

## Downloading Democracy

### Bloggers in the Gulf

---

**AFRAA AHMED ALBAPTAIN**

*Political Researcher, Kuwait*

POLITICAL ACTIVITY ON THE INTERNET differs from one country to another and from one region to another, where the form and intensity of that activity are tied to the technological culture of its society, the extent of the action and interaction of the political forces in it, and the degree of government control over the Internet.

Political activity appears on the Internet through various web applications which exhibit a unique communicative nature making them tools that can be employed politically. Some people use e-mail to send messages with political content to an infinite number of people without cost, while others use chat rooms for the purpose of engaging in discussion about political events with others and trying to influence them. Many individuals and organizations create personal websites to distribute information serving their political interests. Many also create blogs, which is a recent and widely spreading phenomenon that allows individuals to write and post articles online about anything of their choosing, including political entries.

What interests us here is the appearance of a significant amount of political activity on the Internet in the Arab Gulf states, where that activity varies according to the goals, organizational structure, and the extent of influence on the political arena by contributors – not to mention different mechanisms, means and applications through which political activity is carried out. Online discussion forums are considered one of the most important web applications – especially in the Gulf – that can be employed politically, because they exhibit several distinctive features that help moderators and

users achieve political goals. Discussion forums provide the opportunity for dialogue about political issues and events.

### **Web applications in the Gulf region**

The particularity of the political and security situations in the Arab Gulf states has played an important role in the widespread expansion of online blogs and forums. It is worth noting that the majority of those Gulf blogs and forums take a mostly political approach.

These two applications have become outlets for freedom of opinion and expression regarding what is happening in the region, whether on a local, national, or international level. This is why Gulf societies have made use of the distinctive features of blogs and forums in order to promote political participation and increase dialogue about political issues, not to mention providing the opportunity for freedom of expression that allows any user to write and post any opinion without censorship or fear.

Blogs are a distinct way of expressing one's self, ideas and knowledge through the Internet; moreover, the blog's moderator is considered to be the sole person controlling everything published on its pages. Blogs allow their users to participate in politics in a way that differs from the traditional forms of political participation in the Arab Gulf

---

**Gulf societies have made use of blogs and forums to promote political participation and to increase dialogue about controversial political issues.**

---

states, such that bloggers have come to feel a sense of accomplishment in their ability to change the dynamics of Gulf public opinion and political activity in the region. Bahrain and Kuwait are considered to be the most active Gulf States, where their bloggers organize and advance a number of objections to various legal and political issues, not to

mention post critical analysis of political events happening in the region.

Blogs give their moderators an opportunity to test their analytical, critical and debating skills in political affairs, which in the past was limited to a select group of active politicians and professional journalists in the Gulf states. Now, however, it has become possible for any person to participate in the debate about political issues, express his opinion, debate with others in the designated space and thus participate in focused political discussions. There was a time when Gulf blogs were considered an application relevant only to young people – a young people's revolution made by and for youth – considering that intellectuals still shied away from Internet technology. This conclusion is not completely accurate any more, however, for the phenomenon of blogs has been spreading to different age groups and social classes and is no longer limited to only young people.

What makes blogs different from other online political activity – especially online forums – is that they allow the blogger to write and express his personal opinion without interference from outsiders, since the blogger has complete control over his blog and nobody imposes any conditions, regulations, or copyright laws. Likewise, many bloggers seek to achieve their own “virtual” success, where the blogger can distinguish his blog with a special name or symbol that brands his ideas and visions. In addition, the blogger is conscious of his blog’s success when he checks the number of visitors and commentators on his posts.

As for forums, they are firmly established. The number of participants is increasing, the topics are constantly updated, and they are run by a professional administrative team that works towards their success and expansion, encouraging Internet users to subscribe to the forum, visit it regularly, and continue to post their own contributions. What also distinguishes forums from blogs is that when a forum member raises a topic for discussion, his topic is available for other forum members and visitors to see, which guarantees that at the very least the forum members will read it.

