Interview
## Shaping Opinions with the Help of the Internet?

**Has the Internet brought about a structural change in Arab societies? Albrecht Hofheinz tried to answer this question through research. Youssef Hijazi spoke to this expert in Islamic studies.**

Dr. Albrecht Hofheinz's research project at the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO) examined the effects of the Internet on social and political processes in the Arab world. Hofheinz put the cyber world into the context of social behaviour in order to identify more clearly whether any possible effects of "virtual" changes are becoming apparent in the "real" world.

In view of the increasing use of the Internet in the Islamic-Arab world, Hofheinz set about trying to answer numerous questions, including: are we witnessing a structural change in the public? Are people dealing differently with religious and political questions? How do transnational and local publics connect and interact with one another?

*Herr Hofheinz, for years you have been investigating the use of the Internet in the Islamic-Arab world. What prompted you to conduct research in this field?*

**Albrecht Hofheinz:** I received my doctorate in Norway in the 1990s. At the time, the technical facilities for accessing the Internet at the universities there was much better than it was in Germany. I was fascinated by this media and experienced first hand the early days of the first Muslim Diaspora websites. That was what gave me the idea for the project.

*Tell us more about your research topic.*

**Hofheinz:** In the 1990s, Internet enthusiasts had a vision: all you need is a modem, a PC, and an Internet connection to have the world at your fingertips.

This gave rise to the hypothesis that the entire structure of the way in which public opinions are formed would be transformed by significantly facilitating access to publication opportunities for a large number of people. It was felt that public debates would spread around the world, thereby bringing about a radical change in the formation of opinions in Arab-Islamic countries.

The theory was that the emancipatory effect of this development would be twofold: larger sections of society would become more involved in the formation of opinions and this, in turn, would result in greater participation in decision-making processes.

*In other words, the Internet would spread democracy.*

**Hofheinz:** The aim of my research project was to test the theory that more people would get involved in the opinion formation process and would have more to contribute to this process as a result of the Internet. Implicitly, this would pose a threat to the hegemony of traditional hierarchies and authorities in terms of shaping opinions.

The theory was that it would soon become second nature to Internet users to form their own opinions and not simply to refer to a single authoritative source and blindly follow the opinions presented there. The fact that users would themselves be able to comment on material published

by others and discuss solutions in a non-hierarchical manner would result in the development of a social dynamism that would inherently help accelerate the democratisation of decision-making processes. That was the theory on which this research project was based.

*Some observers pour scorn on this democratisation theory; they claim that people only use the Internet to chat or search the web for pornographic images.*

**Hofheinz:** This implicitly does an injustice to Arab Internet users. That is not my intention. On the contrary. Tim Berners-Lee, the "father" of the World Wide Web, recently expressed a very special hope at the World Information Summit in Geneva: he said that the Internet shows us that, at the end of the day, apart from a few cultural specificities, we are not really all that different from one another.

This is also one of the main conclusions of my work. When people chat or look at pornographic images on the Internet, they are pursuing interests that are shared by more or less all of humanity: namely the interest in communicating with friends; the interest in increasing their circle of acquaintances by getting to know users who do not necessarily live in the same neighbourhood, but who have the same interests; or the interest in communicating with members of the opposite sex and breaking down social barriers in their immediate social environment.

*In 1981, IBM launched the first PC on the market. Only one year later, the company Sakhr was established in Kuwait. The aim of the company was to offer Arab IT solutions. Are the Arabs keeping up with global development?*

**Hofheinz:** Sakhr was established with the aim of offering Arabic IT solutions. It originally developed its own PC with its own operator interface. However, given Microsoft's clout on the market, their solution was just not tenable. Sakhr is now a leading producer of Arab Internet sites.

There have been countless conferences on the standardisation of Arab IT solutions. Proposals from the Arab League, Egypt, or Saudi Arabia to find a common denominator for the numerous incompatible IT solutions have all failed. None of these proposals has seen the light of day. The Microsoft standard has ultimately won through. This is indicative of both market forces and who has the last word.

*How has use of the Internet developed in Arab countries?*

**Hofheinz:** You can't generalise. The state reaction to the Internet phenomenon differs from country to country in the Arab world. None of these countries now completely rejects the Internet. However, some treat the phenomenon more restrictively than others. The first countries to open up to the Internet in the early days were traditional, liberal economic, pro-Western states like Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain.

In the late 1990s, Jordan and Lebanon were considered a paradise for the liberalisation of the IT market. Since then, however, both countries have lost ground to Egypt and the UAE. The reason being that the governments of these countries offered more incentives; they did more for IT infrastructure: direct state subsidies worked wonders.

*Two IT centres were established in Cairo and Dubai in order to offer the business sector attractive conditions for Internet use. Could you tell us something about state regulation and the legal situation?*

**Hofheinz:** A comparison of the countries in the Arab world reveals that some allow completely free access to the Internet while others channel all Internet traffic through a filter. This central filter allows them to block access to specific sites. But anyone with technical know-how can get around these filters. This sort of filter censorship can be found in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Syria.

The Saudis, for example, only opened up public access to the Internet in 1999 after a long delay: they waited until the technical requirements for total filtering were fulfilled. Beforehand, the debate had centred on how Saudi society could be protected against damaging influences through the Internet.

