

eLearning, State and Educational System in Middle East

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Abstract- eLearning has provided men with new opportunities in teaching-learning procedures. A historical review of educational systems literature reveals that eLearning has spread out among people much faster than any other learning methods. eLearning as a state-of-the-art technology, has caused great innovations in materials development in those societies in which new methods and procedures could hardly ever been accepted. Technological innovations and the development of tele-communications such as Television Stations and Channels, Satellites, Mobile, and Internet have made it possible for the children and teenagers in the Middle East to access to the latest news and information. Of course, these developments have endangered both political and educational systems in some aspects. The present paper while pointing to some of the recent development in the field of eLearning in the Middle East, tries to examine the political and educational systems reactions to this phenomenon.

Keywords- eLearning

I. INTRODUCTION

eLearning has not only affected youth's methods of learning but also has modified the relations between social structures and young generation. The application and genesis of mass communication and its outcome which is Electronic Learning has

made some sorts of information accessible to the young people [1]. For centuries, being grown up and experienced was a basic and needed factor in the Middle East to gain access to such kind of information. Nowadays, this modification in an ancient area is to such an extent fundamental that everybody should give priority to that. During the last century, emergence of Radio, Newspaper and TV had a kind of tremendous effect on the connections between grown up young generations of society. The history of 50 years of social transformation in the Middle East distinctly shows how each one of these new medium has increased anxiousness and tension in parents, teachers, politicians, and clergymen. It has also widened the extent of misunderstanding among generations. Anyway, all aforementioned social structures were able to adjust the quickness of these modifications. But, today, we are confronting with a new phenomenon called the genesis of Internet and eLearning. New technologies for communication especially Internet would bring this idea to the mind that the world is only a small village. In such conditions, teaching is no more the only case. These new technologies have affected security of traditional societies in the Middle East.

As a result, the act of learning has turned into a national - security issue [2]. It has been turned into a security issue because the sense of equilibrium which has been prevailing in the relation between last and

new generation, has been lost. Parents do not feel secure any more because their kids, quickly and before the appointed time become familiar with the relationship between different sexes. They believe that their children communicate with strangers and play a number of games which are not only time-killers but bothersome and annoying. Politicians do not feel secure because they are not able to exercise their influence on young generation as the “only eternal political source”. They have to fight with their political opponents both in the field of practice and the virtual world. To the politicians, in this critical region, nothing is more perilous than the minds of the young people crammed with opponents’ ideas. Finally, these are the teachers and educationalists who will not be considered as the only right sources and criteria for gaining knowledge. Children and the youth using the internet could do their home work quickly. They can also surpass their teachers in acquiring new information. The Internet has taken precedence over Radio, Newspaper and TV and it has been considered as the most reliable teacher for the young generation [3].

II. ELEARNING

In the Middle East, none of the current ways of teaching and learning is considered more fascinating than eLearning. The reason is poor economical condition, cultural and social impediments and lack of an able and fascinating method of learning. Historical experience in developing countries such as those situated in the Middle East shows that lack of financial sources in procuring costly installations is the main reason [4]. The increase in the oil price in 1970s, made some of the countries in this part of the world enabled to solve this problem to some extent. These countries compare to other developing countries have been empowered to build new schools and equip them with new technologies [5].

The second impediment for the acceptance of these new technologies is the

social and cultural prevention of these societies. Opposing to new technologies, overestimation of negative aspects of their application, and disinclination of families are some inextricable specifications of the societies in the Middle East. Great number of people could easily remember that, there was a very severe disapproving ambiance towards usage of new technologies like radio and T.V by traditional institutes of these societies in its earlier times. In addition, there was not any secure atmosphere for children, juveniles, girls and women who tended to use these technologies. This act was especially done to the kids, girls and women who like to use these facilities [6]. Surprisingly, it should be acknowledged that internet has created an ideal ambiance for all children, juveniles, girls and women of all classes of society. It has given this chance to young generation to not only observe traditional limitations of their societies but also make contact with others easily. Debrah L. Wheeler in her interview with a Kuwaiti girl student explicates this issue clearly:

Interviewer: Why do you think the Internet is so popular among Kuwaiti youth?

