eastern feminism.'" (106)

Wheeler argues that the fact that it is common to use pseudonyms and screen names in the virtual world, allows for many (especially women and girls) to be more willing to participate online because they can protect their identities and therefore their personal reputations. This enables them to access useful information and strengthen their voice in online publics, which is typically difficult to do on the ground as they often remain constrained by history and local culture. One interesting comparison, which Wheeler makes regarding anonymity on the internet to society, is the fact that many women who wear the hijab (veil) are able to also remain somewhat anonymous, allowing them to speak with members of the opposite sex, much like the use of a pseudonym on the internet, which also allows them to speak more easily across gender-lines without

[5] Here I am referencing previous discussion of Lister 1997b.

tarnishing their reputations. Wheeler also claims that the internet allows girls and women to speak with authority, whereas in 'real life' men are considered superior to women and that they shouldn't speak. In fact, Wheeler notes, many young women are especially careful about how they behave verbally in public, as outspokenness could be negatively-construed by potential suitors and other women. A cost of being outspoken, many women are socialized to believe, is the tarnishing of one's personal reputation which reflects poorly on the whole family. This reinforces boundaries between public and private discourses in Kuwait and the Gulf more broadly.

Wheeler also believes that the internet can evolve into a tool for gender activism in Kuwait, and the greater region. One example of this that Wheeler provides is the protesting of a law imposing segregation by sex in Kuwaiti universities. Another is how the internet was used for organizing and advocating for women's rights, which helped Kuwaiti women to claim full political rights in May 2005. The internet can also be used to alert world media and human rights organizations about ways women's rights are being violated. Wheeler also claims that the internet could change the shape and character of women's voices in the future by reinforcing women's role in public life with enhanced access to information and growing public voice.

The internet in Kuwait and the Gulf, Wheeler argues, also has a large impact on the youth in the region. She shows that new forms of communication like the internet enable youths to transgress gender-lines, which are often strictly enforced for many in Kuwaiti society (and in the Gulf more broadly). By crossing these gender-lines, Wheeler argues, youth are better able to interpret traditional social norms and rituals, providing

new autonomy for many young people in how they run their lives. This, in turn, has the ability to affect how norms and values will be shaped and redefined for future generations.

In her study, Wheeler found that many young Kuwaitis/Khaleejis use the internet to meet with the opposite sex and cyber-dating has become common, challenging the traditional role of the family as matchmaker. She argues, "cyber-relations could… help young men and women in Kuwait understand each other in a way that might improve communication and understanding between the sexes in marriage and family." (138) It is also allowing young people more power/ability in their choice of spouse. Wheeler's research shows that, "While some Kuwaiti students are critical of the ways in which the Internet enables them to violate the norms they are raised to embrace, others are taking full advantage… challenging Kuwaiti society's increasingly conservative view of proper public gender relations." (139) Furthermore, she argues, some believe that the internet supports "decentralization, individual empowerment, resilience, and self-sufficiency," each of which illustrates how the internet can be used for enabling the creation of counter and alternative publics. While Wheeler's book focuses on Kuwait specifically, which has its own history, context, and social norms, many of these trends and discourses can be applied more widely to other Khaleeji women and youth.

CONCLUSION:

The Habermasian conception of the bourgeois public sphere limits access and participation of women and other marginalized groups, thereby also restricting what matters are considered of 'public' interest and value. Many of his critics have found that

one over-arching public is impossible in equally including everyone and their concerns. Instead, mainstream publics, which often continue to exclude the wants and needs of the marginalized, are coupled with a multiplicity of oppositional counterpublics as well as a variety of alternative publics. Each attempt to provide places for differing groups to voice concerns of 'publicity'- some engaging with others, and some remaining autonomous. Matters considered public and private are challenged as women and marginalized groups historically associated with the private sphere, are able to demand 'new' issues to be taken into consideration, including violence against women, and domestic and familial issues. Publics beyond the theoretical are taken up in a variety of ways in public space, which Mitchell and Iveson argue is critical for bringing together all kinds of different groups (including excluded groups like the homeless) in one place, as well as through virtual sites created through new communication technologies. In my next chapter, I will focus on the public sphere on the ground in the Arab Gulf, with a special focus on women living there.

Chapter 2:

KHALEEJI WOMEN'S PUBLICS ON THE GROUND

From the previous chapter, it should be clear that various kinds of publics and counterpublics exist whether theoretically, virtually, or in material spaces, with different levels of participation and membership; some publics engaging with each other, and some remaining separate or in direct opposition to each other. The aim of this thesis is to better understand the potential that the internet (specifically blogging) provides Khaleeji women for creating and participating in alternative publics. In order to do this however, we must have a clearer idea of different ways that Khaleeji women participate in various publics on the ground.

There are a number of deeply embedded socio-cultural discourses which have acted as barriers for Khaleeji women's participation and recognition in publics throughout history (exceptions aside) which I will discuss in this chapter. I will also provide a brief overview of some of the different ways Khaleeji women are participating in publics on the ground. Lastly, I will offer some examples of how Khaleeji women's participation in different kinds of media also enables them to create alternative discourses and counterpublics which contend with hegemonic ones.

Underlying socio-cultural discourses

While the Middle East has often been portrayed in an Orientalist manner and in opposition to the West (as has much of the Global South), we need to recognize the tremendous diversity which exists across the region and keep in mind that it is not a static

place but that social, political, and cultural changes have influenced the region over the past century. We must be careful not to generalize across ethnic, religious, national, racial and linguistic groupings which exist across the region, especially considering the historical hybridity which has always taken place here[6]. That said, some important underlying broad patterns do exist, some of which are specific to Arabs and Muslims and are especially prevalent in the Arab Gulf.

Family is often considered the core unit of society in the Middle East, and is central in understanding political, religious, economic, and social issues. Typically, the family unit extends beyond nuclear family, and there is a sense of communal responsibility, obligation and authority which is felt by each member in differing ways (Nashat and Tucker 1999). Patriarchy, which is a gendered system existing across much of the world, privileges males and elders (sometimes including elder women) and is often used as a means of justifying kinship relationships and enhancing the power and authority of elder males in families and society at large (Joseph and Slyomovics 2001). While this is by far the norm, it is also important to remember that exceptions do occur, and in some cases afford alternative ways of understanding gender dynamics in the region.

However, many women must confront patriarchal norms on many levels and in many spheres- family, civil society, through state laws and institutions, as well as in many public spaces. The Gulf states, like many countries in the region, interweave legal issues regarding family and religion (both critically powerful institutions), where personal status laws are often deferred to religious institutions limiting civil recourse in

[6] For more on the historical hybridity of the Arab/Persian Gulf, see Beeman's (2008) work, *Gulf Society: An Anthropological View of the Khalijis, their Evolution and Way of Life*.

issues around marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc. (Joseph and Slyomovics 2001). Historically, and specifically in the 20th and 21st centuries, women's activity in reform and nationalist movements has been characterized by their struggle to liberalize laws governing marriage, and family relationships (Nashat and Tucker 1999). Presently, issues of family law which often dramatically affect women are still often left in the hands of gender-biased institutions. Many women struggle with heightened Islamic conservatism which is increasingly at work on their bodies by "disciplining, dressing, and directing females about how to act in public space and, determining what is not allowed" (Wheeler 2006, 92). In some countries, women face the threat of physical violence against 'un-Islamically dressed' women (to various degrees depending on the country), as well as other forms of harassment.

While family values are certainly diverse across the region and from one household to the next, some cultural patterns are hard to ignore. Family honor is a crucial aspect of the Arab-Islamic world (and more broadly). It implies that "ones sense of dignity, identity, status, self, and public esteem is linked to the regard with which one's family is held by the community at large" and that the importance of the individual is subordinated to that of the collective (Joseph and Slyomovics 2001, 6; Nashat and Tucker 1999). It is assumed that an individual's actions reflect on the reputation of the family as a whole, where children are taught that the family comes before the individual. This is also a means of controlling behavior and is especially relevant for women and youth as family honor reinforces patriarchal power, often "circumscribing women's sexuality, movement in social arenas, and to some degree, economic opportunities" all under the

notion that it is helping to 'protect' women in the community (Joseph and Slyomovics 2001, 6). This need to control female sexuality is often linked to concerns of purity, which is culturally and religiously circumscribed and is largely linked to family honor and reputation (Nashat and Tucker 1999). Additionally, the production of offspring is also often a measure (at least historically) of a woman's value. While the implications of family honor are still a critical discourse in the Gulf and beyond, Nashat and Tucker (1999) note that "increasingly… factors such as class, personal mobility, and the proliferation of ideas about greater individual freedom" are beginning to disrupt this historically-seeded norm (xli).

It is still generally understood, however, that most socialization practices do not support individualism, and the creation of autonomous, separate selves- which when combined with patriarchy often means that many women are expected to put others before themselves, especially their family members (specifically male kin). This understanding of family before self widely contrasts with the Western notion of the nation-state (slowly being imposed on the rest of the world, and becoming politically mandatory) which is based on the concept of citizens as autonomous individuals often separate from communities (Joseph and Slyomovics 2001). While this Western notion of citizen is originally tied to a masculinized construct of a property-owning male citizen, liberal feminist thought has made attempts to integrate women into the state. Many Marxist feminists argue that this only resolves citizenship gendering tendencies for elite women, but ignores other exclusionary elements such as class, race, and patriarchy which limit the active political participation of women further limiting any benefits they might

receive as citizens (Joseph and Slyomovics 2001). By being tied to 'private' affairs typically associated with the family and home, and historically being excluded from participating in public arenas and debate, women are often kept from the position of benefiting from, establishing, and claiming rights. This exclusion is often exacerbated in contemporary representations of the Middle East (particularly the Gulf) where "more rigid gender hierarchies and greater exclusion of women from public domains" are seen to an extreme degree, and where an unequal balance of power in the private sphere often affects women's access to the public sphere (Joseph and Slyomovics 2001, Sabbagh 2005).

Civil society which includes professional associations, unions, political action groups, chambers of commerce, possibly some religious fraternities, etc., are all considered to be under the 'public' domain, which is usually associated with men. Civil society has typically been associated with the public realm where women have historically been excluded. Originally a Western construct, civil society also assumes a split between public and private domains, which is a gendered distinction- where men and male activity are associated with the public and women and female activity are associated with the private (Joseph and Slyomovics, 2001). These assumptions are even more problematic in the Middle East and Gulf states, where kinship and community are such an instrumental part of society. In many cases, family, tribal association, and community influence individuals before civil and state; the relationship between the three are often very fluid and at times difficult to distinguish.

Joseph and Slyomovics (2001) state "If one's rights are experienced as emerging more from being part of… familial, ethnic, sectarian communities than from being citizens of the state, then women are caught in a double vise, because these communities are highly patriarchal" and are often reinforced by the state (13). In order to reconcile the exclusion of women and other marginalized groups, feminist discourse often attempts to destabilize the hegemony of social constructs and open up spaces for creating alternative relationships and understandings. The internet and new communication technologies may have the potential to create these new alternative publics. Limited access to these new technologies cannot be ignored however, as a few are privileged over the majority (I will focus on this later on). Let us turn to women on the ground in the Arab Gulf states.

Public Participation

Considering the vast diversity of Khaleeji women's many different roles and experiences in both public and private spheres, it is difficult to provide a detailed summary of their participation in varying publics on the ground. Unfortunately, given the scope of this paper, a general overview must suffice, and so I will briefly turn to a study by Wanda Krause (2009), *Gender and Participation in the Arab Gulf* in order to address some of ways in which Khaleeji women participate in public affairs. According to Krause, the purpose of her study is to explain the significance of women's participation in government supported organizations in the Arab Gulf, where she argues that women's participation ultimately serves to reconfigure the state.

Krause provides an analysis of Khaleeji women's status in the Arab Gulf, referencing the UNDP-POGAR, 2006 Gender and Citizenship Initiative. According to

Krause, access to education is no longer a major concern for women in most Gulf states, however illiteracy is still a major issue in Oman (as well as Yemen which is not included in the report; see Chapter 3 for more on this). In several countries, women make up the majority of students at the university level, which has been the case for Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Krause 2009). This may however, be in part due to the ability for many men to study at universities abroad (while women also study abroad at the university level, it is more common for men to do so).

Women's participation in the workforce has also increased across Gulf countries at varying rates, as states often push for women to participate in the formal economy (depending on the state). According to Krause, Kuwaiti women constituted 51% of the workforce in 2007 (highest of Gulf countries), whereas in Oman, in the same year, women comprised 18% of the workforce. Most women work in the public sector. Discrimination in promotion and not receiving equal pay for equal work remain to be issues for women, especially in private sector jobs. Women are also encouraged to get 'feminine' jobs such as teaching (Krause 2009).

In terms of political participation, Khaleeji women have made some significant progress in the past ten to fifteen years. While Kuwaiti women have made great advances in the past decade- receiving full political rights in 2005, the right to vote and run for office, have been both appointed positions in the ministries and have been elected as parliamentary members, they continue to be challenged by Islamist influences that can hinder further advances, such as by voting against potential laws favoring women's rights in parliament. In Bahrain, in 2002, women were allowed to vote and run in municipal and

parliamentary elections, were appointed positions as ministers and members of parliament, and one woman was appointed as a judge in the constitutional court (Krause 2009). Women's political advances in Kuwait and Bahrain have come from a combination of grassroots pressures as well as support from state rulers.

In the UAE and Qatar, political gains have mostly been facilitated by rulers backed by their wives and women's movements- finally granting women the right to vote, hold positions in parliament, and be appointed as judges and public prosecutors. Oman has also promoted women's rights, appointing their first female minister in 2003 and 14 parliament members in 2007 (Krause 2009).

There has also been some progress made in personal law, which is especially relevant for women. In Qatar, new laws against domestic violence have been progressive, and are not entirely based on Islamic law, which has been customary. The state has also provided new laws making it easier for Qatari women to divorce, and has banned temporary marriages (Krause 2009). Even with this progress, however, most states still continue to uphold Islamic personal and family laws which are riddled with patriarchal injustice. Unequal citizenship laws also continue to be an issue for women and the children of women citizens whose fathers are non-citizens, as patriarchy continues to be a considerable influence.

According to her study, Krause found that overall, Bahrain and Kuwait are generally pointed to as leading the way for women's freedoms in the Arab Gulf states, and that Saudi Arabia was a state significantly lagging behind. While noteworthy

progress has recently been made, there is a long ways to go in obtaining adequate human rights protection and tracking gender-based discrimination.

Although I will not go into great detail on Khaleeji women's participation in civic and women's organizations as I am sure they differ in each country, I would like to acknowledge their contributions in promoting women's rights. Haya al-Mughni (2001) goes into detail on the influence of Kuwaiti women's organizations in her book, *Women in Kuwait*, beginning with the birth of two women's societies in 1963, which had differing views of women's place in society. In the 1970's, Kuwaiti women's organizations made a number of demands for their political rights, often led by liberal merchant-class women. Al-Mughni argues that the Islamic revival movement in the1980's across much of the Arab world is strongly related to the rise of the feminist movement in the 1970's. She believes that the growth of the Islamic movement "developed as a reaction to the women's movement, seeking to restore the patriarchal order which women's demands for autonomy had threatened to disrupt." (95) Because of this, new conservative Islamic women's organizations were created, which once again hindered attempts made by liberal women's associations in gaining political rights.

Most government supported women's organizations which were a focus in Krause's (2009) study were developed in the last 60 years, with several larger women's associations established in most Gulf States. Krause argues, "The modality of state feminism as part of governmentality has enabled women to acquire some form of greater independence and self-development." (32) She goes on to argue that many of the leaders of these women's organizations are from the ruling elite and merchant class, thereby,

"lead[ing] the associations towards goals that are congruent with the political aspirations of the state." (32) With that in mind, I argue that these government supported women's organizations are often held within the confines of the hegemonic state and bourgeois publics, providing little space for the recognition of alternative views and counterpublics.

Media participation

Another place where women have recently gained influence in the public arena is through participation in popular and alternative media. Ruling elites in the region have historically monopolized the media in order to circulate favorable publicity about themselves, with government control over the press and broadcasting, which has meant that alternative agendas have not been expressed or publicly debated (Sakr, 2004). The rise of satellite television across the Middle East in the 1990's was significant for publics in the region, as it allowed viewers to see material critical of governments and to take part in uncensored public debates. Sakr (2004) argues that Media Studies has a rich potential for illuminating ways in which women are empowered or disempowered. She argues that gender boundaries are often negotiated through media, which is in part due to media's ability to provide an interface between public and private spheres and provides a place for these categories to be contested.

