

The Lebanese and the Egyptian blogosphere: counterpublics between national framing and translocal connections?

Introduction

Can blogospheres be grasped by the notion of counterpublics? And if yes, what kind of counterpublics have been emerging? Especially in research on blogospheres in the Middle East blogging “has been hailed as a new opportunity for public communication, political activism, and a democratic public sphere” (Anderson 2009) and the ‘counter-voices’ on the internet¹ are highlighted. Indeed, it is tempting to understand blogospheres as counterpublics, especially those active under restricted political conditions as they often provide different or ‘alternative’ information. They ‘counter’ representations – governments as well as representation in the media. Nevertheless, the notion often remains vague and the concepts one can rely on, as those by Nancy Fraser (1992) and Michael Warner (2002), do not necessarily take into account internet communication and its distinctive features, especially its translocal connectivity. Blogospheres, even if they are mainly nationally bounded,² are addressing different publics: from local, regional to translocal or even “global” publics – depending on the production context and the cause.

In this article I want to relate the discussion about counterpublics on the internet to two distinct blogospheres in the Middle East, that have attracted attention during the last years: (1.) the Lebanese blogosphere, who has been internationally recognized through its reporting during the ‘Independence Intifada’ 2005 and the July-War 2006 and is specially active in ‘times of crisis’; and (2.) the Egyptian as it is the largest Arabic blogosphere,³ which has become to be a blue print for other bloggers in the region and is known for being one of the most politically active blogospheres (see esp. Lynch 2007). These two cases reveal specificities of blogospheres and distinct cultures of publics. I do not intend to provide a direct comparison of all aspects of both blogospheres but rather to discuss different features of counterpublics on the internet.

In the first part of the paper I will present two slightly different definitions of counterpublics by Nancy Fraser (1992) and Michael Warner (2006). Following up on this I will discuss their applicability to the blogosphere and present the major questions related to my field of study. Before addressing these questions, I will provide an overview about the blogosphere’s history and groups. Following up on this I will then analyze how far they might be described as counterpublics according to the above-presented definitions.

¹ I do not spell internet with a capital “I” as this suggests that the internet is a place or a being and gives it a rather problematic agency (Markham/Baym 2009: vii).

² See study on the Arab blogosphere by *The Berkman Centre for Internet & Society* (ed. Etling et al., 2009).

³ Egypt has both the largest population and the largest online population in the Arab world (see Etling et al. 2009: 15ff).

I. Counterpublics

Theoretical background: definitions

Nancy Fraser's⁴ article "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" (1992) was published in a volume on *Habermas and the Public Sphere* and is to be read as a critical engagement with Habermas public sphere concept from a feminist perspective. Fraser's conceptualization of a "plurality of competing publics" counters the single public sphere concept by Habermas. She argues for a critical interrogation of his idealized concept, discussing mainly the exclusions according to gender and class. Her argument is, that the bourgeois was never *the* public and there existed "competing counterpublics" as the women's public arenas (p. 116). The emphasis in her approach lies on the contestatory function of subaltern counterpublics – which is not undisputed. For example Jodi Dean criticizes that those 'publics' would be merely groups, because they have special concerns and are partial (Dean 2003: 97). But for Fraser despite their function of "withdrawal and regroupment" (p. 116) these arenas are *publics*, as they have a publicist orientation and are in their "agitational activities" directed towards wider publics (p. 124).

Fraser calls alternative publics in stratified societies

subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. (p. 123)

In this definition of a counterpublic it is presupposed that the actors of this public are 'subalterns' or "subordinated groups" that formulate "oppositional interpretations" of their own interests etc.

Michael Warner⁵ criticizes in "Publics and Counterpublics" (2002) that this definition would apply to any public, Fraser would just have added "subordinated" and he asks: "Is the feminist counter-public distinguished by anything other than its program or reform?" (p. 85) Still, he doesn't reject the counterpublic-notion as such, but his conception goes beyond Fraser's definition. For him "counterpublic discourse is far more than the expression of subaltern culture" (p. 87). Furthermore he argues, that the reasons why members of a certain public might be regarded as subaltern would be quite different, sometimes the mere participation in a certain public could people subaltern (ibid.).

Warner complicates the counterpublic notion not only through questioning the ways of how one might be subaltern, but also through shedding light to speech genres and modes of address.

A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominate one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media. (p. 86)

⁴ Professor of Political and Social Science and Professor of Philosophy at The New School in New York City.

⁵ Professor for English Literature and American Studies at Rutgers University.

For understanding a counterpublic it is therefore necessary to look closely at the texts themselves, at the ways the members formulate their ideas, how they address their audience and the wider media context.

Whereas Warner's critique of Fraser's definition is relevant, the Fraserian framework still provides a first helpful understanding of counterpublics. By arguing for a model of multiple publics that does not contradict the public sphere concept, it challenges other public sphere theories and theorists. Warner's approach can then be applicable in looking more closely at special counterpublics and for analyzing the texts, the modes of address in language, speech genres etc. In this article I will rely on both notions.

However, neither Fraser nor Warner take internet communication into consideration. Warner merely speculates on the change on temporality (see below). Can one apply these definitions of counterpublics to blogs, a special media form on the internet?

