Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Internet?

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On 15 June 2010, the Lebanese online community heaved a collective sigh of relief as the Lebanese Parliament voted to indefinitely postpone discussions on a newly proposed e-transactions law. "The ESSA (Electronic Signatures and Services Authority) [would be] established under this law with discretionary, selective, subjective and very broad and unjustified powers", said Gabriel Deek, secretary general of the Professional Computer Association of Lebanon, adding that "its prerogatives are almost repressive for all 'service providers' of electronic services and economic sectors at large" (Deek, 2010). The draft law, which purports to protect e-commerce from fraudulent activities, would actually lead to law enforcement without judicial oversight.

Though Lebanon has long enjoyed an Internet in which law enforcement authorities do not intervene — a situation that stands in sharp contrast to that of its neighboring countries — many in the online community expected this day to come. "The Lebanese government is writing yet another chapter in the endless mockery of our rights as private citizens and social entrepreneurial agents of progress and change," said Imad Atallah of the Lebanese daily, *The Daily Star*. He added that "the state is extending censorship [...] into the last frontier of freedom — the Internet and its supposed neutrality" (Atallah, 2010).

An investigative probe into the vulnerable relationship between Lebanese citizens and the Internet uncovers a series of lawsuits, acts of censorship, and police threats. Additionally, slow and expensive Internet connections, which had long been a source of jokes and mockery by the online community, gradually turned into a source of anger and rebellion. By early 2011, a number of pressure groups had formed out of the bloggers, techies, and Twitter communities, in addition to the private sector, to create lobbying and awareness campaigns calling for a faster, freer, and more affordable Internet. The most active of these has been the "Ontornet" campaign[1] which played on the slang Lebanese word "*ontor*" meaning "wait" to mock the slow Lebanese Internet connections.

Twenty-something years after the end of Lebanon's Civil War, it appears that civil society in Lebanon is beginning to make important inroads in advancing progressive social and economic issues in public and policy-making arenas alike. The number of grassroots organizations that focus on individual and group rights has mushroomed, and for probably the first time in the country's history, the Interior Ministry (up until June 2011) was headed by a politician who has emerged from civil society rather than from one of Lebanon's many dynastic political families. Of this diverse and active civil

society, one particular community that has enjoyed a long and complex relationship with the Internet is the Lebanese queer rights movement, which has become a dynamic, cohesive component of Lebanon's civil society. It is likely that there is no other movement in Lebanon that has benefited more from information and communications technologies (ICTs) for its growth and for the sophistication of its strategies.

This research article aims to examine the dynamics of the queer[2] movement as they relate to ICTs. In particular, it will trace the intricate ways in which queers in Lebanon have used various ICT tools to create, build, and expand their liberation movement. The research focuses on women within the queer movement, because queer-ICT dynamics are especially pronounced in this area, and is carried out in the context of the movement's national and regional environments. Historical, sociopolitical, and economic factors will be considered in order to provide us with a clear understanding of the relatively recent phenomena that we study. In parallel, we will also examine the ICT environment and its development in relation to technology, politics, and human rights. At a time when policy-makers are beginning to raise the prospect of the Internet as a space where Lebanon's many social, economic, and legal "unfreedoms" will soon be implemented, such a study is timely. It is more important now than ever to understand the extent to which queer freedoms are intertwined with the Internet so that queers may use this knowledge to tackle those prospective conditions.

In January 2010, a web-based Arab LGBT magazine Bekhsoos.com published a series of articles celebrating a decade of LGBT activism in Lebanon. "It's actually been over a decade," wrote the magazine's Arabic editor who writes under the pseudonym Aphrodite. As she added, "we consider the registration of GayLebanon.com in 1998 as a marker of the start of an organized movement. But we wanted to celebrate the past decade in which most of the crucial developments occurred". Most of the articles in the commemorative issue featured a Top 10 listing of different queer categories: the most prominent hang-out places, the best LGBT publications, music videos, films, etc. Among these was one that listed the top seven online tools that played a major role in the LGBT movement and community-building. This ranged from "ONElist that later became eGroups that later became Yahoo! Groups that then branched off into other mailing lists" and then Twitter (Shant, 2010). In many ways the development of queer use of software tells the history of its growth. At both personal and political levels, the Internet facilitated the interactions of queer women and helped the movement get recognition with dignity since the late 1990s.

This study exposes the ways in which the LGBT community made use of Internet technologies to build a powerful and tech-savvy movement for social justice, while highlighting formative interplays that occurred between the Lebanese queer women's movement and both the national and international queer movement in this virtual arena. It highlights the queer women's movement in Lebanon and its interactions with ICTs in particular. Queer uses of ICTs in Lebanon represent a number of turning points in the development of the queer women's movement, and allow us to paint a comprehensive picture of the subject at hand. This research project is primarily feminist and auto-ethnographic and depends on a number of methods and conceptual frameworks.

2. See section on "Conceptual frameworks" for an elaboration on "queer".

Interviews and Crowd-sourcing

The study depends primarily on first-hand accounts of Lebanese queer activists since 1997. Sixteen interviewees discussed personal experiences on the Internet with regards to queer issues and helped to flesh out intersections between personal identification, personal growth, and the Internet. Interviewees also traced the development of the Lebanese queer movement, from the creation of local spaces on the Internet to the emergence of NGOs and support groups in the Lebanese public arena. Throughout the course of our analysis, we have tried to incorporate the diverse experiences of our interviewees into our findings while also identifying a common trajectory for the personal and political development of the movement. In order to understand the ICT environment with which the queer movement has developed, we have scanned the online community cross-sectionally. We did this through the crowd-sourcing method. The basic idea of crowd-sourcing is to broadcast a question about a problem and to study the responses. For this research, we published a blurb on one of the researchers' blog about our research question and spread the word about it, mainly using the micro-blogging networking platform Twitter (Moawad, 2010). We asked for tips, contacts, opinions, and links to websites that would help. This method proved fruitful because it required an active engagement with the online community that responded to our call with tweets, comments, and e-mails, subsequently enriching our observations of the ICT environment.

A Regional Context

During our preliminary research, we noted some important interactions between Lebanon and its regional environment that helped to explain some central features of the queer women-ICT relationship. We noted that in several instances, other countries have sought to alter Lebanon's censorship and surveillance policies in order to manipulate certain national political dynamics. This reinforces the notion that the state of ICTs in a country, and particularly the censorship laws that are applied on them, cannot be understood without an understanding of a country's geopolitics. We therefore also studied the ICT-queer relationship in the context of an extra-national environment. Due to time and space restrictions we've placed the frame of our research around a certain region that we identify as more immediate than others. This region consists of countries with which Lebanon shares a border: Syria and Palestine. Also included are Jordan, the Gulf Countries, and Egypt. We also believe that a comparison of the state of technologies in Lebanon and other countries in this region will help to reveal important information about the state of ICTs in Lebanon.

It is also crucial to note that the significant and historic regional revolutions since December 2010, reassessed the role of ICTs and social media as political tools for change. While very little material (and indeed, very little faith in social media) could be found before this time, a plethora of articles and studies have since emerged about the Internet and social change in the Arab world.

Research Target Groups: Meem and Meem-Facilitated Spaces

Meem,[3] which literally means the Arabic letter "m", is an organization founded in August 2007 with the vision of offering better quality lives for lesbian, bisexual, queer and questioning women, and transgender persons in Lebanon. Since its inception, Meem's activist philosophy revolved around creating safe spaces (online and offline)

for individuals who shared a common oppression, mainly one where gender and sexuality intersect. While Meem started out as a lesbian group focusing on women having same-sex relationships, its collective understanding of sexuality and gender developed over the years to focus more on queer identities and feminism. These changes, viewed as significant and defining by members of the group, were a result of countless conversations around individual experiences and identities, in addition to workshops, trainings, and writings, both local and international.

Meem membership rules include strict guarding of the privacy of individuals, activities, and spaces as evident in the following excerpts from the rules available online[4] for individuals who are considering joining the group:

> Everything we do is confidential, and we trust you to maintain the privacy of Meem and all its members if you join the group. We are very strict about this. Meem is not a lesbian or trans zoo. We do not exist to provide you with a display of women of different sexualities or persons of a variety of genders for your university project or TV program or sexual fantasies [...] Meem does NOT out people. We guard the privacy of our members in every way we can. You are forbidden to repeat the names or any private information of the members outside of the group, even to your friends.