One country in the Arab Gulf which has stood out as an example for women's partaking in the public sphere through media participation is Kuwait. Kuwait has long been renowned for its free press and lively public debates in the region as it produces far more newspapers and magazines than any of its neighbors and almost every political group has its own publication (al-Mughni and Tetreault 2004). Freedom of the press is

guaranteed under Kuwait's constitution, yet freedom of expression is often curtailed due to various forms of political pressures. The printing press was Kuwait's premier institution of political and public space, as the liberal merchant-class controlled the media in the early 1960's and daily newspapers began to circulate (al-Mughni and Tetreault 2004). These liberal newspapers finally offered Kuwaiti women a more public place to voice their concerns and call for their rights. Al-Mughni and Tetreault (2004) state, "The media supported women's issues and women sought the support of the media to change society's perception of women's roles. Women also found in the media important tools to change their life situations and promote new roles for themselves." (127) A section of several magazines were designated to the "Women's Corner" which provided a space for women to write and express their views. It further helped to change public perceptions of women's role in society, making Kuwaiti women's issues a vital part of national debate and helped to disassociate women from belonging to the private sphere alone (al-Mughni and Tetreault 2004). The inclusion of Kuwaiti women in mainstream traditional print media (and more recently, broadcasting) has allowed them better access to participate in public arenas. Because of this, they are often looked to as an example, and provide encouragement for similar women's efforts in the Gulf.

Even though Kuwait is often pointed to as an example of its lively and open print media, forms of censorship do exist (Wheeler 2006). State censorship of public media occurs regularly. Self-censorship is also common as a strict press law limits "criticism of the ruling family and its allies, publication of anything considered potentially anti-Islamic, and the distribution of literature considered harmful to public morality" (Wheeler

2006). This law is in direct tension with the guarantee of freedom of expression in the constitution. Despite this, a wide range of media texts are available and public opinion is encouraged (to a certain point). Journalists and writers over-stepping the boundaries often face harassment, persecution, and in some extreme cases bodily injury and imprisonment (Wheeler 2006). This is even more the case in other more conservative Gulf countries, specifically Saudi Arabia. Self-censorship beyond state means also occurs, and is especially relevant for women as the social pressures of patriarchy, family honor, and Islamic conservatism hinder their ability to speak freely on a range of important topics such as sexuality, sex and relationships, rape, violence against women, domestic issues, etc. Because censorship remains an issue in traditional media forms in Kuwait and more broadly in the Gulf, many have turned to new communication technologies as a way to circumvent self-censorship and express themselves more freely.

Skalli (2006) suggests that women's use of new technology has further provided entries into the public sphere on the ground. According to her study on women and information technologies in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA), the rise of modern media has played a significant role in the emergence of alternative ideas, identities, and discourses which often contest the hegemony of authoritarian political and religious regimes. New communication technologies are increasing the scope, intensity, and multiplicity of publics. Skalli argues, "women have been involved in shaping, impacting, and redefining the public sphere despite the often institutionalized norms of exclusion and marginalization restricting their physical mobility and visibility" and that new technologies have greatly enabled this process (36). Skalli continues to argue that an

increasing number of women are "producing alternative discourses and images about womanhood, citizenship, and political participation in their societies." (36) These new discursive spaces redefine patriarchal gender roles by questioning sociocultural, economical, political, and legal institutions often constraining them (Skalli 2006). Skalli believes that many women are using these new technologies for creating transformative spaces and establishing alliances at regional and international scales, which will broaden their bases of solidarity beyond the censoring mechanisms of the state and fundamentalist groups.

Much writing by women in the MENA, Skalli argues, is strategic and transgressive, increasingly allowing many diverse women's voices to enter the public sphere, despite multiple filters and barriers. Some female journalists are becoming more confident and aggressive when informing the public about taboo subjects, breaking the culture of silence, despite censorship and threats from conservative religious and political groups. These women challenge hegemonic publics by providing pertinent information previously unavailable to policy makers and the general public that is typically deemed irrelevant or unimportant by those with power in dominant publics. Such topics include domestic violence, rape, and sexual harassment (Skalli 2006). Women are able to produce alternative bodies of knowledge which compliment incomplete official accounts filling in the voids where women's participation in varying multi-publics has been overlooked.

Heya TV, a Lebanese television station, is another example of a feminist counterpublic for Arab women, Matar (2007) argues, as it provides a public platform on

regional satellite TV, offering Arab women a wide range of topics reflecting a broad and inclusive feminist agenda aimed at improving Arab women's position by incorporating gender questions into wider societal discourses. Matar argues that through programs like Heya TV, hegemonic social norms are being contested through the intervention of the presenter, and discursive feminist counter publics can emerge through these contestations. She believes that a counterpublic is achieved through the management of discussion topics (including marriage, women's rights and the law, family relationships, divorce, homosexuality, extremist behavior, and cohabitation before marriage) the choice of the panelists, and the handling of debates which provide a voice for women representatives for changing power dynamics in society. Matar quotes a producer from one contentious show *Al-Makshouf*, "'We are telling women that the problem about the male society also lies with them, their ways of bringing up their kids; they are part of the problem too, and we tell them that. Our main concern is *to make the personal public*'" (524, emphasis mine). Heya TV, is only one example of some of the new kinds of counterpublics emerging through new media like satellite television, which is important because of its pan-Arab public platform, which can reach a variety of diverse audience members who have access.

From this chapter, it should be clear that many Khaleeji women partake in multiple publics in a myriad of ways, whether by being a member of civic associations, writing, protesting, contributing to traditional and new media, voting, going to school, and so on. It should also be noted that the experiences of women across the region are widely diverse, and that this should be considered when recognizing the differing merits

of women's participation in the public arena. While many advancements have certainly been made, particularly in the last two decades, state-censorship, gender-biased laws, patriarchy, family-honor, conservative religious and political groups, women's continued association with 'the private', and lack of access to education, are only some of the barriers which continue to constrain women from fully participating in publics. Access to and use of new communication media like the internet may be a way of providing some women a space to engage in alternative publics. This is particularly important for women without regular access to participating in publics on the ground. In order to participate in these online publics however, one must have access to these new technologies. In my next chapter, I will discuss internet access and usership in the Arabian Peninsula.

Chapter 3:

INTERNET ACCESS AND USERSHIP IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

While it should be clear from the previous chapter that Khaleeji women partake in various publics on the ground, it is likely that cultural constructs such as patriarchy, religion, and women's association with the private continue to obstruct Khaleeji women from full participation in well-recognized publics. In this chapter, I would like to investigate who is potentially using the internet for alternative publics in the Gulf.

In order to understand whether or not the internet can provide alternative public spheres for a number of people including often marginalized populations, we need to recognize that only a fraction of people have this privilege. State censorship of many popular media sources leads those who want more information and the right to express alternative views to seek it elsewhere, including alternative online forums and blogs (see Lynch 2007, Loewenstein 2008, and Sakr 2004). Virtual space also allows for people to organize and engage more politically than they might have done in the past because of the anonymity that virtual spaces offer, as well as the fact the internet is often more difficult to monitor by the state. Blogs, online chat-rooms and other social/political online forums and networks also offer a way for people (especially the youth, and women) to socialize online and transgress gender and cultural lines more freely than they may be able to on the ground (see Wheeler 2006).

The purpose of this chapter is to gain a greater understanding of *who* is using the internet in the Arabian Peninsula (particularly the Arab Gulf countries), and specifically

who is able to participate and engage in some of the public and quasi-public spaces on the internet (in particular, who is blogging, organizing, reporting, and engaging in online social and political forums), compared to those largely being left out. According to Marc Lynch (2007), blogging remains the activity of a very small Arab elite, which is still only a small fraction of Arabs who regularly use the internet. Blogging is a relatively new activity, and while it is becoming more popular, many do not have the resources and ability to blog daily[7]. Although many bloggers have been able to make a name for themselves and have become politically influential, some face the consequences of repressive political regimes in the region. Many in the area (especially women) who engage online are likely to do so under a pseudonym in order to maintain some degree of security and to protect their personal reputations (especially considering family honor acting as such a strong prevailing cultural norm; see Wheeler 2006, Sakr 2004).

We can make several assumptions around who is able to partake in some of these online spaces. It is likely that they are privileged in having the time (apart from taking care of families, working, and other obligations), the resources (regular access to electricity, computer and internet access), and the ability (are literate, have the technical skills needed, and are unhindered from participating). In addition to this we might find that often those engaging in these spaces not only have the means to do so, but are also well educated and likely choose to engage most regularly within the cohort/s in which they find themselves. Keeping these assumptions in mind, I will utilize some demographic data which might indicate access trends in relation to the internet in nine

[7] For more, refer to my discussion of Lynch (2007) in Chapter 1, under the sub-heading Virtual Publics.

countries in the region of the Arabian Peninsula, hoping to address issues of access in a spatial manner through the use of ArcGIS.

BACKGROUND:

Although the internet has been slow in reaching the Middle East, in recent years there has been an explosion of new internet users. According to Internet World Stats (http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm), the number of internet users between 2000 and 2009 in the Middle East (including Iran and Israel, but excluding Egypt and North Africa) grew by 1,648.2%, which was the largest percent increase in any region of the world. The most recent estimation (2009) of internet users in the region is over 57 million, which is a little over 28% of the total population of the region (Internet World Stats). Within the Middle East, Arab internet penetration as of 2009 is highest in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) at 60.9%, while the lowest is in Iraq at 1%, followed closely by Yemen at 1.6% (Internet World Stats 2009).

While there are a plethora of reasons for people in the region to use the internet, from research to personal communication, business and commerce to blogging, two groups seem to particularly stand out, who might be less likely to regularly participate in other social and media forms, particularly youth and women. As noted in Chapter 2, patriarchy continues to greatly affect many women and children in the region, as it privileges males and elders, and is deeply embedded in many aspects of society. The public-private binary discussed in Chapter 1 is also a vital barrier for many women and girls, as they are often associated with the private/domestic sphere, and many do not have the same kinds of access to public spaces and spheres on the ground such as political,

social, and civil arenas in the same way that men do. In fact, depending on the country, cultural customs, religion, and specific family, many women may physically need a male chaperon (father, brother, son, uncle, etc.) or their permission in order to go out in public, receive certain civil rights, attend certain events, travel, etc. Each of these barriers are likely to affect the amount of public engagement women and youth are involved in, and may be a reason why some turn to alternative publics.

Within the region, youth seem to play a remarkable role in the makeup of internet usership, and some argue that this could slowly be impacting social changes on the ground within the Middle East[8]. This is especially important since many of the countries in the region have large populations of young people which make up a hefty portion of total populations in these countries. For many women in the region, the internet is a way to transgress gender norms as well. Because of the possibility of choosing to remain anonymous, the internet is considered a 'safe' place, and many women feel "safer to voice their concerns, ideas, etc. without having their reputations ruined or without it affecting their social life" (Wheeler 2004, 152-153). The internet also provides a way for women to access information which might be considered politically or socially sensitive. It is important to keep in mind that these women and youth (like the majority of internet users in the region at this time) are privileged to have regular access and are likely to live in urban areas, have higher levels of education, and have the means to regular internet access whether at home, school, or internet café.

[8] For more, see Wheeler (2006), Lynch (2007), Loewenstein (2008), "Saudi Bloggers…" (2006), and Sandels and Al-Atraqchi (2009).

METHODOLOGY:

The methodology that I followed in this particular endeavor was quite straightforward. I found a number of demographic indicators which I felt would be particularly useful in identifying those who are regularly using the internet in the region of the Arabian Peninsula including populations in the countries of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Jordan. I am limited to using a small number of demographic indicators given the scope of this project, and acknowledge that providing more would be beneficial. I created two maps using ArcMap, illustrating some of the different demographic indicators that I used which I believe point to some populations who are more likely to be using the internet frequently, as well as those who are likely not. Data regarding these indicators was downloaded from the World Bank's World Development Indicators and include: number of internet users by country in 1998 and 2007 (as well as percent of internet users by country), Total Adult Literacy Rates for each country in 2007 (data for several countries is unfortunately missing here), and rural population statistics (total rural population, and percent of total population). I was also limited by how many indicators I could show at once given the constraints of ArcMap, and so I chose to provide two separate maps, the first focusing on the percent of internet users in each country in 1998 and 2007, and the second showing total adult literacy rates and percent rural populations in each country, compared to percent of internet users in 2007[9]. Alongside the maps, I have provided a more detailed

[9] Unfortunately, I was also limited by the amount of data available for some of the indicators, depending on the country.

explanation of what each map shows along with further information regarding each indicator located in accompanying tables.

DATA ANALYSIS:

Each of the maps and tables below provide a way to assess the demographic data, both spatially and in tabular form, providing information and relationships regarding each of the indicators mentioned above.

The first map (Figure 1) and corresponding table (Table 1), provide information regarding the total number and percent of internet users in 1998 and 2007 in the nine countries in the Arabian Peninsula that I focus on in this study[10]. Overlaying each country is a double bar-graph, indicating the percent of internet users of the total population of each country. The dark green bar-graph on the left indicates the percent of internet users in 1998, and the red bar-graph on the right indicates the percent of internet users in 2007 (please note that there is no data for Iraq in either year). The Gulf countries of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE, all appear to have populations with the greatest percentage of internet users, while Oman and Yemen appear to have populations with very few internet users. There also appears to be a significant difference in percent change of

[10] **Please note the population differences for each country between 1998 and 2007 in Table 1. Unfortunately, I was forced to normalize the percent of internet users in 1998 and 2007 by the total population of each country in 2007, due to program limitations in ArcMap. See Table 1 for detailed numbers and (correct) differences.

internet users between 1998 and 2007, in each country.

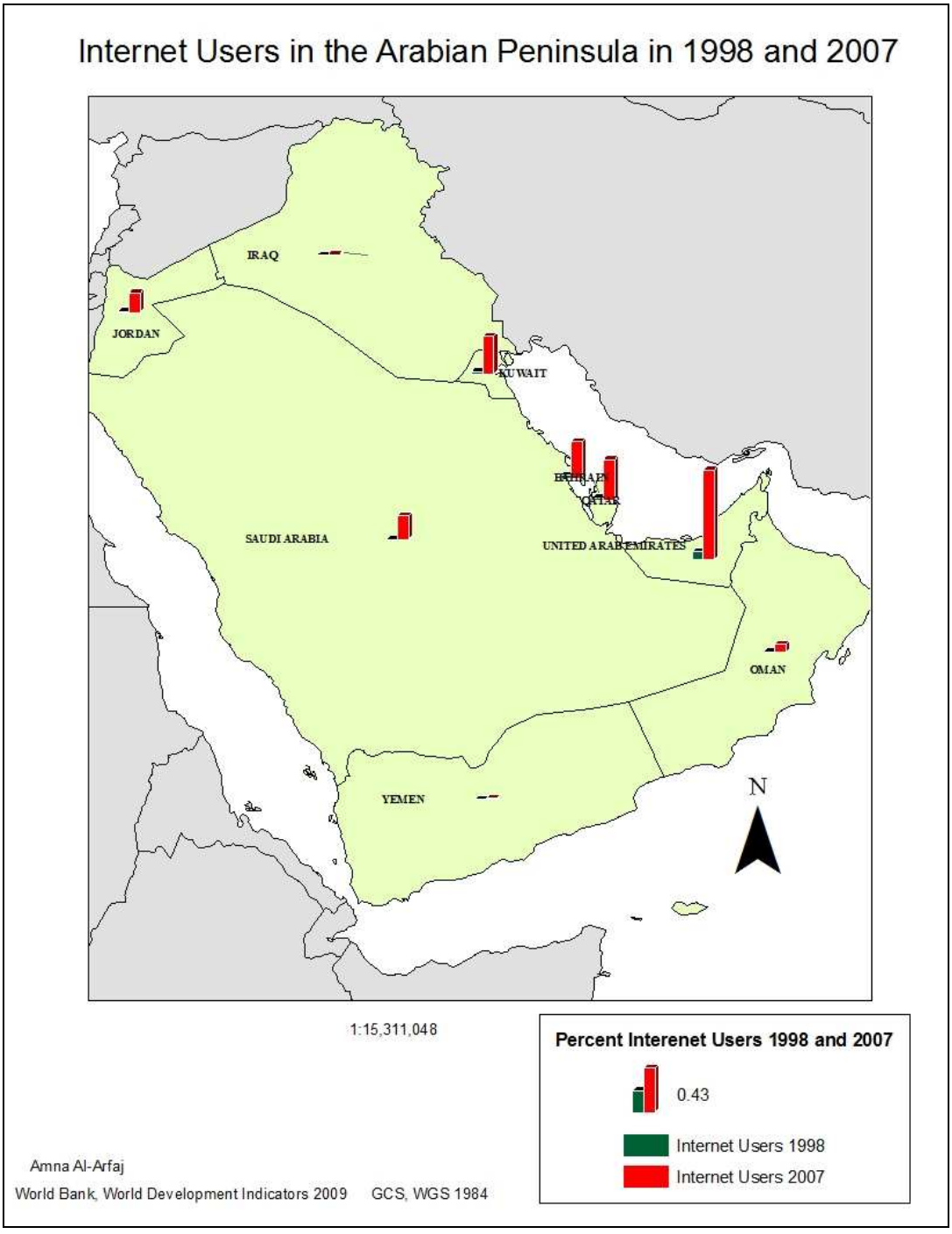

Figure 1: Internet Users in the Arabian Peninsula in 1998 and 2007

Table 1: Internet Users by Country (corresponds to data in Figures 1 and 2).