Blogging as counterpublic?

Blogging might be both looked at as a new possibility of participation in public discussion (Benkler 2006)⁶ or as another part of the internet's "contestatory network" (Dean 2003)⁷ in which in the best case groups of like-minded people discuss with each other. In his book *Zero comments: Blogging and critical internet culture* (2007) Geert Lovink provides a critical (re-)vision of the media form and states right in the beginning: "Blogs zero out centralized meaning structures and focus on personal experiences, not primarily, news media" (p. 1). But from his point of view this does not mean that they necessarily express oppositional interpretations. Lovink criticizes that "blogs have been mainly discussed in oppositional terms as being counter-voice to dominant news industry" while "the blogging majority is conservative" (ibid). Even if the focus of his study lies more on blogging in Western Europe and America, it is important to keep in mind, that blogging is not per se a "counter-voice". One needs to look at specific groups of bloggers since blogospheres as such will both include "conservative" as well as "oppositional" voices.

Furthermore, the structures of publics concerning space and time are different from the publics Fraser and Warner based their theories on – Fraser on the late 20th c. US feminist counterpublic, Warner on queer counterpublics in the last three centuries.

Firstly, blogging is at the same time a local and translocal media practice, both from its producers as well as its readers. Thereby also the notion of the 'general public' cannot be taken for granted, because who or what the general public is thought to be, might be different from blog to blog: whether a local or national public, a regional one, a translocal public, up to a 'world' public.

Secondly, temporality on the internet is structured in a different way from traditional print media. Circulation is not organized through predefined rhythms anymore. As Warner puts it: "Highly mediated and highly capitalized forms of circulation are

⁶ Benkler argues in *Wealth of Networks* (2006) that the internet leads to a "qualitative change in the role of individuals as potential investigators and commentators, as active participants in defining the agenda and debating action in the public sphere" (p. 225).

⁷ In "Why the Net is not a Public Sphere" (2003) Dean argues that the public sphere is an ideological construct and criticizes the self-representation of new media to be a democratic public.

increasingly organized as continuous ('24/7 Instant access') rather than punctual." (Warner 2002: 68f). Production and reception have become merely simultaneous processes.

I will not go deeper in the discussion of the applicability of the counterpublic-notion to this media form at this point. For the analysis, I would like to present three short questions related to my field of study that are developed out of the above presented theoretical approaches: (1.) Are the bloggers subalterns in any sense at all? (2.) Who is addressed and in which way? And (3.) whom or what is the public or sub-public challenging?

II. The Lebanese and Egyptian blogosphere: history and groups

The Lebanese blogosphere

The Lebanese blogosphere has increased enormously after former Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri's assassination in 2005 and the following demonstrations for the independence from Syria, the so-called 'cedar revolution' or 'independence Intifada'.⁸ Between February and June 2005 alone several hundred blogs were created (see Haugbolle 2007) in which a wide range of issues, mainly related to the current political situation were discussed. According to Haugbolle, "blogs acted as a 'counterpublic' of alternative voices (...) during the independence intifada".

The blogosphere then experienced another peak in the 'July War' 2006, during which another hundred new blogs were launched. During the war it offered alternative news to press and TV coverage. Bloggers wrote pieces of war journalism and personal descriptions of life under siege. After this peak of 2006, several of the early blogs and initiatives broke off or are just continued in times of conflict.⁹ The activity of the blogosphere as a whole can therefore be described as irregular and it is strongly linked to political circumstances. But nevertheless new blogs opened up since 2007 and a wide range of thematic fields is touched upon.

The thematic focus of the Lebanese blogosphere from its beginning has been domestic politics and all issues related to Palestine. While blogs that provide political commentary and links to newspaper articles have been dominant in the beginning, in the last two years however, when the political situation was rather stable, the focus has broadened. Bloggers are commenting on social issues, mocking political discussions, posting about cultural events in Beirut, writing about rather personal stories of daily life but also engage in political activism. Most blogs mix several genres and themes, political commentary can be followed by a posted poem or a personal story. Because of this it is in my opinion rather difficult to maintain the division into political blogs and personal blogs. However, there remain some rather classical journalistic blogs and some strictly personal blogs as well.

⁸ The political alliance that refers to this event is now called 'March 14', the date of the 'revolution'. 'March 14' is a coalition of so-called 'Anti-Syrian' political parties (*Future, Lebanese Forces* et al.) and independents. 'March 8' is an alliance of the opposition (*Hizbullah, Amal, Free Patriotic Movement* et al.).

⁹ As for example *Funky Zarathustra* (<http://funkyzarathustra.blogspot.com/>) who notes that she is "blogging mostly during conflicts ie. every four months or so."

The majority of blogs is written in English, followed by Arabic and French. A distinct feature of the Lebanese blogosphere is furthermore the high amount of blogs written from the Lebanese diaspora, especially the US. One of the most important blogs are for example written by Lebanese in the US, as the *Angry Arab*¹⁰, *Across the Bay*¹¹ and *Qifa Nakbi*^{12, 13}.

