The Online Public Sphere in the Arab World: The War in Iraq on the Al Arabiya Website

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Abstract
Many aspects make online media attractive to news readers, including low cost, ease and speed of access, and the opportunity for readers to ask questions, provide feedback, participate in discussions, and interact with other readers in ways not previously possible. Given that traditional media in the Arab world generally are subject to strict government control, the participatory features that accompany the new online media should make these sources even more attractive to users. However, comments posted by readers of online media in the Arab world are still subject to some monitoring and content regulation. This study explores the potential of online media in the Arab world to foster civic engagement. The online source selected for study is www.alarabiya.net, the official website for the popular TV station Al Arabiya in Dubai. Ethnographic observation and analysis of the content of articles published during the Iraq War on Al Arabiya’s site and the responses they received show that Arabs not only challenged the views of the Al Arabiya site about the war, but they also offered their own versions of the truth.

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Introduction
With the popularity of the Internet and the Web growing daily, more and more people are turning to online media for news, information, and entertainment. Unlike traditional media, most online media sources offer their content via the Internet free of charge, which makes obtaining news online less costly than obtaining it from offline sources such as newspapers. Obtaining news from online sources is also faster, easier, and more convenient than from traditional media. Moreover, when people get their news from online sources, they often can also ask questions, offer comments, state their opinions, engage in political debates, or communicate with other readers, which are all features that make online media appealing to readers.

Governments in many Arab countries exercise some control over television, radio, and the press. As a consequence, views from traditional media sources in
the Arab world may not be entirely balanced, because Arab governments tend to steer material emanating from such sources toward their agendas. However, online media cannot be completely controlled by Arab governments. The readers’ ability to contribute to content and interact with other readers and with published content reduces the effects of governmental control. The Internet not only allows people to discuss and debate issues of utmost importance to them, it also makes them authors of media content rather than a passive audience. Through online media, Arabs can share their ideas, thoughts, and feelings with a larger audience and can communicate their perspectives about events in their countries in ways that could enhance their experience as citizens.

This article reports on two ethnographic studies, both of which explored the potential of the Al Arabiya website to foster a public sphere for Arabs. The site is the official website of the popular TV station Al Arabiya, which is based in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates.1 This website was selected because it has become extraordinarily popular among Arabs, with thousands of people visiting and contributing to the site everyday.2 The first study observed and analyzed 10% of the total site content devoted to the 2003 war in Iraq. Two hundred and seventy two (272) articles posted to the site by Al Arabiya staff, along with readers’ comments on those articles, were selected from a pool of 2,720 available articles. The second study observed and analyzed 10% of the total site content of the Final Page on the Al Arabiya site. The Final Page consists of articles that revolve around light issues and funny or strange stories, particularly those that take place in the Arab world. Two hundred and twenty-seven (227) articles posted to the site by Al Arabiya staff, along with readers’ comments on those articles, were selected from a pool of 2,270 available articles. The selection process involved generating random numbers using a program developed by the author for this purpose. In both studies, observational field notes were taken for each article and the responses to it.

The Observed Site

The observed site, Al Arabiya, is among the most admired online media sites in the Arab world. Launched on February 22, 2004, it was crowned the best website of an Arabic news channel at the fourth Arab media festival in Beirut (Ameinfo, 2006). The site features articles on politics, business, sports, and variety. The site servers are placed in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, and material published in the site is updated by the minute. The site utilizes the latest in Web technology and makes uses of extensive multimedia features. The commentary service, which allows readers to comment on the articles published, is one such feature that is described in more detail below. Other features include interactive polls, readers’ choice of the week, and readers’ choice of the month, as well as links to the articles most read, emailed, and saved by readers. The Al Arabiya site, similar to other online media sources (see Eveland, Marton, & Seo, 2004), puts the most important story at the top of the front page. The ranking of other stories on the front page, however, is not dependent on their importance but rather on their up-to-dateness.
Readers’ comments on articles do not appear on the Al Arabiya site the instant they are posted. They are first studied by Al Arabiya staff and then released for public viewing. Therefore, it is likely that some readers’ comments are never published on the site, which was observed as something many readers complained about. It is not clear how often this content regulation occurs on the site or what is the basis for it. However, despite this form of monitoring and content regulation, the number of readers commenting on articles, particularly on the Final Page of the site, suggests that readers greatly appreciate the site. It is obvious from the level of attention that the site receives that readers find the stories published, particularly those in the Final Page, interesting, stirring, and perhaps valuable. Al Arabiya puts links to, and a sneak preview of, the articles on the Final Page on its main page, which is probably why the Final Page is so popular. Figures collected from the second study reported in this article indicate that more people reply to the articles on the Final Page than they do on the political page. Sex, cultural attitudes, religion, news about crimes, and news about female celebrities, e.g., actresses and music stars, are some of the themes that dominate the Final Page, as the results of the second study indicate.

The Al Arabiya television station was set up to compete with Al-Jazeera TV (Feuilherade, 2003), which is based in Qatar and was founded in 1996. Al Arabiya was launched on March 3, 2003 as an all-news channel. The station has a large number of reporters in many Arab and non-Arab countries who cover stories for an Arabic-speaking audience with interests in politics, business, current affairs, finance, sports, science, and lifestyle, and produce in-depth documentaries, in-depth talk-show programs, and social and educational programs (Al Arabiya, 2006). A Saudi, Abdul Rahman Al Rashid, manages the station and the owners of the channel are Saudis as well (Feuilherade, 2003). In the face of this, one might suspect that the channel favors Saudi Arabia. It is also possible that some of the material broadcast from the station is geared toward the Saudi government’s agendas. On the other hand, the Al Arabiya channel is known not only for its ability to offer instantaneous reporting and coverage of major events, but also for setting new standards in the application of new technology to the world of television. In just one year, Al Arabiya had become very popular throughout the Arab world and well known for delivering quality reporting of news to its viewers.