We particularly chose to focus our sample of interviewees on Meem members and activists because of the group's ongoing sophisticated ways of interacting and negotiating through technology for their strategies. Issues of anonymity, pseudonymity, community-building, and self-expression were recurrent themes in the interviews. Meem's large membership (over 400 members in 2001) represented the broadest sampling of the lesbian, bisexual, queer, questioning, and transgender communities in Lebanon.

It is also important to note that the group is generally "unfriendly" towards researchers who are not personally invested and engaged with the issues. Meem coordinators receive many email requests every month from researchers and journalists for interviews. Their security measures led the members to tighten the conditions on interviews they are willing to give. Therefore, only by involving a good number of researchers and interviewers from within Meem (and the membership as a whole) in the discussions and consultations were the interviewers able to reach the targeted sample from within the community for the purpose of this study.[5]

Meem's priorities did not include "coming out" or raising public visibility of queer women and transgenders. Instead, it focused on personal empowerment and building a network of support. In an interview with Lynn, who served as a group co-coordinator from 2009 to 2011,[6] she says: "[Meem's] philosophy of support is to sustain the building of a healthy community of queer women and transgendered persons whose bonds are strengthened by values of trust, respect, and positive energy. Support may come in many forms and is usually comprehensive: from peer-to-peer support to psychological, medical, and legal support; from a heart-to-heart conversation over a cup of coffee on the house's balcony, a counseling session with one of Meem's counselors, to a small

4. . See the section "Join Us" on the Meem website at http:// Meemgroup.org/news/ what-is-Meem/join-us/

5. Read more about this in the section "Positioning of Researchers" on the Meem website.

6. Meem's coordinators serve a 2-year term and are selected by consensus by the group members.

financial contribution for temporary housing and transportation, for example" (personal communication with Lynn).

In order to understand the experiences of queer women in Lebanon, this study specifically targeted individuals active in Meem's work. Over the course of the conversations, the concept of "spaces" emerged as a key understanding that required fleshing out. The "looseness" of defined locations of members' diverse activism led us to identify a number of "Meem-facilitated spaces" which were crucial to examining the progression of the movement. "Meem-facilitated spaces" consist of any space, both virtual and physical, that Meem members use in order to foster communication and to conduct Meem-related activities. These include Meem's support headquarters – "The House", its online publication Bekhsoos, its Twitter page, some Facebook fan pages, some websites, spaces within other organizations (online and offline), spaces "infiltrated" by members, and temporary spaces that Meem borrows in order to coordinate activities.

The significance of looking at Meem-facilitated spaces rather than Meem as a traditional organization is that it allows for a more in-depth look at the diverse community (and its diverse issues) that is represented in Meem. It also promotes a movement-oriented lens, rather than one that focuses on a particular organization and its controlled environment.

Meem enjoys a membership of over 400 women who receive nearly daily e-mails with information about upcoming events as well as about logistical, strategic developments at Meem's offices. Our findings are based primarily on interviews with 14 members/ users of Meem spaces on the Internet who provided us with an understanding of how they used ICTs. The same set of questions was discussed with every interviewee, coupled with an open-ended discussion of the Internet's effects on their personal and activist lives. Since many Meem-facilitated spaces, notably Twitter and Bekhsoos.com, involve many non-Meem members, we also interviewed several non-queers (6 in total) who offered important insight about their use of ICT. This also enabled us to look at Meem's ICT usage within the broader framework of Lebanese civil rights activism and the Arab online community. In addition to these two groups, we also interviewed 4 male LGBT activists in order to understand the historic dimension of queer organizing and ICT usage and also to provide a gender contrast to the findings based on the women's interviews.

All interviewees in this research article are referred to by their chosen online nicknames unless explicit permission was given to use their full names.

Positioning of Researchers

The research team consisted almost entirely (with one exception) of researchers who have been active participants in the queer movement in Lebanon over a number of years. The team had 2 writers and 7 interviewers, a number of whom were also interviewed and asked the same set of questions. This positioning of researchers as "insiders" resulted in a number of advantages such as in-depth knowledge of the subject, ease of gaining trust from the community, and access to individuals who are otherwise difficult to identify and interview. It raises, however, some issues around the politics of positioning. Smith (1999) notes that:

> Insider research needs to be ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical as outsider research. It also needs to be humble… because the researcher belongs to the community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position…. One of the difficult risks insider researchers take is to 'test' their own taken-for-granted views about their community. It is a risk because it can unsettle beliefs, values, relationships and the knowledge of different histories. (Smith, 1999, p. 139)

Therefore, the research process was coupled with critical reflection on the potential biases of the researchers, in addition to engaging other members of Meem – interviewees included in the analysis and direction of the research findings.

The Internet in the Arab World

In this section, we examine the evolution of the Internet environment in Lebanon while situating it within the larger Arab environment. Challenges to online freedom, especially when it comes to discussing sexuality, can be divided along two main axes: legal censorship, which is heavily influenced by culture and public morality, and infrastructural censorship which includes filtering, high costs, and slow Internet.

The Rise of Internet Usage

Most of our research was conducted in the pre-revolutionary period of the Arab world. Public opinion about the Internet and its significant role changed drastically after the historic revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and the ongoing protests happening at the time of writing this paper in Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Libya, Algeria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon. Discourse around Facebook and Twitter usage went from discussing "slacktivism"[7] to recognizing the catalyst role of social media in overthrowing dictatorships and enabling freedom of expression in online and offline spheres.

A report launched by the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) in February 2011 stated:

> The Arab world has witnessed the rise of an independent vibrant social media and steadily increasing citizen engagement on the Internet that is expected to attract 100 million Arab users by 2015. These social networks inform, mobilize, entertain, create communities, increase transparency, and seek to hold governments accountable. To peruse the Arab social media sites, blogs, online videos, and other digital platforms is to witness what is arguably the most dramatic and unprecedented improvement in freedom of expression, association, and access to information in contemporary Arab history. (CIMA, 2010)

There are over 65 million Internet users in the Arab region today,[8] as a result of a recent boom in Internet usage in the region. Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia have seen the highest increase in Internet usage with the UAE showing the highest Internet penetration rate at 60 percent.[9] Egypt has the highest number of Internet users in the region. However, mobile phones remain the most popular and most accessible means of communication. While there is an increase in Internet usage, access to information

and expression on the Internet remains restrained due to low and expensive bandwidth and Internet connections. Language is also a difficult issue since the Internet is not very Arabic-friendly. However, this is slowly changing, for companies like Google started to customize special programs for their Arab users. These include "Ahlan, Online" (www.google.com/intl/ar/ahlanonline) to help first time users navigate the net. Also, recent technological developments allowed Egypt to launch the world's first Arabic language domain name URL.[10] Internet in Lebanon has an access rate of 31 percent whereas that of the mobile market is 68 percent, according to a study by the TRA conducted in December 2010.[11]

Legal Restrictions on the Internet in Lebanon

Freedoms in Arab countries are hampered by the authoritarian systems that govern them. Global Voices lists five Arab countries (Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia) on its Top 10 list of countries where most bloggers are arrested, imprisoned, or tortured. In total, 93 out of the 234 tracked cases, a staggering 40 percent, are Arab.[12] Lebanon has long enjoyed relative freedom of expression, of association, and of speech, although this record is mixed owing to Lebanon's infrastructural deficiency and frequent absence of the rule of law. Sami Moubayed, a Syrian political analyst and journalist, writes for GulfNews.com:

> It is no wonder that Lebanon ranks first when it comes to Internet freedoms in the Arab World. There is no censorship, and active Lebanese can go to great lengths to market their views on politics and life on the World Wide Web. The fact that most Lebanese are young — and are fluent with languages — makes Internet use all the more easier. So does Article 13 of the Lebanese Constitution, which guarantees "freedom of expression, verbally or in writing, freedom of press, freedom of assembly, and freedom to form associations". Internet cafes are everywhere to be found, and there are no age or ID requirements to log-on to the Internet. Unlike other countries in the region, neither political sites, nor pornographic ones — not even Israeli propaganda — are proxied. The only exceptions are schools and universities, or in some workplaces, where certain sites are restricted to ensure a more productive environment. (Moubayed, 2008)

While the constitution of Lebanon describes Lebanon as a secular republic, religious institutions still wield a great deal of influence over several facets of political and social life. Personal and family status issues fall under the jurisdiction of religious courts while the public sphere is ruled by state institutions. Religious institutions, however, weigh in very heavily on a variety of issues, chief among them is media content.

