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New Modes of Communication: Social Networking, Text Messaging, Skype: Egypt

New Modes of Communication: Social Networking, Text Messaging, Skype: Egypt Abstract: This entry gives a brief overview of ICT usage in Egypt including user statistics, digital divide and popular websites. Counseling services on the popular Islamic website Islam Online (IOL) constitute the main focus of the entry. There is a particular emphasis on online marital counseling. IOL's counseling services are the lens through which female use of ICT is examined, as both the users and producers of these services are primarily young women. Moreover, the interactive counseling services provide insight into the everyday marital concerns of Egyptian and other Arab women, and how they employ ICT to cope with such problems. Interactive counseling also illustrates what type of responses IOL users receive from ICT professionals, i.e. the online counselors. This entry sheds light on the last decade of IOL's counseling services, in addition to recent changes to the website.

Subject words: [women's use of ICT in Egypt](#); [Islamic websites, Arabic](#); [IslamOnline.net](#); [OnIslam.net](#); [online counseling](#); [marital counseling](#); [women's agency](#).

Introduction

Structure of entry

This entry begins by providing a brief overview of ICT usage in Egypt, including user statistics, digital divide and popular websites. In the main section of the entry, IOL's counseling service prior to the crisis it underwent in 2010 is elaborated on as this is a service that was in function and in constant development for more than a decade. It draws on both online research and fieldwork amongst producers prior to the crisis. Special emphasis is given to sketching out types of counseling services, themes, questions and answers. Moreover, an outline of the roles of producers, counselors and users is also provided. A brief overview of counseling services on the new IOL website and the On Islam website is presented in the last section of the entry, drawing exclusively on online research. OnIslam.net is the new website created by the previous IOL Cairo staff, and became accessible to the public from August 2010. A comparison of the counseling services of old IOL, new IOL, and On Islam is provided.

ICT usage in Egypt and digital divide

The term "digital divide" was coined to characterize the gap between populations with and without access to computers and the Internet. It may come as no surprise that connectivity to the Internet is higher in populations in developed countries than in developing countries. Close to 80 percent of populations in Arab states were estimated to have cellular phone subscriptions (including mobiles with prepaid calling cards) in 2010 (ITU 2010). In developed countries, 71

percent of populations are online, in contrast to only 21 percent of populations of developing countries (ITU 2010). Of Arab populations, 24.9 percent are estimated to be Internet users (ITU 2010). On the whole, Internet users have doubled from 2005 to 2010 (ITU 2010). According to Abdulla (2007), Egypt has the highest increase in Internet users in the Arab world, at 500 percent. It is difficult to establish the exact number of Skype users who use Skype via computers in Egypt. However, it is likely to be a substantial number of those who are online, because Skype on mobile phones was considered a financial threat to telecom companies in Egypt, resulting in a ban in March 2010 (Mayton 2010). Although the numbers of Internet users in Arab countries are steadily on the rise, especially in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the fact that only a fourth of Arab populations are presumed to be connected to the Internet suggests the existence of a digital divide (Abdulla 2007, Hofheinz 2005).

Still, one can also speak of a digital divide within a nation. In Arab countries, access to the Internet is usually the privilege of upper and middle classes (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009). Van Dijk (2006) concludes that the lack of access to computers and Internet in developing countries is definitely related to lack of financial resources. He also draws attention to another important factor, namely digital information skills. When examining the skills-gap based on global statistics, Van Dijk (2006) deduces that those who have a high level of traditional literacy also have a high level of digital information skills. In an Egyptian context, this translates to educated upper and middle classes. Moreover, in Egypt the digital divide seems to be gendered. Men's access to the Internet is estimated to be twice that of women in Egypt (ITU 2008). In addition to a digital divide, one can also speak of a "broadband divide." Less than 5 percent of Arab populations are estimated to have broadband Internet connections (ITU 2010). In a similar vein, Van Dijk (2006) argues that a "broadband elite" acquires higher Internet proficiency and creativity as a result of being able to access the Internet more frequently and for longer time-spans.

Popular websites in Egypt and gendered ICT usage

The ten most popular websites in Egypt according to Alexa.com (2010d) are: Google.com.eg, Facebook, YouTube, Google, Yahoo, fatakat.com, Blogger.com, maktoob.com Inc, Windows Live, and Myegy.com. These websites are either social networks, search engines or multimedia platforms with a multitude of foci ranging from entertainment to politics. According to Hofheinz (2007), 8 out of the 100 most popular websites in Arabic are specifically Islamic. This means that Islamic websites are very popular amongst Arab users. A similar popularity of religious websites is not observable in any other of the official UN languages (Hofheinz 2007). This entry focuses mainly on the Islamic website Islam Online (IOL). According to Alexa.com (2010b) IOL is currently ranked 609 in Egypt and 27 in the Middle East, but was even more popular prior to the IOL crisis.

In light of the fact that the overall access to Internet in Egypt is considered to be twice as high amongst men compared to women (ITU 2008), IOL is a particularly interesting case to examine, since the typical IOL user according to Alexa.com (2010a, b) is female. Moreover, on average, users tend to be youths or young adults. This entry concentrates mostly on IOL Arabic's online counseling services, with a particular emphasis on marital counseling. There are four reasons for this choice of emphasis. First, counseling services are popular amongst users, and are used predominantly by female users. In other words, there is a large demand for online Islamic support (AlKhateeb 2004, Bunt 2003). Some even consider interactive services such as "questions and

answers” to be the most significant contribution of Cyber-Islam (AlKhateeb 2004). Second, counseling services provide a window into the everyday problems and concerns that occupy women in Arab and Muslim societies. Third, the producers and editors of the counseling services are mostly young females. And, fourth, IOL attempted to address the digital divide, by producing books based on online counseling sessions so that users with limited access to the Internet, or readers with no internet access, could still benefit from IOL’s counseling services. For instance, IOL published books on engagement and love, sexual education, communication between spouses and the internet, and marriage, based on online marital counseling sessions. Since much material has recently been removed from IOL’s website following the crisis, the IOL books have gained the additional importance of documenting transcripts of over a decade of online counseling on IOL.