The Online Public Sphere in the Literature

The literature includes many definitions of the public sphere. One of the most often-cited definitions comes from Jürgen Habermas, one of the leading experts on this topic. Habermas (1974, cited in Elvin, 2002) defines the public sphere as: “An entity that comes into being when private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy” (p. 49).

Habermas (1989) later elaborated on his definition of the public sphere: “A domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed.
Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. … citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion” (p. 231). From this definition, it appears that public opinion formation and inclusion of people from various backgrounds are essential ingredients in the public sphere model envisioned by Habermas. Other elements of Habermas’ conception of the public sphere, such as diversity of opinion and rational critical debating, will be touched on later.

A brief look at the literature reveals many accounts of the online public sphere, most of them based on Habermas’ conception (e.g., Lowrey & Anderson, 2005; Ng & Detenber, 2005; Paulussen, 2004; Poor, 2005). Cammaerts and Audenhove (2003) studied four online environments in order to answer questions related to the usage of the Internet among transnational social movements from the perspectives of organization, mediation of participation, and public opinion formation. They found that the Internet environments they studied foster public spaces that facilitate online civic engagement despite a number of existing constraints. The constraints were related to access, moderation of interactions, and male dominance. Ulrich (2004) discussed the various perspectives surrounding the argument that the Internet is a public sphere in an attempt to understand the impact of the Internet on democracy. Although he concluded that the Internet is capable of promoting democratic values, he too recognized some constraints on the Internet’s ability. Among the values the Internet is capable of delivering, he listed the expression of opinion and the generation of dialogue. According to Ulrich, although most dialogue on the Internet is not synchronous like face-to-face dialogue, it is not subjected to the editorial bottlenecks that typically characterize print media. Furthermore, Internet dialogue, in comparison with face-to-face dialogue, provides opportunities for greater thought and comprehensive reflection on the matters discussed.

Dahlberg (2001) also evaluated the online public sphere in light of Habermas’ model. He derived a set of normative conditions of the public sphere from Habermas’ theory of democratic communication. The normative conditions are autonomy from state and economic power, exchange and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role-taking, sincerity, and discursive inclusion and equality. Dahlberg then compared people’s general practices online with these conditions. Dahlberg concluded that the public sphere that is constituted whenever people enter into political discussions online does not meet these conditions because:

- First, the increasing commodification of cyberspace threatens the autonomy of public interaction online.
- Second, reflexivity is often a very minimal part of cyber-deliberations.
- Third, many online fora lack respectful listening to others and minimal commitment to working out differences.
- Fourth, there is difficulty verifying identity claims and information put forward.
- Fifth, extensive exclusions from online fora result from social inequalities.
- Finally, discourse tends to be quantitatively and qualitatively dominated by certain individuals and groups. (2001, n.p.)
However, for Dahlberg, even though these factors restrict the expansion of the online public sphere, the Internet does nevertheless foster a public sphere because it facilitates rational-critical debating and public opinion formation.

Whereas the above research was concerned with whether the online public sphere meets the criteria of Habermas’ model, Poor (2005) provided his own criteria for an online public sphere, based on Habermas’ model. According to Poor, Habermas’ model rests on three elements: (1) The public sphere is created through mediated discussions (2) among people who had been previously excluded, and (3) the ideas that are present in these discussions are considered on the basis of their merit. Drawing on that conceptualization, Poor (2005) then presented his own criteria for the online public sphere:

1. Public spheres are spaces of discourse, often mediated.
2. Public spheres often allow for new, previously excluded, discussants.
3. Issues discussed are often political in nature.
4. Ideas are judged by their merit, not by the standing of the speaker. (p. 4)

Poor applied his criteria to the online public sphere on the Slashdot website. He concluded that an online public sphere would not be radically different from a face-to-face public sphere just because it is online. It is a public sphere if it meets the criteria outlined above.

In applying the public sphere model to the Internet, Poor (2005) was alert to the notion of multiple spheres, which is also relevant here. Poor doubted that a single online public sphere could accommodate millions of Internet users and still function properly, because deliberation on that scale would be difficult. In his view, it makes sense to have multiple spheres. Multiple spheres are publics within a larger public consisting of people with diverse characteristics coming together for various reasons to form a public (Poor, 2005).

Al-Saggaf and Weckert (2005) concur with the notion of multiple spheres. In a study conducted in 2004, Al-Saggaf found that Al-Saha Al-Siyasia (a Saudi political online community) fostered an online public sphere, although that sphere did not meet all the requirements of Habermas’ model of the public sphere. The existence of that online sphere suggests that there must be other spheres elsewhere online. The online public sphere on Al-Saha Al-Siyasia was mainly for Saudis, who used the community to discuss their own politics and internal public affairs. Members of that community were observed on a number of occasions organizing around a political matter that could affect them and taking a common stand about it. In some situations, they also rationally criticized a crucial political decision, reached a consensus regarding it, and communicated their opposing views about it to government officials, in a few cases triggering action (Al-Saggaf, 2004).

Dahlberg (2001) was not very optimistic about the existence of public spheres in online communities. He noted that what takes place in online communities, which he called homogeneous “communities of interest,” does not take the form of rational-critical debate such as is required to extend the public sphere. According to
Dahlberg, this is because people tend to join discussions online with others with similar interests, values, and concerns, and they do so to offer each other emotional support, companionship, and advice, and to reinforce each other’s ideas rather than evaluate them critically.

The findings from a study of a social online community in Saudi Arabia support this view as well. Al-Saggaf (2003) found that there were very few disputes and minimal debating in the online discussions of these participants. Well-known and active members did not engage in continuous and heated arguments, even if in reality they disagreed with others’ opinions. They appeared to understand that their disagreement could stir emotions and perhaps cause “loss of face” to other participants, and thus perhaps undermine the delicate fabric of their relationships. In addition, members passed a lot of compliments and exaggerated comments to others when replying to their messages. It was rare for them to make negative comments or criticism about another member’s topic or a message. This was true even between close and intimate friends.

