

Syria: Restrictive Social System Adjusting to Open Information Flows

As the Internet is being introduced into Syria, the historically conservative political power and structures in place in that country are shaping the access that the citizens have to the Internet. Can access to the Internet be established in a country where the state wants to control the actions of its citizenry? This paper will briefly show what form that type of access is taking. By relying on theories of structural power, this paper will show that when technologies are introduced into a highly structured and authoritarian political system, the system ends up bending to the structure of technology in order to insure that the country becomes a player in the global economic system. Technology often also establishes a sense of meta-power within its citizenry that encourages a weakening of traditional structures and forms of power.

In 1997, Bassar al-Assad, the successor of Hafez al-Assad (the former Syrian president) introduced the Internet to Syria by establishing the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment's (STE) Pilot Internet Project. The Pilot Project was state owned and regulated and only granted access to government ministries and state owned enterprises like the Syrian Arab News Agency and the Syrian Computer Society. This attempt was followed in 1998 by the Interim Project, which originally only offered email and has since been developed to include Internet services. In October 2000, Syria officially opened up access to the Internet to its citizenry. Private subscriptions, however, continue to be limited to businesses and professionals. Access to full Internet service limited to two Internet cafes (one called Zoni), the Assad National Library (a body run by the

Ministry of Culture), the Damascus offices of the Syrian Computer Society, and access points in transit and arrival halls of the Damascus International Airport. (George, 2000)

Why did Syria wait so long to allow its citizen to access the Internet? The President Hafez al-Assad originally was intent upon establishing Syria as the leader of the Arab world, and in this singular mission, he left his country isolated from its Arab neighbors and lagging behind in the global marketplace. Assad was a tyrant that left no room for public discourse and who frequently killed or jailed those who opposed him. His policies also drove most of the talent young people abroad in search of work. “Almost a million Syrians have had to migrate to the free economy of Lebanon, which Syria dominates with up to 30,000 soldiers, in order to find work.” (Nation, 2000) In his effort to stifle dissenting opinions, he banned all forms of telecommunication (fax machines, television and the Internet until 1990s), and he banned the development of a centralized banking system for fear that it would allow citizens to gain economic power with which to challenge his authority.

With Bashar at the head of the political structure, Syria’s outlook toward the Internet is changing, but that doesn’t mean that the government is any less concerned about controlling its citizen’s speech and access to information. “...Official statements routinely warn of its purported social and moral dangers. The STE remains the sole service provider and blocks access to sites deemed offensive for political or other reasons.” (George, 2000)

Currently, citizens are granted access to the Internet, but their access is limited in various ways. The fee for accessing the Internet at one of the now two Internet cafes is \$6.50 per hour (a rate too high for most Syrians). And most of the coffee shops are

closely monitored in the chance that people would use those spaces to gather and conspire. (The Atlanta Journal, 2000)

What is interesting is how the citizens of Syria are working around government restrictions in order to get the information they want. In the Damascus cybercafe, there is a marker board that lists cloaking sites like besilent.com that customers can use to get around the firewalls in place in order to access sites like hotmail.com and other sites blocked by the Syrian government. The government restriction on sites is also not foolproof, and citizens can access Amnesty International's homepages well as most of the online newspapers and magazines.

For the first time, Syrian citizens are able to easily access sources of information that are contrary to the information available within Syria's borders. And the citizens are already demanding more unrestricted access to the Internet. The political authority in Syria, however, is still adamantly opposed to home Internet use. Saadalla Aghad Kalaa, the head of the media committee Syrian Computer Society has stated that, "Having the Internet at home is something that could hurt this traditional society". Yet the callers to his television show (where he demonstrates the use of computers and the Internet) often ask, "Why are you showing us if we can't use this at home?" (Atlanta Journal, 2000)

Even with the introduction of the Internet, the Syrian government will continue (due to its ideological mindset in which its role is monitoring and establishing a national morality) will continue to execute an instrumental form of power over its citizens through Internet regulations and restrictions upon access to content. However, the structure of power within the country is changing as its citizens gain access to information via the Internet. The benefits of the technology itself will never be full actualized until the

political structure allows the flow of information that will be necessary in order to institute ecommerce which the government hopes will stimulate the economy.

What is most threatening to Syria's traditional structures is when its citizens begin to have access to other conceptualizations of their personal identity as a global citizen. Once they have fully actualized themselves as members of a global community, they will not longer be content to be denied access to information and satisfied with a restricted role in the policies created by the political structure. James Rosenau echoes this sentiment when he stated: "Indeed, the more the technologies advance, the more they have facilitated the opening up of both governments and non-governmental organizations to the influence of their members..." (Rosenau, 2000, p. 419). At this point, the citizens of Syria have yet to be fully empowered by the use of the Internet, and it will be interesting to watch how they will begin to not only demand more access to the Internet, but eventually to the political structure itself.

What is currently shifting is the government's role as a moral watchdog for its citizens. The nature of the Internet makes it impossible to thoroughly block access to certain content, and in allowing its citizens to become a part of the online community; the Syrian government consciously or not, is loosening its grip upon the moral and ideological instruction of its citizens. The development of an identity not placed within state borders encourages a constitutive (or meta) sense of power, and it is this type of development of power in which ultimately will lead to a restructuring of Syria's political system and social ideologies.

Works Cited

- George, A. (2000, Oct). Syrian surfers take to the net Middle East. 305. pp. 31-32.
- Hershman, T. (1999, Dec. 3). High Tech: the Mideast Elixir. Wired.
<http://www.wired.com/news/print/0,1294,32807,00.html>
- Hershman, T. (2000, Oct. 24). Hopes for Mideast Tech Dashed. Wired.
<http://www.wired.com/news/print/0,1294,39484,00.html>
- Kaplow, L. (2000, June 25). Syria embraces the Internet gingerly. The Atlanta Journal: The Atlanta Constitution. pp. G6.
- Rosenau, J. & Singh, J.P. Eds. (2001). Information Technologies and Global Politics: The Changing Scope of Power and Governance. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, in press.
- Sennott, C. (2000, June 21). Syria's leader wants to ease strictures on Internet. Boston Globe. pp. A: S4.
- Viorst, M. (2000, July 3). Assad's Syria. The Nation. pp. 7.