Chapter 1.10
The Arab World, Culture and Information Technology

Mohamed El Louadi
University of Tunis, Tunisia

INTRODUCTION

In 801, Harun Rashid offered Charlemagne a water clock, the like of which was inexistent in all of Europe at that time; the King's court thought that a little devil was hidden inside the clock. In the 1930s, King Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia had to convince his people that the radio was not the making of the devil and that it could in fact be used to broadcast and spread the Quran. In 2003, the Arab region is found to be still lagging in modern technologies adoption (UNDP, 2003). Thus, in a little more than 11 centuries, the Arabs were transformed from leaders to adopters, then to late adopters as far as technologies are concerned.

The Arab world is taken to mean the 22 members of the Arab League, accounting for more than 300 million people with an economy of 700 billion dollars. Although most Arabs practice Islam, they represent less than one third of all Muslims. The Arab world is often thought of as economically prosperous due to its oil resources; yet its total GDP is lower than that of Spain (UNDP, 2003).

Arab countries share language and culture but differ in size, geography, demographics, government type, etc. In terms of spending in and use of IT, statistics portray the Arab world as far from being up-to-date (UNDP, 2003).

This article raises the question of whether existing research models are appropriate to explain this delay. If certain characteristics proper to the Arab culture play an important role in explaining the delay in IT adoption, then we anticipate the answer to be that no existing model is able to adequately study the IT adoption phenomena in the Arab world.

THE ARAB WORLD AND IT

It is a recognized fact that the Arab world lags behind in terms of IT (Aberdeen, 2001; UNDP, 2003). (See Figure 1.) In 2001, Ajeeb reported that the number of Arab Web sites reached 1.24% of the Arab population (Ajeeb, 2001), it predicted that the number of Internet users would equal 5 million by 2001, and reiterated DITnet's March

Figure 1. The MENA region is under-performing in terms of IT spending even when compared with other developing regions (Source: Aberdeen, 2001)
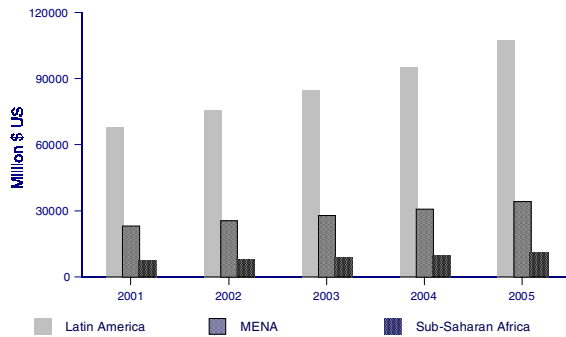
2000 prediction that Internet users would number ten to twelve million by the end of 2002. In fact, there were a reported 8.2 million users by the end of 2002.

To date, no Arab country has been able to develop its electronic commerce capabilities to the extent seen in the West.

REASONS FOR THE LAG

The lag can partly be explained by the delay with which technologies have traditionally reached Arab countries[1]. Davison et al. (2000) suggested several other reasons: a perceived incompatibility between local cultures and imported technologies, a preference for autonomy and independence with respect to technology, and a lack of economic resources to acquire technology.

The first two of are plausible as is it often the case that IT stumbling blocks occur not because of technical reasons but rather because of human and social obstructions. The third reason can be excluded for the six Gulf countries which claim per capita revenues of nearly five times the average of the rest of the Arab countries. The rate of adoption of the Internet for these countries is up to fifteen times that of the rest of the Arab world.

Other factors also explain the low rate of Internet penetration in Arab nations as compared to the rest of the world. In these nations, the rate of penetration is essentially measured based on only one part of society: men.

The Arab Woman

Two thirds of the 65 million illiterate Arabs are women. Women make up only 4% of all Arab Internet users while in Europe women make up 42% on average[2]. The UNDP states that the condition of women is one of the three main factors explaining the current state of economic development in the Arab world.

In that more than 40% of women in Arab countries are denied participation to the technological revolution, Arab nations are failing to integrate a considerable part of their human resources in their future economies.

Information and IT

When Arab countries invest in IT, they do so mainly in hardware. While this may be a characteristic of developing countries, it may also be viewed as Arabs' distrust of anything immaterial. Software on the other hand is associated with innovation, creativity, and the free flow of information and knowledge, qualities that the Arabs have been found lacking (UNDP, 2003). Thus, not only Arabs are increasing their dependence to the West being consumers of hardware, they seem to be passive users of the software and intelligence produced elsewhere.

This issue leads to the tight relationship between information (and not IT, let alone hardware) and democracy and freedom. If Arab countries are truly "information shy" (Henry, 1998), then what information is to be shared and circulated by IT? Therefore, the Arab does not see what use he could make of IT and would therefore not consider it an instrument of development.

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