As general features of the Lebanese blogosphere it can be summarized, that secular views are dominantly represented and religious beliefs are rarely discussed. "Blogging is not equally spread through Lebanon's extremely diverse political landscape" (Ward) as most of the early blogosphere had close links to the demonstrations in 2005. The internal organization of the blogosphere rather enforces discussion under like-minded.

To give an exact amount of the current active blogs is difficult. Altogether there might be around 300 active blogs from a number of 2,000 existing blogs. The Lebanese blogosphere is thus rather small in number but compared to the size of the country quite remarkable.

*The Egyptian blogosphere*¹⁴

Before 2005 there were only a few Egyptian bloggers and about 40 blogs. In this "experimentation phase" most of the bloggers were "bilingual twenty-something" and worked into computers, IT and journalism (see Radsch 2008). They still are the core of the Egyptian blogosphere today. Most of the early blogs were written in English or in both English and Arabic.

The Egyptian blogosphere then increased from the end of 2005 on when bloggers wrote on and participated in the *kifayah* protests for political reform. Whether only "blogs have provided the means for political mobilization" (Al Malky 2007) is rather doubtful, but for sure they played a key role in the protest and documented them in detail. At least, the emergence of the blogosphere in Egypt is strongly linked to the *kifayah* movement. In this "activist stage" bloggers reported on protests attacked by the police and on police violence in prisons by publishing films that were recorded on mobile phones. As citizen journalists the Egyptian bloggers became internationally recognised and represent an alternative and credible information source for media from the West. Despite their popularity bloggers were and are not free from repression, as the examples of imprisoned bloggers show.¹⁵

By 2006 the number of blogs had grown enormously and the Muslim Brotherhood gained a notable presence in the Egyptian blogosphere. It also began with a small core group of activist that expanded in 2007. The blogs "resemble more the efforts of Wael Abbas' Al-

¹⁰ <http://angryarab.blogspot.com/>. See below.

¹¹ <http://beirut2bayside.blogspot.com/>, the blog of Tony Badran, a Middle East researcher.

¹², <http://qifanabki.com/>

¹³ This blogs are written by male academics that provide political commentary in English. All three blogs are to be described as "a-list" blogs (see Haugbolle) that are widely read and quoted.

¹⁴ This history is mainly based on Courney Radsch's (2008) very informed account of "the evolution of Egypt's blogosphere" (in *Arab Media and Society*)

¹⁵ For instance Alaa Abd El Fattah (*manalalaa.net*) (see Lynch) and another blogger Abdel-Kareem Nail Suleiman was sent to prison for four years in 2007 (see Al Malky 2007: 6f). Furthermore constant cases of harassment and arrestments are being reported.

Wa'i al-Masri and Manalaa.net than it does typical Brotherhood activism” states Marc Lynch (2007). They now form a distinct sub-cluster in the Egyptian blogosphere.

The period from 2006 on might be labelled as “diversification phase” (Radsch 2008). With the decline of the *kifayah* movement from the end of 2006 on, the blogosphere became more diverse and fragmented and can be characterised as “a network of identity communities” as Radsch suggests. In early 2007 the Egyptian blog ring counted 1,400 blogs. Meanwhile, according to last estimations, the number of Egyptian blogs amounts to 200,000 blogs!¹⁶

Today there is no single thematic focus of the Egyptian blogosphere to be identifiable, but some thematic fields that are predominantly discussed: the lack of human rights (torture, police violence) and women’s rights in Egypt, domestic politics as well as international, Arab-related politics, especially Palestine. The internal organization of the blogosphere reflects the political spectrum of Egypt and most of the ideological and political streams are represented. Interlinking is mostly under like-minded bloggers, and only sometimes across political boundaries.

Sub-publics in the blogosphere

Blogospheres, as a recent study on the Arabic blogosphere shows (Etling et al. 2009), are mainly national framed since most of the interlinking is with bloggers from the same country. Nevertheless blogospheres cannot be understood as ‘a singular public’ as bloggers don’t link up to anybody but mostly to bloggers that are in one or another sense close, may it be political or personal. The network character of the blogosphere is one of its main features. As Anderson puts it: “Blogging is not only user-generated, but also user-distributed, like social networking sites!” (Anderson 2009) The networking structure of blogging reinforces rather the extended networks of individuals than discussion under different minded people.

In order to give an idea of the sub-publics in the blogosphere I will try to provide a short overview of the main groups in the Lebanese and Egyptian blogosphere. The groups are primarily based on interlinking structures and not on themes or formats, even if this sometimes overlaps. They are rather loose formation of bloggers. The representation of the Lebanese blog-groups is mainly based on the findings during my recent fieldwork. In the representation of the Egyptian blogosphere I partly rely on a recent study by the *The Berkman Centre for Internet & Society* (ed. Etling et al., 2009). The report is a quantitative study on the blogosphere based on a large social network analysis.¹⁷ Their findings will be extended with my own material. Dividing the blogosphere into groups is not an easy task, as the interlinking is not only between closed groups and there are always exceptions that don’t fit in those groups. So the following representation is rather a simplified version.

¹⁶ Talk with Manal at the *Second Arab Bloggers Meeting* in December 2010 in Beirut. She is together with her husband Alaa Abd El Fattah responsible for the Egyptian blog aggregator.