Forums give their members a greater advantage in marketing their subjects better than blogs. Searching for blogs is a long process that puts the Internet user in a predicament as to which of the many blog links to choose. It doesn’t stop at this point, for the matter also requires convincing the reader of the blog’s content as well as its seriousness, so that he will enter and browse it. There is no doubt that this process requires great effort on the part of the bloggers. As for forums, the member has already chosen the forum and at this point is limited to choosing topics within the forum itself. Here is where the role of the writer comes in, to generate interest among the members by choosing interesting and inviting titles to guarantee that the greatest number of members possible read his topic and participate in it.

Despite the notable success of blogs in the Arab Gulf states, online forums are the most well-known and widespread application in the region. This is perhaps due to the fact that forums are considered older than blogs, since Gulf forums are estimated to have been around for 12 years whereas blogs in the region have been around only half this time. Also, by nature, forums include various sections for a wide range of subjects, not only political. In addition, forums provide an intimate and interactive atmosphere for their members, where any member can form friendships very easily and share movies, photos, video clips, programs, games, music, and more with other members.

Thus, a forum member spends a long time browsing the various sections of the forum, not limiting his participation to political sections only. This makes forums a more effective application at attracting members who then interact through political as well as non-political material provided by the forum. The blogger, on the other hand,

provides only his personal opinions and his own political and non-political analyses. He rarely provides materials for visitors; all he usually provides is a list of website and blog links – most of which are his personal preferences – that the visitor can use. This makes visiting the blog like a personal visit to the blogger himself, whereas par-

---

**Online forums have become the web application most used by political forces in the Arab Gulf region to achieve their political goals.**

---

ticipating in forums is closer to group work, where all members exchange information and materials and discuss all subjects, not to mention have the possibility to get to know each other.

Online forums are collaborative efforts involving the participation of all members; indeed, the number of members and the intensity of their participation are considered among the most important criteria for judging the success of the forum. The greater the number of members, the amount of participation and interaction, the number of subjects raised for discussion, the electronic materials that can be exchanged, and so on, the greater the degree of the forum's success. A given forum cannot be judged to be successful unless it has a large number of members and it includes a large amount of participation, interaction, materials, and services. On the other hand, a blogger rarely writes about a wide variety of issues, but rather specializes in a single one: politics, society, art, literature, etc. The blog is based on the personal work of the blogger, and the success of the blog is conditional on the content he offers, the updating of subjects, and his ability to win over the visitor with his style and ability to analyze events.

### **The political use of online forums in the Arab Gulf states**

Political forces began using various web applications intensively because these applications offered services completely different from what other forms of media could provide. Indeed, online forums have become the web application most used by political forces in the Arab Gulf region to achieve their political goals, for these forces make use of the distinct features of forums in various ways, each according to its ambitions and specific agenda.

Online forums facilitate the response time to current events, as well as the mobilization of the masses and gathering opinions with record speed. There is no longer need for physical human gathering – causing commotion, riots, and perhaps even destruction and killing. What is required is writing articles in the forums and making them available to as many people as possible in order to communicate the target message. Thus, the notion of demonstration and protest has changed in the era of online

forums and with the huge number of people using them and trying to benefit from the advantages provided by them. Forums also offer a framework and mechanism that guarantees a lack of confrontation with governments and security forces.

In addition, online forums facilitate the coordination of large groups of people regarding critique and expression, either to protest against a specific issue, criticize certain policies, or express dissatisfaction of existing circumstances at a local, national, or international level. This coordinating capability provided by online forums offers a great opportunity for political and social mobilization. The incident of the Danish drawings satirizing the Prophet Muhammad is an important example of the ability of online forums to coordinate, gather, and mobilize, as well as to direct public opinion in certain ways, especially concerning the boycotting of Danish products – for most of the Arab online forums contained a list of Danish products.

Online forums also play an important role in weakening government control over information, for it has become within the ability of forum moderators and users to transmit and post any information without significant restrictions. This represents great freedom, for forum users can send any message to an unlimited number of other users without censorship or great cost. For this reason, opposition forces move freely and easily on the Internet and intensify their activity – a frequent visitor of online political forums clearly notices the great number of articles and responses, which include condemnations or protests against political systems. Online communities usually use a strategy of channeling their opposition opinions through multiple online forums, which allows a greater chance of escaping government censorship of the content.