Country	*Total Population (1998)*[11]	*Total Population (2007)*	*Number of users (1998)*	*% of total population (*by 2007 data)*	*Number of users (2007)*	*% of total population (2007)*
Bahrain	616,000	708,573	10,000	1.4%	250,000	*35.3%*
Iraq	23,034,000	27,499,638	No Data	No Data	275,000	*1%*
Jordan	4,435,000	6,053,193	27,354	0.5%	1,126,717	*18.6%*
Kuwait	1,913,000	2,505,559	40,000	1.6%	900,000	*35.9%*
Oman	2,364,000	3,204,897	10,000	0.3%	247,095	*7.7%*
Qatar	697,000	907,229	17,000	1.9%	351,000	*38.7%*
Saudi Arabia	20,786,000	27,601,038	10,000	0.4%	6,320,000	*22.9%*
United Arab Emirates	2,303,000	2,642,566	90,000	3.4%	2,260,025	*85.5%*
Yemen	16,388,000	22,211,743	2,500	0.1%	320,000	*1.4%*

Figure 2, below, shows a choropleth map indicating the percent of internet users by country in 2007 (same as red bar-graph in Figure 1). The red bar-graph indicates the percent of rural population by country in 2007 (note missing data for Iraq). The black bar-graph indicates the Total Adult Literacy Rate by country in 2007 (note data is missing for Iraq, Jordan, and the UAE[12]). Observing the map, we can see that Kuwait had the highest Total Adult Literacy Rate at 94.5%, and also had the smallest discrepancy between genders, with 93.1% for adult females and 95.2% for adult males (see Table 2). Yemen, on the other hand, had the lowest Total Adult Literacy Rate at 58.9% and the largest discrepancy between genders with 40.5% for adult females and 77.0% for adult males (see Table 2). Again, we can note that Gulf countries including Qatar, Bahrain, and

[11] The Total Population data by country for 1998 was taken from the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1999).
[12]Unfortunately this data was lacking, and 2007 had the most cohesive data for each country from several of the most recent years.

Kuwait had the highest Total Adult Literacy Rates, where as Yemen had by far the lowest.

By assessing this map, we can also see that Yemen has, significantly, the highest rural population (15,654,745), with the highest percent of rural population (70.0%). Oman has the second highest percent of rural population (28.4%), although Saudi Arabia has a higher total rural population (4,208,224). The Gulf countries (aside from UAE with 22.2% rural population) have the smallest rural populations with Kuwait having the smallest total rural population (44,205), and the lowest percent rural population (1.7%; see Table 3).

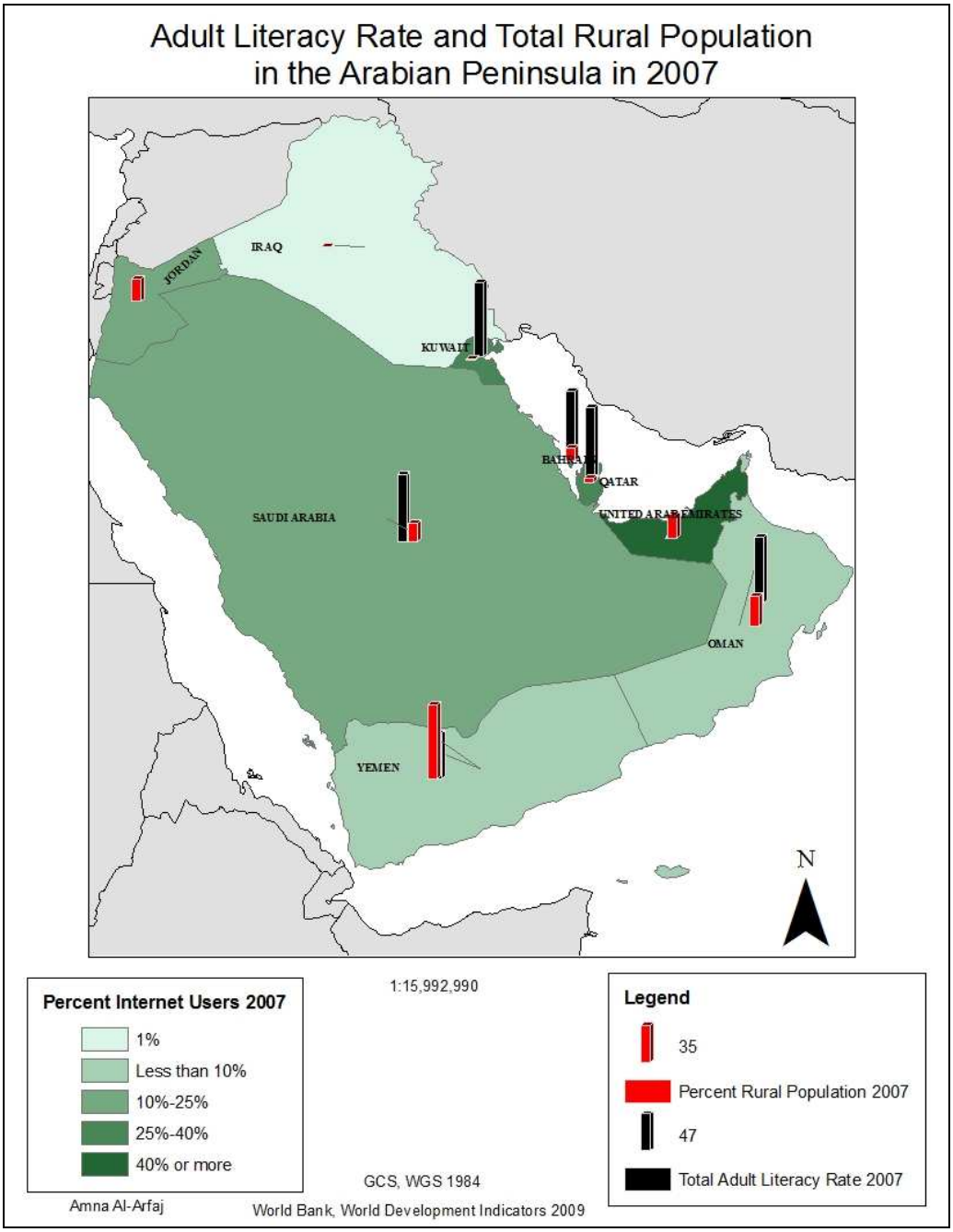

Figure 2: Adult Literacy Rate and Total Rural Population in the Arabian Peninsula in 2007.

Table 2: Adult Literacy Rates by Country and Gender (corresponds to data in Figure 2):

Country	*Total Population (2007)*	*Total Adult Literacy Rate (2007)*	*Female Adult Literacy Rate (2007)*	*Male Adult Literacy Rate (2007)*
Bahrain	708,573	88.8%	86.4%	90.4%
Iraq	27,499,638	No Data	No Data	No Data
Jordan	6,053,193	No Data	No Data	No Data
Kuwait	2,505,559	94.5%	93.1%	95.2%
Oman	3,204,897	84.4%	77.5%	89.4%
Qatar	907,229	93.1%	90.4%	93.8%
Saudi Arabia	27,601,038	84.6%	79.4%	89.1%
United Arab Emirates	2,642,566	No Data	No Data	No Data
Yemen	22,211,743	58.9%	40.5%	77.0%

Table 3: Rural Population Statistics by Country (corresponds to data in Figure 2):

Country	*Total Population (2007)*	*Total Rural Population (2007)*	*Percent Rural Population (2007)*
Bahrain	708,573	86,721	11.5%
Iraq	27,499,638	No Data	No Data
Jordan	6,053,193	1,236,416	21.6%
Kuwait	2,505,559	44,205	1.7%
Oman	3,204,897	774,814	28.4%
Qatar	907,229	50,507	4.4%
Saudi Arabia	27,601,038	4,208,224	17.4%
United Arab Emirates	2,642,566	968,100	22.2%
Yemen	22,211,743	15,654,745	70.0%

Analyzing the data from these two maps and corresponding tables, we can make several observations about who might be using the internet and thus engage in online spaces, potentially contributing to a multiplicity of virtual publics. The Gulf countries of UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait have overall higher literacy rates and smaller rural populations than the larger countries on the peninsula, possibly enabling their citizens and residents greater access to the internet as indicated in Figure 1. This could be

attributed to the fact that they are relatively small, rich, oil-producing countries, and have more urban residents than other countries in the region (as we can assume from Table 3). Conversely, Yemen has a noteworthy rural population and significantly low literacy rates, especially for women (40.5%). This indicates that only a small minority are able to regularly access the internet, also shown in Figure 1. Further indicators, more data, and a better sense of the history, politics, economies, and socio-cultures of these nine countries would allow a much greater analysis and allow us to delve deeper. Doing this would provide a much greater understanding of those privileged to be using the internet, especially those who actively engage in potential alternative public spheres like blogging and online forums.

CONCLUSION:

While it is clear that only a minority of people in the Middle East regularly use the internet, and only a small fraction of those use it to blog and engage in potential alternative online public spheres, the fact that the internet is growing so quickly in the region is a promising sign that in the future, greater proportions of the populations will also participate and contribute as well. Although it is significant that many Arab/Muslim women in the region are able to participate in online quasi-public spaces, it is also important to remember that this is still a very privileged group of women. They have the time, resources, and ability to access the internet to be able to share their views and voices with the world via the internet. Issues of patriarchy, protecting family honor/reputation, and difficulties accessing public spaces/spheres on the ground are all social barriers which affect women, youth, and underprivileged groups in the region.

These obstacles could encourage marginalized groups to explore the internet and other new communication media, which might enable them to participate more freely, as well as to avoid state and self-censorship, by remaining anonymous[13].

[13] For more information and resources regarding access and the digital divide see Servon (2002) and Mossberger, et al (2003) (on the digital divide in the United States); Warschauer (2003), Lowenstein (2008), and Russell and Echchaibi (2009) (on international access/blogging); and Eickelman and Anderson (1999), Sakr (2004), Human Rights Watch (1999), and Gher and Amin (2000) (on access and media in the Middle East).

Chapter 4:

EXPLORING THE KHALEEJI WOMEN'S BLOGOSPHERE

The focus of this last chapter will be on my short empirical study, where I delve deeper into the Khaleeji women's blogosphere. Through the examples of two specific blogs, I hope to demonstrate how these kinds of spaces can provide opportunities for creating alternative virtual publics. I analyzed vital discourses in each blog, supplemented by an interview with one blogger in an attempt to understand how such spaces might contribute to providing a place for Khaleeji women to participate in publics by voicing important concerns and contributions.

The two blogs which I analyze are by no means representative of all Khaleeji women's blogs (which continue to grow everyday), but they do shed light on some of the different ways Khaleeji women use personal blogs. Glitter (GG) is a Kuwaiti woman who mostly blogs about love, relationships, and Kuwait society. Silly Bahraini Girl (SBG) is a Bahraini woman who focuses on a range of issues including the blogging community, censorship, free-speech and cyberactivism. It is important to remember that one's conception of what counts as being an important matter of publicity is not universal. Instead, alternative and counter discourses often masked as 'private,' (and which are often discounted in dominant publics), are brought to the forefront, becoming more inclusive of the issues and concerns of excluded groups. The discourses which I find most relevant in the two blogs which I analyzed may not contribute in politically obvious ways, but I believe they do in both explicit and implicit ways, sometimes so subtly that

one might disregard their contributions completely, contributing to further exclusion and disregard of marginalized voices. I want to demonstrate how while part of a privileged elite minority in some ways, Khaleeji women bloggers such as Glitter and Silly Bahraini Girl are voicing important issues of publicity which I find are significant to both their societies and beyond.

The objective of doing a discourse analysis of each blog is to get a broad understanding of the intentions, motivations, and perceptions of each blogger, as well as to understand how they perceive themselves within a wider blogging 'community' and how they interact with their readers/commenters. I also want to understand what it is that blogging enables these bloggers to do that is different from writing in other forums and speaking in face-to-face discussion. Why blog? I want to comprehend how their subjectivity changes as they blog rather than when they do not blog, and are engaging in face-to-face conversation. Why stay anonymous? What is the advantage? What does it enable them to do rather than if they disclose their identity? How does technology play a role? How do they identify themselves, and what notion of truth are they advocating? What meanings are contested? How do the discourses they engage with reflect and sometimes reify wider social norms, and how do they contest them by opposing and contradicting state and social norms? How do these discourses contribute to alternative conceptions of what is 'public'? These questions guided the way I analyzed the blogs, and although I cannot fully answer many of them, the following analysis provides preliminary insights into how the bloggers make use of their space, and why they turn to blogging.

First, I will briefly discuss the methodologies which I used in this study, followed with an introduction of each blogger and an analysis of their blogs. I will end with some of the implications developed from my analysis of each blog, point out comparisons and differences between Glitter and Silly Bahraini Girl, and discuss some of my own perceptions of and relationship with their blogs.

METHODOLOGY:

When I first put together my proposal for this thesis, I had only a vague idea of what I was looking for, having hypothesized what I might find in the Khaleeji blogosphere from my own previous exposure to Khaleeji women's blogs (like Iraqi blogger *Riverbend*), as well as from my own experiences as a Khaleeji woman and my engagement with other Khaleeji women. This did not mean however that I was by any means an expert in knowing my way around the blogosphere as I have never blogged and was not a regular follower any particular blog prior to this project.

I began by loosing myself in the blogosphere, finding blogs through word of mouth and by doing general searches. I started finding blogs which were linked to other blogs, looked through lists of blogs which were registered within different countries and through specific blog-networks many of which were located in the Arab Gulf countries. My original first choice was to access a blog called Dewanyat Banat, which is a collective of about 30 Khaleeji women bloggers (some of whom have individual blogs as well) which I felt would be a great example of an alternative virtual public. However, I was unable to gain access because it was password protected (therefore not fully public) and the blogger I was in contact with no longer responded to my emails.

After finding what I believed was an extensive list of potential blogs, I began to go through them one by one to see if they met my criteria: The bloggers must be Khaleeji women between the ages of 20-40; the blogs must be public (URL is not password-protected); they must either blog anonymously using a pseudonym or have begun this way; they must post consistently/regularly for a significant length of time (2 years or more); the blogs must have extensive and easily accessible archives; they preferably appear to be somewhat 'popular' (by word of mouth, linked on other blogger's blogrolls, etc.); they must leave room for comments and engage with their readers/commenters; and the content of their blog must convey some aspect of publicity. I finally narrowed it down to two blogs which I felt met my criteria: Silly Bahraini Girl (Amira Al-Hussaini), and Glitter (anonymous), both located on Google's *Blogger* application.

I chose Silly Bahraini Girl's (SBG) blog because I believe her voice/writing is often very powerful through her often cynical point of view. SBG is often very direct about what she believes in and she advocates and publicizes the right for free-speech, especially in her country of Bahrain which has numerous issues concerning censorship and human rights violations. I chose Glitter's (GG) blog because of her ability to publicize 'private'/taboo subject matter on her blog, and because of her often intimate relationship with her readers.

I would also like to acknowledge my own relationship with the blogs which I have read (and will hopefully continue to read) and the bloggers whom I interacted with (via email). As I was doing this research, I found myself in an interesting position, both as a researcher, and as an 'insider,' as I also identify as a Khaleeji woman (I am half-

Kuwait/ half-American, and spent the majority of my life living in Kuwait). As a researcher, I attempted to stay somewhat formal and removed from the blogs (I would never post a comment on the blogs, as much as I was sometimes tempted). At the same time, as an 'insider,' I could relate to many of the situations Glitter and Silly Bahraini Girl blogged about, such as many of the social norms and expectations associated with daily life in the Arab Gulf.