Islam Online and the crisis

Islam Online has been one of the most prominent and influential Islamic portals since it was founded in 1997. IOL had a vast scope, providing users with much more than digitalized versions of religious scripts and corresponding exegesis. It was also an independent news agency and offered a wide range of interactive services, such as fatwas and counseling. Within IOL, users could surf amongst a spectrum of specialized subpages about worship, religious scholarly advice, health, and social pages dealing with family and marriage. According to Gräf (2008) the founders of IOL envisioned a website encompassing all aspects of life, and welcomed the integration of knowledge from secular sciences with Islamic perspectives. This is why professionals from fields such as psychology and psychiatry were among IOL’s employees, serving as online counselors. IOL differed from other Islamic websites in this respect, and was also held to be a more interactive website than its competitors (Sisler 2007).

Ideologically IOL held close ties to Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, renowned for developing the *waṣatiyya* school of thought. *Waṣatiyya*, as defined by its adherents, promotes the middle ground of Islam, offering balanced opinions that are neither too strict nor too lenient. Moreover, *waṣatiyya* aims at being in dialogue with the concerns of contemporary society, and therefore seeks to find solutions to modern-day problems (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009, Gräf 2009, Høigilt 2008). Under the heading “About Us,” IOL stated that it strove to provide “a universal message and Islamic content” and focus on a “balanced, middle ground of Islam, avoiding extremism.” Yet, because of its vastness, it is difficult to assess whether or not the whole of the IOL portal lived up to its professed *waṣatiyya* outlook. In his study of online fatwas, Sisler (2009) maintains that IOL was the most open-minded and moderate of the Islamic websites he studied. This entry illustrates how IOL’s social subpages projected a *waṣatiyya* outlook, in that there was an explicit focus on “lived Islam,” through discussing and finding solutions to the everyday problems of users. Moreover, IOL’s social subpages relied on online counselors with diverse non-religious expertise. When IOL Arabic’s social pages discussed sensitive topics such as sexual relations, over a decade ago, they were pioneers. Since then, such topics have become common on the discussion programs of various Arab satellite channels. Still, IOL’s social pages were reputed to be a virtual space of openness, where all types of sensitive or intimate questions could be asked, well into 2010. It is likely that this reputation led to its popularity amongst users.

IOL was mainly run from Cairo, with an advisory board in Doha, Qatar, headed by al-Qaradawi. The cooperation between Cairo and Doha in the running of IOL seems to have run smoothly for

over a decade. However, in March 2010 there was a colossal clash between the IOL Cairo employees and the new Qatari board, the exact reasons for which remain unclear. What is known at present is that the new advisory board aimed to revise both how IOL was run and its editorial output. IOL's social pages were amongst the subpages held to be at the heart of the conflict. As discussed by Abdel-Fadil (forthcoming-b) the disagreement was understood by IOL Cairo as a clash between Salafism and *waṣatiyya*, in its early days. Yet, as the crisis developed, alternative explanations surfaced. In Arab media, Qatari representatives of the new board denied that they were taking a Salafi turn, and stated that they merely wished to develop IOL further (al-Ansari 2010). In any event, the conflict escalated to the extent that the IOL Cairo offices (with 350 employees) were abruptly shut down and al-Qaradawi was dismissed from his position as head of the Qatari advisory board. Now the Doha offices and a new IOL staff have taken over the production of the IOL website. The structure of this entry has been shaped by the IOL crisis and its repercussions, since the IOL website before and after the crisis are far from identical. Over a decade of online counseling has recently been removed from the (new) IOL website, following the crisis. This entry discusses tendencies in this material by drawing on the author's archived material from old IOL and the published books containing old IOL's counseling transcripts. A comparison of IOL before and after the crisis is due, and is therefore provided in the final section of this entry.

Islam Online pre-crisis

Religion online vs. online religion

Some scholars distinguish between "religion online" and "online religion" (Helland 2000). The former signifies religious websites that function chiefly as portals of religious knowledge. In other words, the user is at the receiving end. Moreover, such websites mostly refer to conventional, offline religious services. By contrast, "online religion" is characterized by a larger degree of interactivity, and often refers users to online religious activities. Online religion thus offers its users a more active role, encouraging them to participate in online religious services. Online rituals are often considered to be prime examples of online religion. Yet, functions such as "Questions and Answers" also represent a high degree of interactivity, and thus activity on the part of the user (Young 2001). Young maintains that most religious websites include elements of both religion online and online religion. IOL appears to be a case in point. Examples of religion online services are: searchable databases of digitalized Qur'ān verses and *aḥādīth*, in addition to various informative essays and articles spanning a variety of topics. Online religion services include interactive fatwa and counseling services.

Old IOL's popularity and user demography

The statistics for IOL usage prior to the IOL crisis are currently unobtainable. However, these numbers can be derived from archived IOL material at Alexa.com (2010a) giving statistics from 18 May 2010 (see Figure 1). As is shown in the section about IOL post-crisis, the number of users dropped significantly by December 2010. The May 2010 statistics thus give an indication of IOL's popularity prior the crisis, although it can be assumed that in February and March of 2010 the numbers would have been higher. IOL's user popularity statistics have at times been so high that IOL constituted the most popular religious website worldwide (Hofheinz 2007). In May 2010,

Alexa's global rank of IOL was 5,054, based on the number of visitors and page views (Alexa.com 2010a). This is a high rank. It means that just over 5,000 websites (about all sorts of topics) were more popular than IOL, on a global basis. At this point in time, IOL was ranked 214 amongst the most visited websites in Yemen. As for other Arab countries, IOL was ranked 248 in Qatar, 318 in Egypt, 339 in Jordan, and 371 in Algeria. Most of IOL's traffic was from Egypt (21.6 percent) (Alexa.com 2010a).