Foot and Schneider (2002) offered another conceptualization of an online public sphere, which they call a Web sphere. Unlike the online public sphere discussed above, which is thought to be situated in a single site, theirs span multiple sites and its boundaries are dynamic, in the sense that the sites that form it are continuously changing. Foot and Schneider (2002) defined their sphere as: “A hyperlinked set of dynamically defined digital resources spanning multiple Web sites relevant to a central theme or ’object.’ A shared object-orientation and a temporal framework delimit the boundaries of a Web sphere” (p. 225).

As can be seen from this definition, a Web sphere is concerned with multiple sites that revolve around the same theme. Foot and Schneider’s study examined the political action on websites on the theme of the United States 2000 presidential elections. To gather data for their research, they used observation, archiving of websites, and interviews with site producers. They found that multimedia and the hyperlinked Web have reshaped not only the way electoral campaigns are conducted, but also the interaction between candidates and citizens. Foot and Schneider (2002) concluded that the Web enables not only candidates and citizens, but also other entities such as the press, to engage in political action more broadly, deeply, and interactively than do traditional print or broadcast media.

The present study is concerned with an online public sphere that exists on one site, the Al Arabiya site. It would appear that the Al Arabiya site meets Poor’s (2005) first criterion for an online public sphere. Although the site is a media source covering news about regional and international politics, it is a public space because it enables people to discuss matters of concern to them. On the Al Arabiya site, people can reply to reports and to each other, commenting on the news and stories reported. The site is publicly available and the discussions that take place on it are accessible to people of similar (or dissimilar) interests, identity, ethnicity, nationality, gender, language, and race. The Al Arabiya site also meets the second criterion. Because it is an online public space, people who were previously excluded from
discussing their local politics because of geography, such as Arabs abroad, are now included. The third criterion can easily be met as well. The results of the first study will show that the articles published on the political page of the Al Arabiya site and the comments to them are mostly of a political nature. Finally, with regard to the fourth criterion, the audience does not judge comments posted on the Al Arabiya site as such, and there is no mechanism for judging or rating responses to articles. Moreover, readers addressed comments not primarily because of the status or popularity of those who wrote them, although in some instances that was the case, but rather based on the value they added to their online experience. On Al Arabiya it is difficult to establish a presence or maintain a reputation, because discussants do not need to register on the site to post comments, making it possible for people to post comments using a different name every time. Because discussants in this site are largely anonymous, they all stand an equal chance of being listened to, and judgment is largely based on merit.

Study Methodology

This article reports on two ethnographic studies, both of which used observation as their primary methodology. The first study, which began on September 20, 2005, observed and analyzed 10% of the total site content devoted to the 2003 war in Iraq. Two hundred and seventy-two articles posted to the site by Al Arabiya staff, and the readers’ comments on those articles, were selected from a pool of 2,720 articles. The 2,720 articles were published on the Al Arabiya site between February 22, 2004, and November 20, 2005. The second study, which began May 28, 2006, observed and analyzed 10% of the entire group of articles from the Final Page of the Al Arabiya site. Two hundred and twenty-seven articles posted to the site by Al Arabiya staff and the readers’ comments on those articles were selected from a pool of 2,270 articles. The 2,270 articles were published on the Al Arabiya site between August 17, 2004, and May 28, 2006.

For both studies, all the articles selected and the responses to them were thoroughly read, and then observational field notes were taken for each article and the responses to it. The number of replies to each article was also noted. In the case of the first study, figures specific to each article, such as the number of those killed in a car explosion and the number of articles within each category, were also counted. (For more information on how these categories were developed and how articles were assigned to them, see the section on observation and analysis below.) The second study was undertaken with the goal of minimizing the effects of subjectivity that could arise from the involvement of a single researcher. Triangulating the findings from both studies is intended to enhance the reliability and validity of the results reported.

Online media and the public sphere in the Arab world is a new and as yet unresearched area. This fact underpinned the eagerness of this researcher to discover as much as possible about it. For this reason the researcher did not start with a specific research question. The purpose of both studies, as mentioned above, was
to explore the potential of the Al Arabiya site to foster a public sphere for Arabs. To achieve this purpose, selected content from the Al Arabiya site was observed, analyzed, and assessed against the criteria of the online public sphere discussed above. Observation of the selected content allows the nature and purpose of interaction of readers with the published articles and with the other readers’ comments to be assessed. Observation also enables the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the interactions between people who provided responses to articles and what their interactions have meant to them (Glesne, 1999; Sudweeks & Simoff, 1999; Williamson, 2002). Given the goal of the study to understand, in context, the meanings that people attach to their experience and to the environment where they operate, ethnography and observation were selected as appropriate techniques.

The studies conducted do not violate the ethics of conducting research in virtual environments. The Al Arabiya site is an online media outlet based on a large and popular TV station; all of its content is intended for public consumption. Observing, recording, analyzing, and reporting such public content, where individuals’ identities are shielded and no personal information not already available to the public is revealed, is consistent with the ethics of online human subjects research (Ess & AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002; Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Frankel & Siang, 1999; Glesne, 1999; King, 1996; Paccagnella, 1997).

The Process of Selecting Content to Observe
In the first study, the political page of alarabiya.net was searched for the word “Iraq.” A total of 272 pages about Iraq were returned. Each page contained 10 articles, which means there were 2,720 articles about Iraq. The first article was published on the site on February 22, 2004, which is near the time the Web service of www.alarabiya.net started its operations. Due to the huge volume of articles, it was decided that 10% of the pages (27.2) was sufficient to get a good picture of the coverage. Thus the number of articles observed and analyzed was 272. Moreover, to minimize any subjectivity that might arise from the involvement of a single researcher and to enhance the reliability and validity of the results reported, a second study in which another 227 articles and the replies to them from the Final Page of the Al Arabiya site were selected for observation and analysis. In this second study, no search for a particular word was conducted. The entire content from the Final Page of the Al Arabiya site was sampled, from which 10% was selected from a pool of 2,270.