Despite the abovementioned possibilities that online forums offer, some groups began using them in a negative way. Online forums have become a principal framework and mechanism that extremist terrorist groups depend on, where these groups take advantage of the forums' communicative and uncensored nature in order to connect and communicate with their followers all over the world. Moreover, they take advantage of the forums to promote their extremist ideologies, as well as to recruit members.

The various methods used by terrorists in forums have grown noticeably, both through development in their use of forums and through the variety of audio and visual materials posted there. Terrorist organizations and groups focus on two main strategies concerning online forums: the first is the establishment of their own online

---

**Online forums play an important role in weakening government control over information with the ability of forum moderators and users to transmit and post any information without significant restrictions.**

---

forums in order to write and post their own statements and fatwas, promote their ideas, and exchange dialogues among the leaders of these groups and other online debaters. These forums are open to everybody and through them there is commentary on political events, posting of analyses, showing documentaries about the group, and adding anthems and songs that encourage what the groups call “jihad,” as well as more provocative messages. What draws our attention is that the terrorists are es-

---

**A writer who calls himself Al-Salim has published a document on the *al-farooq* website (a code name that al-Qaeda is known by in Saudi Arabia) under the title “Al-Qaeda: the Thirty-Nine Principles of Jihad.”**

---

establishing a huge number of online forums which differ in degree of seriousness and strictness, seeking to distract the efforts of security apparatuses. Moreover, they have some alternative forums in case of the destruction, damage, or closing of a forum.

The second strategy used by these groups is to join in already existing online forums. It is worth noting that these groups quickly take to the religious sections of these

forums, with the goal of spreading their ideas, fatwas, and extreme approaches by entering into ideological conflicts with the rest of the forum members. They also take advantage of already existing online forums to distribute their statements and create many links to large folders loaded with their media materials that any member can watch and download. Besides that, they raise funds by advertising fake websites that delude Internet users into thinking that they are charity sites raising donations to give to the poor and people in need all over the world.

Terrorist groups work on the Internet under the name of “online jihad.” A writer who calls himself Al-Salim has published a document on the *al-farooq* website (a code name that al-Qaeda is known by in Saudi Arabia) under the title “Al-Qaeda: the Thirty-Nine Principles of Jihad.” Principle thirty-four glorifies “online jihad” for being a “holy duty,” and emphasizes that all Believers are called to join jihad by way of participating in online forums to defend Islam. It also explains to all Muslims that it is their duty to participate in jihad. Al-Salim adds that the Internet provides the opportunity for immediate response to false allegations and reaches millions of people in seconds. He also encourages those who are skilled Internet users to support jihad by infiltrating and destroying “enemy” websites (meaning American and Israeli) and “immoral” websites (pornography and gambling).<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the jihadi instructional function these forums serve, they also offer

---

1 Abdel Bari Atwan, *Al-Qaeda: al-tandhim al-sirri* (Beirut: dar al-saqi, 2007): 148.

information about how to effectively pursue jihad, starting with teaching their members how to make bombs, mix chemical weapons, load missiles and carry them, and other tactics concerning acts of violence. The forums even provide them with targets to focus on.<sup>2</sup> What is noticeable is that a lot of online forum members transmit this information without full realization of the danger and seriousness of its content, especially since the administration of many of these forums dodges responsibility for all online content and instead places this burden solely on the articles' writers. An important example of this is the large scale reception of *Al-Batar* magazine – an online military magazine issued by al-Qaeda specializing in military and field information and recruitment – which is being published and transmitted through extremist and non-extremist online forums alike.

There is no doubt that this serious matter necessitates conscious supervision on the part of the forum administration and proofreading the material that members upload and create in the forum, especially given the difficulty of full governmental control over the work of all forums due, in part, to the great ease of bypassing government mechanisms to block, filter, and censor websites.