Naturally, fears that the web could also pose a threat to the political regime in the country also played a part in it. It would, however, be incorrect to believe that moral concerns are always used as a front and nothing more. Even if political censorship is often justified on moral grounds, there are indeed serious concerns about social cohesion and religious identity.

*Islamic movements are the main propagandists in Arab countries. How do they deal with the*

*Internet? Do they use it any differently from others?*

**Hofheinz:** Many Muslim thinkers and scholars were very cautious and feared that the Internet could lead to an infiltration and erosion of Muslim social and moral standards. In this context, discussions with Islamic overtones took place. These same discussions had other overtones elsewhere: in Asia, for example, but also in Europe and anywhere people think that the Internet might lead to a homogenisation of the cultures.

In concrete terms, this means that western or American cultural values and ideas are disseminated under the existing balance of power. This discussion has not become any less intense to this day. On the other hand, Islamic groups were some of the first to make use of the Internet.

*At the start of this interview, you said that Muslim Diaspora groups were on the Internet from the word go. What was different back then?*

**Hofheinz:** Islamic Diaspora groups went online before the Internet was even accessible in the Middle East. On the one hand, fears were expressed; on the other, opportunities to spread a message were quickly grasped. This first became evident among the Internet websites set up by the Muslim Diaspora in America. Later on, the same thing happened in the Middle East.

*Did you only come across websites with an Islamic content?*

**Hofheinz:** If I divide things up schematically – Islamists here, secularists there – then I would have to say that the Islamists have to date had a much stronger presence, been quicker, and have more money and better connections. I would not say that they are necessarily as numerous in society; but they certainly are when it comes to virtual Internet appearances and publications.

An analysis of the 100 most popular Arab websites reveals that ten have a decidedly religious Islamic orientation and have a religious/social message and sometimes a political message. This is unique worldwide because this doesn't happen in other languages, where religious websites are not to be found among the top 100.

*Why do you speak only of Islamic groups?*

**Hofheinz:** No, that is a misunderstanding. I mean, while it is correct to say that the "Arab Internet" reflects a greater role for religion than we are used to seeing in other societies, ten per cent of the most popular sites are decidedly religious. However, this is "only" ten per cent, i.e. the religion phenomenon must be put into context and should not be overestimated.

*You use the frightening terms "digital Jihad" and "e-Jihad". What do these terms mean?*

**Hofheinz:** The phrase "digital Jihad" was first coined in the 1990s. Initially, it had nothing to do with hacking; it was simply Jihad by Internet. A very broad interpretation of the word Jihad is "efforts for Islam" and in this case, with the help of the Internet. To my knowledge, it was Diaspora groups, Muslim students in America, that first coined the phrase.

Their aim was the mobilisation of public opinion in favour of mujahidin (i.e. of physical mujahidin) or, if I may be permitted to translate it as such, the liberation movements in the Islamic world such as those in Kashmir, Bosnia, and Chechnya.

Those were the key words back then. The hacking of "enemy" Internet sites only really came to the fore in the year 2000 with the start of the second intifada in Palestine. As a matter of fact, this hacking was perpetrated by both sides: Israelis and Palestinians.

In any case, one must differentiate between actual activities and the way in which these activities are perceived here in Germany or by the western public. After 11 September, there was in the western media a mixture of sensationalism and panic-mongering in reports about the use of the Internet in the Islamic world. These reports often clouded our vision of reality.

*If Microsoft is as powerful on the Internet as you say it is, how can there be any democratisation?*

**Hofheinz:** By deciding for myself what I want to look at on the Internet and what not; what I choose to read and write and what I don't. I am at least increasingly becoming master of the information that I choose to absorb. At the same time, I must say that this is an idealised portrayal of the situation. I am aware of the media power of Microsoft in particular and of other media companies. In contrast to traditional media, their influence is much greater than that of the state.

But even if Microsoft and Co. control 30 per cent of what is on offer on the Internet, and even if a large amount of people click onto a Microsoft website for various technical and economical reasons, and thereby increase the risk of Microsoft becoming a primary source of information; for those who know their way around a little, an alternative view is only a click away.

Even though I do concede that major media companies wield a lot of power over the market, I don't believe that one company controls everything. There will always be a counter development and it is still easier to give expression to these opposing voices on the Internet than it is in other media. The growth of the medium will on the one hand create greater market powers, and on the other greater pluralism.

*Let us get back to your initial theory: did you identify a structural change in Arab society?*

**Hofheinz:** My initial theory has not proven well-founded in the short term. But that doesn't mean that all opportunities have been wasted. I would say instead that the initial theory was naive in its radicality. It was quite simply naive to expect the introduction of the Internet to unleash a political tidal wave. One has to examine what socialisation processes are being promoted on the Internet.

The trend is clear: the Internet reinforces the role and the self-confidence of the subject. Even the chatting of young people should not be underestimated. It is easier to talk openly in chat rooms about things that are usually only talked about among friends.

I still believe that this will lead to a change in political culture: not necessarily a radical change and not only as a result of the Internet, but the Internet is undoubtedly an important factor.

*Interview conducted by Youssef Hijazi*

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*An expert in Islamic studies, Dr. Albrecht Hofheinz will start lecturing at the University of Oslo, Norway, in August 2004. To date he has worked as a research associate at the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies (ZMO) and was previously a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin.*