For both studies, sampling based on the number of pages was easier because each page contained 10 articles, making it easier to obtain 10 articles from one page than to obtain 10 articles from multiple pages, which would have been more time consuming. The 27.2 pages (272 articles) and the 22.7 pages (227 articles) were selected randomly. A computer program developed by the author for this purpose was used to generate 28 random numbers between 1 and 272, which is the number of pages returned as a result of the search above. From the 28th page, only two articles (the lowest numbered) were selected, for a total 272 articles. For the second study the computer program generated 23 random numbers between 1 and 227, which is the total
number of pages on the Final Page of the Al Arabiya site. From the 23rd page, only seven articles (the lowest numbered) were selected, for a total of 227 articles.

The Process of Observation and Analysis
For both studies, article titles were first copied and pasted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This was done for every article in every page. Next, additional fields were added to the spreadsheet, including the page on which the article was found and a field to record observations about readers’ comments on the article. The process of observation began by clicking the article on the original page where it was located and closely reading its contents and the contents of the responses to it. Observational field notes were taken for each individual article and the responses to it. Next, the field notes were organized into broader themes based on the general concepts and ideas they addressed, so that a broader sense of the results could be gained. Finally, and for the purpose of producing a summary of the data, statements that encompassed the developed themes were written. These statements were combined to formulate the results presented in the following sections of this article.

As an additional step in the first study, each news article was assigned a category from a list of four broad categories developed at the end of the process of observation. The first category consisted of articles related to Iraq but not to any of the other three categories. The second category was assigned to reports of incidents of killings, explosions, and injuries. The third category included transcripts of Al Arabiya interviews. The last category held reports that contained the published views (in the local print media) of Arab intellectuals and journalists. The category an article was assigned to was recorded in an additional field in the Excel spreadsheet mentioned above. The reason for assigning each article to one of these categories was so that the frequency of articles within each category could be counted. Providing numeric values in the form of frequency counts enabled some inferences to be drawn about the findings, as described in the next section. This step was not performed for the second study, because the purpose of the second study was solely to enhance the reliability and validity of the results from the first study.

Articles easily fell into one of the four broad categories, in part because the titles Al Arabiya gives its articles provided clear indications as to the categories they were associated with. Any article that did not match any of the other three categories was assigned to the first category. In order to be consistent in the categorization of articles and to limit any subjectivity, the researcher made notes to guide his decisions to assign articles to categories (Neuendorf, 2002).

The War in Iraq on the Al Arabiya Site
The findings presented in this section are from the first study and report mainly on the types of articles published on the Al Arabiya site and readers’ reactions to them. There were 131 (48.16%) reports about issues related to Iraq, the first category, and 3,389 responses to them. The second category consists of reports about incidents of killings, explosions, and injuries. There were 41 (15%) of these and 503 responses to
them. The third category consists of transcripts of actual Al Arabiya programs, mainly interviews with Iraqi officials or Arab intellectuals. There were 56 (20.59%) of these and 121 responses to them. The last category consists of reports that contain views of Arab intellectuals or journalists published previously in newspapers. There were 35 (12.86%) of these and 318 responses to them. These distributions are summarized in Table 1.

Reports about Issues Related to Iraq
Of the 131 articles that covered issues pertaining to Iraq, 11 articles revolved around the functioning of the Iraqi government; five were about the Iraqi constitution and elections, and another five were about the security situation. Other areas that received the Al Arabiya site’s attention included daily living concerns (covered in seven articles), investment in Iraq (covered in six articles), the production of oil from Iraq (covered in six articles), and the reconstruction of Iraq (covered in two articles). There were also other areas that consumed Al Arabiya space such as terrorism (discussed in 13 articles), incidents of kidnapping (reported in 11 articles), Saddam Hussein (discussed in eight articles), criticism of the U.S. and the occupation (discussed in 17 articles), and the relationship between Iraq and neighboring countries (debated in 15 articles). This is summarized in Table 2.

There were 3,389 responses in total to the 131 articles relating to Iraq. By far, terrorism was the most responded to topic by readers. One hundred and twenty-one readers across more than one article lamented the continuous killing of innocent Iraqis by the terrorists. Other readers were upset with the actions of the terrorists, because according to them, they were destroying the image of Islam: “Whatever they are called or titled they are nothing but killers, thugs, and criminals. Their hands are covered with the blood of the Iraqis … they are either Arabs terrorists Wahabis belonging to al-Qaeda … or followers of the dead Saddam regime” [First study, Article #112].

While only 22 reader responses supported Al Zargawi and his men, 105 readers explicitly condemned him and his actions because, according to the readers, they resulted in the deaths of thousands of Iraqi people. When Iraqi authorities captured

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<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Types of articles published on the Al Arabiya site and readers’ replies to them</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Article type</td>
<td>Number (percentage) of articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incidents of killings, kidnappings, and injuries</td>
<td>41 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other issues related to Iraq</td>
<td>131 (48.16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Arabiya programs such as interviews with Iraqi officials or Arab intellectuals</td>
<td>56 (20.59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views of intellectuals or those drawn from newspapers</td>
<td>35 (12.86%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
a group of potential terrorists, 30 Iraqis expressed happiness at this news. Most of the terrorists in Iraq are Arabs. Iraqis in 120 responses to articles in this group said that they are upset with Arabs and do not want them to interfere in their affairs or even comment on their situation. These Iraqis also do not want to be linked with Arabs because they “gained nothing from them except the terrorists who came from there to kill their children.”