Response: Well, I have been told that you have lived for a while in Kuwait, so I would gather you are familiar with the way in which the Kuwaiti society is built. There is a somewhat double standard, and there are many gray areas in terms of the two sexes mingling with each other. There fore I think the most common place for both sexes to mix with each other is through the internet. Girls especially cannot form relationships with boys, even as friends in many families in Kuwait, so the internet is a ‘safe’ place I guess for them to do so. And the fact that the two sides don’t know each other they feel safer to voice their concerns, ideas. etc. without having their reputations ruined or without it affecting their social life [7].

This is the idea of many girls and women in most of the countries in the Middle East. An article by Mazrui and his colleague [8] demonstrates this even in a better way. They first raise a basic question:

The impact of the first industrial revolution on western Christianity probably included no less momentous a movement than the Christian reformation itself and its survival and spread. Will the impact of the new revolution of information include a momentous movement of Islamic reformation?

They believe Internet has been able to present a new view and meaning for some of Islamic concepts such as Hijab (Veil), Meraj (Ascension), Hijrat (Migration), global brotherhood, equality of women. Consequently, It should be said that eLearning has overthrown cultural and social obstacles to some extent. It has been accepted quickly among families and instructional settings.

The third element mentions the weakness of other technologies. A good example is the plan and development of educational TV in Iran before 1979 revolution. Because of increase in oil price, Shah decided to equip schools with TV. As a matter of fact, this was a costly project. But, lack of appropriate educational programme, deficiency of electrical power in schools and lack of instructors who were familiar with application of TV in pedagogical fields ended this project with failure.

Today, time has changed. During my visit of an elementary school in south part of India in 2001. I saw how a teacher uses 4 computers to teach 70 students. He divided

them in some groups each included 5 students. Student's expertise in using computer for doing their assignments, their enthusiasm for learning and observing how web pages change is one of my favorite memories during my professional life. All of these are the result of advancement in the area of eLearning. As a matter of fact, in compare to other educational technologies, there are two reasons for young generation's enthusiasm towards learning through Internet. These are: little cost and lots of attraction. In spite of some shifting views among adults about children and the Internet in the Middle East, the overall responses continue to supply a broad range of strongly positive views about the benefits of Internet use -- especially about its value as an information source, and its growing use for involvement in online communities. [9].

Because of social, cultural and economical restrictions in traditional societies such as Middle East, old information methods could not provide people with appropriate learning opportunities. This problem has been resolved by eLearning, although, based on the information from WorldStats website, only 2.5 % internet user are living in the Middle East. In spite of that, during a period of 7 years (2000-2007) Middle East countries have got a considerable growth in usage of internet. Their growth is equal to four times global growth at the same period [10].

TABLE 1
MIDDLE EAST INTERNET USAGE AND POPULATION STATISTICS

DIDDLE EAST	Population (2007 Est.)	Usage, in Dec/2000	Internet Usage, Latest Data	% Population (Penetration)	(%) of M.E.	Use Growth (2000-2007)
Israel	6,426,679	1,270,000	3,700,000	57.6%	11.0 %	191.3%
United Arab Emirates	4,444,011	735,000	1,708,500	38.4%	5.1%	132.4%
Kuwait	2,505,559	150,000	816,700	32.6%	2.4%	444.5%
Qatar	907,229	30,000	289,900	32.0%	0.9%	866.3%
Iran	65,397,521	250,000	18,000,000	27.5%	35.7%	7,100.0%

Lebanon	3,925,502	300,000	95,000	24.2%	2.8%	216.7%
Bahrain	708,573	40,000	157,300	22.2%	0.5%	293.3%
Saudi Arabia	27,601,038	200,000	4,700,000	17.0%	14.0%	2,250.0%
Jordan	6,053,193	127,300	796,900	13.2%	2.4%	526.0%
Palestine (West Bk)	2,535,927	35,000	266,000	10.5%	0.8%	660.0%
Oman	3,204,897	90,000	319,200	10.0%	1.0%	254.7%
Syria	19,314,747	30,000	1,500,000	7.8%	4.5%	4,900.0%
Yemen	22,230,531	15,000	270,000	1.2%	0.8%	1,700.0%
Iraq	27,499,638	12,500	36,000	0.1%	0.1%	188.0%
TOTAL Middle East	192,755,045	3,284,800	33,510,500	17.4%	100.0%	920.2%

Source: Internet World Stats

Table 1 provides a country by country breakdown of internet usage, in absolute numbers and as percent of population. While the numbers are far from impressive, most countries show between twenty to fifty percent growth rates in the space of one year [11].