¹⁷ For a critical comment on the study’s categorization of bloggers, see Syrian blogger Razzan: <http://razanghazzawi.com/2009/08/14/berkman-centers-study-of-the-arab-blogphere-map-terminology/>

Lebanon

One important group of bloggers are the ‘Lebanon bloggers’ – as I call them because their main focus is on Lebanon in general. They provide perspectives on daily life and politics from different angles. A lot of those bloggers are working in IT, design or similar fields and are managing quite well in linking up their blogs. They rather claim to be political unbiased. One of the most famous is Samer Karam’s blog *Blogging Beirut*¹⁸. Karam is working in IT and blogging since 2005, he has played an active role in blogging on the July-War 2006. Nowadays he is mainly posting photos and very active on *twitter*.¹⁹ Another famous blog that only recently celebrated its first birthday is *Maya’s Amalgam*.²⁰ The maker of the blog is a young designer, who became famous with her drawings on various social and personal stories. Part of her blog stories were also published as a book.

A second group are different political activists from the left that engage in the blogosphere and link up to each other. One of them is *Farfahhine* a student and “revolutionary socialist”, who mainly got inspired by the activism of Egyptian bloggers,²¹ and *Jou3an*, a young Marxist.²² They are in their early 20s and very active engaging in leftist politics in Lebanon, especially active in Palestine-related issues. As *Jou3an*, some of them are working as freelance journalists for rather left journals such as *al-Akhbar* and *al-Safir*.²³ Those blogs combine political commentary, posting about recent events and sometimes also rather personal stories. Also to mention here is *The Angry Arab* blog by As’ad Abu Khalil’s, the “über-leftist” (Haugbolle 2007) of the Lebanese blogosphere, to whom most of these blogger link up.²⁴

On the other side of the political spectrum, there are blogs that clearly support the March 14 coalition, as the *Beirut Spring*²⁵, which was started 2005 after the assassination of Hariri. And one finds blogs close to a special party, as for example the collective blog *The Ouwet Front* that is held by Lebanese Force members. It is one of the most visited and commented blog and clearly political affiliated even if structurally independent. It is not well linked in the blogosphere, but to other Lebanese Forces websites and forums.

Parts of the ‘Lebanon bloggers’ as well as leftist activist bloggers also meet face to face. While the Beirut bloggers tend to meet rather on ‘tweetups’ or other occasions as the *ArabNet* Conference, the political activists gather on political events and through personal links. Furthermore in the beginning of 2010 a new association of Lebanese

¹⁸ <http://www.bloggingbeirut.com/>,

¹⁹ Another blogger, +961, also working in IT, is providing a weekly link round up. <http://www.plus961.com/>

²⁰ <http://mayazankoul.com/>

²¹ Interview with farfahhine, 25.02.2010

²² <http://farfahinne.blogspot.com/>; <http://jou3an.wordpress.com/>

²³ See also hanibaael.blogspot.com and beirutiyat.wordpress.com, who are less engaged in political activism in their writings but still are interlinked with the ‘leftist blogosphere’.

²⁴ As’ad Abu Khalil, political science professor at California State University, is known for critics of media coverage of the Middle East. He is very active for the ‘Palestinian cause’.

²⁵ <http://beirutspring.com/blog/>

bloggers, the *lebloggers* has been established, which envisages to spread the culture of blogging, share experiences and provide trainings and support.²⁶

Egypt

Turning to Egypt, representing the groups in the blogosphere is even a bigger challenge, as they are thousands of active blogs to be considered. I will focus on the rather political blogs.

One powerful group within the blogosphere is surely those of rather ‘secular’ political and human rights activists, who especially in the beginning of blogging were closely connected. Just to mention two of the most known: Wael Abbas with his blog *al-wa’i al-masri*²⁷ (Egyptian awareness) is a leading example for publishing videos of police violence in Egypt. He is a journalist and Human Rights activist who became internationally recognized through various international awards²⁸ and interviews on mainstream media related to politics in Egypt. Another famous blog is *3arabawy*²⁹ maintained by Hossam el-Hamalawy, a journalist and socialist activist, who is covering in particular all kinds of workers strikes and protests worldwide. The blog is written in Arabic and English and provides lot of links to newspaper articles (*Masry al Youm*, *Daily News* etc.) or other blogs (like *Angry Arab*).

A second distinctive group is the Muslim Brotherhood bloggers. Human rights are a major theme in this part of the blogosphere. The most known blog is *Ana Ikhwan*³⁰ (which translates “I am the Muslim Brotherhood”) by Abd Al Moneim Mahmoud, a 29 years old journalist working for *ikhwan.web*. In the blog he is commenting on domestic and Arab politics as well as Islam-related issues. Despite the title and his self-identification with the Muslim Brotherhood he claims that “this blog is only expressing my opinion independently.” *2mwag* (“Waves in the sea of change”) is a blogger collective of 16 bloggers, active since September 2007. “This collective blog deals with negative and positive attitudes inside the Islamic movement which adopt the civilizational wasatiyya project”. They are also providing links to the Muslim Brotherhood website as well as bloggers from the Muslim Brotherhood field. Common linking points of the Muslim Brotherhood blogs are *ikhwan.web* and *islam.online*. Quite striking is that they are nearly exclusively written in Arabic. Next to this group there is a range of Islamic bloggers, who mainly write about their personal reflections on Islam and sometimes intermingle with the Muslim Brotherhood blogs.³¹