Other responses to articles were related to the release of prisoners. Nine were pleased with this kind of news and expressed deep and intense emotions. The division on the basis of race consumed much of the readers’ attention. A total of 515 responses debated this controversial topic: “An Arab, a Kurd, a Jew, a Christian, a Sunni, a Shīā, … a Muslim, an non Muslim leave us alone Arabs. This is our Iraq and we won and shame and disgrace for whoever helped Saddam and for whoever wants damage (Iraq) they are in hell” [First study, Article # 188].

The elections and the wish for Iraq to stand on its own feet appeared in 113 of readers’ responses. The following is a quotation from a response to one of the articles in this group: “My heart cries when I read the responses and some readers say (((((the occupied Iraq or from the occupied Iraq etc))))) I swear by Allah that I know that Iraq is under occupation but I feel knives are cutting me when I read the occupied Iraq” [First study, Article # 271].

Other responses indicated that Iraqis were interested in seeing Iraq move on and the security problem solved. The Iraqis’ happiness about the establishment of a constitution received 636 comments. Derogatory comments by readers to articles about the U.S. and the occupation were seen 123 times across several articles.

Support for Saddam Hussein was evident in 711 responses across the eight articles that talked about him. Only 108 views about him were divided. The politics of the neighboring countries and their influence on Iraq was always a hot topic. Ten responses thought Syria was supporting terrorism in Iraq, while 113 appeared very supportive of Syria and made some positive comments about it. Iraqis are skeptical
about Saudi Arabia because they know that many of the terrorists on their soil come from that country. They were also concerned that some of the Muslim scholars in Saudi Arabia were supporting the insurgency by providing the terrorists with “fatwas” that justify their actions.

The concerns expressed in the reader responses are summarized in Table 3.

### Incidents of Killings

As mentioned above, 41 (15%) of the articles sampled from the Al Arabiya site reported incidents of killings, explosions, and injuries. The major source for these reports was the Al Arabiya site itself (27.2%), followed by other news agencies (15.4%), AFP (14.7%), and Reuters (6.25%). Al Arabiya typically reported the killings in the passive voice. For example, the headings would read “120 Iraqis killed,” or “Explosions in Baghdad: One killed and 10 injured by a rocket missile.” The site did not specify those responsible for the killings. Of the 41 incidents reported, 24 were reports of killings. The total number of deaths reported in these articles was 1,157 Iraqi deaths and 11 American deaths. There were six reports of car bombs and five reports of other types of explosions (Table 4).

The response of both Arab and Iraqi readers to these incidents was overwhelming. Five hundred and three readers (responding to the 24 reports of killings) expressed deep sorrow and regret for the loss of Iraqi lives at the hands of the terrorists (Table 5). The following quotation is taken from a response to one article in this group:

> I am the father of two children who died in the latest explosions in Baghdad. What have these children done to deserve this death you criminal … if you really wanted to fight Americans you could have gone to your country Jordan and there burn the Israeli and American flag. My children will prosecute you in the day of judgment (reader utters words of prayer). [First study, Article # 74]

This was the only theme in almost every response to every article related to this issue. Readers were furious with the terrorists. They expressed deep anger towards

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Article type</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terrorism</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported the insurgency</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Criticized Al-Zargawi</td>
<td>105</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anger toward Arabs</td>
<td>120</td>
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<tr>
<td>Division on the basis of race</td>
<td>515</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elections and the wish for Iraq to stand on its own feet</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The constitution</td>
<td>636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of the U.S. occupation</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for Saddam Hussein</td>
<td>711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive of Syria</td>
<td>113</td>
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them and strongly condemned their actions. Terrorists in the context of this article are foreign fighters (mostly Arabs) who lead the insurgency under the leadership of the so-called Al Zargawi. Only in seven replies out of 503 did people appear supportive of the terrorists; the rest were against them.

Iraqis, in particular, appeared upset with the Arabs in general because the foreign fighters seemed to be all Arabs. They appeared very happy whenever one of the terrorists was killed. Most readers were upset with the deterioration of the security situation in Iraq and were desperate for peace and stability. Others felt “sick” of the division among Iraqis on the basis of race. A few readers thought only another dictator like Saddam could “fix” the problem. Arabs appeared upset and sad for the loss of innocent Iraqi lives. They also appeared upset that these terrorists’ acts were taking place in the name of Islam and the fight against the occupation: “This is a real conspiracy to damage the image of Arabs and Muslims in the world east and west and cause nations to hate them. We have already lost the respect of world governments. Do we have to lose also the respect and sympathy of their nations because of a group of stupid people” [First study, Article # 72].

Arabs worried that the terrorist acts were damaging their image and the image of Islam and making the world hate Muslims, and in turn, Arabs.

Views of Journalists
Most of the 35 (12.86%) reports that contained views from Arabic newspapers (selected for re-publication on the Al Arabiya site) were of a political nature. Seven articles discussed the politics of the neighboring countries and their effect on Iraq. Seven journalists contemplated the U.S. invasion and the deterioration of the security situation in Iraq. Four articles expressed views related to the Iraqi constitution, two related to the changes in the Iraqi government, and two related to the Iraqi elections (Table 6). The following quotation was written in an article by Wael Mirza (a journalist at AlWatan newspaper):

> There are two kinds of suiciders, (suiciders) for liberating nations and (suiciders) for freedom. The former are the (terrorists) or (insurgents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
<th>Types and number of articles for “incidents of killing”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Article type</td>
<td>Number of articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports of killings</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports of car bombs</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports of other types of explosions</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
<th>Types of articles and number of responses for “incidents of killing”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Article type</td>
<td>Number of responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports of killings</td>
<td>503</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
depending on the reader’s view and up to him to decide who want to free the
Iraqi people from imperialism and foreign occupation. The latter are the Iraqi
people who went to the election polls looking for a glimpse of freedom and
a sense of participation and contribution to the present and future. [First study,
Article # 177]

Moreover, terrorism was discussed in five articles, which is not at all strange
given its importance to Iraqis.