Figure 1

Other significant percentages of users were from the following countries: Saudi Arabia (17.2 percent), Algeria (9.2 percent), United States (5.5 percent), Yemen (3.9 percent), Qatar (3.7 percent), United Arab Emirates (3.6 percent), Kuwait, Morocco and United Kingdom (2.7 percent). The average user was a female aged 18–24, a mother, held a college education and surfed from home (Alexa.com 2010a). In May 2010, Alexa rated the IOL website as "average" to load.

Types of online counseling

IOL's social subpages provided interactive counseling services in two formats.

First, asynchronous counseling called *mashākil wa-ḥulūl* (problems and solutions) on IOL Arabic, and a clickable category on the social pages main toolbar. A user sent in his or her question, and received an answer from a cyber-counselor within two weeks. In this sense, the counseling service resembled an email exchange. Users sent in their questions via an online form, in which they had to include information about their background, such as marital status, geographical location and education, in addition to the problem itself. Also, users were required to state how long they had been married, which was particularly relevant to marital counseling. Online forms could be filled out anonymously. There was no limitation to the length of text with regard to describing the problem for counseling was sought. This was a conscious choice from the producers' side, an acknowledgment of the cathartic function of writing at length about feelings and problems. *Mashākil wa-ḥulūl* allowed for complex counseling problems, and in-depth responses. This was supported by two factors: first, the unlimited space for stating a problem and second, the asynchronic nature of the counseling, allowing the counselor more time to ponder the problem before responding. IOL Arabic responded to approximately ten such questions a week, and the service was popular.

All questions and answers were posted online, i.e. could be read by all IOL visitors, with the exception of particularly sensitive problems or if the user explicitly requested a private answer. The English-language equivalent of this service on IOL English was "Ask the Cyber-Counselor." *Mashākil wa ḥulūl* mainly received questions dealing with the premarital phase or marital problems. This appears to mirror global trends with regard to online counseling: 55 percent of those polled in an American survey listed "relationship issue with partner" as their reason for seeking online counseling (Pollock 2006). IOL users' questions dealing with parenting issues were sent to a separate parenting counseling service, and yielded an additional ten problems a week. To view archived counseling sessions about marital relations, the user could click *Ḥawwā' wa-Ādam* (Eve and Adam), *mashākil wa ḥulūl*, and then navigate among the subcategories of marital problems. The categorization was based on how long the marriage had lasted. By clicking

the category “the first years of marriage,” the user could access an extensive list of counseling sessions dealing with marital problems amongst newlyweds, or only a year or two into their marriages.

The second interactive counseling service was synchronous in that the questions and answers were immediate, and in this sense reminiscent of a chat. This service was called *Ḥiwār Hayy* on IOL Arabic and “Live Dialogue” on IOL English (exact translations). A session typically lasted for two hours, and the name of the counselor, his or her specialty and the date and time of the Live Dialogue session were announced in advance. Each counselor could answer up to 30 problems in a Live Dialogue session. The questions and answers in *Ḥiwār Hayy* sessions were of a less complex nature than in *mashākil wa-ḥulūl* and users and counselors were encouraged to keep their questions and answers brief. The Live Dialogue icon was displayed in the main toolbar of the social subpages of IOL Arabic and English. Live Dialogues were typically announced as dealing with psychological, marital or parental issues.

The final type of counseling service was non-interactive, i.e. produced primarily for reader-consumption, and constituted what the IOL Arabic social team called “protocols” (an emic term). Protocols were essays with a distinctive counseling approach and often had titles such as “How to deal with x problem” or “Ten steps to overcome x.” Protocols had a rather set standard. Stylistically, they were formulated in easy language and were to the point. They included a short introduction of the topic and a main body that highlighted different aspects of the problem on a practical level. Step by step lists of possible solutions to a particular problem were usually included in the final section of protocols. The problems dealt with in protocols often reflected common problems IOL users wrote in about to the interactive counseling services. Still, protocols were more general than personalized counseling exchanges. In order to navigate to these protocols about marital relations on IOL Arabic’s social pages, users clicked *Ḥawwā’ wa-Ādam*, Husbands and Wives, and then got to a long list of a total of 204 posts (March 2010). Amongst these posts were protocols dealing with various aspects of marital relations. On IOL English, users clicked Family-Husbands and Wives and then could navigate amongst pre-categorized lists such as intimate relations, love and intimacy, and communication.

IOL’s counseling services can be understood as part of a global trend in modern societies. According to Hoover (2006) one of the characteristics of contemporary societies is that individuals are seeking ways to improve and develop their “self.” He argues that the making of our “selves” has become an essential activity and is increasingly considered the individual’s own responsibility. The acts of seeking self-improvement and developing a reflexive consciousness are therefore central to this trend. Hoover (2006) describes this trend as the rise of the “culture of therapy” and maintains that it is largely based on and available through media. Indeed, the boom of popular psychology and self-help books and websites in the last few decades supports this analysis. According to Hoover (2006, 53), part and parcel of this societal development is that “religious identity becomes less ascribed, and more of a voluntary, subjective and achieved phenomenon.” In other words, the argument is that religious media have adapted to this trend. IOL’s counseling services appear to demonstrate the point. As shown in subsequent sections, IOL’s counseling services can be seen as part of a “culture of therapy” that facilitates development of a reflexive consciousness and improvement of the self.