In fact, the Middle East is an upcoming market as experts suggest today, even though major western eLearning and IT suppliers expanded their boundaries into the Middle East years ago. Microsoft, the worldwide leader in software services and Internet technologies recently started the largest eLearning project in the Middle East. Sana'a University in Yemen will deploy Microsoft's Learning Gateway Solution, an advanced eLearning platform for 70,000 staff and students. Also, another key player in the field of eLearning, WebCT, has over 45 customers in the Middle East. One of them is MTC Vodafone in Bahrain who recently founded an eLearning center located in Sakhir Campus, University of Bahrain. Many representatives from various colleges have attended the course and familiarized themselves with modern eLearning techniques and approaches, WebCT-based communication, e-testing means, and student e-assessment and performance e-evaluation [12].

Significantly, this process has not been limited to the usage of internet only for the

purpose of gaining information. In fact, it has been used for some national interest as well. Two examples about Iran as one of the youngest and most populated countries in this region show that, this country acquiring 700,000 web logs is the eighth in the world after US, South Korea, China, Japan, France, Poland, and Canada. For instance, Iranian web log users - in a virtual space - showed their complaints against using the word "Golf" instead of "Persian Golf" in UN correspondence and the content of the movie entitled "300" [13].

III. STATE

I do believe that the politicians and statesmen in the Middle East more than any other social groups may understand McLuhan, who says "We make our instruments and then these instruments will make us" [14]. This quotation shows the role of new information and communication technologies and their impacts on citizen from the view point of politicians. This issue originates from the fact that since 1870 to the early 1970s, technology has tended to facilitate centralization. Railroads, mass production, the telegraph and telephone all helped those at the center draw in and control the periphery. Today, ICT is having the opposite affect, facilitating the decentralization of power. The rise of the service economy, the development of the Internet, satellite television, and growing

mass literacy are all strengthening the periphery at the expense of the center [15]. In fact, eLearning creates an atmosphere to gain information which politicians are not interested in. Examples which come as follow may illustrate this matter clearly:

- Through email and web sites, human rights organizations in Egypt, Palestine, and elsewhere disseminate information far more effectively than ever before, despite modest resources and limited access to local media.
- Arabic, English, and French newspapers, often censored in some countries of the region, have posted banned stories online, where local and international readers can view them. Stories that newspapers decline or are forbidden to publish due to political pressure or other factors have circulated widely on the Internet [16].
- People from Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Turkey can find large amounts of information on the Web posted by the opposite political groups that challenge official government policies. Such information in more traditional form is either non-existent or one sided in the local news media, bookstores and libraries.
- Israelis and Arabs participate in often lively debates on Usenet, chat rooms and via email at a time when it is either difficult or impossible for them to have face to face contact, telephone conversations, and postal correspondence due to travel restrictions and the absence of international direct dial phone or mail links between most Arab countries and Israel.
- Many NGOs, including human rights organizations, have embraced the Internet as a means of exchanging, collecting, and disseminating information quickly and cheaply [17].

Aforementioned examples show that politicians, statesmen and political structures are very concerned about youth's access to the websites which are in stark contrast with their own objectives and entity. Consequently, they have tried to use filtration to impede youths from access to those websites. Of course, some of new statesmen on their way to gain power have benefited from using technological revolution. One good example is Iran. Actually, some of revolutionary leaders who defeated Shah and brought Islamic Republic into existence used one product of technological revolution which is Cassette tape. They used these tapes for wide preparation and distribution of the speeches of those leaders [18]. So, we conclude that both who are in charge of states and their opponents benefited from using internet website and satellite TV channels to do impact on next generation of society.