The total number of responses to the published reports about views was 318, or
nine responses per article on average. It is not clear how this low response rate
towards views from newspapers can be explained. The article that drew most of
the readers’ attention in this group was one that discussed the ethnicity problem
in Iraq or the division among Iraqis on the basis of race (43 responses). An article
that talked about repeating the U.S. scenario in Syria also caught readers’ attention;
40 readers replied to it.

Twenty-six readers engaged with the articles about the Iraqi constitution and six
readers responded to the articles about the Iraqi elections. Anger with Al Zargawi and
his terrorist friends, particularly Arabs, and the sadness for the continuos loss of
innocent lives was expressed in 108 responses to articles in this category. There were
10 commentaries about the Iraqi government and eight about the politics of the
neighboring countries. In one of the articles that talked about the possibility of the
U.S. repeating the Iraqi scenario in Syria, 58 Syrian readers said they would defend
their country “until the last drop of their blood falls.” U.S. President George Bush
was criticized in one of the articles about him 15 times. Ethnicity in Iraq was always
a contentious issue. In response to one article that discussed the division of Iraqi
society on the basis of race, 58 criticized this practice. These responses are summa-
rized in Table 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Interviews Based on Al Arabiya</th>
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</table>
| The total number of articles within this category was 56 (20.59%). All of the articles in this category were based on actual Al Arabiya in-depth interview programs. Interviews were divided into two types: 33 interviews with intellectuals and 23 inter-
views with politicians such as Iraqi government officials (Table 8). |
The articles about these interviews received 121 responses, of which 99 were responses to articles about interviews with politicians. The interviews were mainly with Iraqi officials such as the Iraqi president, Iraqi prime minister, and party leaders. The range of issues covered in these interviews included terrorism, ethnicity, security situation, elections, constitution, and the reconstruction of Iraq, which are the same issues that appeared elsewhere in the findings.

The interactions of readers with the transcripts of interviews with politicians were more intense compared to their interactions with the transcripts of interviews with intellectuals. For example, when there was a discussion about Kurds, 26 Kurds made it clear that they wanted their rights to be secured, or else they should have their own country. When one guest in one interview criticized the Iraqi constitution, 27 Iraqis came to its defense: “I am a member of the high commission and I participated in the election process and in the counting and sifting stage which we spent half of it last night on the light of candles. That gave us a beautiful meaning which is burning for the sake of this beautiful country” [First study, Article # 162].

In addition, when Al Duri, the ex-Iraqi ambassador to the United Nations, was interviewed, it was obvious that he was very popular among Iraqis, as 28 posted responses that supported him. From the details someone mentioned about a specific matter related to Iraq, it was clear the person who criticized an interviewee was an actual Iraqi diplomat. This shows that the Al Arabiya site was visited by people from various walks of life.

There were 15 responses to transcripts of interviews with intellectuals. Intellectuals were interviewed during the “fourth rule” program, which mainly looks at newspaper headlines, or during the “final print” program, which also looks at

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article type</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity problem</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeating the U.S. scenario in Syria</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi elections</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi constitution</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger with Al Zargawi</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi government</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics of neighbouring countries</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US repeating the Iraqi scenario</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division of the Iraqi society on the basis of race</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Bush</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 Types of articles and number of responses to them for “views of journalists”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article type</th>
<th>Number of articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with intellectuals</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with politicians</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 Types of articles and their numbers for “original interviews”
newspaper headlines. There were 17 articles based on the “fourth rule” program and eight articles based on the “final print” program. Both programs covered issues related to Iraq and the Middle East. There was nothing to report about the responses of readers to this category of articles other than one Iraqi female who was deeply troubled by the continuous loss of lives.

Reader responses to articles in the category of original interviews are summarized in Table 9.

Summary
Interestingly, the nature of articles in all the groups was similar to each other. Terrorism was a theme that appeared in reports about issues related to Iraq, reports about incidents of killings, explosions and injuries, transcripts of actual Al Arabiya interviews, and reports that contained the views of intellectuals or journalists. Terrorists were strongly condemned in the reports about issues related to Iraq. In the original interviews, particularly with Iraqi politicians, condemnation of the terrorist attacks was also heavy. The views in the published reports from journalists and intellectuals harshly attacked the terrorists and expressed grief for the death of innocent lives. This suggests that not only did the Al Arabiya site consider the incidents of killings of Iraqis by, for example, car explosions to be acts of terrorism, but that the guests interviewed by Al Arabiya, and the Arabic journalists and intellectuals whose views were published on the site, did so as well.

The range of views expressed by readers to topics across the article categories was also similar. With the possible exception of terrorism, which was denounced by people from all sectors of Iraqi society, people expressed similarly diverse views about the topics they read across all of the article categories. For example, the issue of ethnicity among Iraqis was a contentious topic in all the articles that addressed it. Views of readers were divided about it everywhere it was brought up. That is, those who commented on the issue of ethnicity in the reports about issues related to Iraq, appeared as divided as those who commented on the ethnicity problem in the group of articles about views from journalists and intellectuals. With regard to terrorism, readers, and particularly Iraqis, appeared tremendously disturbed by the reports about the deaths of innocent people, many of whom were women and children, and regarded this issue as their biggest concern. This was evident in their comments across articles in all categories.