The role of producers

IOL was a huge website with many subpages and corresponding sections that produced and edited online content. Each section was relatively autonomous with regard to production. The counseling services discussed here were the responsibility of the social team, which prior to the crisis consisted of nine persons, seven of whom were female. These individuals were relatively young professionals, in their 20s and 30s, with higher education (primarily journalism degrees). In other words, in this context the producers were the social team that was mostly comprised of female media-professionals. As authors and editors, the social team first and foremost had the authority to select the themes of focus and how these were framed and presented. The producers primarily selected the themes of protocols on the basis of common problems that users wrote in to IOL about. Still, the social team also selected additional problems they deemed important. A number of protocols were penned by the producers themselves. Other protocols were outsourced to either freelance IOL writers or to IOL's pool of counselors. These protocols were then edited by the social team to fit the protocol standard.

Particularly in the case of interactive counseling, the producers acted as facilitators. They read through the problems sent to *mashākil wa-ḥulūl*, and selected the most suitable counselor on the basis of the problem itself and the background information provided in the online form. The producers sought out the best match according to which counselors were known to handle specific topics particularly well. The producers selected the counselor they believed had the formal competence and practical skills (demonstrated in previous responses to similar questions) to respond to any particular question. On certain occasions, editors sent complex problems to two different counselors in order to achieve complementary responses. Differing counseling opinions were at times posted online as two individual responses, and at other times edited into to one response by members of the social team. In such cases, the decision of whether to mould the responses into one or publish two individual responses was that of the producers. A single counseling response edited from two different counseling opinions was usually signed "the IOL counseling team" rather than with an individual counselor's name.

The producers were responsible for the editing of IOL users' questions and the responses of the counselors. The editing of users' problems was restricted to correcting grammar and spelling. Editing counselors' responses could at times be more substantial. Moreover, the producers were the ones who selected, cut and pasted, and linked counseling exchanges up to previous counseling sessions about similar topics. This was seen as an important means of providing the IOL user with a wider perspective on the given problem, but it was also dependent on the producer's interpretation of the problem and response. This meant that producers exerted a substantial amount of influence in selecting what they considered relevant links. Gräf (2008) observed a similar role of producers amongst IOL's fatwa team. Other facilitating functions of the producers included requesting more background information from the user if the counseling form was not sufficiently filled out, and making sure the counselor kept the deadline.

It has been argued that Islamic websites contribute to a pluralization of religious opinions and the individualization of Islam (Anderson 1996, Bunt 2003, Sisler 2007). The two postulates are interlinked in that when an Islamic website provides a plurality of opinions, individual users are able to pick and choose the opinion most suited to them. The present analysis supports the notion that IOL's counseling services contribute to a plurality of opinions. The social team at times included complementary counseling opinions in protocols dealing with specific marital problems. As well as the possibility of sending a particularly complex problem received by the

interactive counseling service to two different counselors, in order to receive a plurality of opinions, the producers could link counseling exchanges to previous counseling sessions on similar problems, and could therefore potentially provide additional new angles on the user's problem. Achieving a multitude of opinions was chiefly the responsibility of the social team; indeed, the role of the producers calls for further analysis.

Previous studies of Islamic websites have theorized about the coming of "a new class of interpreters of Islam," primarily male engineers and computer scientists with no formal religious schooling (Anderson 2003). Although an intriguing argument, it needs to be explored further through more empirically-based studies. The case discussed here demonstrates that the new class of interpreters of Islam may at times be comprised of predominantly female professionals. As has been shown, the producers played a significant role in editing, framing and shaping the counseling services made available to the IOL users. The argument put forward here is that the team of producers set the agenda on the basis of what they individually or collectively found important. Put differently, the opinions, values and priorities of the producers played a considerable role in shaping the output of IOL. The producers' opinions about themes and foci were not only influential but actually determined what topics would be dealt with on IOL's social pages. This can be interpreted as evidence of an individualization of Islam, with an emphasis on the interpretations of the producers rather than the users. This argument has two important implications. First, it suggests that if IOL's social pages had been run by other individuals, the content may have been very different. Second, the findings suggest that the role of producers and moderators is much more significant than accounted for in previous studies of Islamic websites. Indeed, this conclusion is in line with Krüger's (2005) declaration that once he started collecting offline empirical data, he discovered that he had underestimated "the discursive power" of the moderators of the religious websites he studied. Against this background, it can be argued that the role of producers – male and female – ought to be taken into serious consideration when theorizing about Islamic websites.

Professed goals of counseling and counseling topics

IOL's counseling draws on a combination of Western counseling theory from the fields of psychology and social counseling in addition to keeping in line with an Islamic ethos (Abdel-Fadil forthcoming-a, Bunt 2003). The ideal of IOL counseling was to assist IOL users in finding a solution to their own problem. The goal was thus the empowerment of the IOL-users, so each could cope with their problem. In other words, ideally the counselor did not spell out "the solution," but rather assisted the IOL user to find possible solutions to the problem. The idea was to stimulate reflexivity in the IOL user, but also to suggest possible solutions that were in accordance with Islamic teachings. IOL counselors strove to find solutions that reflected an adaptation to modern life. Amongst the topics discussed in IOL's counseling output were matters dealing with many aspects of marriage: love, flirting, romance, intimacy, disagreements, anger, quarrelling, communication and marital silence. How to deal with in-laws was often discussed as well. IOL focused on how to keep love, flirting and intimacy alive in a marriage. Users were counseled on how to combat marital silence, how to communicate discontent without anger, and how to improve overall communication.