Censorship Through Defamation Accusations: The Case of Gaylebanon.com

While a number of cases have been made public in recent times concerning the Internet and freedom of speech, the first serious case dates back 10 years and involves the first Lebanese LGBT website: gaylebanon.com. The domain name was registered on September 29, 1999 and is considered to be one of the manifestations of the beginning of an organized LGBT movement. Gay and lesbian activists and individuals who were unable to come out publicly were able to use the website to find information, resources, links

10. See BBC Team 2009, 'Egypt launches Arabic web domain' BBC, 16 November. Retrieved June 28, 2011, from, http://www.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8361676.stm.

11. See Telecommunications Regulatory Authority 2011, accessed 28 June, 2011, from, http://www.tra.gov.lb>

12. See 10 Worst Countries to be a Blogger 2009, Committee to Protect Journalists, 30 April, accessed 28 June, 2011, from http://www.cpj.org/reports/2009/04/10-worst-countries-to-be-a-blogger.php.

to chat rooms and mailing lists, and a connection to a larger community. On April 3, 2000, a vice squad conducted a raid on the offices of Destination, the Beirut Internet Service Providers (ISP) wrongly associated with the website. Ziad Mughraby, owner of Destination, was interrogated and pressured to reveal the names of people responsible for gaylebanon.com but he did not have the information that the Hobeish Police Station, Beirut's morality station infamous for its violations of the human rights of detainees, wanted. A human rights organization led by Kamal Batal, MIRSAD (Multi-Initiative on Rights: Search, Assist and Defend) took up the case and issued a press release that highlighted "the unlawful attempts by the police to interfere in the freedom of the Internet and the freedom of expression of the gay community" (Singh-Barlett, 2000). Both Batal and Mughraby (who are civilians) were then transferred to a military court and charged with "tarnishing the reputation of the vice squad by distributing a printed flyer". They were eventually released with fines of 219 USD each.

This gaylebanon.com incident is the only known Lebanese website case to result in prosecution and a court case, albeit arbitrarily against the only two people the police could find, however remotely, connected to the owners. The website, registered in the USA, survived as a portal of knowledge and paved the way for many other websites that came after it. On March 17, 2010, Khodor Salameh (who blogs at http://jou3an. wordpress.com) became the first Lebanese blogger to be threatened by officials for criticizing Lebanese President Michel Sleiman. The Lebanese security forces asked him to change his tone, close his blog, or stick to writing poetry. He was also threatened with a defamation lawsuit.[13]

Data Retention and Monitoring

All Lebanese ISPs, of which there are 17 licensed in Lebanon, are required by Telecom Law no. 431 to maintain logs of all sites visited by their users for at least two years. These logs can be made available to the Internal Security Forces or General Security for criminal investigations. Encrypted connections to password-protected accounts, however, prevent ISPs from tracking personal e-mails and chat logs. One Lebanese Internet expert and hacker who identifies himself as LoCo says: "[ISPs] can keep logs, yes, but when I was talking to some people inside ISPs they said they don't keep much of the logs. They probably keep only the connections you open, but not the details".

Internet Access and Filtering

In 2009, the OpenNet Initiative (ONI) carried out technical tests in Lebanon using several ISPs and different connections and found no evidence of the use of technical filtering to limit access to Web content.[14] To date, public or religious concern with the open access to Internet pornography or sexuality-related material has not been voiced, despite common vocal interference in traditional offline portrayals of erotic material. The production or dissemination of pornography in Lebanon is prohibited under Article 533 of the Lebanese Penal Code.[15] Pornography is defined as harmful material that violates "public decency" ("public decency" is interpreted as both that formulated in laws and in what the general public attitudes dictate, influenced by religion and tradition naturally).

The ONI research that looked at Internet filtering in the Middle East and North Africa determined that "Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and the West Bank do not currently filter

13. Threatened Voices 2010, accessed 28 June 2011, from, http://threatened. globalvoicesonline. org/blogger/khodor- salameh.

14. OpenNet Initaitve 2009, accessed 28 June 2011, from, http:// opennet.net/research/ profiles/lebanon.

15. Article 533 states that anyone who manufactures, exports, imports or owns writings, drawings, photographs, films, or other material that violate public decency with the intent of commerce or distribution, or who advertises or shares information on how to access such material faces imprisonment from one month to one year.

any material ... But even though the state in Lebanon does not practice surveillance, many private spaces do. Some Internet café operators in Lebanon have admitted to using surveillance software to monitor the browsing habits of clients under the pretext of protecting security or preventing them from accessing pornography" (York, 2009). Similarly, on all university campuses in Lebanon, wireless Internet connections are censored using different techniques from keyword filtering to site blockage to bandwidth limitations. At the American University of Beirut, a number of websites are filtered by keywords such as "lesbian" or "porn". However, the university links students to a request form should they wish to report the website as safe and remove it from filtering.

In September 2009, an Islamic search engine, ImHalal.com was launched with pre-filtered search that allowed Muslims to avoid surfing across any website that wasn't halal (i.e. permissible within Islam). When the CEO of ImHalal.com was asked about the motivation behind creating the search engine, he noted:

> We had picked up that many Muslims avoided the Internet because they were afraid that they or their children would bump into explicit content, which is a shame because it's important that everyone is able to collect information and get him or herself informed about certain subjects ... we don't believe that the Google safe search is returning "clean" and safe enough results. (Al-Saleh, 2009)

The launch of ImHalal.com could signal the beginning of a movement towards restricting the Internet based on cultural traditions and practices. Bekhsoos.com reported on the new website noting that:

> "Nipple" will get you a *haram* (i.e. sinful) level 1 out of 3, while "breast" gets you 2 out of 3. When I first checked the site in August, "lesbian" would get you a 3 out of 3 *haram* level (in red!) but now it's been reduced to level two, the fastest *ijtihad* (i.e. process of re-interpreting the Qur'an) I've ever seen. (Nadz, 2009)

The Sexual Rights Movement

In parallel to the development of the Internet over the past decade, both in terms of increased access and technological sophistication, the queer movement in Lebanon also developed its usage of the Internet for personal and political gains. The relative freedom of posting and accessing content online has undoubtedly facilitated and empowered Lebanese queers and offered them a virtual space to further their quest for justice. In sharp contrast to neighboring countries in the Arab region, Lebanon has a vibrant and developed queer movement that has been active for over a decade. In countries like Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, small LGBT communities have emerged in recent years but are still in the nascent stages in terms of organizing on the ground and online presence.

The following section enumerates the ways in which the queer women's movement in Lebanon has operated within the developing ICT environment. It aims to gauge the effects that ICT has had on the size, voice, and shape of the movement and the nuanced ways in which this played out.

Homophobia Entrenched in the Legal System

Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code criminalizes "sexual acts against nature" with up to a year in prison. A leftover law from the French mandate, Article 534 has been a pivotal point of advocacy for the LGBT movement, which calls for its annulment. Helem,[16] the national LGBT organization, provides legal services for individuals charged based on Article 534 and continues to highlight its detrimental effects on the LGBT community. In addition to the above article, a myriad of other laws affect the LGBT community including laws against "offending public morals" and "promoting lewdness".

Although Article 534 is widely known as an anti-sodomy law and targets men more than women, women still face acute and different forms of homophobia, both as a direct result of homophobic and misogynist legislation and because of public perceptions of women's bodies and sexuality.

A Quick History of Lebanese Queers and the Internet

Personal and Political levels

As early as the Internet got to Lebanon in the early 1990s, gay and lesbian individuals used search engines to find other people like themselves. Many undertook this research thinking they were going to find other individuals internationally and not in Lebanon. The first dating and matchmaking websites for homosexuals were in English and hosted in the United States or Western Europe, and many Lebanese LGBTs found themselves on these websites connecting with English- or French-speaking LGBTs with the very odd chance of finding an Arab or Lebanese gay person online. Internet chat sites contributed to the rapid formation of gay self-identities, with a growing number of people actively seeking out others like them to date, befriend, and talk to. One user who goes by the nickname "eagle" explains her first interaction:

> I remember googling... wait, no we didn't have Google at the time. I remember searching for homosexuality on Yahoo as soon as I had Internet access at home. It was in the late 90s. I found a bunch of links, a lot of them were about AIDS, and most of them were American. Although it felt good to find positive information about homosexuality, it still felt alien to me. One night I was chatting on FreeTel, the popular chat client at the time and I found a nickname that was "lesbian4lesbian" and rushed to chat with it. She (actually I'm not sure if it was a she) was from London and freaked me out when she started talking explicitly about sex. I was too shy to continue the conversation. But I do remember that she was the first person to teach me that :) was a tilted smiling face.