Concerning the wider question of counterpublics, these are the most important groups. Aside of these there are a wide range blogs that are not clearly political active, such as

²⁶ Hanibaael, one of the participants, wrote an article about this association: <http://hibr.me/ar/issue4/lebaneseblogging>

²⁷ <http://misrdigital.blogspirit.com/>

²⁸ Human Rights Watch in 2008, Knight International Journalism award in 2007, and he was appointed as most influential person in 2006 by BBC.

²⁹ <http://arabist.net/arabawy/author/hossam/>

³⁰ <http://ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com>

³¹ See Etling et al. 2009: 18.

Baheyya, *Egyptian Chronicles* or *Lasto Adri*.³² They are blogging about wide range of issues, providing political commentary and engaging in current discussions as well as writing about personal stories. Furthermore the Egyptian youth is very engaged in blogging about different kind of issues, from daily life experiences with family to music and film.

Looking at both the Lebanese and Egyptian blogosphere it becomes apparent, that publics on the internet cannot be regarded as homogenous publics and that they are internally divided according to political and religious orientations.

In Lebanon one finds extension of other subpublics in the blogosphere: There is a Lebanese leftist public that transcends into the blogosphere which is reflected by the links and common actors in *al-Akhbar*, *al-Safir* and certain blogs. The leftist blogger like *Jou3an* and *Farfahhine* link up with each other and actors of the other side of the political spectrum do also, as the Lebanese Force members (*The Ouwet Front*). So one could speak of networked sub-publics that are not limited to the blogosphere but are linked to other online-publications like websites of political parties or newspapers. In Egypt the blogosphere changed from a small open network into a huge network that contains different clusters of blogs, in which rather like-minded link with each other.

In the Egyptian blogosphere one could perceive several interrelated counterpublic spheres like the Muslim Brotherhood public sphere (with special links to *ikhwan.online*), as a ‘*ex-kifayah*’ public with links to other media (*Al-Masry al-youm*, *Al-Dustour*). Both have a strong focus on human rights and also may overlap for specific causes. As in the Lebanese case those spheres are not restricted to the blogosphere or the internet but transcend the medium by far. But in contrast to the Lebanese they are much more related to activism on the street and also face much stronger repression.

Thus the question of whether the blogosphere as a whole is a counter-public seems not be the right questions. One should rather look at specific groups within the blogosphere and the content they produce.

III. Blogospheres as counterpublics: actors, audiences, causes

Bloggers, the bourgeois subaltern?

Fraser defines counterpublics as publics in which “subordinated social groups” “invent and circulate counterdiscourses” (s. a.) and Warner mentions the awareness of the “subaltern status” in the counterpublic as essential feature. But are the actors in this field be subordinated or subaltern in any way?

In the profiles of the most wide read Lebanese blogs one finds a lot of academics, journalists, IT workers and knowledge workers in general. So the majority of bloggers has obtained higher education, which implies mostly English education when it comes to university level. Blogging in Lebanon surely is a middle and upper class activity. Access

³² <http://baheyya.blogspot.com/>, <http://egyptianchronicles.blogspot.com/>, <http://lasto-adri.blogspot.com/>. A project initiated from the last is *kolenaleila*, where different stories about women’s life in Egypt and now also other Arab countries are published: <http://kolenalaila.com/>.

to the internet is limited³³ as the infrastructure in Lebanon is not well developed which leads to high prices and slow internet connection.³⁴ Regarding the social background, Lebanese bloggers are not to be described as subalterns in their society. Nevertheless some of the bloggers may be regarded as subalterns because of their political, religious (or rather non-religious) views or their sexual orientation. A blogging radical leftist, a homosexuals or atheists are holding views that strongly oppose dominant culture in their society.

Concerning Egypt, one can argue in a similar vein. As mentioned before, the first bloggers in Egypt often had a background in IT or journalism and this is still common for the blogosphere. A majority of the Egyptian 'a-list' bloggers are still journalists – or have become journalists through their blogging activity. Today, as the entry barrier into the blogosphere from a technical standpoint has become lower and internet access has grown³⁵ there are quite different backgrounds to be found in the overall blogger scene. Still, as well as the internet users whose majority has some university education (see Abdullah 2007: 50), the same can be said about the bloggers. But even stronger than in Lebanon, bloggers in Egypt can be described as subaltern because of the views they express: whether political oppositional opinions from different angles or their religious views as Baheyyas, Copts or atheists. Furthermore it could be argued, that simply by belonging to the Egyptian blogosphere, one might obtain a subaltern status and face oppression that one would not otherwise.

Nevertheless blogging as such is not to be regarded as a subaltern activity. On the one hand bloggers also use their blog for their own professionalisation as designers or writers. On the other hand, bloggers may also belong to dominant groups and express those views, whether on a political or social level. So the notion of the subaltern who is aware of its subordinate status (see Warner above) does fit to certain bloggers but surely not to the blogosphere as such.