Given the scope of my thesis, I decided that doing a discourse analysis of such extensive blogs coupled with potential interviews with the two bloggers was all I could manage within constraints. Each of these methods provide some risks. Since the blogs are written as personal blogs, there is always the risk that the blogger could choose to make their blog inaccessible at any time by either making it password-protected, and therefore no longer public, or by completely erasing/closing the blog. Links, pictures, and comments which they provide in their posts could also fail or be removed at any time, which is a risk associated with the nature of the internet. With this in mind, I went through the material as efficiently as possible, taking notes and copy/pasting information (excerpts/comments) that I found especially pertinent into word documents. Risks with the interviews included gaining IRB approval (in a timely fashion), getting permission to participate from each blogger, maintaining a relationship with the bloggers, and hoping that they would respond to the interviews (also in a timely manner).

Discourse Analysis

Once I made my final blog selection, I did an initial read-through of each blog and developed a list of potential themes which I then refined to the list below. Following this,

I did a more in-depth reading and analysis of the blog-posts in each blog that I felt were most relevant to my research. Here is the list of broad themes/discourses which I focused on in the analysis of each blog (note that I paid special attention to those with asterisks*):

Discourse Analysis Themes:

*Blogging/Blogging Community/Support and Advice
*Identity (anonymity)
*Censorship/free-speech/Access

*Relationships/Marriage/Sex/ Sexuality
*Society/Social Norms/expectations

Human Rights/Activism/Cyberactivism
Women's Rights/Feminism
Race/Ethnicity/Prejudice
Sexual Harassment/Violence Against Women

Politics
Religion
Material/money

Because both bloggers used their blogs as personal space to discuss a wide range of subject matter, I felt these themes were significant in their blogs both due to how often they discuss these themes, and/or because I felt they are important discourses which seem to clearly influence them. Unfortunately, given the constraints of this thesis, it was impossible for me to do an extensive analysis of each of these themes/discourses. I felt the themes without asterisks were significant because they influenced the bloggers, and/or were discussed in their posts, but were not my main focus in this thesis. I would like to acknowledge their importance and the fact that they are often connected to and embedded within the main themes which I choose to focus on. These main themes are: Blogging/Blogging Community/Support and Advice; Identity (anonymity);

Censorship/free-speech/Access; Relationships/Marriage/Sex/ Sexuality; and Society/Social Norms/expectations. I felt these five main thematic groupings best conveyed the bloggers main interests and motivations for blogging.

I chose to focus on the thematic grouping of Blogging/Blogging Community/Support and Advice because I felt that both GG and SBG engage with their readers and other bloggers, and post on the phenomenon of blogging. It is evident that Glitter wants to engage with her readers and a wider blogging community since she often poses questions to her readers and is involved in certain blogging activities such as 'tagging' other bloggers, and blog awards. Silly Bahraini Girl also does this, but as a journalist, she is also involved in going to conferences on blogging.

I chose to focus on Identity as a theme because I think it is an essential part of having a personal blog; both bloggers are clear that their blogs are their personal space, and as such, they convey each bloggers' personal opinions and views on the subject matter they discuss and the societies which they come from and are a part of. Both express their identities as Khaleeji women, but do so in different ways. The importance of anonymity is especially important here because without it, it is clear from reading her blog, that Glitter would not feel comfortable discussing the very 'personal' and often taboo subject matter which she makes public through her blog. Amira also began blogging anonymously but is in a very different position as Glitter and was able to continue blogging using her true identity.

The themes of Censorship/free-speech/Access are very commonly found in Silly Bahraini Girl's blog-posts because of her strong opinions on these subjects. The

promotion of free-speech is one of Amira's main motivations in her blog, and her opinions on the matter are very explicit. Glitter only discusses the issue of free-speech in her blog, but does so in a very different way than Amira. GG does not promote free-speech as a human right in the way that Amira does, rather she expresses her need for free-speech as a way to discuss 'private' subject matter on her blog, through the use of a pseudonym, in order to protect her real identity and reputation.

I focus on Relationships/Marriage/Sex/Sexuality because these themes are present in both blogs, but they especially so as a main focus in Glitter's blog. GG discusses her take on these topics which are considered 'personal' and taboo (especially sex and sexuality) in dominant Khaleeji society. SBG also discusses these themes in many of her posts, but they are not as prominent as they are in Glitter's blog.

Lastly I focus on Society/Social Norms/expectations which influence both bloggers, whether they are often criticizing aspects of Khaleeji/Bahraini society as SBG often does, or by reifying certain social norms such as advocating arranged-marriage the way that Glitter does. Although I mainly focus on these five themes and their discourses, the others which I list greatly affect them and will be represented in nuanced ways. I feel that it is also important to remember other socio-cultural discourses which shape the views and experiences of these bloggers and Khaleeji women more broadly (see Chapter 2). These include patriarchy and its influence in dominant institutions, familial roles and expectations, family honor and personal reputation, and the public/private dichotomy where women are often associated with familial/domestic spheres; historically having little influence in hegemonic publics. It is also important to recognize the ways in which

Islam and its many discourses penetrate and influence every pore of Khaleeji society. Both women are influenced by these dominant discourses, but while SBG is often more critical of them in her blog, GG often supports them (not that she is not critical of some).

Both blogs which I analyze are quite different, as they focus on dissimilar things, but I will focus on their commonalities and differences regarding the content they choose to focus on, and how they interact with their readers. I want to be clear that while they are different, they are both important and I have no intention of setting them up against each other as I feel they both offer insightful takes on the different issues which they discuss.

Interviews

In addition to doing a discourse analysis of each blog, I decided to interview both bloggers so that I could ask more pointed questions and develop a more refined analysis of how each blogger makes use of their blog, to have a better understanding of why they choose to blog, and to find out what blogging enables them to do which is different from other modes of communication. I made initial contact via email introducing myself, and enquired about whether or not they were interested in partaking in my research; they both agreed. I then sent each of them a list of interview questions via email. Doing this enabled me to keep Glitter's identity anonymous, while Silly Bahraini Girl (Amira Al-Hussaini) gave me permission to reveal her identity[14].

[14] *Note- at the time that I am writing this, I have only received an interview response from Glitter. I will include quotes from Glitter's interview responses throughout my analysis below. For the time being, I must formulate my analysis of Silly Bahraini Girl based on discourse analysis of her blog alone.

ANALYSIS:

"Glitter"

The first of the two blogs which I analyzed belongs to an anonymous blogger who refers to herself as "Glitter" (http://glitterpowder.blogspot.com/). After reading and analyzing Glitter's blog, I have come to understand that she is an unnamed, recently married Kuwaiti woman in her early/mid-twenties. She identifies as Muslim, and seems to be well educated in both Arabic and English. Glitter also seems to be quite close to her family (including extended family), who appear to be rather well-off, and she also seems to have a number of close friends. She began blogging under the pseudonym, Glitter, in February 2008, and as far as I know, this is her only blog. Since her entrance into the blogosphere, it appears she has managed to become quite popular gauging from word-of-mouth, the web-counter on her blog, the high number of comments on each blog post, links to her blog from other blogger's blogrolls (list of blogs which they follow), and the blogging awards and nominations which she has received from other bloggers.

Since she first began blogging in early 2008, Glitter (aka GG) posts a blog entry an average of about five times a month, (widely varying from month to month and year to year). Typically each post is quite long and is followed by commentary between herself and readers. Commenters often ask questions, and engage with the content of Glitter's most recent post. Glitter usually responds to the comments of each reader/commenter from each post, especially when they ask her direct questions. The tone of each post varies, but typically Glitter uses a story-telling narrative, and poses questions to her readers related to the content of each blog. While the content varies from post to post, it is typical of Glitter to tell personal stories about herself or someone close to her,

sometimes in multiple segments, and she often focuses on love and relationships. She also posts about information on local events, current events, and Kuwaiti society which she often relays from newspapers, emails, other bloggers, and friends and family.

The general layout of Glitter's blog as a whole might be described as 'fun' and 'girly' as it is often very colorful- with a pink and grey-blue color scheme; she often uses images and graphics in her posts, along with different font sizes and colors to further her story-telling capabilities and set the tone of each narrative. The top of her blog displays her pseudonym and name of the blog- "GLITTER" with definitions of the word "glitter" in hot-pink- "To reflect light with a brilliant, sparkling luster." On the left-hand sidebar of the blog, she displays a small icon associated with her blog- an ambiguous shadow of the profile a woman looking upwards, with a number of colorful shapes across the image. Below this is a web-counter (seemingly near and dear to her heart) displaying the number of guests which have visited her blog. Also displayed in the left-hand column is her email address, a link to her *Twitter* account, a small graphic where visitors can "feed [her] fish," a list of blog labels which link to similarly themed blog-posts, and lastly, she provides links to her archives. As is typical of most blogs, Glitter's most recent blog-post entry appears at the top of her blog's 'home' page, followed by former posts, getting older as one moves down the page. Readers can access her archives through the archival folders in the left-hand sidebar and can easily navigate to specific blogs, as well as start 'at the beginning' of the blog with Glitter's first post (located in the bottom folder of the archives).

Glitter blogs using a combination of English and two dialects of Arabic. Most of her posts are in English and transliterated Khaleeji/Kuwaiti Arabic- where she spells out the vernacular using English letters and numbers which convey specific sounds/letters not found in Arabic and hard to replicate using English letters alone[15]. Glitter also blogs in Modern Standard Arabic- typically when relaying emails, articles and other copy/pasted information. At times Glitter will use a combination of all three of these within one post and possibly one sentence, depending on the post. Most of her readers who choose to leave comments on her blog also use some combination of the three languages (or might use only one or two, but likely understand all three or some combination) which seems to be quite common on many of the Khaleeji blogs which I came across (that is not to say that there were not purely English or purely Arabic blogs, but many included some combination and more specifically transliterated Khaleeji dialect using English letters and numbers). When I asked Glitter why she chooses to blog using the combination of languages mentioned above, she replied:

> There is no specific reason for which I chose to blog in this language.
> Maybe because that I first stumbled on blogs written in english.
> However I do blog in Arabic when I feel like it.
> Whatever I'm in the mood for ;) [16]

Glitter's choice to use a combination of these languages implies that she is catering to an audience similar to herself- likely Khaleeji women in their late teens to

[15] For more, see Palfreyman and Khalil (2003). Transliterated Arabic using English letters and numbers seems to have developed and become quite popular in the past two decades across the Arabic-speaking countries as new technologies like text-messaging and instant messaging have developed along with new communication technologies like the internet and cellular telephone.

[16] All quotes and excerpts from both Glitter's and Silly Bahraini Girl's blogs as well as from Glitter's interview are copied verbatim, except for words or notes placed in [brackets] where I have either translated a word or made attempts to explain things more clearly for readers.

mid-thirties who are able to understand English, Arabic, and the Khaleeji/Kuwaiti dialect. Glitter, her commenters, and readers belong to the (imagined?) 'community' of the Khaleeji blogosphere- most of whom are also likely women and Kuwaiti based on comment analysis. Most of the readers who leave comments on Glitter's blog do so under feminine names/pseudonyms, identify as being 'female,' and/or use language associated with being feminine/female.

Motivation

Even though Glitter discusses a range of topics (which I will get to) on her blog, her main motivation for starting a blog seems to be so she could write about her experience of having an arranged marriage. Here is an excerpt from her blog on November 30, 2009:

> When I first came into the blog world, I noticed that the main concern of most of the girls is love, and finding Mr. Right. They expect to live a romantic fairy-tale, and so did I at one point of my life. Romantic movies and fictional novels have distorted our way of thinking. It's not all candy and roses in real life. I see girls all the time lose themselves in the pursuit of love, compromising their way of life for the sake of getting a chance to live a fairy-tale.
>
> This inspired me ..
>
> and my main reason for starting this blog was to project a happy image of a family arranged marriage. All I wanted to do was give hope that eventually you can find love. Not by breaking the rules and running behind your family's back. [The opposite] find love with their blessings. And I tried the best I can, to convey that no one is perfect. I wrote about my journey as openly as I can. I wrote about the good things, the bad things, and even my fears and doubts. After all… [everyone] has their own problems.

From this excerpt we can discern that GG, seemingly like many bloggers in her cohort, was once concerned with finding love and romance on her own, which goes against dominant Muslim/Khaleeji social norms. These perceptions of love and romance could

very well come from their portrayal in much of popular Western media and have influenced Khaleeji women's ideas of romance. However, Glitter seemed to resign herself from finding the right man for herself, and turned to her family and socially supported arranged marriage instead. Because GG views her experience as having been successful thus far, she began her blog in order to support the traditional practice of family arranged marriage for other Kuwaiti women who are trying to find love by "breaking the rules" of their conservative society and "running behind their family's back."

When I asked Glitter why she decided to begin blogging, she confirmed that she turned to blogging in order to be a role model for other women who are 'confused' about love and marriage, and whether or not they should attempt to find it on their own, or follow societal traditions and rely on their family. Here is Glitter's response from the interview:

> *When I first discovered the blogging world, I noticed a lot of girls talk about love, and their dream of being swept away. Each one of them wanted to live her own version of a fairy tale and so was I. In my late teens I started my own quest of looking for my prince charming and instead all I found was heart-ache. and I stopped believing in Love all together. It was only when I raised my white flag and stopped looking that God sent me this perfect man in the most conventional way ever-Arranged marriage.
>
> So I started this blog to tell girls out there that in our conservative community, arranged marriages do work…

In her interview response, when asked about why she feels motivated to blog, Glitter states:

> It's my personal space, where I can let my hair down, and talk about intimate moments in my life. Moments so shocking, disturbing, or even personal that I can't share with anyone close. Yet I choose to open up here because it is always

> easier to confess to a stranger, and it's always good to see how readers react to my posts and read their un-biased comments

As stated earlier, Glitter often blogs about a story (often regarding love and relationships) in several segmented posts (similar to chapters, often leaving her readers with a hook at the end). She first begins her blog with her own story "Chemical Attraction, Physical Reaction" in eleven different posts over the course of three months, with other posts on differing subjects (updating her readers on why she is away, making interesting observations, and side-stories) interspersed throughout the story posts. Glitter begins her very first post (on February 27, 2008) starting with the initial segment of "Chemical Attraction, Physical Reaction," which introduces her readers to her story, and her decision to agree to an arranged marriage:

> Fairytale love, blekh! It's just a myth to help sell movies.
> In the past, I believed my prince charming is just around the corner. I opened up my heart to potential suiters, thinking each time that he may be THE ONE! .. But no, that one true love, the so-called soul-mate was just a far-fetched dream.
> I agreed finally to an arranged marriage. His sister saw me in a gathering and recommended me to him. He came and saw me in college. He was Ok. Not as tall as I hoped, but that's fine. He was no McDreamy, but he had this cute dimple when he smiled. We exchanged pleasantaries and went our separate ways..
> When I returned home, Mom told me that his mother already called to set a date for khe6ba [the engagement]. "*He obviously liked what he saw*", she said with a wink.
> So before going any further, I went straight to my father, he had already asked around about the guy and got positive feedback. But I needed to know one more thing, so I went up to him and asked him straight up:
> " Dad, is he **rich**? "
> (I figured that since i didn't find love, i desereved at least to live in luxury)!

In this post, Glitter introduces us to the man that her family picked to become her future husband. Glitter explains the social process of how it happened- his sister sees her and recommends her to her brother, the families get in touch with each other, they see each other for the first time (Glitter is not terribly impressed with his looks, while he

"obviously liked what he saw"), and they get feedback about each other from others in the community (note importance of family/personal reputation here). Glitter, knowing nothing about her potential fiancé and resigned to finding love, asks her father if he is rich, which is telling of what is important to her since she cannot find love on her own.

For the remainder of the posts of her love-story, Glitter blogs about her engagement- getting to know her fiancé and his family, making wedding preparations; and she shares her thoughts and experiences of the process ending with the finale of the wedding party. Following her initial story, Glitter returns from her honeymoon and discusses settling into married life, once again sharing her experiences with her audience as she gets to know her husband. Aside from her own story, Glitter discusses the story of her cousin "Sweetness" who is pursued by a potential suitor. Throughout her blog, Glitter acts as a matchmaker to her single friends and family members, always looking for potential matches. Peppered throughout these stories, Glitter offers snippets of her life- a car crash, a brief battle with an illness, her travels abroad, her daily happenings in Kuwait, TV, blog, and book interests, and so on. At times, Glitter also acts as an adviser- providing helpful feedback to readers who ask for her advice and the advice of her readers when she posts their stories and problems on her blog. Some of these include issues of relationships between different cultural groups, issues about failing marriages, and domestic violence. Each of Glitter's posts, while fresh, witty, and fun, provide a window to some of the underlying social norms and expectations which face Khaleeji women, especially in the context of love, relationships, and marriage. These topics are typically considered 'private' and were/are not commonly discussed outside of a close

circle of friends and family. Throughout her blog, GG politicizes previously 'private' non-political issues (love, relationships, marriage, etc.) and makes them public through her blog and interaction with her readers.