A similar experience is described in the story "My Quest to Find Lesbians" in *Bareed Mista3jil* (2009):

> The first word I ever searched for on Yahoo! was "homosexual". It was the first day my dad got me a dial-up Internet connection for my birthday. It was October 1998 and Internet back then cost a fortune. I remember it was something like $6 an hour, so I had to be very quick and I got right down to the point. I had to find some lesbians! (p. 107)

The online tools of communication that the LGBT community predominantly took advantage of in the early days of the movement were chat rooms (on mIRC or Yahoo! or websites). Many, however, reported feeling frustrated that online spaces were predominantly Western. So they were spurred to create a local forum using mIRC. The chat channel #gaylebanon was created by a group of ten queer Lebanese: "It was much easier with a local chat room for individuals to discuss local matters and meet each other. With global spaces, it was much harder to find one another", said TouchE, one of the founders of #gaylebanon, "It was also hard for us, Lebanese, to relate with other queers who lived abroad, who had their very own rights and freedoms". While the queer virtual network in Lebanon flourished, Lebanon's queers slowly began to emerge from the underground into the streets of Beirut. Queers converged in Acid, a nightclub that sits among a cluster of industrial warehouses in the capital's outskirts. "The few times that, when I was 16-17, I went to Acid, it was like, you know how you go to have one night stands and you don't mention your name or anything or where you come from and you just dance with a person", says Shant, a queer activist and member of Meem, "and then at the end of the night you just go home as if nothing happened".

In parallel to the chat room, a small group of individuals also ran a ONEList (which later became Yahoo! Groups) mailing list. Membership on the list reached a few hundred within a year and tens of e-mails were exchanged daily on the topic of homosexuality in Lebanon. From the mailing list emerged a group of people who met in person to form what they called then ClubFree. SS describes it:

> A few of us who used to meet weekly and organize social events (nothing political or activist) decided to start moving forward. An ILGA (International Lesbian and Gay Association) individual member suggested that we form a group that we can register with ILGA and we started meeting at someone's house every week. We put bylaws and created the name ClubFree. We all had fulltime jobs elsewhere, so it was very difficult to do. ... It took a long time to write the bylaws and agree on them, and then we'd have General Assemblies so after a year we had the bylaws accepted. Then there was the ILGA conference in San Francisco that I went to. I was funded by IGLHRC (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission).

When Helem (Lebanese Protection for LGBTs) was later founded in 2004, by another group of individuals that sprung out of ClubFree, the Internet continued to play an important role in LGBT activism. According to Georges Azzi, who directed Helem for 5 years since its inception, Helem's online communications strategy developed very "naturally". He said:

> The work on the Internet was very present, and there were very few places 'on the ground' that we could use to target the community. There was just Acid (a nightclub in Beirut), and they didn't really let Helem members be there. So, the use of the net, the mailing lists, and the website, were the most important things.

Helem's online tools included a website, multiple mailing lists, a chat room that never came close to competing with #gaylebanon, forums that were very active for a year

between 2005 and 2006, an online donations account with PayPal, a downloadable *Barra* magazine, a regular PDF newsletter, and after 2008, a Facebook group and Twitter account. In addition to the organized activism, other initiatives sprouted online in the mid-2000s, the most notable of which is the Raynbow Media Monitor that archived all press clippings about homosexuality in the Lebanese media since 1998.

Instant Messaging is one of the more popular online tools that maintained its usefulness over the past 10 years for personal connections and for organizing as well. MSN was the most popular of these and guaranteed mIRC chatroom and Gaydar users follow-up with people they met in chatrooms. LGBTs would use MSN to romance with others and also introduce people to each other on chat. A young woman user, Bloody Mary, recounts:

> It will sound pathetic now, but back in 2004-2005, every time I got a private message from a girl on Gaydar, I wondered to myself: is she the one? Am I going to fall in love with her? ... Friendship was an option, of course, but it came after love. What I really wanted was love, even if its possibility was in the form of weird online strangers.

MSN was also then used for organizing the queer women's movement that started with Helem Girls. The coordinator created a special MSN address to maintain daily contact with all the members of the community. Ran, a member of Meem, explains:

> [O]ne person on MSN was talking to the girls and spreading information about meetings through personal messages. I know it might sound like a very stupid tool right now, but back then it was very powerful to have... Lesbians back then and still right now are scared to have a face-to-face meeting right away with someone from the community. So to have a person on your MSN contacts list who you can talk to and express your fears to and someone who can convince you to come to the meetings... I think it was a very powerful tool. This was the tool used to gather all the girls and get the numbers.

Meem's Early Relationship with the Internet

From the start, Meem built most of its communications, community-building, awareness-raising, and support strategies using the Internet. One of the founders said in an interview:

> Some [organizations] go to learn about ICTs to support their work. At Meem we had no other choice. We were using ICTs before they became tools for change. Because we had no other choice. Was I supposed to go hang a poster that Meem had a meeting at so and so location? We used to send e-mails. And that's why we became really experts at [using the Internet]. The Meem blog was created because we needed a place to write. The YouTube channel was launched because we needed a place to post our videos. That [was] the only creative way that we can think of when doing things. Now everyone is using ICTs.

Shant, also one of the Meem founders and coordinator of the communications committee, also explained:

> I don't think Meem would have really existed without all [the ICTs]. I sincerely
> don't... I wonder if it's because 10 years after the civil war [have passed] —because
> usually they feed us this crap that 'it's not your time now' so maybe it was the
> timing: 10 years later. I don't really know...

ICTs also played a crucial role in the creation of alternative media platforms, online
web spaces that civil society in Lebanon sought to improve as social media picked up.
The queer movement saw itself as part and parcel of the movement towards alternative
writing spaces online. Shant notes that because of the Lebanese mainstream media's
affiliation with established political parties, they are often reluctant to discuss progressive
issues or to portray them positively, so the communications strategy must be crafted
delicately:

> Basically all you can do with alternative discourses that are underground is
> to create alternative media to house them... and also when you want to make
> something mainstream, be smart enough to remain very radical in your discourse
> while negotiating ways of passing it through mainstream media.

Therefore, Meem's strategy focused on creating alternative online media to use as
channels for self-expression (and self-discovery at times) as well as to reach out to the
public without compromising the security of individuals or the group.

Main Issues around Queers and ICTs

Throughout the course of the nearly 13-year old Lebanese queer movement, a variety
of socioeconomic, geopolitical, and gender issues surfaced. These issues influenced the
structural and ideological development of the movement. The authors of this paper
identified a number of overarching issues that the movement faced and sought to tackle
and that continue to form an enduring feature of the movement. Debates around private
versus public and online versus offline spheres of activism, in addition to acceptable
versus harmful expressions of sexuality, are issues that the young queer activists are
tackling on a daily basis, often and still in the face of massive challenges. Panning the
history reveals crucial shifts in agency and power in the relationship between the queer
Lebanese women and the Internet.

Sociopolitics and Privacy

Perhaps one of the most obvious distinct features of the queer movement in Lebanon is
its concern for the protection of personal identities. Members of the LGBT community
were concerned about their personal privacy both online and offline. Therefore, the
movement had to respond to this pressing need voiced by all members of the LGBT
community with varying degrees, from women more than from men, by adapting
its strategies to guard this anonymity and request for privacy. In the formative mIRC
chatrooms, chatroom moderators were tasked with ensuring that participants would
not be "outed". The moderators themselves maintained anonymity as well because of
the public nature of the chatrooms. Anybody could join and it was often reported that
police informants or users with malicious intentions to bash gays or harass lesbians
were logging in under false pretenses. Although the chat rooms focused on providing
services for LGBTs to meet and/or hook up, the moderators and users were also conscious

of the constructive role the chat rooms played in building a network of support among individuals who shared common forms of oppression. They also served as a source for community news, sometimes trivial and sometimes important. An implicit code of conduct was present among the users and forced outing was seen as destructive behavior that caused harm to many individuals. The mailing lists that were later created maintained a rigorous screening process. In offline spaces, the same code of conduct was maintained: "Everybody knew everybody", said Shant of the pre-ClubFree period of the movement, "except that when I knew someone, I wouldn't know that this someone knew a certain other person when in fact he/she also knew that other person. It's like le secret de Polichinelle[17] in a way..."

