Special Paper: *Cyber Politics in the Middle East*
Dr. Miryam Aouragh

Description
Does the study of politics online differ from analysing politics in (historical or contemporary) offline settings? What is the impact of agency and resistance formed by the internet? Is the internet any different in how it shapes the politics of representation? What are the online counterparts of the more 'classic' methods of coercion? Science and technology have become increasingly important in social science studies. Internet is a continuation of and in dialogue with (new) media studies. But contrary to the *one-to-many* medias, online audiences are (interactive) consumers as well as (customized) producers. However, cyberspace is not a substitute or derivative of everyday life. What matters is *how* participants relate to the internet as a means of communication and additionally, to discover *what* the socio-political consequences of computer-mediated-communities and internet activism may be. This field of study inevitably enters into contested terrains: the internet strengthens the panoptic state system through even more sophisticated surveillance techniques; feeds the logic of capitalist corporate control; and deepens the potential escapism, alienation, or submission of consumers. Yet, the paradox is that it also decentralises power: examples from the Mexican Zapatista movement in 1994, to the birth of the anti-capitalist movement with the Battle of Seattle in1999, and the antiwar movement's post-9/11, testify that the internet can be turned into a tool of resistance. The internet assists neoliberal globalisation and imperialism; and at the same time it creates spaces for anti-imperialist struggle, therefore it is impossible to understand the structure of contemporary social movements without exploring the internet.

Context
Unsurprisingly, there is ample academic fascination for Middle East politics on the internet. Bunt (2003) refers to *E-Jihad*; Roy (2004) argues that Wahabi and Salafi Islam have became more present because they are now mediated online. Researchers, politicians and commentators alike argue that the internet effects politics in the 'belly of the beast' (Muslims in the west) as well as the battlefield of empire (resistance/'terrorism' in the Middle East). Online disseminated opinions and actions are believed to extends into offline settings (often referring to 9/11, the 7/7 London bombings, 11/3 Madrid bombings, the 'cartoon crises' (Denmark) and the death of filmmaker Theo van Gogh (Holland)). US congressman Lieberman for instance claims that the 'axes of evil' have moved into virtual space. These assumptions are backed by studies such as *Mass mediated Terrorism* in which Nacos (2007) argues that the internet is the most important instrument for terrorists, or *Fighting Terror in Cyberspace* where Last and Kandel (2005) point at terrorist threats. Governments meanwhile worry the internet becomes a tool to recruit, propagate, and organize 'radicalism'. The debates, discourses and adjoining policies to counter 'internet terror' feed into existing politics of fear and Islamophobia. Studies about the social implications of the internet often represent a dichotomy. This special paper aims to surpass the dystopian/utopian and situated/mobile polarity. The lectures introduce students to basic concepts and critiques relevant to studying the internet. Based on both classical and innovative theories and methodologies, students will be exposed to cutting-edge ethnographic studies. Internet research requires a different approach to collecting, interpreting, verifying data. These empirical differences raise important (ethical) questions about internet methodology which we will discuss.

The relevance of the internet in the Middle East is here understood in sum as:
* a medium for grassroots voices that are normally refused or ignored in public/political spheres;

* since nearly 2/3rd of the population in the Middle East is below 21, the birth of the internet is 'naturally' adopted by a large part of the population;

* previous media largely mirrored the patriarchal hierarchy it is now possible to overcome gender segregation and social control: the internet is unprecedented in overcoming the social hierarchies in which both women and junior males are made subordinate to senior male authority;

* fragmented and exiled diasporas challenge on-the-ground immobility by crossing borders in cyberspace.

Research about the construction of online (imagined) communities in the Palestinian diaspora (Aouragh 2008) and about the use of Web 2.0 by activists in Lebanon and Palestine (Aouragh 2010), reveal the complex synergies of technology and politics. The urgency lies in the fact that internet penetration exploded amid an important leap in the evolution of Middle East politics. The internet appeared in the late 1990s and penetrate society, and through ISPs and Internet Cafes around 2001/2002; at the same time the region was roiling in rebellion as the Al Aqsa' Intifada broke out and the 'War on Terror' brought war and invasions.