### **Types of Gulf online forums**

Online forums vary regarding the nature of their specialization, goals, and performance. On the one hand, there is the comprehensive forum that consists of many sections covering different fields, such as political discussions, ideological and dogmatic dialogues, literature, technology, sports, and more. On the other hand, there is the specialized forum.

Forums in the Arab Gulf region have witnessed rapid growth and cover diverse areas of interest: political, Islamic, ideological, sports, feminist, economic, literary, etc. What Gulf online forums are most distinguished for is their large number of members and high level of participation in a variety of subjects. Among these forums, political forums are considered to be the most intense in terms of the number of members and participation, as well as the number of subjects covered.

There are a number of large political forums that have asserted themselves on the Internet, reaching not less than 30,000 registered members. Some political forums have more than 70,000 articles, and in some forums the number of responses to political postings is close to one million. Table 1 shows the most important political Gulf forums the amount of participation in the political section, as well as their number of members.

---

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Next Attack: The Failure of the War on Terror and a Strategy for Getting in Right* (New York: Henry Owl Books, 2006): 76.

**Table 1: Most Important Online Political Gulf Forums**

<b>Forum Name Website Country</b>	<b>Political Section Postings/ Responses</b>	<b>Forum Postings/ Responses</b>	<b>Forum Members</b>	<b>Number of forum administration</b>
<b>Saudi Cool</b> s3odicool.com/vb Saudi Arabia	729/ 14,980	28,880/ 403,444	33,700	4
<b>Alquma</b> www.alquma.net/vb Saudi Arabia	79,468/ 930,730	181,472/ 2,517,159	32,665	10
<b>Bahrain for you</b> www.bahrain4u.com Bahrain	71,290/ 582,619	181,923/ 1,482,822	42,992	27
<b>Bahrain future</b> www.bhfuture.org/vb Bahrain	1,782/ 7,169	10,984/ 60,849	4,971	7
<b>alommah</b> www.alommah.org/forum Kuwait	4,212/ 45,135	7,558/ 78,820	4,234	4
<b>kuwaite</b> www.kuwaite.com/vb Kuwait	1,746/ 28,679	72,697/ 1,315,835	143,759	8
<b>Oman lover</b> www.omanlover.org Oman	1,151/ 13,411	64,869/ 1,681,755	46,839	21
<b>Al-qatarya</b> www.al-qatarya.com Qatar	1,077/ 10,840	52,851/ 823,351	32,976	19
<b>Watan</b> www.wa6an.net/vb UAE	1,480/ 10,209	4,810/ 33,443	1,303	11

Source: The table was made by the author with the help of the available statistics provided by the forums mentioned in the table.

These forums have taken part in establishing an environment of debate and great freedom in addressing subjects which might be hard to broach directly, subjects that have long been considered taboo, and that perhaps still are considered taboo in face to face dialogue. This conclusion can be reached easily by reading these forums and the subjects under discussion by the forum members. The subjects under discussion, the views about those subjects, and the illustrations contained in the forums all indicate the great contribution of these forums in promoting, or at least revealing, the religious, ideological, and political diversity within Gulf societies.

For example, a member of *eltwhed* forum ([www.eltwhed.com/vb](http://www.eltwhed.com/vb)) who calls himself *al-hayat helwa* (“life is beautiful”) submitted a post titled: “I am a liberal ... and I say this without boasting?”<sup>3</sup> He wrote:

After making it clear in more than one post, after saying it with all calmness, and after screaming as loud as possible that liberalism is not a religion, doctrine, or creed, but rather an ideology that is in harmony with all creeds, religions and doctrines – after all that, I say to you that you and I are liberals.