Identity

Glitter's personal identity outside of a general description is unknown and it is clear from her blog that remaining anonymous is imperative to her. When I asked her why she chooses to blog anonymously in the interview, Glitter responded, "*I blog anonymously because it gives me the freedom to write whatever i want without being judged. I want to keep my personal life private, and share only what I choose to share." By using a pseudonym, GG is able to freely discuss' private' and often socially taboo issues in a public forum without facing social repercussions.

There are a number of places in her blog which highlight the importance of remaining unidentified. The first time Glitter makes this clear is in her post on March 12, 2008, only a couple weeks after she began blogging. The post is titled "OH GOD!" and she only writes one line- **"I think my identity has been compromised!"** Because Glitter belongs to a culturally conservative society, and chooses to adhere to many of the dominant social norms, she faces very real consequences should her real identity become known. The 'private' issues she chooses to publicize on her blog likely go against how she was socialized, and she could face the consequences of personal ridicule and damage to her reputation and her family's in the process. Because of this, it is imperative for her identity to remain unknown.

This particular blog entry, on March 12, 2008, has 28 comments (as of the time I am writing this chapter), which reflect a number of responses- from some commenters relating that this has happened to them as well, some asking why this is an issue, and others telling her to keep blogging anyway. One comment states "Kuwait [is a small place], everyone knows everyone, no matter how anonymous they try to be. Unfortunately, all bloggers learned that the hard way." This comment reflects dominant social discourses in Kuwait and the realities of protecting family honor, due to difficult social consequences. Another comment offers the solution of making her blog private, while another assures her that she is not doing anything wrong and that she should return to blogging. By stating that Glitter is not doing anything wrong, this commenter challenges dominant social norms as it is implied that she supports discussing 'private' issues in a public forum, and that it is nothing to be ashamed of, contrary to the norm. The last comment is from Glitter herself, as she states, "For all of you who missed me… thank you THANK YOU… I really missed my space here." A few days later after this incident, Glitter felt it was safe to post again:

> ***Glitter opens the door slooooooowly. Carefully sticks her head out and look around… As she peeks through she finds that everything looks ok. Nothing happened. No one came busting the door open and exposing her, praise the Lord. So maybe it's safe to come out now.**
> **She bravely steps out side. Stands still for a second and breathes in the fresh air of freedom ***

This excerpt reflects the idea that GG is conditioned by dominant social norms, and yet still wants the freedom to discuss 'private' issues openly without the need to self-censor.

Weeks later, (March 24th) Glitter recognizes a dilemma, asking her readers- should she blog in English or Arabic? How should she use her blog? Should she continue

to tell her story or should she use it to tell confessions? She questions her own motives for keeping a blog, “Why I'm I writing this blog anyway? Will it help to get it off my chest? How?” She also wonders about what her husband (referred to as X throughout her blog) and parents would think of her blog if they read it and GG stresses, “Let’s just pray that my identity remains anonymous!” Again, it is clear from this quote that GG must continue to remain anonymous so that she does not upset her family and loved ones. While her readers provide plenty of feedback about what language to use (most suggest English or an English/Arabic mix), one anonymous commenter suggests:

> Writing anonymously can help you let out your feelings and help you feel better about yourself, so as long as you're careful about remaining anonymous, this blog can really help you.
> As for which language, write in whatever makes you feel comfortable, the way you started is perfect..
> Maybe you can confess as you tell your story? Whatever makes you happy comes through to the readers :) Keep up the great job!

This comment promotes free speech and the right to publicize ‘private’ matters, but also reflects an adherence to dominant socio-cultural norms since s/he cautions GG to keep her identity anonymous.

In another post (September 8, 2008) Glitter blogs about a situation where she and her sister were at a large gathering and were called over to a group of ladies deep in conversation, only to find out that they were talking about her blog and speculating about her true identity. After this gathering, Glitter decides that she must run home and delete her blog so that her sister will not read it and her identity becomes known. In response to this post, readers leave 130 comments all discussing her story and what Glitter should do; some suggesting that she make her blog private. In her next post, ten days later, Glitter

weighs the options- should she make her blog private, make it open to only a handful of readers, or continue to blog openly?

Almost a year after she began blogging (January 22, 2009), Glitter realizes that her sister has discovered that she is Glitter, as her sister uses her computer and Glitter is still signed into her blog account:

> She looks up from my laptop, smile devilishly, and announces:
> "***U're Glitter!*** "… Her smile broadens: "***Don't beat yourself up, I knew it was you*** **[for a long time]…**
> I feel like someone just hit me over the head with a sledge hammer!
> I stare at A7lahom- my sister, in total shock: "***You KNEW it was me and you didn't say anything??*** "
> She shrugs nonchalantly and says:" ***I figured it would be best not to let you know I know so you can write with no pressure***"
> "***But A7lahom, if I know something about you I would run and share it with you. How could you keep this to yourself and not tell me?***"
> "***I'm a good keeper of secrets***", she winks. "***I didn't feel the need to tell you madam you obviously cherich your anynomousity***"…
> Now I trust A7lahom with my life, and she already does know all my secrets..
> But the idea of me being exposed- even if it's by her, is a bit disturbing :-/

Clearly, GG is disturbed that even someone as close to her as her sister has discovered that she is Glitter, but it does not seem to affect how she blogs or their personal relationship.

In one post (November 30, 2009), Glitter confronts some of the gossip and rude comments which she has heard circulating about herself and her blog. These comments accuse her of lying and making-up her stories. She writes:

> you can imagine the hurt, and disappointment I feel when I hear people talking about me… I opened up my life to share and hoped it will be of a help to anyone who needed it. And instead, this is the feedback I'm getting… What is really heart-breaking is that this awful crusade to "**Discover & Distroy Glitter**" is being launched by a girl who I used to [confide in]. What did I do to deserve all of this? So to her I say, -Me being clever, and hiding my tracks well, doesn't mean that I am lier. -You being unable to find out who I am, doesn't mean I

> fabricated my stories. And to the other girl who claims she knows me, I say you are the lier. How pathetic it is to go around saying you know who I am while you have no clue?.. Wallah when I heard this [gossip/lies] I was laughing so hard at how desparate you are to be known as the one who knows Glitter. If you really know the real Glitter, then why don't you tell your friends my real identity?

It is obvious from this excerpt that GG is hurt by readers who do not believe that she writes the truth and she feels threatened by those who are attempting to expose her true identity. Glitter goes on in the post attempting to brush off her hurt and anger, deciding to continue to blog for her fans and for herself, despite gossip and threats from those attempting to reveal her identity. In my email interview with Glitter, I asked her if she did ever self-censor on her blog because of the potential risks of revealing her identity. Here is Glitter's response:

> I do censor what I write most of the time. I change bits and pieces of the story without ruining the main idea of it just to protect my anonymity. It is very hard but I have to do it. I admit it's a lot of work and sometimes I wish I just can say well this is who I am, but how can I? I have revealed too much: intimate moments with my husband, private discussions with my family, embarassing secrets about my past. I said too much and now there's no turning back.

This response once again supports the fact that Glitter feels the need to protect her identity, while at the same time, she wants a space to vent about important 'private' issues in her life which she finds is difficult to do in other spaces given the societal norms which she is subject(ed) to. It seems that even using a pseudonym, is not always enough to protect Glitter's reputation, and this implies, once again, the possible severity of consequences which may affect her should her true identity become known. At the time this is being written, Glitter continues to blog openly under her pseudonym, risking the possibility that one day her identity may be compromised.

When I asked Glitter, through the email interview, how her identity as an Arab woman is reflected in her blog, she replied:

> My identity as a khaleeji woman is reftected clearly in my blog. You can see it through the posts I write, the opinions I express.
> I am not one of those women who are submissive to their fathers, brothers and husbands. Nor am I very liberal and outgoing.
> I believe every woman should be strong, form her own opinions, and still be coy and feminine.
> Does that make sense much ? *smile shyly*

I find Glitter's response interesting because on the one hand she attempts to break the Western stereotype of submissiveness often associated with Arab women, stating that she is "not one of those women who [is] submissive to their fathers, brothers and husbands," which also conveys her attempts to challenge patriarchal discourses. However, on the other hand, she states that she is not liberal. Instead, she takes the middle ground, and chooses to challenge some Western stereotypes while reifying other gender norms like being "feminine" and "coy." I believe that Glitter portrays a number of these characteristics through her blog quite well, hopefully busting some of the Western stereotypes which paint all Arab women as submissive, oppressed and in need of being saved (see Abu Lughod 2002).

Blogging 'Community'

Although it is clear from the excerpt above that not all of Glitter's readers believe she is who she claims to be, and do not have her best interest in mind, the majority of comments following her posts seem to be very supportive. Often commenters compliment Glitter's posts and many seem to identify with her experiences and stories as they state that they can relate. Many describe their own experiences (see example in

section below, from post “In the Name of Love”). Glitter will frequently pose questions to her readers which they will answer in the comments section. One example is from her post on September 9, 2009, as Glitter discusses a short TV series (common during the month of Ramadan) titled “Om ilBanat,” or “Mother of the Girls.” She discusses the characters of two of the lead women on the show- Sherifa, who reminds her of her own mother and goes “beyond the call of duty” doing things for her husband, and Bashayer who is selfish and the direct opposite. Most of the commenters following this post said that they aren’t like either, or that they would like to be like Sherifa, but many said they lack the patience, or as Glitter states in response to one commenter:

> I sincere;y don't think that a Sherifa can make a guy happy.
> Wallah sij [Really], they need a woman who is interesting, un-predictable, keeps them on their toes.... Not some form of a maid :-/

Here, Glitter is challenging social norms by seeking an alternative female role-model for herself, which converges from dominant Khaleeji society’s conception of a ‘good’ and ‘submissive’ role model through Sherifa.

At times (as noted above with the English/Arabic example), Glitter will ask for her reader’s advice on a certain matter and they typically provide what advice they can. Readers will also email Glitter about certain issues which they may be having and she responds to them and sometimes blogs about it with their permission, opening up to potentially receive advice from any of her readers. One example of this, is from her post on February 17, 2009 titled “A Bubble Burst” where she ‘publishes’ a letter from a woman seeking advice from Glitter and her readers regarding her marriage. The letter outlines her problem of falling mutually head-over-heels in love with her boyfriend and

eventually getting married, only to become bored and dissatisfied with her marriage. In response to this letter Glitter's readers offer all kinds of advice on what this anonymous married woman should do. Many suggest that she should try all kinds of things to rekindle their love and that initial 'spark' at the beginning of their relationship. By keeping her blog public and opening it up to share with other women's love/relationship/sex issues, GG is further publicizing 'private' issues and clearly feels comfortable enough to do this within the blogging community to which she believes she belongs to.

Another example of how Glitter interacts with other bloggers is through 'tagging' each other, and giving each other blogging awards. Some bloggers will 'tag' (a virtual shout-out hyperlinking to another blog or website) Glitter in their own blog-posts, and Glitter will do the same, engaging with other bloggers and the content of their blogs, often in a way of promoting them. She does this in her post from March 4, 2009, "For You, With Love," where she responds to a question asked by blogger Technogal who asks, "Which blog do you read/visit most frequently?" Glitter responds by saying:

> Well, my lovely Techno..
> The answer to that would be **Estekana**'s blog…
> i've been a silent reader of hers for ages.
> She amazes me with her unwavering belief in God, her sense of humor, her optimism.
> I always feel good after reading her posts.

This exemplifies GG's often intimate relationship and respect for her readers and other bloggers like her. Glitter has also received a number of blog 'awards' from other bloggers which typically involve some kind of question-answer component. One such award, "Honest Scrap" was presented by two fellow bloggers, on January 9, 2009. According to

the post, the recipient must- **“ a) List 10 honest things about yourself - and make it interesting, even if you have to dig deep!” and “ b) Pass the award on to 7 bloggers that you feel embody the spirit of the Honest Scrap.”** Glitter does this, providing her readers with a few more tidbits about herself including the fact that she “can’t lie to save [her] life,” although she does admit to **“**editing the truth here abit to protect [herself] from being exposed.”

Another aspect of Glitter’s blog which conveys her relationship with her readers is the small awards ceremonies or a running “Honorary List” which she provides for her blog, giving a shout-out to certain readers as her web-counter tracks hits and the readership of her blog. As her web-counter displays what she believes to be a significant number of hits (i.e. 1000, 5000, 10000, 100000, etc.) Glitter will display a list of names of her readers who email her and sometimes take screen-shots to show that her blog has achieved a record number of hits. GG provides a list of people who were her 10,000th guest, and so on, she does so in a very festive manner, setting the tone of achievement with “drumrolls” and “lazer shows” often thanking her fans. On her post on May 25, 2008 GG writes, “Thank you all for your love and support :-*” These award ceremonies reflect the pride that GG has in the rising popularity of her blog and her seemingly close relationship with and appreciation for many of her readers.

Blogs like Glitter’s provide a communal space (in the comments section of each post) where women can engage with issues collectively. Because of the many social and cultural barriers which limit many Khaleeji women from participating in dominant

publics (both Western and mainstream Khaleeji publics) and lack of recognition for the contributions which Khaleeji women make on the ground (see Chapter 2), I believe that such virtual spaces are tremendously significant and should not be overlooked. My main point here is not that women *always* use these kinds of spaces as alternative publics to discuss such topics, but that they *can*, and *often do*. Whether or not they recognize their own contributions is another question for another time.

Dominant Socio-cultural Discourses

Reading Glitter's blog, I feel the most significant underlying discourses in her blog which shape both Glitter and her many of her readers is their often implicit engagement with dominant Kuwaiti/Khaleeji social norms and expectations. This includes conceptions of love, relationships, marriage, family involvement in arranging marriages; cultural/social perceptions of what is 'good' or 'bad'; the role of Islam, how others might perceive oneself, and many others. It is clear from reading comments, that there is a large spectrum of views and conceptions of what is considered socially or culturally 'normal' which affects how one thinks and acts in dominant Khaleeji society. This is shaped by one's family (a core unit of Khaleeji society), friends, education (possible Western or Islamic influences), religion (Islam is specifically influential in many aspects of Khaleeji society), class (due to the influence and power which comes from having money and a particular background), nationality/ethnicity/race (often a point of prejudice in the Gulf, especially for foreign workers), tradition, history, politics, technology, media, Western influences (especially through media and popular culture), and so on. There are many examples on Glitter's blog where she and some of her readers

contest social norms, as many of the excerpts so far should illustrate, but they also indicate how dominant social norms and expectations are reaffirmed in their comments and through their shared experiences.

Throughout Glitter's story regarding her arranged marriage with her husband X, Glitter demonstrates the importance of maintaining her personal reputation as well as that of her family which is vital for many Khaleeji women in her position. Glitter includes her family in every important step of her engagement, and respects her family's decision about choosing X as her fiancé, especially as she gets to know him. GG's family and their opinions are important to her, which reifies dominant Khaleeji discourses around the importance of family as the main social unit. It is also startlingly clear from many of Glitter's posts, just how privileged she is in many ways, and how important money, fashion, and appearance are to her. It is also clear that she feels a certain entitlement to having the best in life[17]. In one entry, on March 9, 2008, as Glitter is at the start of her engagement and just beginning to make wedding plans, she consults with her parents about the wedding:

> "***Mom, dad, I would like to have a big wedding pls***"
> "***Sure habeebti***", dad said "***anything you want***"
> "***Are you sure that's what you want?*** ", mom tried reasoning " ***Don't you want us to give you all that money u're willing to spend on one night to go buy yourself some piece of jewellery that'll last you a lifetime?***"
> The offer was very sensible, I could throw a small intimate party, and save the rest of the money for myself.
> But no, I wanted my dream wedding party for I have planned it for ever…
> Dad whisked us- *my mother, sister and I*- to rome. I went straight to this designer I love, explained what I had in mind, got fitted and had all my measurments

[17] I find is the case for many Kuwaiti youths, similar to Glitter, and came across this in other blogs which I looked at. Discourses around money/materialism/neo-liberal seem to be quite prevalent in the Arab Gulf states. A feeling of entitlement may come from their position as being Kuwaitis or Khaleejis (and the exclusivity of benefits which come with citizenship of some Khaleeji states) over other Arabs or expats which may have negative stereotypes associated with them.