Founding queer activists cited social and family taboos, in addition to legal repercussions as the source of recurring fears that confined initial queer interactions to the Internet. The lessons learnt from previous organizing experiences were expressed most pronouncedly by the women who were part of these early communities. Risks ranged from family members accessing individuals' computers, emails, and chat logs to recognizing their writings or online profiles.

When Meem was founded in 2007 as a lesbian support group, founding members decided early on that privacy guarantees would be of fundamental importance when bringing queer women into the support spaces that they aimed to create. Members were all required to adopt nicknames and to refer to one another using those nicknames. In all written work that emerged out of Meem, most notably its book *Bareed Mista3jil* (2009), a collection of stories from queer women in Lebanon, and Bekhsoos, an online queer Arab magazine, there is little to no mention of the authors' names or identities. "We live in a society where obviously being gay is not acceptable. Without this privacy our lives would be ruined...", said Meem member Ran who added: "Of course there are times when you feel like you want people to know that it's you who wrote this. I'm sure there are times when you feel like you want credit for what you're doing, but we can't afford this. This is a compromise you have to make".

Meemers realized that there was a fine line they must straddle between addressing privacy concerns and boosting the visibility needed to integrate queer issues into the public sociopolitical environment. This is an enduring feature of Bekhsoos's development, a publication that promotes visibility as an engine for connecting and supporting queers while at the same time protecting the identity of its contributors. In an article entitled "Framing Visibility: Coming Out and the International LGBT Spectrum of Progress", Lynn, a Meem coordinator, recounts:

> Total secrecy would have turned Meem into a static bubble. There had to be a way, an intricate way, to reach out to the queers that we hadn't reached out to. Some of the ways Meem did this was through writing ... At the time and even today, we are often accused of wanting to take the movement 'back into the closet'. ... Meem rejects the binary between the closet and coming out — just like we reject gender and sexual binaries. We operate in the grey areas. We are obsessed with writing, producing knowledge, archiving, and we do it all under nicknames or first names. We constantly build up different public platforms so that progressive

17. *"Le secret de Polichinelle" or "Polichinelle's secret" refers to a secret that everyone knows but that is never shared or discussed publicly.*

and sex positive discussions on sexual and bodily rights are reaching people who are outside of our usual communities. There's obviously an ambiguous space that comes with this kind of visibility, and we take that ambiguity, that space, to our advantage. We negotiate this ambiguity of spaces and identities according to our own sense of surroundings and judgement. (Lynn, 2010)

The same article critically discusses the international notion of "coming out" and its emphasized relevance to queer movements and presents an account of Meem's negotiation around visibility and movement-building. Meem's work is very visible on the Internet with thousands of articles, videos, websites, e-campaigns, and followers on social networks. And yet, the group maintains an invisibility that they see crucial to their work — not only in order to protect the members — but also to remove the spotlight from the queer subjects and place it on the queer experiences. One of the founders explains:

When we first started Meem, we thought we would move from the underground to public space in five years. We assumed that this was the correct linear trajectory to follow. But today, four years into our work, we have realized that these binaries (offline/online) are very limiting, and our work on the Internet allows us to negotiate these ideas. We have been increasing content and reach and it just so happened that the Internet has shifted from an alternative medium to becoming the primary source of information and interaction for a growing population in Lebanon and internationally. And so the question becomes: is our online presence still alternative when the Internet has become so mainstream?

This analysis was also pervasive in the book *Bareed Mista3jil.* "At first we thought it was most important to find the stories from the people who wanted to tell them. But as the work on the book progressed, we found it necessary not only to include stories ready to come out, but also to search for those that weren't ... because each story is a representation of an experience common to hundreds of individuals in Lebanon ... we opted not to use any single name or person for each story". Because of the crucial role that the Internet plays in queer organizing in most contexts around the world, activists integrated digital security trainings into all capacity-building programs. While the Internet was traditionally a youth sphere where individuals were protected from parental access to ICTs, most recently and with the growing popularity of social networks like Facebook, parents and older family members started gaining more access to profiles and networks of their children. A re-evaluation of privacy in these shifting times has become more pressing. Another Bekhsoos article, "Your Mom Has Added You on Facebook", states:

[F]or the first time in a long time, my virtual gayness found itself thinking about e-closets again. Was I revealing too much online? [...] Online privacy and security has always been a central issue for queer communities, who are known to use anonymous log-ins, nicknames, multiple online identities, and other strategies to protect ourselves from outing. The need to systematize and think collectively about these strategies will only become more crucial as new social media trends push online users to reveal more and more about their preferences, purchases, locations, connections, and everyday activities. (Nadz, 2010)

This is yet another example of the ways in which social surveillance often mattered as much, if not more, than state surveillance, necessitating that Meem's privacy policies be intricate and constantly in flux.

Gender Politics: Access, Privacy, and Usage

Much has been posited about gender usage of ICTs, especially across the Arab world, where women's freedoms are restricted by strict social and legal codes. There has been recent movement with respect to this theme on the part of both techie communities and feminists, and more recently through the visible role of women within Arab revolutions — both on the ground and in online activism.

Arab Techies, a collective of Arab technology geeks formed in 2008, held an Arab Women Techies meeting in Zouk, Lebanon in May 2010 following the poor participation of women in the Arab Techies meeting. The purpose of the meeting, according to one of its organizers, Manal Bahey El-Din Hassan, was to build more connections among women geeks in order to support their participation in tech collectives.

From the other activist end of the issue, a group of young feminists founded Take Back the Tech Arabia in April 2010 to serve four goals: highlighting gender issues in Arab tech collectives, building ICT capacity of young women, encouraging girls in school to pursue tech studies, and developing programs and codes that are of use to women's rights advocates and feminists fighting discrimination and violence.[18]

Gradual Access to Online Spaces

As women have less access to public spaces than men, the same problem was reflected online when the LGBT community first went on the Internet to build content and connect members with each other. Women were a very small minority in the chat rooms, mailing lists, forums, and as content-producers. While the very small percentage of women accessing offline spaces such as ClubFree activities, gay nightclubs and pubs, and Helem, was understandable because of restrictions on curfews and mobility, their absence from online spaces was less clearly explainable. According to SS, an early member of the queer community in Lebanon:

> #gaylebanon was not a private place to be in ... it was 99 percent male, it was difficult to trust people, but once in a while I would come across some people I could talk to, and I made friendships that have lasted to this day ... the [ClubFree] meetings had very few girls; two to three at most. Once we had a picnic, there were two girls and 55 guys.

Despite common struggles as homosexuals, except for small circles, few women were able to integrate into the male-dominated spaces. The cover story of the second issue of Barra magazine addressed lesbian invisibility asking the question: "Where are the girls?

Our interviewees expressed that, in retrospect, it was a lack of privacy within the women's families, a lack of courage due to internalized sexism, and difficulty of identifying with the LGBT community that made online access difficult. Even with the

18. For more informations see Take Back the Tech 2010, accessed 28 June, 2011, from, http://www.nasawiya.org/web/2010/04/take-back-the-tech/

guarantee of anonymity online, young women were intimidated by the possibility of a family member discovering their online activities and by the generally aggressive atmosphere in chat rooms and forums. Anonymity was critical but it did not suffice alone to encourage queer women to speak up and connect with others. In later sections of our analysis we will see how a complementary offline supportive community broke many barriers of fear among women to express themselves online as well.

The key strategy of creating women-only spaces allowed women within the LGBT community to gain a vocal, strong, and lesbian expression that later developed into a queer feminist discourse. What was particularly successful about lesbian organizing that boomed by the beginning of 2008 was not that it was online. Indeed, there were many offline Meem-facilitated spaces. But communication was always maintained online in deliberate and personalized ways. All public lesbian activism was done online, creating a clear-cut separation of activities. The first were in-person meetings that were extremely confidential, banned the taking of photos, and prohibited the revealing of personal information. The second were online expressions of voices that were securely anonymous but that were promoted to the public in ripple-effect word-of-mouth strategies. Examples of these were the YouTube videos[19] launched in the summer of 2008, the early Bekhsoos issues,[20] and the blog.[21]

A Safe Space Online

For young women in particular, the growth of an organized constituency online allowed much-needed privacy and security, as well as a nurturing environment to talk about taboo sexuality issues. The significance of the ICTs strategy employed by the queer women's community is not so much that they were able to use the technology to advance their issues, but more that this strategy was given priority over other more traditional ways of organizing. The activists considered the mantra "we must write"[22] infinitely more significant than "we must come out" for example. And while interviewees expressed that in the early stages they thought that they would be moving from online to offline spaces, once they did, they realized that they must move simultaneously online as well. Privacy and allowing the young women to come out or identify themselves at their own pace was a central component of their work. All stories published in Bekhsoos are written from the perspective of someone who has experienced gender discrimination, bias, stereotyping, and restrictions. Bekhsoos includes topics that are taboo even in the queer community: body ownership, frank expressions of sexuality, stories of molestation, and other powerful acts of coming to terms with gender-based violence. Similarly to how Meem was founded as a response to the lack of safe, empowering spaces for women in LGBT spaces, Bekhsoos was focused on filling up the empty spaces where women's voices could be heard. News related to sexuality in the Arab world are reported (or covered) through women's experiences. Echoed in all these pieces are the words of Audre Lorde: "It's a struggle but that's why we exist, so that another generation of lesbians of color will not have to invent themselves, or their history, all over again".

