Celia Romm Livermore: According to what you have found in your research, how are people in the Muslim World using Information communication technologies (ICT) and social media?

Dr. el-Nawawy: We have to make a distinction between the Muslim World and the Arab World. The term Muslim World is more encompassing with more countries. Arab World is what’s now witnessing Arab spring or revolutions with the use of social media more so than the Muslim World in general. About the state of ICT use in the Muslim World, let me start with description of my empirical work which culminated into a book called “Islam dot com”. My co-author and myself looked into discussion forums on three mainstream Islamic websites. We looked into Habermas’s theory of public sphere and of “shura”. We thought that some aspects of public sphere are common with shura. We also applied the concepts of Ijtihad and compared that to how people reach consensus based on rational critical debate. We found, unfortunately, that people reach consensus by one of two ways, i.e., either they were already in agreement before the rational critical debate or people were very confrontational. For example in the case of Palestine-Israel conflict, on these forums, people were either already in agreement or if someone disagreed it will turn confrontational. People will become aggressive to the extent of using profanities. So, we concluded that in using social media, people either already agreed on issues or they were confrontational. The middle ground, based upon rational discussion and critical debate, was rarely found in our research.

Therefore, in my opinion, use social media can either exemplify “clash of civilization” or be used as a tool for constructive dialog between civilizations. Unfortunately, this clash of civilization not only exists between Muslims and non-Muslims, it also exists among the Muslim World, e.g., clash between Sunnis and Shiites. In fact, we found several discussion threads
between Sunnis and Shiites that were more confrontational than discussion threads between Muslims and non-Muslims. That shows that there is something wrong with the basic socialization process within the Muslim World and this is what exemplified in the social media. Social media is nothing but an extension of what is available in the offline world. Social media is not going to do miracle. It is not going to educate people about how to engage in rational critical debate. That is something that comes from society, schooling and upbringing at home. In fact, social media will create another layer of dogmatism that already exists in the offline world.

Celia Romm Livermore: Do you see any hope that by using social media, Muslim World will be better off?

Dr. el-Nawawy: I can give you a ray of hope. I ask my students in a course on Middle East Media to engage in rational critical debate with peers in the Middle East by participating in weekly web cam discussion on issues such as identity, i.e., what does it mean to be an American, Muslim, an Arab, a male or female in the Arab World or America. I have observed that the students are defensive and anxious for the first week or two. Then they let their guard down and they start listening to the other side. They may not necessarily reach an agreement but at the end of the day they reach an understanding of what the other side believes. That is where I think ICT and social media can play a very important role.

However, usually when someone starts finding a forum for discussion, they look for forums that agree with their opinion. They don’t go and necessarily search for forums that disagree with their point of view to listen and understand the other side.

Celia Romm Livermore: In your book “Islam dot com”, you looked at different Islamic discourses in the cyberspace. What emerging discourses have you observed since that work?

Dr. el-Nawawy: Being a scholar on media science, I shall probably be saying that social media is a good thing and they are marvelous. However, I am very cautious about the kind of credit we should give to social media in these revolutions that we are witnessing in the Arab World. I cannot ignore the fact that social media has played an important role. However it is not the main role. It is a supporting role. Social media has been able to recruit and attract the attention of many young people. It’s a form of citizen journalism that has allowed people the opportunity to express, share and exchange their views and ideas. For example people from the Muslim Brotherhood can exchange ideas with people in secular political parties. They do not have this kind of discourse in the offline world. That is a beautiful thing about social media.

I interviewed many bloggers mainly in Egypt and found out that those bloggers started out as activists in the offline world and adopted social media later on. They were already activists. They did not become activists because of the social media. Therefore social media was only a tool. Therefore the role of social media needs further investigation to understand its role in socio-political and socio-religious environment. For example, Iran has more than 700,000 bloggers; that is one of the highest number for bloggers for any single country in the World. Egypt, on the other hand, has may be 160,000 bloggers. Yet, the movement in Iran failed in achieving their goals, i.e., changing the course of elections and replacing Ahmadinejad with Mousavi. Compare that to the Egyptian revolution which succeeded in at least toppling the regime.

The revolution in Iran failed because the socio-cultural environment in Iran is different. Iran has strong religious foundation and ideology based upon the Mullah system. This made it very difficult for social media to make any change on the ground. Egypt had a corrupt regime which lost credibility. Egypt had a civil society which despite being suffocated by the Mubarak regime still had some momentum. They formed what is called revolutionary youth coalition. This coali-
tion succeeded without any particular leader. They collaborated in a synchronized manner with the help of social media and they were able to stand up against the regime. In Iran, that was not the case. The regime didn’t allow any activity in the civil society and most of the support came from outside. This comparison shows that social media can be useless if the environment on the ground was not conducive to change.

To illustrate my point further, there was a Facebook page called “We are all Khaled Said” (http://www.facebook.com/elshaheed.co.uk). Khaled Said was a gentleman who was killed by two undercover police officers in Alexandria, Egypt. He was killed because the police officers thought that he will post something that will indict them in some illegal activity. So, they beat Khaled to death. The Facebook page was launched in the aftermath of this incident and hundreds of thousands of people followed that page. The officers were indicted. The success didn’t come because of Facebook; the success came because Khaled was a symbol of oppression of the Egyptian youth. Therefore, social media was a tool. This is also contrary to “medium is the message” theory because medium receives its importance through the content of the message. If you don’t have a message that resonates with the public, then you cannot expect the medium to do you any good. Social media is not going to do miracles by itself.

Celia Romm Livermore: Why do we see problems in those Muslim countries that have seen some level of democratization such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon?

