

QUICK STUDIES



QUESTION AND PENSÉES

Question: How Have Internet Developments Changed What—or How—you Study about the Middle East?

Pensée 1: The Excessive Charms of the Internet

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The most obvious answer to this question would be to underline the huge impact of the Internet on research on the Middle East: the speed with which material is circulated among colleagues, reviewers, and editors; the increasing availability of documents and materials; the ease of access to scholarly work through online databases; the availability of scholarly forums (such as H-Net) for exchanging information and views; and a long list of other benefits. My own correspondence with a publisher and some journal editors in the past few months is a case in point: a seven-month strike declared by postal and other public-sector workers to protest the Palestinian Authority's nonpayment of salaries stopped all mail services to and from the occupied territories. Without the Internet (and private mail carriers) I certainly could not have published what I did manage to publish in these turbulent times. There are more substantive implications of Internet developments for scholars of the Middle East, and I would like to focus on two of them in the short space allowed here.

The first is the vastly enhanced ability of Middle East scholars to act as public intellectuals, that is, to invoke their scholarly responsibility and/or authority to express themselves on issues of public concern. Obvious examples are opportunities to write for both specialized and general audiences about Islam and Islamist movements, the “clash of civilizations” and “the war on terror,” the erosion of academic freedom in the United States, the Palestine question, as well as more sensitive issues such as sexuality, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, Zionism, and anti-Zionism. The Internet as medium has been enthusiastically embraced

by many academics, as exemplified by Edward Said's *Al-Ahram Weekly* pieces that were disseminated electronically to networks of academics, Juan Cole's blog, Daniel Pipes's various projects, and the Internet activism of proponents and adversaries of the academic boycott of Israel, to mention only a few.

On the lighter side, however, the allure of academic activism can also compromise and threaten our scholarly work if we are not vigilant. Anyone mildly involved in activism or public affairs knows that the Internet can devour most of our time. Professional discussion forums, online petitions, correspondence around campaigns of various sorts, and blogging are some of the most obvious ways we can spend a great deal of time, sometimes to the detriment of our scholarly production. Besides, the immediacy of the Internet does not leave time for reflection and, more importantly, procrastination. A message sitting in the inbox demands immediate attention and cannot be postponed, as was possible in the old days of postal correspondence. In my own case, my Internet-enhanced "workload" has increased tremendously.

My second point concerns Internet-based resources for studying the Middle East, especially for those concerned with lifestyles, intellectual currents, social movements, and the like. The Internet, like satellite television, holds fantastic promise. One example is the proliferation of Middle Eastern blogs, from which we can presumably better understand the subjectivities of middle-class intellectuals and other cultural workers or identify the burning public issues as seen by citizens of the region. (Middle East historian Steve Tamari is compiling a list of such blogs at jusur.blogspot.com.) The same applies to the veritable explosion of Internet sites featuring videos, *fatwa* forums, celebrity gossip, and myriad other issues of the day.

Although these Internet resources open fresh new windows into Middle Eastern societies and cultures, we have to be vigilant against falling into the trap of mistaking virtual reality for the lived reality of people's lives. We have to keep reminding ourselves that capturing the sensibilities and dispositions of Middle Eastern subjects through the Internet still requires grounding them in the materiality of life, the context in which they are produced and in which they acquire meaning. In this sense, there is no alternative to good old field research, to experiencing and living the events, settings, and practices of daily life, and to understanding the larger political contexts of cultural symbols, discourses, or whatever it is that interests us in the Middle East.

I will give one example. The veritable explosion of Internet chatting, short message service, and other forms of electronic communication among youth offers new insights into the sensibilities of urban twenty-something youth from Casablanca to Tehran. Basing ourselves on the Internet, we may be tempted to posit the existence of two youth publics, a conservative "Islamic" public and, for lack of a better term, a more liberal and "globalized" one. We need to question, however, whether things are as neat as that. Are Nancy Ajram or Haifa Wahbeh fans and *fatwa* devotees two different creatures? Are their concerns, life projects, and troubles so vastly different?

We will never get to the bottom of some of these issues if we do not immerse ourselves in the here and now of everyday life. I remember getting the shock of my life in Cairo a few years ago and realizing how little I knew about urban life in the big metropolis. Coming from small-town Ramallah, where everyone knows everyone and where public conduct is under surveillance, I was struck by the sight of young men and women (the latter invariably wearing some version of the hijab) holding hands on the Nile Corniche past midnight. What were they talking about, who were the women, did their parents know where their daughters were, and how did they get away with it?

On balance, of course, the Internet has opened up a new era in scholarship as well as for activism. The challenge is to use it judiciously and not allow ourselves to be too easily seduced by its manifold charms.