Intersections of Gender and Class

Access to the Internet in Lebanon is limited to economically able groups because of the high price of connections and mobile data plans. Therefore, queers of lower classes have little access to content, information, and networks online. Class divisions surfaced as a

19. See Meem YouTube Channel 2011, accessed 28 June, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/Meemgroup

20. See Bekhsoos 2008, accessed 28 June 2011, http://Bekhsoos.com/issue0/issue0.ph

21. The earlier blog is no longer available online. The newer version can be found on http://Meemgroup.blogspot.com/ but has not been updated since October 2009.

22. See About Bekhsoos 2009, accessed 28 June, 2011, http://www.Bekhsoos.com/web/about/

prominent problem in Lebanon's queer community, which is split between supporters of the flourishing gay nightlife venues and critics of its benefit to the community. Some argue that having more "gay-friendly" businesses attracts more gay tourists and opens up spaces for queers to meet and hang out. Others have argued that these venues give a false sense of freedom and encourage a consumerist behavior among the Lebanese queer community and facilitates the further isolation of the majority who cannot afford the increasingly expensive restaurants and clubs, which are restricted to premium locations in Beirut.

A recent article published on the occasion of International Women's Day in *Al-Akhbar*, a mainstream leftist newspaper, entitled "Lebanese lesbian and gay rights: Down with sectarianism" stirred controversy among the activists. Written by President of the Helem board Hiba Abbani (2011), the article challenges the notion that "the situation for queers in Lebanon has improved drastically with the opening of many bars, clubs, restaurants, and saunas in addition to businesses that cater to the gay community", a promotional statement issued by organizers of the IGLTA symposium in Beirut in 2010. Abbani argues that the reality on the ground is very different from the one promoted for commercial gains and that, indeed, many political and socio-economic factors prevent a large segment of the queer community from identifying with the elites who benefit from the consumerist services. She called for a deeper understanding of the effects of sectarian politics on the community at large and for stronger demands by the movement to address these pressing issues. The article was met with much criticism[23] by gay male activists who argued that the movement has catered to all strata of Lebanese society and that gay-friendly businesses were a vital part of the local movement in the same way that parts of gay history developed in different parts of the world (mostly the Western world).

Self-Representation and the Creation of E-Narratives on Bekhsoos.com

This section will trace the evolution of the narrative that Meem has consciously sought to create throughout its growth. The section will focus on Meem's weekly online publication Bekhsoos.com, a website that describes itself as a "queer Arab weekly magazine" and whose articles have been read over 400,000 times since September 2009. At the time of writing this article, Bekhsoos had 420 posts and 2,339 comments. Anyone in the Arab region who wishes to discuss queer Arab issues is invited to contribute, as a means of self-representation. We examine the conditions out of which Bekhsoos emerged in relation to Meem's development as well as that of the larger queer movement in Lebanon.

This case study examines the content of Bekhsoos articles and its editorial processes. It attempts to gauge the networks that Bekhsoos's readership and its pool of contributors have given shape to. We also seek to flesh out the effects that Bekhsoos has had on the queer movement itself, against the backdrop of growing Internet usage, the emergence of social networks, and movements for online freedoms. Bekhsoos is selected because of a number of elements that make for an interesting case: the combination of various ICT tools on the magazine's platform, the authors' navigation of anonymity within wide exposure and reach, and the fact that the website was launched at a strategic meeting point of both the LGBT movement and the Lebanese blogosphere. Additionally, because

23. For more information see Raynbow 2011, 'Did Helem Miss!?', Raynbow Monitor, weblog post, 9 March, accessed 28 June, 2011, http://raynbowmonitor. wordpress. com/2011/03/09/did-helem-miss/

the magazine is primarily a space for women and transgender writers, its content sheds light on the gendered usage of the Internet in the queer community. "I think it was just natural that Bekhsoos would come to be, to be very honest. It was clear from the begining that there was a need for people to write and to express what they wanted to say...." says Shant. Bekhsoos.com was launched in June 2008 as an "Arab lesbian online magazine published quarterly by Meem cover[ing] topics related to homosexuality in the Arab world". The "About Us" page on July 1, 2010 defines Bekhsoos as a "queer Arab magazine published weekly by queer and trans folks at Meem cover[ing] topics related to (homo)sexuality in the Arab world". The evolution between the two descriptions is reflective of the evolution of the magazine's politics as well as the personal politics of the collective behind it. It is, in fact, the magazine as an online space for personal expression and political self-reflection that facilitated this process of "queering" the LGBT movement itself. Late 2010 saw the emergence of a dozen gay and lesbian blogs that narrated stories of being gay in Lebanon.[24] This is a result both of Bekhsoos's influence and also of the increased power of the ICT environment as an alternative space for self-expression.

The newer version of Bekhsoos.com was launched on September 7, 2009 by a Meem committee initiated by two key members: an English editor and an Arabic editor. The idea to publish weekly had been proposed by the English editor at a Meem meeting in August and in the form of a challenge to the collective that had grown to reach over 300 members over the course of 2 years. In her opening editorial, she writes: "This is the new Bekhsoos [...] we've decided to publish weekly. Yes, that's a huge commitment ... We're putting ourselves to the challenge of publishing at least 5-6 articles weekly because we want to be on top of information technology today" (Nadz, 2010). She continues:

> The age of 'wow, gay groups in Lebanon, that alone is impressive' is over. It's not impressive anymore. Now is the time for us to become engaged with our own societies, to think analytically, to advance politically, to understand the truth about oppression, to create, to research, to be proactive, to write, to write, to write! (Nadz, 2010)

The motivation depicted in this editorial became the driving spirit of the magazine as the team persisted in self-publishing week after week. "Every Tuesday, we hold an editorial meeting to discuss the articles of the next issue. We brainstorm ideas, we discuss current events, and we assign an article topic to every writer". All articles are due on Saturdays. According to the team, on average, half of the articles agreed upon are actually delivered on time every week. The weekly target is between 10 and 15 articles.

The team refuses to use any funding money for the production of Bekhsoos whether technically or to pay for articles, graphic design, or editing. It doesn't even solicit donations on its website. What it does solicit is more readership because it depends primarily on word of mouth for its readership to grow organically, rather than sporadically. There is a safety in that strategy. It is very similar to the strategy Meem used to gain membership.

> We've gotten to a stage where our readers expect their issue every week, and that's what keeps us motivated. It's very powerful — far more powerful than if we were,

24. Some examples include http://guymeetsworld.wordpress.com/ and http://gayinbeirut.blogspot.com/

say, getting paid or in some sort of competition to win something. It's even more powerful than our 'LGBT' cause in abstraction. Knowing people are out there — hundreds of them — waiting for Bekhsoos is all the motivation we need.

The Value of Personal Stories

Interestingly, the new weekly Bekhsoos was launched only 3 months after the successful launch of Meem's first book *Bareed Mista3jil* in a staged performance and also across Lebanese bookstores. The collection of 41 personal stories from a diversity of Lebanese queer women and transgenders proved popular in LGBT as well as mainstream communities. An *Agence France Presse* (AFP) article said: "Often silenced and marginalised by society and overshadowed by their straight, siliconed counterparts promoted in the media, the stories of Lebanon's other women have resonated with local and international audiences, and the book has been reprinted after the first batch of hundreds sold out" (Yazbeck, 2009). Weeks after the launch of the book, positive book reviews were coming out in newspapers, blogs, and magazines much to the empowerment of the community which was being significantly heard for the first time in the oppressed group's history. The need to continue to tell other stories, more stories, more points of view, more experiences, more secrets, more celebrations, was rising and paved the way for the launch of a rigorous Bekhsoos that carried the volume and sensitivities of bearing witness to personal narratives.