> taken, and they promised me the dress will be ready long before the wedding date… Then we went to Paris for some more shopping. Dad was happily driving us around and went everywhere with us. Anything I liked was purchased without hesitation. It was truelly the most amazing trip I had with my parents :-)

Here her sense of entitlement and the influence of her family's wealth are apparent, as is the importance of having the best in life. Another example of this is when she discusses her dowry of 4,000 KD (~$13,400) and *shabka* (a set of jewelry given to the bride during the engagement party, similar to an engagement ring but extending to a full set of jewelry including ring, necklace, bracelet, and earrings) with her mother one day, as she is very disappointed with both:

> I'm really disappointed and I feel un-appreciated.
> I go to my mother to talk it over. She assures me that it's ok, hermahar [dowry] was just one laira thahab [of very little value; was just for tradition, and was a common practice, as it wasn't really related to value]. I tell her that our time is different, what was acceptable then is not acceptable now.
> She then shifted my attention to the shabka [jewelry set]: "***And your shabka is quite AMAZING, this long necklace is gorgeous with its big-cut diamonds, it couldn't have cost less than 15 thousand*** [~$50,000]. ***Ok, so maybe its not to your taste, but it's a piece you can be proud of***" (March 21, 2008).

This exchange with her mother shows how social expectations of what counts as an 'acceptable' dowry have changed over time, and reflects the importance of showing one's worth through material objects such as jewelry[18].

Glitter illustrates her expectation for the best in life once again when she is returning from her honeymoon and she recalls the good time she had with X:

> The last forty days went by like a dream. Not only did X not disappoint me, he went above and beyond, he exceeded my expectations and treated me like a spoilt little princess- *as well he should!*
> First class tickets, the most luxurious hotels, the finest restaurants- that all was expected. But him catering to my needs, looking after me, trying his best to please me- that just felt great, I like being pampered and he was doing an

[18] I also want to point out that this recent change in what constitutes as being appropriate values associated with a Khaleeji woman's dowry, also seems to be a trend in the West, as discourses associated with Weddings seem to have become more focused on materialism as well.

> awesome job of it.
> Shopping in BARNEYS NY, strolling down Rodeo Drive, Disney-ing in Orlando, diving in Cancun.... *sigh* (May 7, 2008).

This excerpt shows that an extravagant honeymoon was expected, and is likely the norm for women in a similar position as GG. From this description of her honeymoon, Glitter is clearly not 'in need of saving', or being mistreated by her husband, but is respected and cherished, which possibly breaks some Western stereotypes associated with Arab machismo. Although these excerpts from Glitter's blog may reify some Western conceptions of what Arab women from the Gulf are like (rich and spoiled), it may also challenge ideas of how some Arab women are treated, and the ways that gender dynamics might be conveyed in Western media. This is not to say that all Arab women are in the same position as Glitter, as their experiences are extremely diverse and we should not rely on stereotypes.

In order to further illustrate some of the varied experiences of Khaleeji women, I want to return to the ways in which Khaleeji women's blogs like Glitter's portray a virtual community/alternative public for Khaleeji women with access. In one of her most recent posts (April 10, 2010) titled "In the Name of Love," Glitter relays a story about a pious woman who grew up in a religious home and fell in love with a man who said that he would not marry her unless she removed her hijab (veil), which she decided to do. At the end of the post Glitter asks her readers, "*Have you ever done something stupid in the name of Love?*" The feedback from her commenters is varied in response to what the woman in the story did, but some do tell of 'stupid' things which they have done in the name of love as well. One commenter offers her opinion regarding the woman in the story who unveiled for love:

> I dont want to judge anyone...maybe she was only wearing it for family and actually took it off 'behind their backs'? Not every mit7ajba [woman who wears the veil/covers] is a mit7ajba... we all dont know their circumstances so i dont think everyone should be so harsh on their relationship. Good luck to them both...

As is the case in many comment sections following Glitter's posts, her readers not only interact with Glitter, but often with each other. One anonymous commenter, in response to the question which Glitter posed (stated above) relayed her own experience:

> Love is blind and stupid indeed
> my parents told me he's trouble but I wouldnt listen. They told me hes no good but I insisted.
> now I hide my bruises, tears wetting my pillow every night.
> I wish I listened.

This comment not only publicizes the 'private' issue of domestic violence, it also reifies the dominant social norm which advocates the importance of family. Another anonymous commenter left a comment about a similarly hurtful experience:

> In fear of being dumped,
> I let him have me.
> And guess what..
> he dumped me after all.
> That was 10 years ago, and my heart stops still whenever I remember, and I cry and pray for Gods forgivness night and day.

Again, this comment relays a women's taboo experience with pre-marital sex, and the consequences and guilt she feels for going against dominant social norms supported by Islam and Khaleeji society which dictate remaining 'pure' until marriage and upholding family honor.

In response to the last comment, another anonymous commenter attempts to console "Anonymous #2":

> 10 years is a really long time ago! and Allah [God] suba7anah is Ghafoor [merciful], [and no human is free of sin]. If it's tawba na9oo7, He already forgave you:) Don't ever think inna maybe masami7ach, lana you should trust that He did

in order to really be forgiven…

This comment offers support, while the commenter still adheres to hegemonic social norms.

This exchange also exemplifies some of the interactions that occur amongst Glitter and some of her readers in the comments section of each post. Sometimes people debate differing opinions on a subject, but generally they are quite supportive of one another. It should also be noted that many commenters use pseudonyms or leave comments anonymously as is the case above, which I believe allows them to discuss certain 'taboo' and 'private' issues which might threaten their personal reputations in other forums and often have very real repercussions for them in such a conservative patriarchal society. As noted above, some of these issues include sex before marriage and domestic violence which are issues associated with social stigmas and or are usually not addressed in civil courts (considered personal issues), at least not favorably for women in such a highly Islamic and patriarchal societies. The fact that such spaces as Glitter's blog (among other Khaleeji women's blogs) are providing 'safe' spaces to discuss important 'taboo' issues which clearly affect many women, should not be overlooked. These spaces allow for women to discuss issues openly without the need to self-censor their feelings and experiences. They often receive support from others, and find that they are often not alone in their experiences.

As I was reading through Glitter's blog, I found one post (on October 14, 2008) particularly relevant while analyzing GG's posts reflecting social norms and expectations. Glitter discusses an email exchange with one of her anonymous readers,

identified only as “Mr. A,” who believes that Glitter is challenging Kuwaiti/Khaleeji social norms. Glitter begins her post by questioning his statement:

> Hmmm, is it really so?.. Do I "**challenge our societal norms**" ?
> This is what some email is blatantly accusing me of.
> And " **.. where else would it come from if not out of Kuwa**it" !!
> What does he mean?
> Who is this "**A**"?
> The email was beautifully written, stating that he liked my blog and wishing me and X well. But the sentence mentioned above threw me off a bit and made me think…
>
> The next day, I check my inbox, and there it was, another email from Mr. "**A**"…
> Nothing could have prepared me for what I read next....
> Listen to this:
> " **Yes it was a compliment; I don't think the (insert name of his country) mindset is quite ready for such openness. I think it's a healthy thing in a society to be able to look with a humorous/critical eye and learn from our mistakes and scenarios. And it is well known that Kuwaitis in general are more open-minded than most Khaleejis, and each state has it's own experience and peculiarities.**"
> Then he goes off and tells me his story. How he had been studying abroad for many many years now. How the thought of him getting married soon never crossed his mind, let alone an arranged marriage to a complete starnger! But reading my story kind of sold it to him !! (*Yaaay Me!!*) hehehee
> So when the opportunity, of a similar situation to mine, came his way he took it. And now after all these years he's finally engaged and on his way to be a married man within the next few months. :")
> " **I guess it takes a LOT of courage and blind faith to make that big step, but I firmly believe it should be done sooner than later, and when one has the backing of his family then there is little reason to delay (unless there really is major incompatibility between the parties).**
> **Sooo you see how your lil blog did a bit of good and touched someone's life far faar away. Small world.** "
> I swear to God I can feel my heart warm up with each word, and my smile is growing bigger bigger with each sentence. This has got to be one of the most precious emails I have ever recieved.
> He ends it with:
> "**I hope that my future bride's experience is as happy as yours :D** "
> Needless to say that that email made my day. I walked around all day with a happy glow in my heart. His sincere words lifted up my spirits and for that I am greatly thankful, and forever grateful.

We can discern a number of things from Glitter’s exchange with “Mr. A.” First, it is apparent that not all of Glitter’s readers are female. Second, Kuwait is once again

recognized as being a more "open-minded" compared to other Khaleeji states. Third, I gather that "Mr. A" is quite moderate like GG and believes that some Khaleeji social norms like arranged marriage have their place, however, he also seems impressed with the fact that Glitter and other bloggers like her are able to use their virtual 'personal' spaces to engage with others about 'private' issues and make them public. At the same time, "Mr. A" and GG reject certain Western norms like finding love before marriage and one's own partner, which they feel do not work as easily in their experiences because of the implications these have on them when veering from dominant norms.

There are multiple ways in which Glitter and her readers have challenged social norms in Glitter's blog. With the choice to remain anonymous, which many do, they have been able to discuss changing conceptions of relationships and marriage and gender roles in societies in the Arab Gulf and more broadly. While Glitter may be reaffirming the social norm of arranged marriage which has recently become less popular among Khaleeji youth, she does so in a way which is open to other's views and experiences that may differ from hers. Glitter and her readers have shared their desires, experiences of dating, sex before marriage, problems within their relationships and within their families, all of which are 'private' issues, and typically not discussed in public arenas. As I have mentioned before, these discourses may not be considered political by many people's standards, however, I believe these women are taking a risk by sharing their stories and experiences, slowly making 'the private political' (similarly to producer on Heya TV; see Chapter 2) by addressing issues which have been discounted by hegemonic publics. These issues become political because they are made public and considered important to

many of these women who are happy to finally address many of these 'private' issues which greatly affect them daily and have either been discounted in other publics, or their views on the matter have gone unrecognized.

"Silly Bahraini Girl"

The second blog which I analyzed was started by an anonymous Bahraini woman who uses the pseudonym Silly Bahraini Girl (also the title of her blog; http://sillybahrainigirl.blogspot.com/). In a later post, her identity as Amira Al-Hussani is revealed (which I will discuss later). From what I have gathered from reading her blog, I believe that Silly Bahraini Girl (SBG) may have begun blogging in her late twenties to early thirties and is now somewhere in her thirties. When she first began blogging in early December of 2004, SBG was married, living in Bahrain, and working as a senior news editor for the English daily newspaper- *Gulf Daily News*. Silly Bahraini Girl seems to be close with her husband and family, and has many friends, acquaintances, and business contacts. It was also clear from reading her blog that she is well educated; she states in one blog that she went to private British schools in Bahrain, and tells her audience that she excelled as a student, which is obvious from her smart, witty, and often sarcastic writing.

Sometime in 2005, Silly Bahraini Girl and her husband moved to Hamilton, Ontario for three years while her husband pursued a graduate degree at McMaster University. During this time, Amira mostly worked at home freelancing for different newspapers, and became an editor for *Global Voices* online. She also was able to travel to different blogging conferences and worked in New York City for one month, writing as a

liaison for the United Nations. Upon the completion of her husband's degree, they returned back to Bahrain in December of 2008,where they continue to live.

Silly Bahraini Girl began her blog in December of 2004 and has posted anywhere between 0 to 48 times within one month; often posting multiple times in one day. The number of posts per year also varies greatly, as she posted a total of 217 times in 2005, and as of mid-April 2010 has only posted twice this year.

As I made my way through SBG's blog, I have come to the conclusion that her blog is quite popular not only within the Bahraini blogosphere, but also perhaps in some more specific networks in the Gulf and globally. Like Glitter, SBG leaves space for comments after each post, and from what I have read, Amira's readership includes Bahraini and Khaleeji bloggers, Arabs living abroad, expatriates living in Bahrain and the Gulf, and people living in a number of countries across the world including the USA, New Zealand , Canada, and a number of European countries. SBG often replies/interacts with her commenters in each comment section following her posts, answering questions and going back and forth in dialogue. Often, because Silly Bahraini Girl can be very provocative and outspoken on her blog, commenters will challenge her views and even spark heated debates over the myriad of issues which SBG discusses in her blog.

While I know that the layout/format of Silly Bahraini Girl's blog has changed numerous times since she began blogging in 2004 (from what she has mentioned in some posts), the layout of her blog at this time is clean and simple. At the top of her blog is her titlebar/heading which states the name of her blog "Silly Bahraini Girl" in white lettering over a graphic of a blue sky with a smattering of white clouds. Below this is a dark blue

tool bar with links to her "Home" page with her most recent posts, and "Archives". The overall color scheme of her blog is navy blue, light blue, and white, and she mostly uses black lettering in her posts. A right-hand sidebar/column displays a number of *Global Voices* icons and a link to Amira's *Twitter* updates along with a small headshot of Amira with a Bahraini flag in the lower right corner. This column also provides links to SBG's archival folders. At the top of this column, under the heading of her blog, Amira provides a small blurb about her blog:

> *Silly Bahraini Girl* is a blog for all of us - women blessed with a brain which ticks and a heart that throbs. A Bahraini girl is never silly but there are some factions out there who insist that we are not given our place in the society. To those, I say, HARD LUCK!

This blurb indicates SBG's intentions for her blog as well as the fact that she is using the pseudonym "Silly" Bahraini "Girl" as a parody; as she is in fact an intelligent woman using her blog as a space to publically discuss political issues, especially those affecting women.

At the bottom of the page of her blog, SBG displays a disclaimer for her readers:

> *WARNING: THIS IS A SILLY BLOG. YOU MAY CONTINUE SURFING AT YOUR OWN RISK. SILLY GIRL IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY MISUNDERSTANDINGS WHICH MAY OR MAY NOT ARISE. DISAGREEMENTS ARE HEALTHY. KEEP THEM UP. FEEL FREE TO USE PROFANITY. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IS GUARANTEED AS LONG AS YOUR VIEWS ARE IN LINE WITH THE CONSTITUTION OF THE LAND OF THE LORD.

This sarcastic "disclaimer" suggests that Amira is open to healthy debate/disagreements that might take place on her blog and she supports freedom of expression, which is a main political concern of hers throughout her blog. It is likely that this disclaimer is also used as a satirical illustration of her attempts to protect herself from the Bahraini state's

censorship acts and from the possible repercussions which may come from her criticism of the state and at times, Islamic practices.

There is a great deal of content on Amira's blog covering a whole range of diverse topics including local politics, human rights, violence against women, cartoons, daily happenings and frustrations, sex and relationships, and so on. I cannot hope to cover each of these in the scope of this thesis. Therefore, in SBG's blog, I will focus on Amira's take on the subjects of blogging, identity, censorship, free-speech, and cyberactivism as the main discourses; while social norms and expectations, sex and relationships, feminism, human rights, race/ethnicity, religion, politics, money/material, and so on, as are all are underlying discourses influencing the themes which I choose to focus on in her blog. I will focus on the subjects of censorship, free-speech and cyberactivism because these are the themes which Amira focuses on herself, and are part of her main motivation for blogging, unlike Glitter whose main motivation is to blog about love, relationships, and other 'private' issues.

Like Glitter, Silly Bahraini Girl blogs in a combination of languages- English (British), transliterated Khaleeji Arabic, and Modern Standard Arabic. The vast majority of her posts are in English, although occasionally she does use some transliterated Khaleeji words and Arabic. Some posts have more Arabic (typically copy/pasted articles, emails, cartoons, chat exchanges) which SBG almost always translates into English, for her non-Arabic reading/speaking audience members. Her readers/commenters mostly write in English, however, there are also combinations of the languages above, and some choose to comment only in transliterated Khaleeji Arabic or in Arabic. Because Amira

writes mostly in English and often takes the time to translate Arabic, and explain Arab politics and social norms, I may at times classify her as a bridge-blogger[19]. Although, at different times, she may also be classified as an activist/cyberactivist, supporting causes she believes in like the right to free-speech, as well as a public-sphere blogger, discussing important women's and human rights issues in Bahrain, especially through her anti-censorship efforts.