Objectives

We will study the socio-political implications of the internet in general; and ethnographic analyses of internet utilisation in the Middle East in specific. The overall target of the lectures is two-fold: to develop critical expertise about contemporary grassroots dynamics of Middle East politics; and academic skills to analyse the powerful crystallization of politics and the internet. The option is interdisciplinary in character and derived from methodological/theoretical examinations that bring together contributions from Anthropology, Politics, and Media Studies. The emphasis during the lectures is on acquiring the tools with which to understand internet research with regards to the Middle East. Taken the general objectives and specific focus together, the main objectives are formulated as follows:

- To look at the decentralization of information and communication in the context of contemporary social movements; gain insight into newly accessible voices emanating from the Middle East;

- To deconstruct the Arab-Israeli conflict through the prism of the internet;

- To assess how online political representations correspond to offline political practices;

- To identify both the offline context of activists and their online agency; in other words: the specific function of the internet in their mobilization and protest strategies.

Experimenting with new methodologies is an important way of getting acquainted with this new field of research. Guest lecturers from the OII (Oxford Internet Institute) will explain how websites are tracked and hyperlinks are deciphered, and how virtual networks can be discovered through url relations (*webomatrix/issue-crawler*). As the lecturer writes about online activism in Palestine and Lebanon she will offer students the opportunity to engage as co-authors and hereby better understand the complex world of writing and publishing. The lectures are broken into three sections.

Part One: The basics of internet studies (lecture 1 and 2)

In the first part of the option we will study the foundational concepts; the essential frameworks and the innovative methodological contributions. Questions to be answered are: What are the main trends; how are research developments applied; which new questions do these developments raise?

Part two: Offline and Online implications (lectures 3, 4, and 5).

In part two we will scrutinize the virtual homes of Web 2.0 e.g. the blogs, wiki's, Facebook, Myspace. This part of the option looks at the sites of contestation but also puts back virtual identities into their existing everyday realities.

Part Three: Online Agency: Politics of the oppressed (lectures 6, 7, and 8).

In this last phase of the option we will engage with examples of internet resistance. What are the pros and cons of Cyber Intifada. The lectures will deal with online acticism by looking at transformations of new Open Source and 'citizen journalism' techniques and aims to answer the following dilemma: how does internet technology translate the discourses and voices in cyberspace into collective action and alter the existing power dynamics in 'realspace'?

All books in the syllabus are available in the OII library, the lecturer will prepared a reader containing the separate articles.

Lecture 1.

The Basics of internet studies 1: "Cyber Culture, Virtual Ethnography, Virtual Worlds, Second Life…": Defining the net.

Hine, C. 2000. Virtual Ethnography.

Silver, D. 2000. Introducing Cyber Culture. Resource centre for Cyberculture Studies. (reader)

Wellman, B. 1999. Networks in the global village: life in contemporary communities.

Shields, R. 2006. 'Virtualities'. (reader)

Maffesoli, M. 2008. 'Second Life and Hyperreality. (reader)

Okin, J. R. 2005. The Internet Revolution: Not-for-Dummies guide to the History, Technology and Use of the Internet.

Franda, M. F. 2002. Internet Cultures in Israel and the Arab world (chapter 2 of: Launching into cyberspace. Internet developments and politics in Five World Regions)

Franklin, M.I. 2005. Postcolonial Politics. The Internet and Everyday Life Pacific Traversals Online.

Recommended:

Castells, M. 2001. The internet Galaxy.

Turkle, S. 1995. Life on the Screen.

Rheingold, H. 1993. The Virtual Community.

Lecture 2.

The Basics of internet studies 2: "Data analyses, Online Accountability, Ethics in Cyberspace…": Researching the net.

Carey, 2005. Three flaws of internet research. New Media & Society. (reader)

Danet, B. 2002. Studies of Cyberpl@y: Ethical and Methodological Aspects. (reader)

Strathern, 2000. Virtual society? Get Real! (reader)

Megens, H and Martin, B. 2003. Cyber Methods: An Assessments. (reader)

Hine, H. 2005. Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the internet.

Aouragh, 2008, Palestine Online. Chapter 1. Anthropology from below: Internet as Space & Tool. (reader)

Recommended:

Garton, L, Haythornthwaite, C, and Wellman, B. 1997. Studying Online Social Networks. (reader)

AoIR, 2002. Ethics Working Group Recommendations. (reader)

Part two: Offline and Online implications.