Yes, I like conservative liberalism. Fashion attracts me. I watch satellite channels. I go to the movie theater when I am out. I enjoy dancing. I am passionate about traveling. Daring ideas and theses grab me and I learn and benefit from them and look for the truth in them. I don't deny that apple-flavored beer (*al-musi* or *al-fayruza*) makes me feel intoxicated. I also believe that it is not a shame or forbidden for a woman to drive a car. I also strongly believe that revealing a woman's face is not a temptation nor is her voice a temptation, and that seeing a good omen in the Prophet's female companions and those who followed them and those following those who followed them ... I would also like to clarify that I enjoy listening to Fairuz and her chants when she sings (*A'tini al-nay wa ghanni*) (*Uhibb min al-asma'*) (*Sa'aluni al-nas*). I say with all conviction that the Western experience amazes me regarding the organization, discipline, and margin of freedom the regimes give to the individual, as well as their working for a better life for mankind. I also do not deny that the right of Muslim women to work is indisputable and I don't find in this any kind of shame or rebellion against religion or something sacred. Before I finish this post and go to the barber to shave the scattered hairs of my beard, I would like to whisper to you that I believe dying one's hair is a personal freedom. I have many reservations about our historical heritage and transmitted culture.

I wonder if everything I have mentioned will remove my cloak of Islam.

This post provoked strong responses from the opposition, and one of these responses, Islamic in nature, is that of member called Brahim, who has a picture of Bin Ladin as his profile icon in the forum:

Life is beautiful indeed! I am Muslim and I say this without boasting!!

---

3 See: <http://eltwhed.com/vb/showthread.php?p=82670>

I am passionate about the Quranic verses. I watch lectures and lessons on TV. I enjoy praying. I am crazily passionate about jihad. Daring ideas and theses grab me and I learn and benefit from them and look for the truth. I drink apple and banana flavored juice, and things that are halal make me feel an intoxication that I have never found anywhere else. I like to hear the Quran. I say with all conviction that the experience of the Prophet and his Companions amazes me regarding the organization, discipline, and margin of freedom the regimes give to the individual, as well as their working for a better life for mankind.

This is the Muslim.

Another member, called Rafidite fighter, posts:

I myself hate all these foreign ideas, and the reason for this is that our identity and religion is Islam. Islam is a way of life that we are proud of in front of infidels, and we try to reduce the number of infidels with it. So why would we bring to the Islamic nation propaganda or foreign Western ideology that opposes the forgiving Islamic religion?

### **Political online forums and democracy in the Arab Gulf states**

The spread of online forums in the Gulf has led to a change in the form of political participation in the region. It has become possible for any person to enter and participate in any forum, as well as to engage in dialogue, debate, and share political opinions with other users, which in the end has multiplied political activity.

Online forums have played a clear role in encouraging political participation and freedom of expression in the Gulf region. Many factors have helped this, the most important of which is the distinctive nature of the online forums, as indicated earlier. In addition to this, there is the abundance and continuing spread of online forum programs that are Arabic enabled, which has greatly helped. The idea of online forums is based on dialogue, discussion and posting articles. If not for the existence of Arabic versions for online forum programs, then these online forums would be limited to the select group in the Gulf societies that can speak English.

Likewise, the practice of concealing the identity of forum members by using screen names has played a significant role in attracting a large number of individuals to participate. There is no doubt that the use of pseudonyms gives each participant in these forums a greater willingness to engage in dialogue with the rest of the members without reservation. It has also given them a greater willingness to challenge prevailing customs and traditions in Gulf societies.

It is also worth mentioning that the diversity of these political forums has played an additional role in expanding the amount of alternatives available to the Gulf citizen. There is no doubt that the amount of alternatives plays an important role in enhancing the ability of the citizen to think about these alternatives and evaluate them, allowing him to avoid the narrow-minded thinking of believing there is only one way.

Despite all of these positive aspects, there are still obstacles to the role online forums play in the process of democratic change in the Arab Gulf states. Although forums play an important role in promoting political awareness, they have not yet developed to an extent that pushes the forum member to positive political and social action, which means his participation is limited to the virtual world. Thus, it is necessary to distinguish between exercising freedom and participation as a virtual behavior and activity, on the one hand, and exercising freedom and participation as a non-virtual physical behavior, on the other hand, without disparaging the positive long-term effects of the former form of political participation.

