

"Your life and your cause bound up together; before and after all, it's the essence of who you are." Mahmoud Darwish

First Arab Bloggers Meeting

Beirut 22-24 August 2008
@ Zico House

Blogs are becoming ever more important as catalysts for previously unlikely political mobilization and activism in the Arab world. They constitute public forums that help citizens practice and bolster their right to freedom of expression and enhance their argumentative and analytical skills. Blogs have in some cases clearly allowed for more diversity, greater acceptance of plurality, and accountability and transparency. Especially for young people, blogs represent an outlet for their thoughts and emotions and a sphere that they can freely navigate and where tangible results might even be possible.

It is therefore paramount to keep supporting this essential tool of expression and activism in a region plagued by authoritarian rule and numerous serious grievances, and to assist bloggers in raising their voice and optimizing their outreach and impact.

The meeting is an opportunity for bloggers to exchange experiences, forge alliances, pinpoint obstacles faced by bloggers and ways to overcome those, in addition to gaining tools that maximize impact and outreach of blogging and that advance a blogger's cause.

30 participants from Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Palestine, Iraq, and Syria are attending the meeting - a colorful potpourri of voices that will enrich the discussions and hopefully yield fruitful results for everyone.

Program

22 August 2008

SESSION 1 Welcome note & intro

9:30 – 10:00

Layla Al-Zubaidi – Director Heinrich Boell
Stiftung Middle East/Beirut

Alia Rayyan – Heinrich Boell Stiftung Arab
Middle East/Ramallah

Dina Fakoussa – Heinrich Boell Stiftung Middle
East/Beirut

SESSION 2 Mapping the Landscape

10:00 – 11:00

*Who are we?
What are we doing?
What for?*

Every participant introduces him/herself, their professional/blogging background, and the motivation behind becoming bloggers. Mansour Aziz, Media Specialist, will terminate the session by giving a short presentation on visualization options for mapping in general.

SESSION 3 A journey through the 'blogosphere' -presentation of country examples

11:00 – 12:45

What are the main obstacles, challenges and success stories of blogging in the Arab world?

Examples from Egypt, Bahrain, Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria, and Saudi Arabia presented by previously selected participants from the respective countries.

12:45 – 13:15

Q&A

13:15 – 14:45

Light Lunch

SESSION 4 Solidarity, bloggers communities & linkage to non-bloggers

14:45 – 17:30

What kind of communities and alliances do exist?

What are their strength and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages?

Is there a lack of solidarity nationally and regionally?

Is there a need to increasingly enter alliances (also with non-bloggers) and establish communities?

How should they be structured and managed?

Activism is often constrained to a local or individual level and engagement in other national and/or transnational activities is absent. The questions to be raised are whether this should be changed and whether there is a need for national/regional/global networks to deepen impact and enhance outreach of blogging. The session will additionally discuss whether there should be more attempts to partner with non-bloggers who work on similar causes (human rights organizations, freedom of the press associations, independent media etc.). Representatives from **Human Rights Watch** and other organizations will be present and will engage in the discussions.

20:30 Dinner @ Wardeh Restaurant-Hamra

23 August 2008

SESSION 5 Activism & advocacy toolkit

10:00 – 12:30

What kind of means and tools are available for mobilization, activism and advocacy purposes?

This session is moving to the field of digital activism, exploring online but also relevant offline techniques and means to spread the word and mobilize a critical mass, hence exerting pressure to achieve results. **Sami Ben Gharbeia** from **Global Voices Online** and **Ahmed Karout** from **Amnesty International Middle East/North Africa**

will ignite the discussion by making interventions.

SESSION 6 How do we gain the trust of our readership?

12:30 – 14:00

What are the elements in a blog that lend it authenticity and hence are likely to secure a broad readers' and supporters' base for a given blog?

Blogs have a non-conforming, independent and informal character and applying strict general media ethics and laws on this sphere deprives blogging of its unique nature and spirit. Yet, activist bloggers who seek supporters for their cause need to constitute a trusted voice. This session is devoted to elements that need to be considered by bloggers to attain a necessary level of trust by readers.

14:00 – 15:30 Light Lunch

SESSION 7 Creative usage of the net

15:30 – 17:00

Which technical and audio-visual means and tools (high-tech and low-tech net tools) are available that lend a blog more attractiveness and popularity?

This session will explore different options for bloggers to move beyond the text by discussing a range of technical and creative possibilities. Two bloggers will provide ideas

and/or serve as examples: **Mazen Kerbaj** (Lebanon) and **Alaa Abd El Fattah** (Egypt).

24 August 2008

SESSION 8 Legal regulations,
protection & safety

10:30 – 13:00

What is the legal framework in the Arab world that affects blogging? How can a blogger deal with censorship?

Legal restrictions and interferences by authoritarian governments in the region are an immanent threat and impediment to bloggers. The pressing issues of legal regulations of the internet and state control in addition to ways to evade censorship will be the focal points of this discussion. Journalist and blogger **Elijah Zarwan** and the Egyptian blogger **Ahmad Gharbeia** will deliver presentations.

13:00 – 14:30 Light Lunch

SESSION 9 Closing session and
evaluation

14:30 – 15:30

Participants will be asked to give an evaluation of the meeting and to make suggestions for future joint activities.