Ways of addressing: Language

A first indication of ways of addressing is surely language. Language use is also one of the major differences between the Lebanese and Egyptian blogosphere. This issue deserves more detailed study as language use and politics in both countries (dialects, use of foreign languages etc.) are quite complex, but still I want to reflect a bit on the reasons for this difference here.

In the Lebanese blogosphere English is the predominant language, and used by the most known bloggers as *Blogging Beirut* or *Maya's Amalgam*. English is followed by Arabic and then French. Some bloggers use both languages alternately or even have two

³³ Reliable data of internet access and use is hardly accessible. This is partly due to self-reported internet use and also to the sharing of personal computers that are difficult to measure. *Internetworldstats* reports 945,000 internet users in Lebanon, what makes ca. 23.5 % out of the population.

³⁴ Maha Taki defines the political and economic conditions in Lebanon as responsible for the low internet penetration, as there is a "lack of developed infrastructure" (Taki 2009: 284).

³⁵ According to *internetworldstats* Egypt had 12,568,900 internet users in June 2009, which means 15.9 % of the population used the internet. The number of users alone is outstanding in the Arab world. Egypt belongs to the states with the highest growth rates in the Arab world and is the first when it comes to the amount of data transferred (Abdullah 2007: 39).

different blogs.³⁶ Some also post in the two languages or understand themselves as a bridge between both languages and their audiences – as for example *Ethiopian suicides*³⁷, an issue blog on Migrant domestic workers in Lebanon.

The use of English “allows to communicate with international human rights groups, media, researchers, and, most importantly, a community of other bloggers worldwide” (Haugbolle 2007). The Lebanese blogosphere, at least in its beginning, was a much more an endeavour from academics, researchers, political analysts that provided political analysis for an informed and often ‘Western’ public. This outreach and bridging factor is partly related to the huge Lebanese diaspora in the world, which is estimated to be up to 15 Million people and thus much higher than the Lebanese population in Lebanon. Another reason might be the background of the bloggers as described above. As most of them obtained higher education in English, using this language seems often ‘natural’ and is not even questioned as I could observe in some of the interviews. Typing Arabic even poses a problem for some of the bloggers as they are more used to type in English or French. Still there is a number of bloggers that post in Arabic as most of the leftist bloggers but also bloggers that are not politically. They explain it by their choice of audience, that they want primarily communicate with Lebanese or Arabs in general. Those who are blogging in French mainly obtained French education and/or lived in France and therefore feel that their French writing skills are better than their Arabic. Still this issue deserves more detailed study as language is highly contested in Lebanon as one can see in current discussion about the state of Arabic in Lebanon.³⁸

In the Egyptian blogosphere by contrast, the percentage of Arabic blogs, both in standard Arabic and the Egyptian dialect, is much higher. Since its beginning, the Egyptian blogosphere was more related to activism. Even if it also provided reports for Western media, the most important audience seems to be Egyptians themselves. To inform them about the situation in Egypt, and make them aware of it, is for example a goal of Wael Abbas blog “Egyptian awareness”. Wael Abbas explained to me that he only writes in English when he needs international solidarity, but mostly writes in Arabic because his blog mainly targets young Egyptians.³⁹ Of course one cannot generalize from one ‘star blogger’ to the overall blogosphere, but generally speaking the focus on the local readership seems to be a common trend and much stronger than in the Lebanese case.

Nevertheless, also for Egyptian bloggers it is not always ‘natural’ to blog in Arabic as lot of them also obtained English education and are more used to write in English. For example the *Lasto Adri* blogger told me that she was encouraged by some Egyptian bloggers to change to Arabic and that she was working on her Arabic writing skills a lot.⁴⁰ And there is also a bunch of bloggers, that are posting in English, as *Egyptian Chronicles*, who are to be considered as bridge bloggers.

Who is addressed is of course not only a matter of language, but also of styles of writing. The genres in writing are as diverse as writing as such is: from newspaper-like political commentary, all kinds of poetry, the use of dialectal and everyday language and all kinds

³⁶ Like *Ana Min Beirut*: <http://anaminbeirut.blogspot.com/> and <http://minbeirutbilarabeh.blogspot.com/>

³⁷ <http://www.ethiopiansuicides.blogspot.com/>

³⁸ <http://beirutspring.com/blog/2010/03/01/hi-kifak-ca-va-pride/>

³⁹ Interview with Wael Abbas, at the 2nd *Arab Bloggers Meeting* in Beirut, 09.12.2009.

⁴⁰ Interview at the 2nd *Arab Bloggers Meeting* in Beirut, 09.12.2009.

of not standardized speech, just to name a few. Informality applies to form as well as to content, different languages might be mixed, grammar and spelling changed, capital letters admitted and so forth.⁴¹ Furthermore the linking to other blogs as well through different channels like *youtube* and *facebook* and twitter is to be considered as through this active audience building is happening.

To sum up, language use indicates that the Lebanese blogosphere is more oriented towards a translocal public, whereas the Egyptian is more concentrated on the local audience and its mobilisation. In the next part I want to shed light on what the bloggers are actually challenging and thereby taking a closer look at what publics the bloggers are aiming at.