---

**Although forums play an important role in promoting political awareness, they have not yet developed to an extent that pushes the forum member to positive political and social action, which means his participation is limited to the virtual world.**

---

There is also an important physical obstacle embodied in the decreased percentage of Internet users in the Gulf states, where the influence of online political forums remains limited to those who excel at using computers and the Internet and online forums, specifically. Despite the rapid spread of the Internet in the Gulf compared with a lot of other Arab countries, the percentage of Internet users has not yet reached the required levels for the phenomenon of online forums to achieve the effect of large-scale democratic change. Table 2 illustrates the number and percentage of Internet users in the Arab Gulf states.

The statistical data in Table 2 indicates that less than one fourth of the population of the Arab Gulf states (about 22.2 percent) accesses the Internet. It is a tiny number compared to the financial means available to the Gulf countries which, according to the latest analysis, decreases the ability of online forums to spread the culture of democracy in the region.

The third obstacle is related to the control imposed by Gulf governments over online forums, especially the political ones. Namely, Gulf governments – like many political systems in the third world – refuse to relinquish their control over information and news resources, which has pushed the Gulf states – in an uneven way – to ration, control, and block the available content on the Internet, especially the applica-

The third obstacle is related to the control imposed by Gulf governments over online forums, especially the political ones. Namely, Gulf governments – like many political systems in the third world – refuse to relinquish their control over information and news resources, which has pushed the Gulf states – in an uneven way – to ration, control, and block the available content on the Internet, especially the applica-

---

**Despite the rapid spread of the Internet in the Gulf, the percentage of Internet users has not yet reached the required levels for the phenomenon of online forums to achieve the effect of large-scale democratic change.**

---

tions that are used politically, such as online forums. There is no doubt that the continuation of these restrictions limits the ability of these forums to make changes, encourage opening of the society, and strengthen democracy in the region. Likewise, the methods of the Gulf states concerning the banning and blocking of online political forums may alienate Internet users from frequently visiting those forums and push them to look for

other means of expressing their ideas and opinions.

The fourth obstacle is related to the prevalence of superficial posts in many forums, in addition to the fact that in many cases they are full of verbal violence, psychological terrorism, and the rejection of the “other.” In the end, this hinders the supposed role of online forums to enhance democracy in the Gulf states, which in turn stands in the way of attracting intellectual groups to the online political forums and enriching them with more profound discussions. This lowers the level of discourse and increases the difficulty of moving the debate to the level of organized action, especially when the administrators of these forums stoop to such lows.

**Table 2:**  
**Number and Percentage of Internet Users in the Arab Gulf States, 2000-2007**

	UAE	BAHRAIN	SAUDI ARABIA	OMAN	QATAR	KUWAIT
<b>2007 Population</b>	3,981,978	738,874	24,069,943	2,452,234	824,355	2,730,603
<b>Internet users in 2000</b>	735,000	40,000	200,000	90,000	30,000	150,000
<b>Internet users in 2007</b>	1,708,500	157,300	4,700,000	319,200	289,900	816,700
<b>Percentage of population that uses Internet</b>	42.9%	21.2%	19.5%	13.0%	35.1%	29.9%
<b>Increase in Internet usage from 2000-2007</b>	132.4%	293.3%	2,250%	254.7%	866.3%	444.5%

Source: The table was made by the author with the help of available statistics on [www.Internetworldstats.com](http://www.Internetworldstats.com).