In part two we will scrutinize the virtual homes, e.g. the blogs, wiki's and web 2.0. This part of the option looks at the sites of contestation and puts back virtual identities into their existing everyday realities and critically analyses the politics of identity online.

Lecture 3.

Politics of identity online/Online identity politics

Miller & Slater. 2001. The internet: An Ethnographic approach.

Aouragh, M. 2008. Palestine Online. Chapter 3: Online Mobility/Offline Exile. (reader)

Aouragh, M. 2008. Palestine Online. Chapter 4: Virtual Space/Territorial Place. (reader)

Wheeler, D. 2005. The Internet in the Middle East. Global Expectations and Local Imaginations. Chapter 5: The internet and Youth subculture.

Wheeler, D. 2009. Working around the state: internet use and political identity in the Arab world (chapter 22 of Handbook of Internet Politics, 2009.

Recommended:

Kolock, P and Smith, M. 1999. Communities in Cyber Space.

Christensen, N. 2003. Inuit in Cyberspace: Embedding Offline Identities Online.

Lecture 4.

Floating between the Public and Private Sphere: Gender, Intimacy, Secrecy, Escapism,

Aouragh, 2008. Palestine Online. Chapter 6: At the crossroad: Internet Cafes. (reader)

O'Brian, J. 1999. Writing in the Body: Gender (Re) production in Online Interaction. In: Kolock, P and Smith, M. 1999. Communities in Cyber Space.

Gher, L.A. and Amin, H. Y (Eds) 2000. Civic Discourse and Digital Age Communications in the Middle East. Chapter 3: Between Constitutionality and Morality.

Nunes, N. 2006. Cyberspaces of Everyday Life.

Van Doorn, van Zoonen. 2009. Theorizing Gender and the internet: past, Present and Future , in: (chapter 19 of Handbook of Internet Politics, 2009)

Wheeler, D. 2005. The Internet in the Middle East. Global Expectations and Local Imaginations. Chapter4: Women, Gender and the internet.

Bunt, G. 2004. Rip. Burn. Pray: Islamic Expressions Online. in: Dawnson, L and Douglas. E, 2004. Religion Online.

Lecture 5.

The (dis/empowering) sites of contestation: how web 2.0 became a virtual home.

Bunt, G. 2000. Surfing Islam: Ayatollahs, Shayks and Hajjis in the Super Highway.

Doostar, A. 2004. The vulgar spirit of Blogging: On language, Culture, and Power in Persian Weblogestan. (reader)

Lange, P. 2007. Publicly private and privately Public: Social Networking on YouTube. (reader)

Bell, M. 2008. Towards a definition of 'Virtual Worlds'. (reader)

Baker, N. 2008. The Charms of Wikipedia. (reader)

Schmidt, J. 2007. Blogging practices: An Analytical framework. (reader)

Boyd, D and Ellison, N. 2007. Social Network Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship. (reader)

Recommended:

Boellstorff, T. 2008. Coming of Age in Second Life. (reader)

Franda, M. F. 2002. The Middle East and Global Internet Regimes. (chapter 3 of: Launching into cyberspace. Internet developments and politics in Five World Regions)

Part Three: Online Agency: Politics of the oppressed.

In this last phase of the option we will engage with examples of internet resistance and the pros and cons of Cyber Intifada in the Middle East. The lectures will deal with online agency through Open Source and 'citizen journalism' developments. The challenge and crucial difference between this and previous media is to translate online discourse and language into collective action and alter the existing power dynamics.

Lecture 6.

Panoptic 2.0: Cultural Imperialism and the neo-liberal IT bubble that Wasn't

Chadwick, A, Howard, P. New Directions in Internet Politics Research. (Introduction of Handbook of Internet Politics, 2009)

O'Neal, N. 2009. CyberChiefs.

Gandy, O and Farral, K. N. 2009. Metaphoric reinforcement of the virtual fence: factors shaping the political economy of property in cyber Space. (chapter 25 of Handbook of Internet Politics, 2009)

Israel/Palestine as State of Exception, several good conference papers on Surveillance/technology

Hindman, M. 2008. The Myth of Digital Democracy.