Motivation

Amira, like Glitter, discusses a range of subjects on her blog (as noted above) and considers it to be her personal space, since she uses it to express her views and opinions which may counter many dominant discourses in Bahrain. SBG also often goes on rants and uses very strong language (often bashing Bahraini politics and social norms), even with the potential risks which many Bahraini and Khaleeji bloggers face. In her first post, "Why Blog?" from December 4, 2004, SBG outlines some of her motivations for starting a blog:

> Why speak your mind when you have the option of shutting up and suffering in peace?...
> I have thought about it for a long period of time and like most other bloggers in Bahrain, I will choose to remain anonymous. It will give me more freedom to express my true feelings and opinions, without worrying whether I am politically correct or not.
> In a nut shell: I am a total nutcase and I admit it. I thoroughly enjoy it - every second of it.
> Born under the sign of the Libra, I have problems balancing right and wrong and living with injustice. I just can't accept seeing other people hurt.
> The current condition in Bahrain is starting to have its toll on me: the double-standards, the hypocrisy and the fact that the kingdom claims it is a democracy when it isn't.
> I may have strong views about certain issues, but all this is what makes me who I am!
> Who am I anyway, some of you may wonder?

[19] Refer to Chapter 1, discussion of Lynch's work (2007).

> I am a Bahraini woman: young, professional, career-minded and dynamic. The only catch is that I am not available. My knight in shining armour has kidnapped me and we tied the knot more than a year ago. My family was happy when that finally happened and they thought that I would just calm down and be the silly little girl they have always wanted me to be.
> Problem is I just can't be that.
> I am not a machine which can be switched on and off. I am a human being with a brain ticking like a time-bomb on my shoulders.
> Sometimes, I wish I was a silly little Barbie.
> Sometimes, I wish I was born a retard.
> Sometimes, I damn the day I was given access to education and an opportunity to work and grow in my career.
> What's wrong with being a silly little girl ask myself?
> Well, on this blog I will be just that. I will rave and rant and scream and yell and shout and be myself – both the silly and the serious.
> Nothing will stop me... until the police come knocking on my door!

From her first post, we find that Amira began blogging anonymously, so like Glitter, she could be 'free' to discuss things without needing to self-censor, and face possible social and political repercussions for doing so. SBG cares about injustice and wants to speak out about human rights conditions in Bahrain. Amira is not a Barbie, but instead is an educated professional woman equal to any man. Because of her awareness of the injustices which take place in her country, which seem to burden her somewhat, she is ready to challenge dominant social and gender norms that she does not agree with, using this blog as a personal yet public forum to do this.

In addition to this first post, Amira points out the need to have a space to vent unhindered about her daily frustrations in the society in which she lives; as she must remain professional while writing as a journalist. These include relaying news-stories and personal experiences which she finds disturbing; anything from daily politics to how she is treated in public space. Amira often uses her blog to discuss imperative issues which she may not be able to discuss in other arenas, especially given the proliferation of state

and self-censorship which takes place in Bahrain, and the consequences of speaking one's mind in an unconstrained manner.

Most importantly, SBG uses her blog to advocate blogging as a mechanism for challenging state censorship, and as a way to promote free-speech. Her post from August 14, 2005 illustrates this:

> I strongly believe in freedom of expression...
> I swear I do.. and just as I exercise it whenever the conditions allow me to and when I know I won't get into serious shit, and summon up some courage to speak my mind, I encourage you all do so…
> Speak your mind. Let me know. I have the right to know just as you have the right to speak. Let's get it all out.. in the open!

This excerpt not only shows SBG's passion for the human right to freedom of expression for herself and others, she also confronts state suppression and challenges others to do the same.

Although Silly Bahraini Girl began blogging anonymously at the start of her blog in December 2004, her real identity- Amira Al Hussaini, was revealed in an article by Online Journalism Review in May of 2005, which she blogs about in her entry on May 18th, "We're famous":

> For some limelight, my cover is blown!
> Check this out: http://www.ojr.org/ojr/stories/050517glaser/
> It doesn't matter... the truth of the matter is that I started blogging to draw attention to Ahmed's plight in Wonderland [Bahrain]
> http://freeahmed.blogspot.com
> Little by little I caught the bloggers' bug and now I guess I am hooked... and will continue to be until... I am ignored/arrested/threatened/forced to stop doing what I do for recreational purposes and as part of my therapy!

From the excerpt above, you can access the article which 'outs' Amira and some of her fellow Bahraini bloggers, and also access a link to another blog which Amira started in

order to spread awareness in regards to the unjust conditions which fellow blogger, "Ahmed" was facing by Bahraini authorities in late 2004.

Blogging 'Community'/Identity

My presumption from reading SBG's blog is that her main audience is likely to be made up of liberal, Western-educated Arabs like herself. Compared to Glitter's blog, I do not infer the same sense of intimate community found there. Rather, I would use the term 'community' more loosely in SBG's blog because I believe there is a larger range of readership both geographically, and in identity. While SBG does engage with her readers/commenters like GG, she does so in a very different way. There is a lack of intimacy and often the comment section of her posts contain few comments (compared to Glitter's blog) SBG's comment section also seems to have more debates and points of contention, compared to the general support and respect which seemed to be the norm in Glitter's case.

In one of her earlier posts (when she is still anonymous) from December 10, 2004 titled "Depressing condition of the press!" Amira wrote about the state of the press in Bahrain:

> Without being crude, I want you to take a close look at what is available now (two English and four Arabic dailies!!!). I know it looks a lot for a country with a population of 600,000 - but where is the quality. I personally find more quality, in-depth, reason, logic and thought in blogs - even those written by teenagers - than in our national papers...
> My heart goes out to all the people working in the Press (I pronounce it DEPRESS). I know there are people there who are geniune and who shoulder the responsibility and want to ensure a certain level of credibility.
> But I also know that there are sinister forces which are happy with a weak muzzled Press, which cannot address real issues, which effect real people.

Most of the comments following this post seemed to mirror Amira's thoughts and general mentality. An exchange between Amira and commenter, "Scorpio" illustrates this:

> Scorpio said...
> Reading this chick Adheya Ahmed's column today she seemed to be suggesting that the red lines regarding writing about sex had shifted recently - does this seem to be the case?
>
> Take for instance Tariq Khonji's column in today's GDN on the motives of those guys proposing sex segregation and covering up women - would that have been published a year ago?
>
> December 12, 2004
> SillyBahrainiGirl said...
> Sorry Scorpio...
> Was too busy and didn't have a chance to read Tariq's column. Will do at some point today. There should be a copy of the GDN [*Gulf Daily News]* somewhere around the office...But the Tribune? With all my respect to people who work there...I...I..I prefer not to comment. (heheheeh)
> Lemme do something useful...look up Tariq's column.
>
> December 13, 2004
> Scorpio said...
> Lol. tut tut. What are you saying about the Tribune?
>
> Her column's worth reading this time (there's nothing to make you reach for the revolver in the desk and end your life there and then about it) and in fact she says she's going to feature a TV programme on the "phenomenon of gays" (in Bahrain!?)
>
> That's pretty ballsy I'd say - be interesting to see what angle she takes.

This exchange between SBG and commenter, "Scorpio," shows that they are both involved with current events, and contentious politics in Bahrain, including women's and gender issues like sex segregation and gay rights. From their comments, it is obvious that they also support media's publicizing of such contentious subjects in Bahrain.

While many of Amira's readers hold similar views as her, it is clear that not everyone who reads Amira's blog shares her socio-political outlook; at times readers are offended by the controversial content of her blog, which includes Amira's tirades against

state political figures, strong opinions on the treatment of women, and social norms which she finds hypocritical, sometimes related to Islam, and they leave disgruntled comments challenging Amira's views. Silly Bahraini Girl often vents about the claimed 'DeMOCKracy' portrayed by Bahraini authorities, at times using very strong language. In one post, in which Amira vents about Bahrain while living in Canada, a sarcastic and potential threatening comment was made:

> that sounds very nice coming from a bahraini. You seem to have forgotten who you are, don't worry I will make sure you remember when you and your "hubby" come back and make sure the right people will see your nice nice comment... (November 16, 2005)

This commenter seems to believe that by criticizing certain aspects of the Bahraini state, she is betraying their country, and views her as a traitor who should be severely reprimanded by very influential people, when she returns to Bahrain.

In her next post (from November 17, 2005), Amira addresses the potential threat left by the dissatisfied reader, using very provocative language:

> For the twit who thought she can scare me, and others monitoring this blog to see how they can hurt me, I have news: This is my personal space. This is where a normal Bahraini vents out the frustrations of the normal Bahraini people. This is how we feel . This is why we will continue to speak out about all that is hurting us..and no matter how much you think you can threaten us, we will continue to make our voices heard. And we have an audience. And the world is watching. And for those who think they can threaten me. And I am well-connected too. And I have friends up there. Yup.

I find Amira's response is interesting because, in this case, she chooses to remove her blog from the public, claiming it as her "personal space," but at the same time, she is able to represent and speak for the "normal" Bahraini people, which she associates with herself.

While Amira can be quite outspoken and provocative challenging hegemonic social norms (often related to Bahrain), and may cause heated debates among some of her readers, she is also quick to defend her love of Bahrain, and her identity as a Bahraini. In one post (March 12, 2008) SBG responds to a commenter who sarcastically asks how her Canadian citizenship is coming along: "silly 'bahraini' girl, hows the Canadian citizenship thing going? Nearly there?" Amira passionately responds:

> I am a Bahraini. A Bahraini. And a Bahraini. Bahrain is my country, identity and soul. And you can hit as much as you want under the belt and think what you want to think, but I am as Bahraini as every other decent Bahraini - if not more.
>
> My stay [in Canada] is not for a citizenship or a passport. I have unique circumstances which I don't think you would understand. I have a country and a family and a home. I have friends and roots in Bahrain. I am a Bahraini. I don't need an Exit Plan B or a Plan C. My destiny is in Bahrain. I was born there and insist on being buried there and won't have it any other way.

This excerpt not only conveys some interesting meanings associated with citizenship (as thought one can only 'belong' to one place and claim an identity/patriotism to one nation/state), it also shows us that SBG clearly identifies as Bahraini, despite her often harsh criticism of the state and society to which she belongs. This signifies her desire to represent an alternative to dominant publics in Bahrain and the Gulf, and the fact that she does not want to completely separate herself from them.

Cyberactivism

In this section, I want to return to discussing some of the main content that Amira focuses on throughout her blog- cyberactivism. She has numerous posts against state-sponsored censorship, and frequent posts on the promotion of free-speech, and she also has many posts that reveal other human women's and human rights violations in the Gulf.

In late April of 2005, SBG blogs about the repression of free speech by the Bahraini state in a number of posts. She states:

> In the new era of freedom and democracy, ushered in by a new constitution and reforms never known to the world before and will never be seen ever again anywhere else for as long as we and our children and our grandchildren and our great grandchildren after them live, the Ministry of Information has come out with a new means to supress **FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION** (April 24).

The next day, Amira provides three excerpts from three daily newspapers in Bahrain which state that all Bahraini bloggers in the country and abroad must register their blogs with the Ministry of Information or face legal action. By April 27th, SBG cynically writes:

> You grow up all your life being taught right from wrong.
> God is watching you, they have warned us.
> If you do wrong, God will punish you.
> You will have to repent and ask for forgiveness.
> On the Day of Judgement, you will be cross-examined.
> You will be asked what you did and you will have to replay all the dusty tapes and admit to all your sins.
> Forgive me God, for I have blogged!

Here, SBG uses a sarcastic tone regarding how she was socialized and what she was taught was 'right' and 'wrong' while growing up. She is pretending to repent for speaking her mind through blogging.

In response to this, one commenter replies (also in a cynical tone):

> I don't think god has anything against you sinful blogger, however, you might have to answer to another authority that might consider itself just as powerful as him.
> We've been brought up to think that we should stick to the straight and narrow because god is watching us. Apparently some people think that he might be needing an extra eye lately.
> Sinful blogger, by the laws of the Holy Bahraini Government, you shall register your blog or shall burn in the hell of the CID headquarters in Adliya.

This commenter's use of sarcasm signifies his beliefs similar to Amira in promoting freedom of speech, while cautioning her in a satirical manner, as he describes the Bahraini state's attempt to control the blogosphere.

In one post on October 26, 2007(over two years later), SBG seems quite optimistic about Bahrain's blogosphere, despite attempts of state control. Amira discusses the fact that while small, the Bahraini blogosphere is gaining global recognition and support:

> We are still blogging, ranting and raving .. and our voices are being heard. Yes, it is only us hearing each other .. but the world is listening and keeping a close eye on us…
> What the goons [Bahraini state] don't understand is that the world is now too too small.. and just as they are watching us .. they are being watched by a growing number of people around the world who are not at all pleased with our immaculate human rights record!...
> Thank you world for watching.. Thank you for reading and listening .. and thank you for spreading the word. I know I am not doing any wrong by speaking my mind and writing my thoughts.. and I also understand that you have the right to do the same. I know I will continue to write .. and I know that if for any reason I am 'kidnapped' or muzzled... you will be there for me!

Here, Amira is acknowledging the publicity of her blog and other Bahraini blogs similar to hers which expose Bahrain's "immaculate" human rights record. She also expresses hope that such global publicity will both continue to spread awareness of such matters, as well as protect her from the state and those who oppose her alternative views.

As the years go by, it seems that Silly Bahraini Girl becomes further engaged with cyberactivism (beyond Bahrain), as she begins to write for *Global Voices*[20], and attends conferences on blogging and free-speech. In late February of 2008, when Amira and her

[20] Global Voices is an international community of bloggers who report on blogs and citizen media from around the world (http://globalvoicesonline.org/).

husband are living in Canada, she is able to attend the We Media[21] conference in Miami. In addition to meeting with some of her colleagues from *Global Voices*, SBG states that the "who's who of media and the blogging community will be present" and that "the array of workshops, sessions and networking opportunities" will also be an educational opportunity for her as she goes to a number of different lectures and workshops on new media technology at the conference (February 24, 2008). Amira also ponders how she should respond when asked about the blogging situation in the Middle East, and then goes on a passionate tirade about some of the conditions that Arab bloggers are up against:

> Do I tell them that a Saudi blogger next door has been kidnapped by the authorities and is being held for articles he published on his blog?... Do I tell them that our ministers of information have just met, under the auspices of the same barren Arab League, and decided to further strangle our propaganda-riddled television stations with a new code of ethics ... to apparently safeguard our traditions and values .. and further stifle freedom of expression?
>
> Would they be interested to learn that as human beings, we are still subjects and are yet to aspire to become citizens with RESPECT, rights and duties in our own countries?... Or do I tell them about Egypt, which was one day the beacon of the newspaper industry, and which today takes the lead in the number of bloggers arrested?
>
> Shall I dare mention that it was only last week that Morocco had sentenced a blogger to THREE years in prison for a joke? That Syria harasses and arrests bloggers too and that once upon a time, a brave Information Minister was appointed in Bahrain, and whose only legacy was to order bloggers to register their blogs with his ministry?

These are only snippets from her post, which acknowledge some of the threats and conditions which bloggers in the region face daily.

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[21] We Media "create[s] web sites and digital media strategies, produce [s]research, conferences, seminars, workshops, awards, investment challenges and organize[s] a global community of innovators and visionaries. [They] also manage iFOCOS, a nonprofit media think tank and futures lab committed to harnessing the power of media, communication and human ingenuity for the common good." (http://wemedia.com/).

Silly Bahraini Girl, also uses her blog to challenge some of the existing social and cultural norms which discriminate women, and marginalized populations (like many foreign workers) living in the region. In one post, Amira brings to attention a story about a Saudi girl who was killed by her father for chatting to a man on Facebook (this is associated with patriarchal discourses like family honor). In another post, SBG shares an offensive newspaper clipping from Bahrain, illustrating the racist mentalities of some Bahrainis, which she finds disgusting:

> [The clipping] translates roughly to: "For Exchange in Hael (somewhere in Never Never Land). A Dodge (car), model 1991 for a housemaid (NEW) from Sri Lanka or India.."
> Oh my God! I really am speechless.
> What the f***k is going on here? A human being in exchange for a flipping car? Why is Sri Lankan or Indian life so cheap that it can be bartered with a handshake? I really am ashamed that people can be bought, sold and exchanged in the open market like cattle at this day and age (July 12, 2005).

In this excerpt, Amira wonders how something so blatantly racist and unjust is able to continue without ramifications.

One of her most passionate posts on human rights violations in Bahrain is from SBG's post on March 10, 2006, where she begins the entry with, "There is one word to describe human rights conditions in Bahrain.. and that is DEPRESSING!!" Amira then outlines some of the highlights from a report from The US Department of State Country report on human rights practices for 2005 in Bahrain which include:

- inability to change the government
- political parties prohibited
- impunity

> • restrictions on civil liberties--freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association
> • lengthy pretrial detention
> • lack of judicial independence
> • allegations of corruption in the judicial system
> • discrimination based on gender, religion, sect, and ethnicity
> • infringement of citizens' privacy rights
> • restrictions on freedom of religion and of movement
> • violence against women
> • trafficking
> • restrictions on labor rights

Each of these points are issues that continue to take place in Bahrain and in many of its neighbors.