The level of attention of readers to topics across articles in all categories was also similar. For example, terrorism in the first category of articles attracted 121

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article type</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kurds (division of Iraqi society on the basis of race)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraqi constitution</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Duri, the ex-Iraqi ambassador to the U.N.</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
responses, in the second category 503 responses, and in the third category a total of 108 readers replied to topics about terrorism. This suggests that Iraqis perceived terrorism to have the same degree of importance. The attention Iraqis gave to the war in Iraq in their country is not at all surprising. A previous study found that Saudis allocated the invasion of Iraq about 11% of the total content they contributed to Al-Saha Al-Siyasia, a Saudi Arabian political online community (Al-Saggaf, 2005).

In the beginning, the Al Arabiya site and its service that allows commentary on articles were not known to people. This explains why so many articles published in the site in the beginning did not have any responses. Once this changed, the number of responses to articles rose tremendously.

The Online Public Sphere of Arabs on the Al Arabiya Site

The findings presented in this section are from both studies and discuss mainly the potential of the site to nurture a public sphere for Arabs. Al Arabiya allows readers to read the comments other people have written about a published article from the instant they choose the article, i.e., with one click of a mouse button. The comment option is located at the end of each published article. This option is essentially what distinguishes the Al Arabiya site from other Arabic news sites. Readers can access the comments and post their own replies after they scroll down through all the replies to a particular article. The Al-Jazeera site,5 the Al Arabiya site’s strongest competitor, also offers a commentary option, but theirs is manifested in a Web-based forum in which readers have to select the articles they wish to read as well as having to select responses to articles individually. While the BBC Arabic site,6 another competitor to the Al Arabiya site, attaches the readers’ responses to articles in a way similar to what Al Arabiya does, readers still have to find the area that houses the articles they wish to read or comment on. Moreover, readers of BBC Arabic are not given the chance to comment on all the articles BBC Arabic publishes, but only on selected articles.

There is no doubt that the site journalists themselves have benefited from the commentary feature. It is quite possible that they used it to survey the mood of their readers about a particular topic or to test their response to it. During a discussion about the Iraqi constitution when people in their responses said they wanted to know what the constitution looked like, Al Arabiya immediately published the full contents of the Iraqi constitution for its readers. This example shows that Al Arabiya used the commentary service to discover what their audience wanted and acted accordingly, which means that the commentary service allowed Al Arabiya to offer their readers more of what they were seeking. Responding with the full contents of the Iraqi constitution would have been impossible to do in the case of other media such as TV or press. Another example that shows interaction between the readers and the site journalists is when the site announced the death of a famous Egyptian actress, Sana Younis. When the site journalist mistakenly put a photo of another actress in the report, one of the readers commented on this error, which prompted Al Arabiya to correct it immediately.
Comments on articles (or on comments by other readers) varied in nature. Some were humorous, some were sarcastic, some were informative or factual, some were agreeable or were supportive of others’ views, and some were merely expressions of opinion. Some of the responses provided further information about the reported events in the form of Web links to homepages or files containing pictures, audios, and videos. Other responses provided a different take on the issue under discussion or tried to portray it more clearly to the readers. In some of the responses, people who had experienced the reported event told their stories as they unfolded. In so doing, they provided their own version of the truth. The identity of the readers who contributed such stories and the truthfulness of the details they provided were difficult to establish, but they received responses that suggested that other readers took them seriously.

Debate among readers or respondents was minimal in the Al Arabiya data analyzed in these studies. Views were not rationally criticized or evaluated; rather they were asserted. Two readers do not respond to each other’s comments on the same issue more than twice in the present sample. A similar observation has also been reported in the literature; see, for example, Elvin (2002). At the same time, readers appeared to have enjoyed the diversity of opinions and the range of people they met online. A group of readers indicated in their responses to others that they enjoyed the presence of people from other countries, as the following quotation from one of the female participants suggests:

This article drew my attention and I want to say to the guy from Emirates, Abu Mesha’al, Naser, Sager, and Sameer God damn you (jokingly of course). Your comments are the best among all the other comments and I nearly dropped dead from laughter. I wish we always see more of these topics on Al Arabiya because it entertain us and reduces the pressure on us. [Second study, article # 142]

This is despite the fact that topics about Iraq attracted mainly, albeit not exclusively, Iraqis, and topics about Saudi Arabia, for example, attracted mainly Saudis. Interaction on Al Arabiya allowed people at opposite ends of the Arab world to become more familiar with each other and with the politics of each other’s nations. It also allowed them to discover many of the things that connect them and many of the things that differentiate them from each other.

The ability of readers to comment on articles or on other peoples’ comments allowed them to share their thoughts and feelings with other readers in ways not previously possible. Despite the fact that comments posted by Al Arabiya readers were subject to a modest form of monitoring and content regulation, the comment facility enabled readers to be active participants, not just in the sense of selecting messages, but also in the sense of creating and responding to them. The following quotation from someone who became upset with another’s comment on the issue of women driving in Saudi Arabia (where they are still not allowed) illustrates this:

Do you think you are intelligent in your comment? well go and look for the daily dozens of accidents saudi guys are making in riyadh or dammam or
jeddah or any other city... even in all the world. so that means the authorities shall not let them drive too. next time think before you talk its better. i always read ur comments and never find something important in them. [Second study, article # 202—this comment was posted in English and thus was left as it was]

Although this comment is critical of another person who posted comments on the site, at the same time it indicates regular readership of that person’s comments. This is evidence that readers can be listened to and have an audience of their own. By commenting on other readers’ comments, moreover, anyone can join the media conversation, as this commenter did.

Although the site fuelled conversation and shaped public opinion, it did not cause political changes or trigger any real-world action. That is, although some people, through their participation on the Al Arabiya, appeared to be able to influence the opinions of others who visited the site, based on their posted comments, there was no evidence to suggest that such influence extended to the political decision making process in their countries during the time period studied. Studies by Katz (1992, cited in Hunter, 1998) and Elvin (2002) found similar results. In contrast, Al-Saggaf and Weckert (2005) found that the conversations and the discussions that took place on Al-Saha Al-Siyasia (a Saudi political online community) had noticeable impacts on the Saudi political and social landscapes. In some situations, members of that community rationally criticized a political decision, reached a consensus regarding it, and communicated their opposing views about it to government officials, in some cases triggering official action.