IOL also dealt with and welcomed problems of a sensitive and taboo nature. Amongst the sensitive topics were problems dealing with sexual relations between spouses. IOL's counseling

attempted to improve sexual education so that users could overcome insecurities and ignorance and eventually enjoy good sexual relations within the institution of marriage. Amongst taboo topics were problems dealing with masturbation, homosexuality, rape and incest. IOL's stance on homosexuality was to recommend ways of abandoning homosexual behavior. IOL distinguished between masturbation amongst married and unmarried people. The latter was not considered unlawful. The former was tackled as a problem that had to be done away with. As for victims of sexual assault and incest, the goal was to provide a counseling service to these users and assist them in their healing process, so that they could move on in their lives and eventually enjoy intimate relations with their current (or future) spouse. Focus on counseling victims of sexual assault was also part of an awareness campaign that the IOL social team believed was necessary in the Arab world. They believed in addressing this taboo area, rather than denying the existence of rape and incest. This is a specific example of how the producers set the agenda with regard to the social pages' output and focus.

IOL's counseling can be analyzed as part and parcel of the "culture of therapy" in that it provided a service that responded to users' quest for sense-making and the project of the "self." Individuals quest for self-improvement can be both religious and therapeutic. On IOL these two goals were unified through their particular brand of counseling (Abdel-Fadil forthcoming-a). More specifically, IOL's counseling services aimed to assist users in developing a reflexive consciousness, and focused on ways to improve the self, rather than changing the other. This is related to the concept of empowerment: self-improvement is within reach, while attempting to change another person may prove futile. The religious aspect of IOL's counseling could be implicit, in the sense that advice conformed to an Islamic code of ethics and would therefore be more "safe" or *ḥalāl* for IOL users than non-Islamic counseling portals. However, explicit references to religious sources or what is considered *ḥarām* or *ḥalāl* were at times also integrated into IOL's counseling responses.

The way IOL-counselors responded to questions dealing with masturbation and homosexuality are an example of this. These topics would in all likelihood have been responded to differently on a non-Islamic or secular counseling website. IOL has been characterized by el-Nawawy and Khamis (2009, 13) as providing material that is "a hybrid between preservation and reform in Islam." This appears to be an apt description of IOL's counseling services. In their dealings with sexual relations, IOL spoke with clarity and at times graphic detail and sought to reform and modernize conservative and traditional attitudes toward sexual relations. Similarly, IOL's take on masturbation can be considered flexible in that it took into account the realities of contemporary societies, i.e. that many Muslims cannot afford to get married. In this context, masturbation can be seen as a legitimate means to avoid illicit extramarital sexual relations. IOL may have been groundbreaking in discussing homosexuality so openly; however, their stance was traditional (or conservative) in that homosexuality was considered an anomaly to be eradicated.

The role of the counselors

Counselors who wrote protocols or responded to IOL users through *Ḥiwār Hayy* or *mashākil wa-ḥulūl* were generally trained professionals within the field of social work, psychology or psychiatry. Most of the counselors serving the Arab audience were Egyptians. The majority of the counselors held doctorates in their respective fields. A few of the IOL counselors held an MA or a BA. Most of the counselors worked as offline counselors as well. All counselors were trained

within IOL on how to respond to IOL users' problems. Special attention was given to how counselors should approach written online counseling. This entailed counselors receiving guidelines on how to analyze the main text in the online counseling forms. More specifically, counselors were trained to read between the lines and look for repetitions, key phrases or aspects of the situation that may have been left out. Another technique often employed was that the counselor attempted to read the problem from the point of view of the other party in the problem sketched out. Moreover, counselors strove to find the general relevance (to other IOL users) in a specific problem. Counselors could suggest psychological therapy if a problem was considered severe. Of the eight counselors often consulted for marital problems, the gender divide was 50-50. Counselors held regular counselor meetings (offline) where they discussed particularly complex problems, and how they should respond. At times, such discussions would result in more than one counselor responding to the user, with complementary opinions. Such responses were posted as either complementary responses signed by different counselors or fused together into one response and signed "the IOL counseling team." Counselors had various counseling styles. Some counselors were known to be strict or harsh in their frankness, others were renowned for their boundless empathy regardless of the problem. Some counselors tended to spell out the solutions, while others were more suggestive. Moreover, there was also a stylistic difference with regard to how prominently explicit religious references featured in the various counselors' responses.

The stylistic differences in the counselors' responses can be interpreted as further indications of IOL contributing to an individualization of Islam, in line with the theoretical postulates of previous studies. At times, counselors also instigated a plurality of opinions by consulting other counselors with a specific problem of a user. Moreover, it can be argued that IOL's online counselors are part of what has been classified as "a new class of interpreters of Islam." Once again, the data indicates that female interpreters play an important role, constituting 50 percent of the marital counselors. Moreover, pursuing this argument further, if IOL counselors are new amongst the new interpreters of Islam, then this new class of interpreters consists of not only engineers or computer scientists, but also psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers, addressing the project of the self.

Users' agency

The anonymous nature of online counseling combined with an Islamic ethos provided IOL users with a safe arena in which to pose questions of a more sensitive nature. The average user of IOL was a young female with a college education and had children (Alexa.com 2010a); it is safe to assume in an Egyptian context that these users were either married or divorcees. The fact that so many female users used IOL and asked counselors for help demonstrates female agency. Seeking online counseling can be seen as doing something about the problem. Moreover, a number of users vocalized either satisfaction or discontent with the response they received from the counselor, actively partaking in mixing and matching counseling opinions. Users often posted evaluations of the counselors as comments to counseling exchanges. At times, users demanded that their problem be sent to a new counselor because of dissatisfaction with the first counselor's response. An increasing number of users started requesting that their problems be sent to specific counselors from the outset. Such demands were met by IOL producers. Users also demonstrated agency in their comments on counseling sessions other than their own. It is also interesting to note that some users would return to IOL with a status-report or the continuation of

their problem. These users shared the progress in their the situation after following the counselor's advice. Sometimes this functioned merely as positive feedback to affirm that the counseling advice had worked. Other times, users wrote in chronological counseling sequences, requesting more counseling as events developed.