After providing this list, SBG goes into detail on each of the points listed above in addition to some others from the report. It is clear from the way she wrote her post that she is disheartened by these human rights violations. In response to this post however, Amira received a variety of comments, some very lengthy. One commenter, named "tooners," replies:

> Very, very interesting. Wow, girl, you've shed light in areas that I knew nothing about. The sexual harrassment stuff is interesting. As an expatriate, I've seen this and have been subjected to it in a previous job. Not a lot, but enough to make my skin crawl. I think some men like to push the envelope to see how far they can get w/ this American chick! Since we're all whores.... yeah, baby.
>
> But seriously, some great info here!

This commenter, an American woman expat living in Bahrain, appreciates SBG's attempts of spreading awareness of human rights violations in Bahrain, and she admits to

being subjected to sexual harassment herself. Another commenter, "Balushi," is skeptical of the source for this report, as he states:

> Yeah right the same source that gave the report of WMDS [Weapons of Mass Destruction] in Iraq and bla bla bla!
> USA is the biggest dictatorship and Human Right Violator in the world! - They shouldnt be talking!!!!!
> USA dictates to the world as to what one should say and what Not!!! Its dicates everything to everyone and It preaches things to others that USA itself doesnt practices!!!

This commenter is unconvinced of the report, and instead of admitting to any of these issues taking place in Bahrain like "toners," he criticizes human rights violations made by the government of the United States, pointing out the hypocrisy of the report. These are only some of the views which readers have regarding Silly Bahraini Girl's passionate post on Bahraini human rights violations, and should illustrate some of the differing perspectives had by readers of Amira's blog.

In a number of posts, Silly Bahraini Girl acknowledges her conception of limited freedom of expression in Bahrain, due to discourses which govern and shape how people think and act. She describes this in her post from December 5, 2004:

> Responsible people like me, and I presume you, realise that our freedom is limited and bonded by a complex set of rules and regulations, values and principles, teachings, religious doctrines and dos and don'ts which together make us who we are.
> If we were living in a vacuum, then freedom would be limitless.
>
> The fact that we are in a society, shackled with age-old traditions and customs, makes our freedom really worthless because whatever we do should be socially acceptable and politically correct.

In this post, Amira presumes that her readers hold similar views as herself regarding the fact that 'freedom' is bound by a "complete set of rules and regulations… which make us who we are," or that socio-cultural discourses govern the way one thinks and behaves.

Because one is always subjected to these dominant social discourses and norms, Amira believes that one cannot truly be "free."

SBG recognizes a lack of freedom for many in Bahrain, and uses her blog as a space not only to vent her numerous personal frustrations, but also to challenge dominant discourses and institutions which govern and constrain Bahrainis and Khaleejis alike. She does this by promoting free-speech via such venues as blogging (which she demonstrates in her own blog), spreading awareness regarding censorship practices and threatening tactics used by the Bahraini state, by exposing the plight of those (like Ahmed) convicted undeservedly by the state, and ways in which the state thwarts basic rights and freedoms.

By providing a space for readers (which vary across background and geographic location) to also leave comments expressing their own views and often challenging SBG's views, she is actively promoting a space for critical debates and exchanges to take place on a range of significant topics of 'public' concern. I believe it is important to point out, however, that Amira's positionality (as a popular and well-connected professional woman in Bahrain and wider blogging community) has allowed her to possibly 'get away with' some of her controversial writing and criticism of the state and society (especially since she is still comfortable to express contentious views despite the fact that she no longer blogs anonymously). Others not privileged with her position may suffer severe consequences for challenging the state and social norms in such a blatant manner as she does. Amira herself points out how her position changes not only from when she writes as a journalist to when she is blogging in her 'personal space,' but also as a blogger living

in Canada versus when she is living in or visiting Bahrain. In one post, she jokingly states that she needs to begin self-censoring her blog again before she goes home to Bahrain.

SBG discusses are political and she make them public through her blog. Amira often directly confronts practices of the state as well as dominant social norms in her posts, and engages with a diverse group of people in her comments section, who hold a variety of views (some possibly interpreted as counter/alternative views, while others align themselves with dominant views).

IMPLICATIONS:

There are a number of implications which can be made from a thorough analysis of each blog, and the supplemental interview responses from Glitter. In this last section of the chapter I would like to discuss how both of these bloggers can be seen as contributing to the construction of virtual publics in the Khaleeji blogosphere. Hopefully after reading the analyses of each blog, and backed by excerpts from both blogs and interview responses from Glitter, I have supported this argument.

Blogging has provided both Glitter and Silly Bahraini Girl a space to speak about a range of issues which they find important in their lives. Each blogger uses the space of their blogs quite differently, as they both have different motivations and aspirations in mind. They also use different feminist lens and have different 'political' approaches on their blogs. Glitter uses a personal narrative and reaches out to a community of readers and bloggers similar to herself. She discusses and publicizes issues that may be classified as 'personal' or taboo, which may be left out of spaces/publics on the ground, thereby making the 'personal' political. Silly Bahraini Girl, on the other hand, often uses her blog

as a space of cyberactivism; publicizing a range of important women's and human rights issues, especially by challenging state-sponsored censorship of media and the internet, and promoting free-speech efforts in Bahrain and the Gulf. She often confronts the state and hegemonic discourses which she finds problematic in a very direct manner- by venting, ranting and swearing, spreading social awareness and providing documented cases of state and social abuses, and by calling for people to "wake up" and effect change. Glitter, at times, challenges and problematizes some of the patriarchal discourses prevalent in Khaleeji society, through her desire to publicize some of the 'private' issues which Khaleeji women face. However, in some cases, she also reaffirms certain dominant social norms and expectations, such as through her endorsement of arranged-marriage. Amira's use of language, and her focus on content related to women's and human rights, might suggest her association with a more Western notion of feminism.

Confronting the state and social norms is likely more challenging in spaces and publics which exist on the ground not only because this typically involves revealing one's identity (which could be dangerous), but also because it may be more difficult to access these publics and/or be recognized for one's contributions (as is still the case for many women and marginalized groups in the Gulf). New communication technologies like the internet also offer ways to access all kinds of information from around the world, and provide ways to connect with a myriad of networks (local, national, regional, transnational, and everything between) and people who might share similar beliefs and convictions.

Given state-censorship efforts as well as powerful socio-cultural discourses which govern the freedoms and actions of many Khaleejis, and the often severe repercussions of defying them, these virtual spaces offer some relief. Through the ability to write, and 'speak' anonymously on the internet and thus gain publicity, these virtual spaces may provide a way to circumvent some of the risks associated with challenging both the state and societal norms. Both Glitter and Silly Bahraini Girl provide different examples of how spaces like their blogs can be used to express alternative views by people often disregarded from mainstream publics.

Having said this, it is also important to remember how (relatively) privileged both Glitter and Silly Bahraini Girl are. They are both well educated and literate in multiple languages, they have daily access to a computer and the internet, as well as the time and means to blog. Both have the support of their families (even though Glitter remains anonymous to most of her readers, her sister and husband X know about her blog), and a wide network of friends, families, and colleagues. At this time, both belong to the small privileged elite class of Khaleeji women who blog and are able to use their blogs as 'personal space' to discuss whatever they want engaging with others likely privileged in similar ways. However, these blogs may also be used as forums to discuss important political issues, and to make 'personal' matters issues of publicity, as Glitter has done, as well as to advocate freedom of expression, as Silly Bahraini Girl has done. Aside from these examples, we must remember that the views and experiences of Khaleeji women are very diverse, and that many are unable to (or choose not to) share with others for some of the reasons mentioned in the previous chapter. The internet, however, continues

to grow at an exponential rate in the Middle East, slowly giving more and more people the ability to engage online.

I also find it necessary to point out some of the differences between Glitter and Silly Bahraini Girl, keeping in mind their different positionalities, but doing so in a way which will hopefully not shroud either of their contributions to the Khaleeji blogosphere. Glitter and SBG are different in a number of ways, but one which I find especially stands out is the power differential between them, through their different positionalities. For example, it should be clear that the content of their blogs is quite different, and the fact that Glitter remains more cautious even while writing under a pseudonym is in stark contrast to the fact that Amira is no longer anonymous, and writes in a more provocative manner than Glitter. To me, it seems that SBG is well established, and knows people in positions of power in Bahrain (she refers to herself as a big fish in a small pond when she is in Bahrain), where as Glitter, while coming from a wealthy family who probably have some connections, and is seemingly outspoken in her own way, is much younger and less connected in professional networks than Amira. I also believe that while SBG began blogging anonymously, and was not 'outed' by choice, in the long run, it may have allowed her to speak more freely, and has possibly given her greater credibility as a blogger. SBG is relatively well known within the Khaleeji blogging community, as well as the some channels of the 'global' blogging community (having attended numerous blogging/journalist conferences across the world), and has been interviewed numerous times, by other journalists about her position as an influential Bahraini blogger. With her identity out in the open, and the connections which she has in Bahrain on the ground,

Amira is likely able to make more visible impacts in the blogging community than Glitter since she has become so well known. Should something happen to her, there would likely be great uproar in the Bahraini and 'global' blogging 'communities'. If Glitter's identity was revealed however (even with her popularity in the Kuwaiti blogosphere), she likely has a greater chance of closing her blog and disappearing from the blogosphere without much that anyone could do (since she and many of her followers are also anonymous).

Because much of the content and discourses that Glitter engages with on her blog might be discounted more quickly as being 'silly' or 'frivolous' (by various publics) than some of the more explicitly political issues of state-censorship and free-speech which SBG discusses, her impact may also be less visible in larger blogging networks/publics. This does not, however, mean that she is not challenging social norms in her own way. The fact that she has created a space for herself and other Khaleeji women who in the past may not have had a forum to share important issues considered 'private' and/or 'taboo' but still may affect them daily is significant, especially since remaining anonymous may provide them with some semblance of 'safety,' giving them their own way of promoting free-speech.

I could relate to Glitter and many of the commenters, around a number of different subjects. I also understand why remaining anonymous is of such importance to her, given how small Kuwaiti society is and how much people like to talk, as well as the pressures to keep one's personal reputation and that of one's family untarnished. Prior to reading these blogs, I found it difficult to find such a space where I could relate personal topics addressed in a quasi-public forum, where anyone could read about Glitter's

experiences and express their own feelings and experiences through comments. Previous to this, I had to rely (like many Khaleeji women) on a close circle of friends and family, to discuss such 'personal' subjects. I especially enjoyed Glitter's relationship with her readers/commenters. In her blog, I could read about issues I find important and care about with, and relate to (as well as engage with if I choose to participate in the comment section) other Khaleeji women like myself. This is not always easy to do when it comes to discussing socio-cultural norms which affect me, as it is often difficult for many Westerners to understand and relate to my experiences. I truly enjoyed reading Glitter's blog.

As for my experiences with Amira's blog, I could also relate, as I have been Western educated, and also go off on similar rants which are found in her blog. I admire SBG's ability to stand up to dominant social norms and state politics that she does not agree with. I am proud of both these women and many of the people which commented on their blogs. I believe that Western audiences unfamiliar with Khaleeji women who read these blogs (and similar blogs) might be surprised with what they find; perhaps challenging some of the Western stereotypes about Arab women on the one hand, while possibly reifying some stereotypes on the other. However, I find it significant that anyone with internet access, and a rudimentary grasp of English and/or Arabic is able to directly engage with these women via email and the comments section of each blog (instead of relying only on Western media to shape their views of Khaleeji women). These blogs provide a way to engage in public debate and challenge social norms in the West just as much as in the Gulf, as they cross gender, cultural, and territorial borders and boundaries.

Conclusion

Historically, Khaleeji women, like so many of the world's women before them, have been barred from participation in the public sphere. In response to the exclusivity of dominant publics, multiple publics including counterpublics as well as a number of alternative publics have arisen in order to provide spaces for excluded groups to openly discuss and publicize important issues often disregarded by mainstream publics. For under-represented groups, such as Khaleeji women, who often lack access to 'the' public sphere on the ground, or face significant barriers accessing it, the virtual realm can provide a potential site for construction of publics.

As access to traditional publics similar to Habermas's idealized conception of the bourgeois public sphere has changed with new communication technologies like the internet and mobile phone becoming more popular and providing access to virtual publics, I believe we must expand conceptions of the public sphere. The complexity of the blogs that I analyzed in my study (Chapter 4), including the diverse content, views, and opinions of the bloggers, commenters, and readers, makes it difficult to define these new virtual publics through the limited theoretical terms offered in Chapter 1. Having recognized the complexity of the blogs that I read, I am uncomfortable categorizing them only as 'counter' or 'alternative' publics because they discuss a variety of issues with a range of people who have different views, experiences, and perspectives. In some areas in the blogs, the blogger and commenters might engage in counter-hegemonic or alternative discourses, while in other places they may reify and/or wholly support dominant

discourses of dominant publics. Indeed, at times it appears as though participants have multiple identities. These blogs thus complicate the meaning of counterpublics- there are no neat boundaries, and some aspects of their blogs remain within the realm of hegemonic publics. My analysis suggests that the virtual space of the web offers a space for multi-faceted publics to form, albeit for those with access. With the multiplicity of virtual publics available, and considering the different positionalities and identities that people encompass, especially in such a globally connected world, there is the potential for one to belong to and participate in multiple publics simultaneously- both in cyber space and on the ground.

The world is increasingly becoming a more connected place as interlacing transnational networks are continuing to be created and connected, often with the help of new communication technologies such as the internet. These new technologies help to disrupt imagined borders and boundaries, which can be especially relevant for Khaleeji women, who often join in solidarity, breaching state-boundaries and norms, and sharing similar interests and concerns, such as advancing their rights and contributions in the patriarchal societies in which they live (see Yuval-Davis and Marcel Stoetzler 2002). The internet is one such way of connecting these women not only with each other, but with wider communities.

In the course of my analysis of Glitter and Silly Bahraini Girl's blogs, I discovered different kinds of feminism that emerged in these virtual publics. Both bloggers challenged ascribed gender roles and the public and private divide, but in different ways. Through the use of pseudonyms and anonymity, Glitter and the majority

of her commenters and readers were able to remain somewhat anonymous. This permitted them to speak-out on a range of topics often considered 'personal' and taboo while maintaining their personal reputations. By discussing these 'private' subjects together in such a public forum, Glitter and her commenters challenged the boundaries between private and public and in the course of it politicized what were seemingly irrelevant 'private' issues. In contrast, Silly Bahraini Girl, in her blog, challenged dominant gender norms through a rights discourse, claiming women' s rights as human right. Furthermore, SBG seems to be promoting a kind of transnational/global feminism, whereas Glitter and the majority of her readers and commenters seemed to support a regional – Arab Gulf feminism.

Khaleeji women bloggers such as Glitter and Silly Bahraini Girl, who are still part of a privileged elite minority, are able to use their blogs as virtual publics to regularly engage with others on matters that they consider important, often challenging dominant social norms, which may be difficult to do in other spaces. Difficulties of challenging dominant norms in non-virtual spaces may be due to the complexities associated with maintaining one's reputation in a patriarchal society dominated by discourses such as preserving family honor (often observed in Glitter's blog), as well as due to the need of circumventing state-censorship and repression of free-speech (often observed in SBG's blog). Aziz Douai (2009) argues that, "Overall, Arab women have used their blogs as a platform that builds on the Internet's capacity to enable 'virtual activism' despite patriarchal conditions inhibiting their participation." (139)

Presently, many Khaleeji women do not have access to the internet, and some are unable to read and write. The views and experiences of Khaleeji women are diverse, and continue to be shaped by the many underlying socio-cultural discourses in their societies, as well as by their families, class, religion, race/ethnicity, and numerous conditions in the countries in which they live. Some Khaleeji women like Amira Al-Hussaini (Silly Bahraini Girl) are very explicit in how they confront the state and social norms which they do not support, while others like Glitter are more subtle, and continue to adhere to some dominant social norms such as arranged marriage. Still others, (like many of Amira's commenters) align themselves with hegemonic discourses, possibly reifying certain Western stereotypes about the Arab Gulf.

I believe that in addition to publics on the ground, blogs, online forums, wikis, and other social networking-sites such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* provide potential spaces for Khaleeji women and youth to engage in a multiplicity of virtual publics. I also hope, like Mona Eltahawy (2008; see Chapter 1), that these online spaces, where Arab women and youth engage with issues of publicity, will continue to grow and find their way to publics on the ground- slowly influencing society- and effecting much needed change in the Arab Gulf.

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