Kalathil, S and Boas, T.C. 2003. Open Networks--Closed Regimes. The Impact of the Internet on

Authoritarian Rule.

Gher, L.A. and Amin, H. Y (Eds) 2000. Civic Discourse and Digital Age Communications in the Middle East. Chapter 4: Myth or Monster?

Recommended:

Waked, M. 2005. Information Society in Palestine ch.2 The Maze of ICT indicators case of Palestine (reader)

Human Rights Watch, 2007. The internet in Middle East. (reader)

ECSSR. 2006. Arab Media in the Information Age. (reader)

Lecture 7.

Social-cyber-Capital: counter-hegemony Online

Feenberg, A. 2004. Virtual Community: No killer implication. (reader)

Fenton, N. 2008. New Media, Politics and resistance. (reader)

Weber, S. 2004. Success of Open Source.

Dartnell, M. 2006. Insurgency Online: Webactivism and Global Conflict.

Kellner and Kahn. 2004, From battle of Seattle to blogging; 2005, oppositional politics and the internet

Recommended:

Meikle, G. 2002. Media Activism and the internet. Chapter 3: McSpotlight.

Reedy, J and Wells, C. 2009. Information, the internet and direct democracy (chapter 12 in Handbook of Internet Politics, 2009)

Lecture 8.

Social-cyber-Capital 2: Cyber Intifada

Aouragh, M. 2010/forthcoming. Cyber Intifada: Internet Activism in Lebanon and Palestine.

Stangelove, M. 2005. The empire of Mind: Digital Piracy and the anti-capitalist movement.

Stanyer, J. 2009. Web 2.0 and the transformation of news and journalism. Ch. 15 in Handbook of Internet Politics.

Alani, N. 2005. We are Iran, The Persian Bogs.

Recommended:

Nesson, C. 2003. IP Imperialism. (reader)

Nacos, B.L. 2007. Mass mediated Terrorism

Last and Kandel. 2005. Fighting Terror in Cyberspace.

Film material: Avatar (read Forte's (2004) review); Elia Suleiman, Cyber Palestine (1999—a modern-day Mary and Joseph receive orders to cross check points and return to Bethlehem over the Internet); Selected videos from Rheingold online digital library about the internet.

Tutorial (preliminary) questions (for students taking the option for credits):

Part one: We have moved from an information society to a network society. New media represents active rather than passive interactivity; audiences are involved as producers rather than only consumers. For instance, asynchronous discussion (group/ individual level) forums replaced previous one-to-

many/moderated mailing lists. As it transforms into web 2.0 with self-managed infrastructures the internet itself is experiencing an important evolution.

Part One:

1: Describe what can be considered the three main flaws (Hine 2000, Carey 2005, etc.) in internet research; where did you find each of the flaws in the different texts you read?

2: Argue which different ethnographic research instruments fit internet research and which don't, and where the discipline of anthropology (Strathern 2000) can be considered best applied, give examples from case studies in one of the empirical/ethnographic books.

Part Two:

3: Discuss the implications of the internet for community and identity from the case studies of Aouragh (2008) or Franklin (2005), discuss the role of gender as well.

4: Argue why you think whether our behaviour is or is not influenced by the internet. Explain how Miller & Slater (2000) might help you in your analyses.

5: Compare (similarities and differences) the analytical approach of Franklin's (2005) South Pacific and Christensen's (2003) Inuit communities online.

Part Three:

6: Look at these screenshots of website of one of the political activist movements; choose one and explain how they disseminate their message (which technology? web 2.0?); how do they link up with the critique of Nacos (2007, Mass mediated Terrorism) or Last and Kandel (2005, Fighting Terror in Cyberspace).

7: How does the political economy of the internet reshape property rights (Candy and Farral 2009), what does Franklin (2005) mean by a 'tale of two internets'?

8: Discuss the empirical case studies from Lebanon (Aouragh 2010) and analyse them from a theoretical framework as offered by Fenton (2008) or O'Neal (2009).

9: Many authors refer to the 'practice everyday life' when discussing online communities and offline implications of the politics of identities; but how can we employ the concept of 'everyday life' when researching political activists' use of the internet?

10: Which part/lectures of the option comes closest the the films we have seen, choose one (or two) film and link them to any theoretical framework we discussed that you find most interesting.