The term "agency" is used to signify users taking action to resolve their problem. By contacting an IOL online counselor users are taking action and seeking a solution. The act of contacting a counselor can thus be understood as a "coping strategy" (Harter et al. 2005). Moreover, through the process of writing, users externalize their problems. Academic literature about online counseling underlines the importance of "typing as an externalizing mechanism" whereby clients/users "develop some distance from their problems and see themselves and their relationships as distinct from the problem itself" (Murphy and Mitchell 1998). In a similar vein, externalization of problems is held to promote therapeutic change. Put differently, the act of writing down the problem can in itself be considered an important exercise leading to an awareness of the self. Most importantly, the writing process can be understood as a sense-making activity for the user. The user seeks to make sense of her life and her particular problem through the narrative she constructs (Blumer 1991, Harter et al. 2005, Murphy and Mitchell 1998). This is why *mashākil wa ḥulūl* set no maximum limit of the words users could use to express themselves. The counselors and producers of the service did not want to curtail the users' own capacity to make sense of their problem, even if this at times led to very long texts for the counselors to analyze.

Returning to Hoover's concept of a "culture of therapy," IOL users can be understood to be seeking guidance for their project of self-improvement. The data outlined here indicate that IOL users consider it their privilege to mix and match various counseling opinions in seeking an opinion that resonates with their inner convictions. Although IOL's projection of a plurality of opinions may make the task of mixing and matching easy for users, one should be careful in considering this activity an effect of Islam going online. Similar offline tendencies exist both within Islam and in other religions (Abdel-Fadil 2002, McGuire 1997). Moreover, users' active engagement in commenting on counseling exchanges can perhaps be considered as part and parcel of developing a "reflexive consciousness." IOL users employ IOL and thus the Internet to make sense of their everyday problems. This suggests that media usage is well integrated into the users' daily lives, and can be considered an extension of – rather than in addition to – daily life. Whatever impacts IOL may have on each individual user's life, it ought not be seen as something separate from everyday life.

Common problems and answers

IOL users often wrote to online counselors about premarital choices and engagement. A common problem was insecurity regarding the choice of the future partner. Doubt about a fiancé was usually expressed as having encountered negative traits that made the IOL user unsure about whether to marry this person or not. Examples of unattractive traits often listed were: jealousy, stinginess, stubbornness, being controlling, unsympathetic behavior, or being non-religious. Often counselors would respond that they could not make the choice for the user. Instead, counselors suggested ways for the user to find out how big a problem the negative trait was. Indeed counselors often advised spending more time with the fiancé and his or her family in a variety of situations, in order to be able to make an informed choice for or against marriage. Counselors

tended to argue that the purpose of an engagement phase was to explore the compatibility of the couple. In other words, breaking off an engagement was not only considered feasible by the counselors but they actually recommended this if an IOL user expected that the union would be an unhappy one. On the other hand, counselors tended to assist the user with a reality-check if the user appeared to be too dreamy about their future partner. For example, IOL users were often cautioned that they should not expect their partner to look like attractive pop stars. In this sense counselors attempted to employ humor in order to bring IOL users' expectations back down to earth. On the whole, counselors appeared to be concerned with assisting young users in distinguishing between superficial and substantial checklists, when choosing a spouse (Islamonline.net 2004c). A variation of this theme was the discovery of negative traits or incompatibility after marriage, also a frequent problem amongst users. Counselors often critiqued traditional types of marriages, *gawāz al ṣālūnāt*, for not providing the opportunity for the spouses to get know one another before marriage. Discovering incompatibility after marriage was attributed to this social praxis. If the knot was already tied, counselors guided users in how to make the best of their situation. More specifically, counselors often attempted to assist the user in assessing whether or not she was being unreasonable in her judgment of her spouse, and provided tips on how to deal with particular traits she mentioned (Islamonline.net 2004a and b).

As for other problems within a marriage, there were several topics frequently addressed by IOL users. For instance, a number wrote in about problems concerning communication between spouses. A common sub-theme was lack of communication or marital silence. In addition, methods of tackling discontent, anger, nagging and quarreling were frequently asked about. Counselors tended to provide tips on how to stimulate conversations and change communication patterns. They further guided IOL users on how to learn to express their discontent in a constructive manner counseling sessions tended to include tips on timing for expressing discontent (not in anger) but also concrete ways of building up sentences in order to avoid an accusational tone towards the spouse (Islamonline.net 2004a and b).

Another common problem IOL users wrote to counselors about was the relationship with in-laws. The most common problem was what was seen as unwanted meddling that upset the relationship between the spouses. In this context, the counselors balanced between advising the users to express appreciation of their in-laws, and making sure the in-laws did not exert influence in any important marital decisions or disputes. The latter was related to counselors' belief that in-laws were a far from neutral party and tended to escalate rather than calm disputes between spouses. Similar advice was given about involving best friends (usually girlfriends) in marital disputes. On the whole, it was recommended that spouses resolve disputes between themselves; and if a third party were needed, spouses ought to seek professional counseling (Islamonline.net 2004a and b).