Documentation and Archive-Building

"Our objective is to fill the gap of lesbian and transgender-produced writing in the Arab world through articles, reports, investigations, personal stories, opinion pieces, and creative writing", reads the "About Us" page of Bekhsoos. Several of Meem's founders expressed that they viewed Bekhsoos's archiving function as serving purposes that were both practical and ideological. "The documentation of history bears significance not only for posterity but also serves as current useful guide for LGBTs continuing to organize in different ways in other Arab countries. It also fosters the habit of writing one's own history, rather than leaving it to researchers, historians, and professionals", says one interviewee.

Meem members expressed a wish to use Bekhsoos as a testament to the evolution of their development in sexual rights issues and other fields of activism that branch out of that, including feminism and anti-colonialism. Moreover, Bekhsoos encourages its members to document as well as reflect upon events that Meem participates in and organizes. This, Meem says, provides the queer movement with a richer historical record to refer to than mere log taking. Building an archive also allows Meem to fulfill its aim of saturating the Arab Internet space with queer issues, so that those interested in getting information about queer Arabs through a search engine or social networking sites, perhaps, will easily find Bekhsoos content. This, says one of Meem's founders, ensures that indigenous queer voices do not become drowned out by Orientalist examinations of 'queers' in the Arab world [that a growing number of scholars, notably Joseph Massad]. Archiving also leads to a form of 'queering'. By publishing a lot of queer content related to issues such as Apartheid, colonialism and feminism — subjects that yield tens of matches on Bekhsoos's search engine, Bekhsoos is able to inject a queer perspective into discussions about those issues in this region. This strategy is

illustrated in an April 2010 article that offers an analysis of Meem's role in feminist regional networks:

> If we were to trace our steps over those two years from the Marrakech conference to the Amman meeting, we would be able to map out Meem's strategy in pushing Arab women's organizations to become safe spaces for lesbians, transgenders, and people of alternative sexualities … we educated each other on women's issues other than sexuality and trained our members on gender equality. We placed lesbian and trans people's issues within a broader framework of sexual and bodily rights. (Nadz, 2010)

Politics of Inclusion

One of the objectives of Bekhsoos, extracted from its "we must write" motto is to promote the act of writing as a tool of personal healing and power. Writing allows individuals to think, formalize ideas in their heads, organize thoughts, challenge themselves, and then voice it. The act of writing things out provides clarity and eases the pain of repression. Repression is a common feeling in the queer women's community in Lebanon, which has little room for talking, expressing, and letting things out. By publishing weekly, Bekhsoos allows space for large quantities of articles (40-50 on average every month). This encourages individuals to write and aim to get published. According to Ran, one of the writers on the team, a significant strength of Bekhsoos is that it places a team of volunteer editors, in all three languages, at the service of members of the community who want to submit their work:

> The inability to write well may impede a lot of women from expressing themselves. Knowing that you can send your submission to editors who will fix it up and correct all the mistakes and make it publishable is very encouraging for those who are not comfortable with or used to writing.

Bekhsoos's editors recognize that writing is not accessible to everyone in the societies that it interacts with. It aims to make the writing process easier by having one-to-one communication with potential contributors and making the editorial process a rigorous one. That is one of the primary reasons why *Bareed Mista3jil* was not a submissions-based project but one written using the interviews technique. In addition, the question of who the author or illustrator is, presents an important criterion of what gets published. While the magazine generally tries to adhere to certain publishing standards in article quality, the editorial policy allows for compromises with regards to quality to encourage first-time authors and expressions that may not otherwise pass the publishing standards. "Sometimes it is more important at the level of personal empowerment that one person see their work published and read than for the article to be fantastically written or politically sharp", said the magazine's Arabic editor, Aphrodite. "It's a constant editorial decision that we have to make in almost every issue", she adds. More than half of the Bekhsoos articles are in English, the rest in Arabic, and a small percentage (less than 5 percent) in French.

Transcending Boundaries and Occupation

After Meem, the most active group using Bekhsoos as a vehicle for queer self-expression

is Aswat,[25] a support group for Palestinian queer women living under Israeli occupation. Aswat are a group of self-organized young queer women who work on the support and empowerment of their community. Because they are Palestinians living in the Israeli state, which is officially considered to be at war with Lebanon by the Lebanese authorities, communication is restricted between them and Lebanese activists. Meetings between Lebanese activists and Palestinians who hold Israeli passports is risky and could lead to criminal persecution in Lebanon. Through the Internet, activists on both sides of the borders have found a common space to discuss and share strategies such as community organizing, queering the Arabic language, and lobbying against the Israeli occupation and normalization with Israel.

A quick search of the term "Aswat" in English and Arabic on Bekhsoos.com yields over 30 links, most of them submissions by Aswat members to Bekhsoos. Submissions reflect either a Palestinian experience or a political stand vis-a-vis Palestine. The statement by Arab queers against the Zionist "Stand With Us" workshop planned for the US Social Forum published[26] on June 15, 2010 catapulted into the Top 10 read articles with 1167 reads within a week of its publishing. By publishing a number of articles on the topic of Israeli "pinkwashing", Bekhsoos situated itself as a strategic portal in the struggle against Israeli usage of LGBTs as propaganda to hide its war crimes and apartheid. In early 2011, Aswat then launched their own magazine in print and online, see www.3ashtar.com.

This political feature of Bekhsoos is significant on a number of inter-related levels. Meem's insistence on connecting queer struggles with other forms of struggle is an important facilitator of discussions around Israeli apartheid given that the occupation to the south of the border is a contentious topic in Lebanon. However, it is this subject in turn which provides queers in Lebanon with a geopolitical distinctiveness within the global queer movement. Bekhsoos's critiques and refusal of Israeli pinkwashing[27] has frequently put it at odds with global gay discourse, causing it to add nuance to the global gay landscape. By rallying around resistance to Israeli apartheid, writers from Meem and Aswat strengthen connections between the two movements that enable queer issues in both countries to be better integrated into a regional framework. There is frequently an interweaving of queer and apartheid issues in articles published by these two organizations.

Bypassing Censorship Restrictions

The technology behind Bekhsoos.com also carries political implications for communication rights and freedom of speech. The site is currently in its third version, having moved from simple php to Drupal and is now run on Wordpress, which has quickly become a popular open-source software for blogs and dynamic websites in Lebanon. The significance of using open source is that it is politically aligned with the activist movement towards freer open Internet tools.

Subscription to the website is available through a Facebook page, Twitter account, email subscription, and RSS feeds by page, category, author, and tag. The RSS feeds are an important strategy utilized to bypass censorship restrictions by different private and governmental filtering that filters by keyword or by IP address. Lebanese blogger

25. See Aswat 2011, accessed 28 June, 2011 http://www.aswatgroup.org

26. See Team 2010, 'Don't Stand with Zionism', Bekhsoos, 15 June, accessed 28 June, 2011, http://www.Bekhsoos.com/web/2010/06/dont-stand-with-zionism

27. A search of all Bekhsoos articles related to pinkwashing can be found here http://www.Bekhsoos.com/web/?s=pinkwashing

Jad Aoun posted about the re-launch of Bekhsoos with a screenshot[28] of the warning graphic used by UAE ISP that reads: "Surf Safely! This website is not accessible in the UAE. The Internet is a powerful medium for communication, sharing, and serving our daily learning needs. However, the site you are trying to access contains content that is prohibited under the 'Internet Access Management Regulatory Policy' of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of the United Arab Emirates". Dozens of Arab Internet users have written to Bekhsoos to complain that the website is blocked in their city.

The ongoing problem of censorship of material related to LGBT in specific and to sexuality in general is rarely addressed in Arab discourse. The new draft law mentioned in the section on legal regulation of the Internet in Lebanon carried dangerous implications for queer expressions in private as well as public online forums. "We have been publishing queer material online for many years, protected by a cloak of anonymity and privacy", Bekhsoos.com editor commented on the new law, "but now, and out of the blue, this new law threatens to silence, censor, and implicate us in a random manner". Members of the queer tech community joined the coalition working to reform the law and stressed the important aspect of defending freedom of expression around sexuality in the debates held among activists studying the proposed law. One of these queer activists who attended the strategy meetings stated in a follow-up interview:

> When you're collectively facing a threat to your freedom of expression, it becomes easier to drive home the point that queers have a right to that freedom too. Even if among those meeting there are people who are homophobic, they will still defend your right to freedom of speech because they are facing that threat to their own freedoms too. I feel that we have built an unlikely alliance that will protect us from online persecution or silencing in the future.