Challenging regimes, challenging representation

Whom or what is the blogosphere or sub-public challenging? What are the causes bloggers engage in? And which public is respectively addressed? I would like to shed some more light on the causes or events the blogospheres or parts of it are mobilising. Thereby I want to look at two events in the history of each blogosphere. They do not represent all activities in the blogosphere but rather point at differences of how counterpublics in the blogosphere are evolving and how they are structured.

Lebanon 1: The event that made the Lebanese blogosphere spread very fast, as hundreds new blogs were launched,⁴² was the July-War in 2006. During this war, the bloggers reported from current events in Lebanon, provided personal stories⁴³ from life under the siege. In their blog posts, the writers challenged an international version of the event in which Lebanon (Hizbullah) was often portrayed as the responsible and countered it with personal experiences or analysis from ‘on the spot’. They were actively engaged in providing another representation of the war, documenting the consequences for the civil population and were calling for an end of the Israeli military assaults.

Samer Karam from *Blogging Beirut*, who has been blogging since 2005, told me about how blogging during these became really a responsibility, because so many people (400.000 per day!) were visiting his blog.⁴⁴ A lot of other bloggers felt this responsibility to write about what was happening or needed a channel to express what they were experiencing. Those who started blogging, described it as being pushed to open a blog, because they needed to let things out, as Wadih Asmar, the author of *Rever le Liban*. He found himself in a position where he was not completely with Hizbullah, but could not be against the armed resistance neither and felt he needed to put something against the international coverage of the conflict.⁴⁵ Often the blogs began as notes for friends, to inform them about the current situation, as for example Rasha Salti’s blog.

However, these diary notes are becoming something else, and I realize now that I am no longer writing to the intimate society of people I love and cherish, but to an opaque blogosphere of people who want “alternative” news. I am more than ever conscious of a

⁴¹ See for a further discussion of speech genres in the Lebanese blogosphere Haugbolle 2008.

⁴² According to Haugbolle 2008.

⁴³ See *Muzna’s* stories, now on <http://hakaya.blogspot.com/>

⁴⁴ Interview with Samer Karam, Beirut, 19.11.2009.

⁴⁵ Interview with Wadih Asmar from *reverleliban*, Beirut, 10.03.2010.

sense of responsibility in drafting them, they have a public life, an echo that I was not aware of that I experience now as some sort of a burden.⁴⁶

So even when the initial opening of a blog was not intended to provide “alternative news”, as Rasha Salti described, the blogosphere became a kind of counterpublic during the war; a counterpublic that was not mainly countering the national public in Lebanon but transcending its boundaries by far. As most of the blogs were written in English or French, they could reach an international public: a public, that was no longer to be localized, but truly translocal.

This moment was surely unique in the history the Lebanese blogosphere. But even if a lot of the blogs stopped after the war, it was kind of a catalyst for the blogging activity and showed its momentary force. A lot of those who have not heard about blogging before, became aware of it. The blogosphere, even if incorporating diverse voices, challenged a specific version of the war. Especially as those who were writing were young Lebanese. They were far from representing the stereotypes of pro-Hizbullah or ‘Islamic’ Lebanese, but young educated, technical experienced journalists, artists or students, whose cultural background seemed to be very closer to other young people in the ‘West’. They thereby countered both, the representation of the war and Lebanese population as such. And the blogs one could argue that they represented not ‘simply’ the voice of victims but a dignified voice of Lebanese living the war.

Lebanon 2: A second recent more example from the Lebanese blogosphere, is blogging about the demonstrations against the Egyptian “wall of shame” that took place in Beirut in front of the Egyptian embassy on January 26 this year. Some leftist bloggers⁴⁷ were active first in mobilizing and then in reporting on this demonstration. The demonstration was a distinctive moment in the blogosphere, as different bloggers shared their blog posts on the event⁴⁸ or got to know about their respective blogging activity through this event. During the demonstration some protesters were attacked by the army and the bloggers provided photos, films and reports on this particular part of the event. Furthermore *Jou3an*, *Hanzala* and others wrote articles in which they heavily criticized the army as such.⁴⁹ In talks after the demonstration several bloggers told me that only one Lebanese channel (*New TV*) reported about this attacks by the army, others were blaming the demonstrators.⁵⁰ Most of the involved bloggers were writing in Arabic, only a few English posts were published.⁵¹ This indicates that primarily a local and regional (Arab speaking) public was targeted.

Egypt 1: A series of sexual assaults in Cairo in October 2006 became a defining moment for the Egyptian blogosphere (Radsch 2008, Al Malky 2007). It happened during the religious holiday Eid al-Fitr when young women were harassed in Cairo Downtown

⁴⁶ <http://rashasalti.blogspot.com/2006/07/lebanon-siege-day-5.html>

⁴⁷ farfahhine.wordpress.com, hanzala.wordpress.com, jou3an.wordpress.com, beirutiyat.wordpress.com, hanibaael.wordpress.com, saghbini.wordpress.com

⁴⁸ *Hanibaael* provided a list of links on the 25th of January (<http://hanibaael.wordpress.com>)

⁴⁹ *Jou3an* on 24th and 26th of January (<http://jou3an.wordpress.com>) and *Hanzala* on the 25th of January: <http://hanzala86.blogspot.com/2010/01/blog-post.html>. *Hanzala's* article was partly published in *Al-Akhbar*.