IOL users often wrote to the online counselors about problems relating to sexual relations. A number of questions simply displayed an ignorance of foreplay and/or sexual positions, and requested more information. IOL counselors would include some information in their responses, but also refer these users to IOL protocols dealing with sexual relations (via links) or educational books, for more detailed accounts. Other sexual problems included lack of enthusiasm or even fear during sexual relations (particularly the wife). Questions about how to address this type of problem were asked by both females and males. Counselors tended to contextualize their answers. They argued that the combination of inadequate sexual education in the Arab world,

where people had been brought up to think that sex is shameful, and limited socialization with the opposite sex, together form a highly unfortunate background that may foster numerous sexual problems. Counselors also provided guidelines on how IOL users could overcome such problems (Islamonline.net 2004d). Other common themes in users' queries about marital relations included infidelity, the husband wanting to take a second wife, and fertility.

The problems sent to the IOL counselors reflect the everyday concerns of IOL users. Demographic data from Alexa.com (2010 a) further suggest that these users are young, Arab, married women, primarily from Egypt and Saudi Arabia. And, as can be seen from the type of problems sent in, many of these problems are rooted in a specific societal context. This is particularly true of problems relating to compatibility of spouse and sexual relations. The counselors addressed these problems with the local contexts in mind. They advocated a more liberal praxis with regard to getting to know each other before matrimony. Counselors also urged users to use the engagement phase wisely, and break off engagements if the fiancé proved to be incompatible. This is a contemporary take on marriage that challenges traditional praxis. It is founded on the belief that having a long and prosperous marriage is much more difficult if the couple are badly matched. Another area in which IOL counselors challenged traditional praxis was in their critique of in-laws meddling in intramarital disputes.

Similarly, counselors criticize strict gender segregation and the notion that sexual relations are shameful, as many Arab women are brought up to believe. Counselors held that lack of sexual education is a problem that applies to both women and men, although it is perhaps more acute for women. The result of these negativities, as described by the counselors, is the image of a shameful and ignorant woman who is expected to have intercourse with her husband, a man she barely knows, on the wedding night. In this way counselors link their critique of traditional weddings, lack of sexual education and being brought up in shame. Indeed, counselors are not only attempting to assist IOL users with their specific problems, but they are also advocating social reform and modernized practices that ensure viable marriages. This is perhaps further evidence that IOL's counselors can be considered part of the new class of interpreters of Islam.

IOL post-crisis and On Islam

New IOL's popularity and user demography

According to Alexa's site statistics in December 2010 (see Figure 2), the global popularity of the new IOL website was ranked at 10,968 (Alexa.com 2010b). These statistics are based on the number of visitors and page views. Regionally, IOL is ranked as 27 amongst the most popular websites in the Middle East. Breaking down IOL's popularity country by country, IOL is ranked as: 155 in Qatar, 161 in Mauritania, 329 in Yemen, 289 in Sudan and 609 in Egypt (Alexa.com 2010b). It is interesting to note that in May 2010, IOL had been much more popular in Egypt (318). As for geographical distribution of the audience, IOL still has most visitors from Egypt, constituting 19 percent of IOL's total audience (Alexa.com 2010b).

Figure 2

Saudi Arabia follows with 13.6 percent of IOL's visitors. Other significant geographical nodes of users are: Algeria (7.4 percent), Qatar (7 percent), Sudan (6 percent), United States (3.5 percent), Yemen (3.7), Morocco (3.3 percent), and Kuwait (2.9 percent) (Alexa.com 2010b). This

yields a slightly different distribution of users from the Arab world than IOL prior to the crisis (see first section). Compared to the general Internet population, IOL has an over-representation of female users with children. This is also true of users with a college education, and users between the ages of 18 and 24. Nearly all other age groups are under-represented, that is, between the ages 25 and 64. IOL also has an under-representation of users surfing from work. Thus, the average user of IOL is female, aged 18–24, has a college education and is a mother. She uses the web from either home or school (Alexa.com, 2010 b). The new IOL website is rated as slow to load, in contrast to average loading-time on the old IOL website.

Types of online counseling services

IOL Arabic's counseling services are less extensive on its new website. First of all, the synchronous counseling service, Live Dialogue, is no longer on offer. The asynchronous counseling service is still part of the website, albeit with a new name, "social counseling." However, there are only a total of three counseling posts during the five months between August and December 2010. Two of these posts have headings about problems with marital communication in Ramadan. The scarcity of posts renders the counseling service rather inactive and undynamic, compared to what it was prior to the IOL crisis. Moreover, the topics in the two marital counseling posts are dated in that the themes will presumably not be relevant to any IOL users until next Ramadan. An examination of the content of the two posts reveals that while one of the counseling responses deals with the user's problem on a practical level, it does not suggest ways for the user to discuss the problem with her spouse (Awdallah 2010). This is a departure from old IOL's counseling trend, where dialogue with the partner about the problem was considered key. The second response to a user's problem is extremely general. In fact the response is so general that the counselor does not actually address the particular problem of the questioner at all. The response focuses instead on how to reconcile with the hardships of fasting during Ramadan, and in this sense is more about how to complete an act of worship than how to deal with a particular type of marital tension (Alsheemy 2010). The response also contains numerous explicit references to religious sources. This suggests that the new IOL counseling services differ from those offered prior to the crisis.

With regard to non-interactive counseling services, the picture is similar. New IOL's activity is much lower than before the crisis. Clicking *shabāb* (youth), then *mahārāt al-ḥayāt* (life skills), reveals a list of posts spanning over two pages. Some of the posts can be classified as protocols. However, only one protocol deals with marital life. This protocol is about how a wife can deal with her husband's bad moods (Naser 2010). Both the content and writing style is reminiscent of some of the protocols posted on IOL prior to the crisis.