Geo-Politics and Queer Lebanese and Palestinian Resistance

Lebanon's past and present as the object of neo-imperialistic designs makes the queer experience akin to walking on a tightrope. Two geopolitical factors over the past ten years have made the Lebanese queer experience especially complex. The first relates to the second Bush administration's aggressive Democracy Promotion policies of which Lebanon was a strategic target. This came packaged with a set of liberal ideals that aimed to lure in many with promises of new individual freedoms. During Israel's war on Lebanon in July 2006, as US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice's pronouncement of the dawn of "A New Middle East" reverberated across the region, queers in Lebanon took a stand that would prove to be monumental to their movement. In a televised address to the 2006 Montreal Outgames, Helem member Rasha Moumneh remarked that being gay in Lebanon would not prevent Lebanese queers from standing in solidarity with Arabs in Gaza and Lebanon whom Israel had slain. "We do not accept democracy at the barrel of a gun," said Moumneh, "we do not expect to be liberated through war, if the price of that liberty is our lives meted out in collateral terms" (Moumneh, 2006).

The second very pertinent factor that has influenced the way the queer movement views geopolitics relates to the position of prominence that Israel has strategically assumed on the international queer arena. Jasbir Puar (2011) of *The Guardian* reports:

28. For more information see Aoun, J. 2009, 'Bekhsoos is Back', Lebanon News: Under Rug Swept, weblog post, 8 September, accessed 28 June, 2011, http://jadaoun.com/blog/2009/09/08/787/Bekhsoos-is-back

> Israel is invested in a large-scale, massively funded Brand Israel campaign, produced by the Israeli foreign ministry, to counter its growing reputation as an imperial aggressor...one of the most remarkable features of the Brand Israel campaign is the marketing of a modern Israel as a gay-friendly Israel.

Queers in Lebanon have consciously sought to detach themselves from the gay discourse that Israel began to co-opt and have regularly voiced their opposition to Israeli colonization. The global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement has served as a potent medium in this regard and it has served as a cohesive component in its relationship with other queers in the region, notably those in occupied Palestine. The global and regional dynamics of queers against Israeli apartheid are demonstrated and reinforced by Bekhsoos. Moumneh's keynote speech at the Copenhagen Outgames in 2009 elaborates on this political stand:

> There is an unfortunate tendency within the [global LGBT] movement towards a reduction of people's multiple selves into a single aspect employed falsely in place of the whole: in this context, sexuality and gender identity. By doing this, by positing a 'global gay citizen' stripped of context, of environment, of relationships, of community, of a politics, in order to sustain the myth of a 'happy global gay family', we are doing harm... it is incumbent upon us, as LGBT activists, to know, to seek out information about the world we build our activism around, to understand its complexities and intersections and to create a progressive and inclusive politics of justice, because the lies we are fed come in so thick and so heavy that it takes energy and commitment to sift through them to get to our truths.

The above quotation encapsulates the many issues that queers in the region have had to grapple with and demonstrates that the gay experience in the region is often at odds with the 'international gay discourse' in ways that cannot be ignored. From the beginnings of the queer movement, the impulse to localize the struggle has been potent and can be seen to have led to the genesis of the movement in the form of the mIRC chatroom #gaylebanon. Sentiments like that of #MiRC founder, TouchE, that reflect a disconnect between the realities of local queer spaces and international queer spaces (as well within local queer spaces) would become a mainstay of a movement that continues to try to "understand its complexities and intersections and to create a progressive and inclusive politics of justice".

In trying to reconcile the realities of occupation and imperialism with queerness, the queer movement, and particularly Meem, has come to position itself as a platform that connects a variety of struggles, globally, regionally, and locally. Imperialism in other parts of the world and repression of Arabs in some countries are often brought to light. There is an awareness of issues related to class, refugees, and migrant workers that underpins nearly every piece in Bekhsoos. This political awareness, Meem members insist, did not come about from textbooks or outside interference, but grew organically from within the group and was informed by personal experiences. As one interviewed member stated:

> When we started out, our collective political understanding was very limited and all we really wanted was to be in a gay, positive, and healthy environment. But

with time, new members who joined brought their own perspectives, experiences, and oppressions in a way, and the interconnectedness of just causes became visible in front of us. Our queer feminism then expanded and continued to expand with our exposure to different causes carried by diverse individuals who come to Meem. But it is still that one common thread that brings people to and keeps people in Meem: a common experience of injustice based on sexuality.

Conclusion

Throughout our research, we sought to map out the contours of the Arab ICT environment as it relates to the queer ICT movement in Lebanon. We aimed to show that the majority of the Arab region is hostile to free expression on the Internet and that while Lebanon enjoys a unique status with respect to freedom of expression within this region, its social, political, and economic boundaries are porous and volatile and therefore vulnerable to change. Our findings demonstrate the degree to which queer women in Lebanon have benefitted from the space that a free ICT environment offered. We hoped to show how this environment is an engine for both political and personal growth.

We attempted to highlight that ICTs provided a portal for queer women to not only consume information about queer issues – something that was greatly lacking in Lebanon's traditional media – but also to produce and disseminate information about themselves for others to read and experience. From the beginning of the movement there was an impulse to create local queer spaces in the virtual world because the disconnection between local experiences and the Western-dominated global online spaces was clear to most Lebanese queers. As the movement evolved in shape and in its global standing the urge to articulate that disconnect became strong and resulted in the creation of such publications as Barra, Sou7aq, Bekhsoos and *Bareed Mista3jil*. The more successful of these publications functioned through a consciously decided upon set of editorial principles that ensured accessibility of both readership and writership to all queer women. They ensured also that the publications would act as a platform for all struggles so that the specificities of Lebanon's queer women's situation could be incorporated into the discourses the movement aimed to create.

In 2011, a remarkable scandal erupted online with the revelation that the presumed Syrian blogger "Gay Girl in Damascus" was actually a married heterosexual American Man in Scotland, Tom MacMaster.[29] It was quickly followed by other similar exposures that catapulted the issue of representation and the authenticity of voices. Bloggers and journalists debated the harmful actions of MacMaster and the questions they raised on anonymity versus trustworthiness online. In the light of the global attention to these questions, we believe the research and in particular its findings on self-representation are crucial to promoting greater understandings of such complexities.

As the queer women's movement evolved in Lebanon, it became increasingly clear that geopolitical realities could not be detached from the discourses that queers in the region were trying to create. Geopolitics, specifically with respect to the Israeli occupation and Arab authoritarianism, had to be incorporated into the queer Arab reality. The politics of inclusion that Bekhsoos adopted allowed struggles to organically intersect. They also

29. See APC 2011, 'APC: "Gay Girl in Damascus" needs to Man Up', media release, accessed 28 June, 2011, http://www.apc.org/en/node/12544/

brought in Palestinian queers who would otherwise be inaccessible due to occupations and borders. This sheds significant light on the ongoing online debates between Palestinian queers and Israeli queers who are battling over entitlement to the "authentic" voice of LGBTs in the Middle East.

The pervasiveness and institutionalization of homophobia and transphobia across the Arab world makes it counter-productive to use the argument that the Internet should remain free so that sexual minorities may find room to express themselves. That is why our analysis focused on methods activists use to maneuver between censorship and advocacy. It is most likely that the movement for communication rights and that of queer rights will continue to progress in parallel as techies fight for an open Internet and queers fight for recognition and human rights. What is clear from the findings, however, is that the intersection of the two movements, embodied in the queer techies, allows for spaces to join forces and present the argument that expressions of sexuality should always be on the table when it comes to advocating for online freedom of speech. It is crucial that all social justice movements are aware of and work for a freer, more open Internet. Online trends suggest that the Internet will continue to be a space that mirrors offline interactions and public opinion and many of the interviewees expressed feelings that the two spheres will eventually merge into one and the same. And so the investment in online presence, content, and the mastering of technologies becomes a crucial component of any strategizing in Arab countries.

The demand for a free Internet in the Arab world is not only in sync with the larger demand for freedom of expression and speech, but it is also significant to maintain the Internet as a space for all self-expression and as an alternative room for activists to organize, advocate, mobilize, and raise awareness. Perhaps nothing in our modern history has made a stronger case for this than the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and the ongoing revolutions of the 'Arab Spring'.

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