Dr. el-Nawawy: The problems exist because of several factors, e.g., Western interventions and the voices calling for change are not necessarily indigenous voices. These voices are coming from the outside. You should not expect immigrant leaders to understand the domestic problems. They don’t live with the people and they don’t face the same problems that people face on a daily basis. Change has to come from the inside; it has to be indigenous. It has to erupt from the grassroots civil society. The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions succeeded because they erupted from the grassroots civil society and without any help from outside. In fact they refused any help from outside. The people who led the revolution in Egypt and Tunisia were locals. They were just young people who were fed up with the corruption; they were fed up with the torture; they were fed up with the repression and they decided to move on. They decided to take actions in a purely spontaneous manner with the help of social media.

Celia Romm Livermore: In the case of Libya, do you think the demonstrations and the anger weren’t really from people?

Dr. el-Nawawy: Libya has a different structure. Libya had no civil society to start with. You see the situation in Libya escalated to this level because of the lack of a civil society in Libya. You need a strong civil society. You need it to initiate any change, to be able to have any type of leadership on the ground. The Egyptian revolution and the Tunisian revolution were peaceful revolutions. The people did not take to the streets with weapons. They were armless people, but their strength lied in their determination, their numbers and their credibility among general public. You start with a small group of people that goes out on the street and becomes a group of one thousand, five thousand, fifty thousand and then a million. That is their secret. They didn’t have any weapons. The regime had weapons, the police had weapons and yet they failed. They failed because you cannot stop people’s determination and people’s will. Without an active civil society you are not going to have any kind of success indigenously, and that’s why what we are seeing in Libya today.

Celia Romm Livermore: Are these revolutions based on national identities or the religious identities?
Dr. el-Nawawy: I’ll use the Muslim Brotherhood as an example. It is an Islamic force. It’s the strongest opposition force in Egypt; like it or not this is a reality. The Muslim brotherhood is the most organized and the most visible opposition movement in Egypt. In the revolution, there is not a single slogan raised during the revolution that you can say is a Muslim brotherhood slogan, e.g., calling it “Islamic revolution”. We didn’t see that because Egypt has a big minority of twelve million non-Muslims. More than 10 percent of the total population is Christian. I like to call it a national revolution based on Egyptian identity, not Islamic identity. If the revolution was based on Islamic identity it would alienate 12 million Christians who live in Egypt.

It is unfortunate that now some elements are trying to create a division between Muslims and Christians in Egypt to affect the fabric of society in a very sensitive way. However, in my opinion the Egyptian revolution was a symbol of Egyptian nationalism more so than based upon the religious identity.

Celia Romm Livermore: What do you think Aljazeera has done other than rattling governments in the Middle East and North Africa?

Dr. el-Nawawy: Aljazeera has paved the way for a new form of broadcasting journalism in the Arab world, in a region that has really not witnessed or experienced that kind of freedom and that kind of openness before. The success of Aljazeera can be witnessed on many Arab television screens today. Many Arab channels are emulating Aljazeera. In 1996, when Aljazeera was first launched, it was a different Arab world than what we are seeing today.

Celia Romm Livermore: After Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, what would your recommendations be to governments and people in the Muslim World about how to use social and ICT?

Dr. el-Nawawy: First of all I think the Egypt and Tunisia revolutions are not done yet. In fact, toppling the regime was the easy part. What comes after that is the hard part. Forming a new regime, forming a new parliament and electing a new leader in a truly democratic election is the difficult task. These things are not easy. I think the people have to stand up for their rights and now that the barrier has been broken and the people realize that they can actually succeed in shaping a change. People were in the state of frustration, feeling helpless and humiliated. That is over. Now it is a new era and a new age.

Godaffe has been in power for more than 40 years. The longer the corrupt regime stays in power the longer the transition period and the harder the transition period. So the people have to realize first they have to educate themselves about their political rights because this doesn’t happen overnight. People have to be aware of the rights. Otherwise, the government is going to misuse and abuse their powers.

In the future the governments in the Muslim world have to realize that they are in the position of power because of the people’s will and the people who elected them have the power to impeach them. People have the power to topple them. The people have the streets and the squares and they know that they own those streets and squares now. They have regained their identity, they have regained their dignity and I think they are not going to give it up.

Editorial Note: In its simplest understanding, the concept of public sphere bridges “private sphere” and “sphere of public authority” where civil society and ruling class can exchange ideas and develop consensus on issues.
**Shura** (شيرا) is an Arabic word for "consultation". It was the method by Arabian tribes to select leaders and make major decisions. **Ijtihad** is the process of using reason to arrive at a solution to a specific problem based upon general or broad rules.

Mohammed el-Nawawy is a Knight-Crane endowed chair in the School of Communication at Queens University of Charlotte. He teaches international communication, mass communication, media globalization, and Middle East media courses. His areas of expertise and research interests are focused on the new media in the Middle East, particularly satellite channels and the Internet, and their impact on the Arab public sphere. He is also interested in issues of public diplomacy and ways of initiating effective dialogue between the Middle East and the West. He is the author and co-author of several books, including "Islam dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace" by Palgrave Macmillan (2009); "Al-Jazeera: The Story of the Network that is Rattling Governments and Redefining Modern Journalism" by Westview Press (2003); "Al-Jazeera: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East" by Westview Press (2002); and the "Israeli-Egyptian Peace Process in the Reporting of Western Journalists" by Greenwood Publishers (2002). He has also published in several national and foreign journals in the international communication field. His work on Arab media in general, and Al-Jazeera in particular, has attracted the attention of the popular press inside and outside the United States. He is the founding and senior editor of the Journal of Middle East Media and serves on the editorial boards of Media, War and Conflict journal and Global Media journal. He is also a board member on the Arab-U.S. Association for Communication Educators. Dr. el-Nawawy also has professional journalistic experience in the United States and the Middle East.