### Conclusion

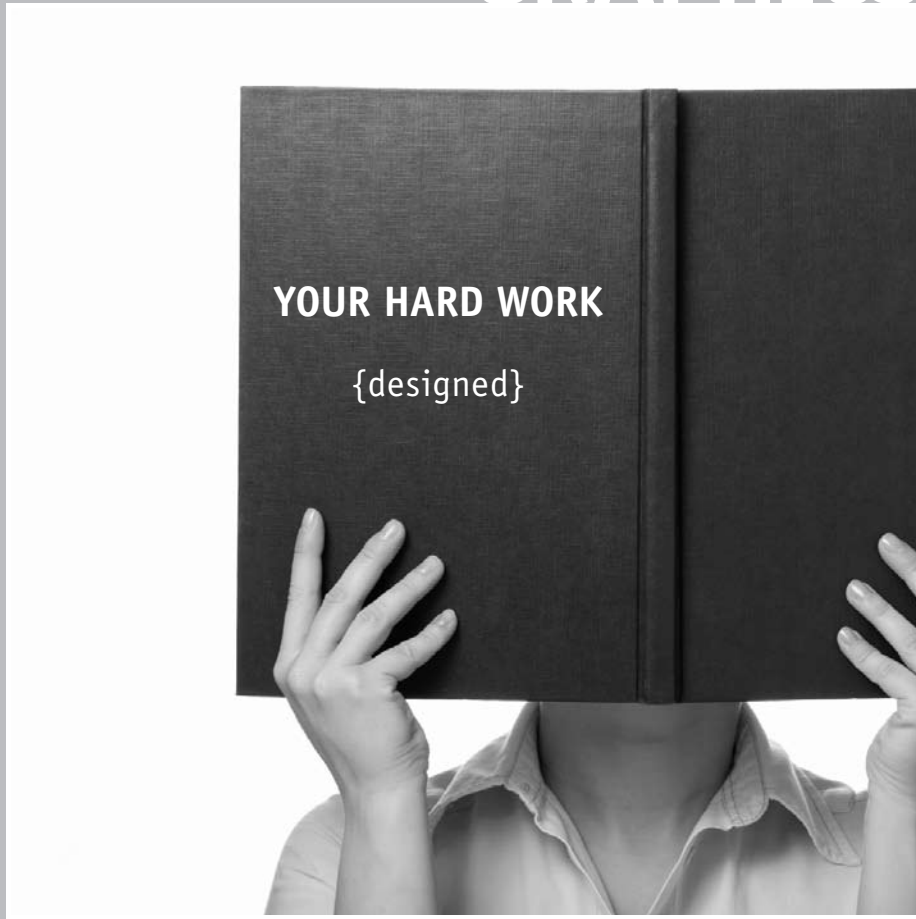
It is possible to say that online forums in the Gulf states have two faces: the first is the positive face of political engagement, for Gulf people have taken advantage of them as a means of political action, by writing and posting the opinions and ideas related to political issues, as well as for coordinating among members to exercise political protest, even in its virtual context. The other face is the negative one that serves extremist ideas, since terrorist groups have taken advantage of forums to market their ideologies, as well as to recruit new members and attract sympathizers. In addition, they have changed it into a tool to raise money.

What may also be observed in online political forums is the number of participants and the intensity of participation. Forums are very popular among Gulf people, for they use them as a space to express their opinions on various pressing issues, as well as to debate with other forum members. It is regrettable that the level of culture and dialogue in these forums is often petty, and they contain ideological disagreements which place the members in continuous conflict, dismissing each other's ideas. These forums are dominated by a harmful negative environment. Many members rebel against anything and everything and have a strong desire to attack all moderate tendencies on the pretext of a revolutionary spirit and of fighting the restrictions which limit their movements and ideas. This petty style of dialogue is considered one of the most important obstacles that prevents the role of online forums in enhancing and strengthening democracy.

It is possible to say that despite the generally positive phenomenon of online political forums in the Arab Gulf societies, their success in achieving significant progress in spreading democracy remains contingent on dealing with these obstacles. However, one should not disregard the important capacity of online forums to encourage freedom of opinion and expression, since exchanging political ideas and discussions in public is not easy in the Gulf's political and cultural climate.

The ability of online political forums to create political change in the Gulf and strengthen democracy in these countries remains unclear. It is difficult to predict the future path of these forums given the novelty of the experience for Gulf societies and the fact that online political forums alone are unable to start a revolution or affect the political change in the Arab Gulf region to achieve the values of freedom and democracy. ■

# FREERAYN GRAPHICS



202.668.0608

[www.freerayngraphics.com](http://www.freerayngraphics.com)

books  
reports

journals  
newsletters

copy editing  
proof reading