Comparing the three posts on new IOL with tendencies in hundreds of posts prior to the crisis may perhaps not provide a fair assessment of new IOL. However, the fact that there are only three posts on new IOL's social pages to compare is in itself significant. It points to the fact that old IOL's social pages were much more dynamic. Although the marital protocol on new IOL does not seem to represent a clear departure from old IOL's protocols, the interactive counseling indicates that new IOL may be taking a different turn. The frequent religious referencing is perhaps reminiscent of certain old IOL counselors' style. Yet, a counseling response that in no way answers the question of the user, but instead preaches about improving an act of worship, is a complete departure from old IOL's counseling style. These preliminary findings suggest three

possible conclusions. First, the producers of IOL past and present are the ones who shape and determine the content of the webpage. Now that IOL has new producers and counselors, the content of the social pages is different. Second, the previous producers of IOL were more committed to (and perhaps more competent in) creating a dynamic interactive counseling service. Third, new IOL's social pages may be taking a turn towards more explicit emphasis on religious references and acts of worship. This may happen at the expense of users, in that users may end up receiving general religious instruction rather than practical guidance in how to deal with their specific problems.

On Islam's popularity and user demography

Turning now to On Islam, the website created by the previous producers of IOL in Cairo, as a result of the IOL crisis and the IOL Cairo office being shut down. On Islam is run from Cairo and seeks to continue providing the services provided by old IOL. Hence, On Islam's social pages are run by the old social team of IOL, and draw on the same pool of counselors previously used at old IOL.

According to Alexa.com (2010c) On Islam's global traffic rank is 1997,875, which is significantly lower than the new IOL. On the other hand, On Islam had an 80 percent increase in visitors over the last three months of 2010, which is less surprising when taken together with the fact that it is a new website, established in August 2010 (Alexa.com 2010c, see Figure 3). The average user is a female aged 18–24 (or to a lesser degree 25–34), a mother, has a college education and is surfing from home; 35 percent of the website's visitors are from Saudi Arabia and 24.8 percent are from Egypt (Alexa.com, 2010 c). Other locations are not listed.

Figure 3

Types of online counseling services

On Islam has simply relocated the old counseling services from old IOL to their new website On Islam. Both of the interactive services *mashākil wa ḥulūl* and *ḥiwār hayy* are now available on On Islam, with the same names. Moreover, On Islam's counseling services are more vibrant by far than those of the new IOL. At the end of 2010, there were no less than 52 pages displaying as many lists of counseling exchanges between IOL users and counselors about problems during the first years of marriage on On Islam.

Of the non-interactive services, protocols about marital relations still feature heavily. Under the heading *Ḥawwā' wa-Ādam*, a list covering 105 pages worth of headings is displayed. A significant portion of the posts on these pages are protocols dealing with marital counseling. A few of the posts appear to be old protocols from pre-crisis IOL. Still, most of the protocols appear to be new, signaling very high activity since the website was launched in August 2010. The themes of the protocols seem to be largely in line with the topics addressed on old IOL, although there may perhaps be slightly less focus on marital communication.

The content of On Islam's social pages is similar to the social pages of old IOL. This is hardly surprising considering that On Islam is produced the producers are the same. On Islam was launched because the producers could no longer work for IOL. In comparing the content of On Islam's social pages with new IOL's social pages, it becomes evident that On Islam is more

successful in forging a link between the culture of therapy and Islam. On On Islam the two are intertwined. Put differently, On Islam comes across as more dedicated to the project of the self. Once again, this points to the significance of the producers. Who the producers are, and their corresponding opinions, interpretations and agendas, greatly determines the content of the website.

Conclusions

This entry has examined female usage of ICT in Egypt through the lens of Islam Online's counseling services. More specifically, it has provided an overview and preliminary analysis of the roles of producers and users, counseling topics and goals, and common questions and answers. It has been argued that IOL's counseling services prior to March 2010 could be seen as part of a culture of therapy dedicated to the project of the self. Moreover, IOL's counseling services contributed to "a pluralization of religious opinions" through providing complementary opinions on various problems. The plurality of opinions, in turn, facilitated an "individualization of Islam," in the sense that complementary or contrary opinions originate from individual counselors' or producers' interpretations. Also, users were able to pick and choose amongst these opinions. As the data have demonstrated, IOL users actively engaged with counselors' and other users' opinions.

New IOL, now produced from Doha, lost some of its user popularity after the Qatari takeover and the total transformation of the website in August of 2010. Still, new IOL remains a relatively popular website in Egypt and the Arab world. However, IOL, in its new guise, has not managed to provide a dynamic website in the field of counseling. The element of a culture of therapy that is dedicated to the project of the self seems to have subsided after IOL switched location and producers. Moreover, the new IOL's social pages appear to be taking a turn towards more explicit emphasis on religious references and acts of worship. This could be an indication that IOL will develop a more conservative brand of Islam than the old IOL. In contrast, On Islam has succeeded in the area of creating a dynamic and very active counseling service. Moreover, it is more successful in the fusing of a culture of therapy with Islam, which may eventually attract many new users. However, as at the end of 2010, On Islam is lagging far behind IOL in terms of user popularity. This is the current picture, but as the IOL crisis illustrated, these constellations could change swiftly.

The analysis and findings presented in this entry have implications for future studies of Islamic websites. Future research ought to revise previous assumptions about producers, moderators and the new class of interpreters of Islam on two counts. First, producers play a significant role in determining the content and foci of the webpage, and their discursive power ought not to be overlooked. Indeed, when IOL's team of producers was comprised of new individuals after the crisis, the content of the social pages changed. Second, the theory that the new class of interpreters of Islam are male engineers and computer scientists no longer holds. On IOL's social pages the producers were primarily female with backgrounds in journalism, and female psychologists and therapists formed a significant portion of IOL's counselors.

Mona Abdel-Fadil

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