⁵⁰ Interview with *Jou3an*, 24.01.2010.

⁵¹ *Farfahhine* for example published an English post of a “comrade”: <http://farfahhine.blogspot.com/2010/01/police-attack-protestors-at-egyptian.html>

without any interference of the police. Bloggers were round the corner to document the assaults and published them on their blogs. It took some days until the story migrated to the daily *al-Masry al youm*, *al-Dustour* and other newspapers. This was but one of the few examples where the stories of the blogs really made it in the Egyptian mainstream media.

Egypt 2: Especially torture and police violence has been one of the fields bloggers are reporting on. Wael Abbas blog *Al-Wa'i al-masri* is a leading example for publishing videos of police violence in Egypt. One of the most prominent cases is from 2007 when Abbas published a video of police beating, torturing and sexually abusing a bus driver with an iron stick, an incident that had happened in 2006. This led to a court case and the sentencing of two police officers. The case attracted media attention as well in Egypt as internationally (*Le Figaro*, *Libération*, *The Guardian* etc.⁵²) and is one of the success stories against police violence in Egypt. Nevertheless, after this case media tend to be less interested in those cases, as Abbas criticized in an interview in 2009.⁵³ What is striking in this case, is that the video has been public before on *youtube.com*, but it hasn't been framed in the same way.⁵⁴ This shows how same kind of information can be perceived in different ways and not the publishing per se makes the case, but framing certain actions as injustice. By publishing videos of police violence and following up on those cases Abbas and his fellow bloggers⁵⁵ have been constantly challenging the Egyptian regime in exposing structural injustice that hasn't been persecuted and on another level they have been raising the awareness among Egyptians about torture. The addressed audience of such exposures are mainly Egyptians themselves, the government as well as the population. Another audience is of course the international public and press that can help in pressuring the Egyptian regime.

If one looks at both blogosphere, no doubt, different oppositional views are expressed. In Egypt the state is challenged as police violence and torture are exposed and the non-democratic regime constantly criticized. Egypt is one of the countries with the highest number of arrested bloggers, which clearly shows that those views are not tolerated by the government. Also in Lebanon oppositional views are expressed, but on another level. In general the sectarian political system and politics are often criticized, especially from Leftist bloggers. But as such the blogosphere is not as politicized and related to activism as the Egyptian one.

In comparing concrete cases from Lebanon and Egypt varying forms of counterpublics on the internet become visible: they do challenge different representations and target different audiences: a rather "global public" (Burne) or translocal networked public in the Lebanon war and a local and regional public in the demonstration against the Egyptian wall in Gaza. In Egypt mainly the local public is targeted and international coverage seen as a support in special cases. This shows that both the local and international media context must be taken into consideration in order to fully grasp the dynamics of

⁵² See <http://misrdigital.blogspot.com/archive/2007/01/index.html>

⁵³ <http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/7111-egyptian-blogger-uncovers-new-alleged-case-police-torture>

⁵⁴ This was mentioned in a discussion about blogging in Egypt with Wael Abbas, Alaa Abd El Fattah and Manal at the *Second Arab Bloggers Meeting 2009*, Beirut, 11th December 2009.

⁵⁵ See also Noha Atefs blog <http://www.tortureinegypt.net/>

counterpublics on the internet. A feature of “translocal media cultures” (Hepp) is the traveling of certain ‘news’ between local media and international media.

IV. Preliminary answers and further thoughts

Overall in both blogospheres there is not a distinctive stable “subaltern counterpublic” in the Fraser’ian sense to be distinguished. Rather time-limited issue-politics as during the high of the Egyptian *kifayah* movement or in the July-War 2006 in Lebanon are to be detected. Subpublics in the blogospheres seem to be able to form counterpublics for a special cause and limited in time. In framing new issues (like police violence and sexual harassment) blogs are efficient. Thereby convergence with other media (print) and internet forms (*youtube*, *twitter*) is important to consider, as blogs are not ‘acting’ in an autonomous field, but are strongly interlinked with other media forms on the internet and in the ‘offline’ publications.

Furthermore it is important to consider, that despite the national boundedness of the blogospheres, production (especially in the Lebanese case) as well as reception are translocal phenomena. Therefore the counterpublic notion must be related to different publics: local, regional and translocal/global. Which audience is addressed might change, depending on the cause and the actors. Thinking with Warner’s definition of counterpublics, the “dominant public” is not always the national public sphere, but can be changing from case to case. Whereas in Egypt the dominant public might be for the most part the public loyal to the regime, in Lebanon it is more difficult to detect what the dominant public could be, as the Lebanese public is strongly segmented. Ongoing research and theoretical reflection is needed to grasp the internal dynamics of these blogospheres and evaluate their relation to the wider public sphere. A challenge for this kind of research is, that the publics in the blogospheres are in constant change and not stable entities.

35,727 characters

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