It would appear that the Al Arabiya site matches the criteria for an online public sphere as outlined by Poor (2005). As the findings of these studies show, the site is a public space for political discourse that is mediated online. It includes previously excluded individuals such as Arabs abroad and makes it possible for comments posted to it to be judged by their merit, not by the status of those who made them. However, the site does not seem to meet all the requirements for the public sphere model outlined by Habermas (1974, 1989). Although opinions expressed on the site were diverse and interaction among readers was good, the site did not appear to facilitate rational, critical debates, which is an essential ingredient in the public sphere model envisioned by Habermas. This finding is consistent with other studies of online public discussion (e.g., Cammaerts & Audenhove, 2003; Elvin, 2002; Ulrich, 2004). Despite this limitation, the Al Arabiya site is still valuable for the Arabic community, for the reasons observed in this study, and because there are few alternatives available.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Further Research

The results of both studies were consistent. In their responses to articles, readers discussed issues, expressed opinions, attacked views, and supported others. In their responses, readers also posted news about the events covered that they obtained from other satellite television stations, such as Al Jazeera, or from websites in which news
was reported by people who witnessed or were involved in the events themselves. This gave Arabs the chance not only to challenge the views of the Al Arabiya site on the events they reported, but also to offer their own version of the truth about them.

The studies also showed that the responses to topics on Al Arabiya did not come from like-minded individuals but from a diverse range of individuals, making the comments also diverse. In some cases, the responses to articles appeared to cause some individuals to change their opinions about a specific topic. Of course, in other cases that did not happen. Overall, the responses indicated that people enjoyed the experience of commenting on articles on the site and interacting with others. The site met two of the conditions that support the claim that the Al Arabiya site nurtures an online public sphere, namely the presence of diverse opinions in the site and interactivity between readers and the articles published and among readers themselves. While the online public sphere that Al Arabiya facilitates does not meet all the other requirements of the public sphere as envisioned by Jürgen Habermas (1974, 1989), such as the presence of rational-critical debate, the site satisfies Poor’s (2005) criteria for an online public sphere.

Since the Al Arabiya TV channel is owned and managed by Saudis, it is possible that some of what is broadcast is intended to serve the interests of the government. While this control could extend to the online version of the channel, the findings of both studies suggest that the commentary facility in the site has made this difficult to achieve. Despite Al Arabiya’s monitoring of this service, it is still largely in the hands of its readers. Arabs from all backgrounds use it to communicate their ideas and send messages to others. The readers’ use of this facility transforms them from a passive audience to authors of media content. This service also proved a valuable source for information about politics and a medium for people to express themselves and participate in the media conversation, shape public perception about a specific issue, and contribute to the political public sphere in their countries and the Arab world.

The research findings need to be considered in light of the following limitations, however. The results are limited to the Al Arabiya site and should not be generalized to other online media sources in the Arab world or outside it. Generalizations were not sought in this research; rather, the purpose was to provide a broad but rich picture about the potential of the Al Arabiya site to foster a public sphere for Arabs. Similarly, the results are limited to the content selected for observation and analysis. The 10% of the articles and the replies to them chosen for observation and analysis may not be representative of the overall number of articles within the period examined, or of articles and responses posted during other periods.

Two further limitations are the uncertainty surrounding the process of censoring comments on articles by Al Arabiya staff and the identity of the respondents themselves. There are no guidelines or policies on the site that address what comments are allowed and what are not. If there is censoring, it is not clear how often it occurs on the site. Censorship could restrict freedom of expression on the site and the expansion of the public sphere that the site facilitates. The other limitation is related to the authenticity of the respondents. Since respondents were not assigned stable user IDs
from the site to use to post comments, their identities could not be verified. It is possible that a single reader could have posted multiple replies about the same topic. This could pose a problem for the reliability and validity of some of the research results.

While this article does not offer a comprehensive account of the online public sphere facilitated by the Al Arabiya site, it is hoped that this research has at least scratched the surface and prepared the way for future research about the topic. A number of specific issues remain to be addressed. For example, why are readers attached to some topics but indifferent toward others? Why do people participate in the Al Arabiya site in the first place? Do readers always trust the reports published on the site? In the event that readers were to provide compelling evidence regarding a story that contradicts what Al Arabiya reported, would other readers find them credible? More generally, what is the feeling of readers toward reading the responses of others? Do they respond because of what is written in the articles or because of what is written in the responses to them? These questions could be answered through further investigation making use of survey or interview techniques.

Finally, it would be useful to examine in-depth the role of the Al Arabiya political public sphere in the lives of Arabs and the democratic process in their countries. Can the site facilitate a platform for political change in the Arab world that could positively affect Arabs? Can it allow Arabs to engage with each other in ways that could affect their own understanding of their politics? Can it make it possible for them to enhance their engagement and feel that they are participating citizens in the political affairs of their countries? These are interesting and important questions that call for further analysis.

Notes
1 http://www.alarabiya.net/
2 This statement is based on the number of people who participate in the Al Arabiya site’s news polls, which the site conducts regularly. While the number of people who participate in online polls is not an accurate measure of the popularity of the site, it is nevertheless indicative of it in the absence of other mechanisms.
3 Arab intellectuals in the context of this article comprise university academics, writers, poets, historians, thinkers, journalists, political analysts, scholars, media commentators, and so on who appear regularly on Arabic television to offer their perspectives on the politics of the region.
4 Fatwas in the context of this article are the respected Muslim scholars advisory opinions on matters of Islamic law.
5 http://www.aljazeera.net/portal
6 http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/news/

References


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