Internet chat rooms: Opinions by the Arab listeners of the BBC

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Abstract

Contributions to a BBC news feedback forum by 94 Arab listeners on "Internet chat rooms" were analyzed. The results show conservative approaches to using these rooms and a cautious outlook towards their effect on society. They also point to differences in male and female views and use of these rooms.

1. Introduction

Along with social networking sites, news feedback forums are one of the fastest growing manifestations of the importance of public opinion on the Web. Particularly in the last seven years, news organizations have been using these forums to provide their users with venues to voice their opinions on virtually every topic covered by these organizations.

These forums have become popular throughout the world largely due to improved access to the Web and to ever increasing interest in global developments on the political, economical, technological, social, and entertainment scenes. Users on these forums, through their candid and anonymous contributions and comments, provide glimpses of opinions that are otherwise rare to see in more restrictive and controlled opinion outlets.

2. Background

The BBC is a trusted news source in the Arab World, and has recently celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of its Arabic service. The Arabic radio service of the BBC has been a stable source for Arab listeners for the last six decades and has maintained loyal audiences in every Arab country and among Arab expatriates all over the world. The Web presence of the Arabic service[1] started in 1997, allowing the BBC to widen the base of its Arab audience and to provide interactive services.

On the Arabic BBC news feedback forum[2], Arab listeners can voice their opinions in their language on news and on economic, technological, and social issues related to the Arab world and affecting developments in it. This paper reports on a research project that was undertaken in 2007 to study and analyze the contributions made by the Arab listeners of the BBC on the topic of Internet chat rooms. The listeners were asked to use the news feedback forum to comment on the positive and negative effects of these rooms on the social fabric and values of the Arab world.

The topic on Internet chat rooms was posted by the BBC's Arab staff in August 2007[3], garnering 94 contributions from listeners representing the majority of the Arab countries. The questions tackled by the research conducted on these contributions were: 1) what do the Arab listeners of the BBC think of chat rooms and their effects on their societies; 2) for what purposes do these listeners enter these rooms and how do they use them; and 3) are there any differences

of opinions based on sex or country of origin.

3. Method

To answer the research questions, the 94 contributions were saved, categorized, and analyzed. The quantitative analysis included the sex and country-of-origin distribution of contributors; the distribution of positive and negative opinions in the different categories of listeners; and the distribution of categories of the use of chat rooms among the different contributors. The qualitative analysis included comparisons and discussions of the translated versions of representative contributions.

4. Results

The following tables list the results of analyzing and categorizing the contributions, providing data on the distribution of contributions among the different categories.

Table 1 displays the distribution of contributors by sex and country. The BBC asks contributors to provide the name of their country of residence; these are listed in the table as provided. In cases where posters provided non-Arab countries, al these countries are listed in the table as "Expatriate". Contributors who did not provide a clear reference to a country of residence are listed under "Other". The sex of contributors was determined on the basis of the names they provided.

Table 2 lists the distribution of positive and negative opinions on the use of chat rooms broken down by country. Negative opinions included any reference to the negative effect of the use of these rooms on the social fabric of Arab countries or on the moral characters and beliefs of individuals. Positive opinions included references to the usefulness of chat rooms and to their role in connecting people. Contributions that did not provide clear opinions are listed under "Neutral".

Table 1: Contributors by country and sex

	Male	Female	Total
Bahrain	1		1
Egypt	22	3	25
Expatriate	5	3	8
Iraq	16	6	22
Jordan	3		3
Kuwait	4		4
Lebanon	1		1
Oman	1		1
Other	8	2	10
Qatar	1		1
Saudi Arabia	5		5
Sudan	3	1	4
Syria	4	2	6
UAE	2		2
Lybia	1		1
Total	**77**	**17**	**94**

Table 2: Use of chat rooms by country

	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Bahrain		1	
Egypt	6	17	2
Expatriate	2	6	
Iraq	6	9	7
Jordan	1	2	
Kuwait	1	3	
Lebanon			1
Oman	1		
Other	2	6	2
Qatar	1		
Saudi Arabia		5	
Sudan	1	3	
Syria	1	4	1
UAE		2	
Lybia		1	
Total	**22**	**59**	**13**

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Table 3 lists the distribution of positive and negative opinions on the use of chat rooms broken down by the sex of contributors. Contributions that did not provide clear opinions are listed under "Neutral".

Table 3: Use of chat rooms by sex

	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Male	20	45	12
Female	2	14	1
Total	**22**	**59**	**13**

Table 4 lists the primary reasons for which the contributors use chat rooms broken down by sex. When more than one reason were mentioned by a contributor, the first mentioned one was considered the primary reason. Contributions that did not provide a reason are listed under "Other"; those who were clear in their objection to using chat rooms, or specifically mentioned never using them, are listed under "Never used".

Table 4: Primary use of chat rooms

	Male	Female	Total
Chat with family	12	5	17
Chat with friends	32	3	35
Curiosity	7	2	9
Meet new people	9	3	12
Never used	4	2	6
Other	13	2	15
Total	**77**	**17**	**94**

The tables represent the numerical data extracted from the contributions and show a noticeable difference between the number of female contributors and the number of males. They also show that most of the contributions were from Egyptians and Iraqis.

Most females viewed negatively the use of chat rooms as did most males. But the percentage of females with negative views was higher (82% to 76%). The data also show that users from countries that seem to have higher rates of Internet usage (as reflected by the number of contributions) tend to be less negative views on chat rooms (68% of Egyptians and 40% of Iraqis in contrast to 100% of Saudis 75% of Sudanese.

The following are translations of representative contributions from four different countries: two are from male contributors and two are from females. They provide textual illustrations of some of the data presented in the tables, showing differences in the perception of chat rooms.

A female contributor from Iraq wrote: "I am all for closing chat rooms. They cause irreparable damage to our values, especially when they are used by those low moral and ethical values. However, we cannot ignore the Internet as a civilized source of news and information."

A contribution from an Egyptian male reads: "Yes to Internet chat rooms but with moderators to prevent chaos as is the case with most chat rooms."

From Syria, a female contributor wrote: "..Unruly behavior has its root at home…Upstanding males or females do not change their behavior whether they are home or on the Internet…Censorship of chat rooms does not make any difference.."

A male Kuwaiti contributor wrote: "Honestly, they are useful if used to meet people from different cultures and chat with family members …but they are destructive when used for cynical purposes…"

5. Conclusion

The results highlight the views expressed

by Arab users of chat rooms on the Internet, showing, in general, a conservative approach to the benefits of using these rooms and a cautious outlook towards their effect on Arab society and individuals. They also point to differences in how male and female from different Arab countries view and use these rooms, suggesting a need for further investigation into differences in the use of other Internet and Web services by both sexes in the Arab world and a closer look at the effect of geographic locations on them.

Endnotes

1. http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/news/
2. http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/talking_point/default.stm
3. http://newsforums.bbc.co.uk/ws/thread.jspa?forumID=3863

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