It is worth mentioning that creating impediment to the usage of internet by young generation does not mean that political leaders are against development in the area of eLearning. Political leaders in Syria, Jordan, Iran and some other countries in Persian Gulf region who are young and educated in US or Europe are interested in usage and applying new methods in the area of education. Since, a western academic criteria and atmosphere was prevailing at the time of their own education, so, it is not too strange if they are willing to propagate new methods of learning in educational institutions [19]. The other point is that, these politicians are not only concern about negative political impacts of internet on children and young people but also they bother about social and ethical consequences. As a matter of fact, this angle is the common issue of concern for families, politicians and teachers.

IV. EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

It has been written that those who seek to understand what is happening in the Middle East today and to speculate about the area's

future, would do well to look carefully at youth, for they are the next generation in the process of becoming adults [20]. Amalgamation of citizens in this part of the world shows that children and young people form a considerable part of age pyramid of population. Educational system is one of the first among social structures which is under the impact of this constitution.

During the last two decades, educational systems have seen the increase of registration in all academic levels. For example, girls form more than 60% of all university students in Iran and more than 90% of graduate students in high schools of UAE register at colleges and universities [21]. Anyway, increase in usage of eLearning is not limited to the universities only. We can see the access to eLearning even in people with lower levels of age. Available citations show that educational systems of Iran, Kuwait, UAE, Israel and Turkey are under the influence of global privatization and therefore the number of kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools connected to the Internet are increasing [22]. For instance, we can mention the experience of Kuwait (small and thinly populated) and Iran (big and thickly populated).

In Kuwait, 57% of the population is under the age of 25. Young people in Kuwait constitute both the highest concentration of internet users (estimated to be approximately 63% of all internet users in Kuwait) and the largest sector of Kuwait society. Moreover, for reasons explored above, young people's internet practices are likely to stimulate the most significant changes in Kuwaiti society over time [23]. And Iran, with population of 70 millions and literacy rate of more than 72% holds almost one of the most educated people of the region. About 34% of the population are under the age of 16 and according to a survey in 2004, 25.7% of population in Iran were younger than 15 years old and nearly 45% are less than 30 years old [24, 25]. Therefore, due to youthfulness of population and the increase

in the number of educated people, children and young people are the most and major Internet users. Iran with the largest population of Internet users (18,000,000 people) during a period of 7 years, has the higher growth rate of usage in the Middle East (more than 7000%) (See Table No.1). Since, Iran and Kuwait are not the only two countries which got young population; we can consider it as a characteristic of the whole region.

Today, teachers in the Middle East are observing that Internet has been gaining popularity among young people, though at a much slower pace than television and radio. In addition, experimental evidence shows that in the Middle East there are so many more computer-literate young people than adults indicates the younger generation's greater interest in and aptitude for technological advances. Young users are increasingly turning to the internet as a source of information, communication, socializing and entertainment and actively seek access whenever possible, more than any other medium, it helps them establish contact with the outside world and freely seek information. Young people of the Middle East countries like their peers in other parts of the world, use internet primarily for communicating (email and chat rooms); downloading (computer games, software and music); and obtaining information (about education, entertainment, sports, "taboo" topics not addressed by adults, and news that maybe censored for political motives) [26].

However there are serious questions about the short and long-term effects of this material. Growing numbers of teachers, researchers and policy-makers in the Middle East are alarmed about the lack of moral quality of Internet for children and young people. As a matter of fact, Internet influences on children and young people are somewhat debatable, but many of these people believe that internet has negative affects on children such as:

- ◆ Growing influence of entertainments on youth style and identity.
- ◆ Decreasing role of traditional sources of influence: family, school, religion and state.
- ◆ Appeal of individualism and personal, as opposed to collective or societal achievement
- ◆ Distortion of reality and rising expectation gaps.
- ◆ Creation of harmful or unrealistic stereotypes; a promotion of intolerance or apathy.
- ◆ Emphasis on the banal and trivial; de-emphasis on education, creativity and culture.
- ◆ Tendency for young people to think less for themselves and to follow media-set agendas [27].

In this kind of situation, educational systems have to accept and adjust to new technologies. Attractiveness of internet for children and young people is stronger than schools. They can not wait for school instructions. That's why, availability of CD (beneficial or ineffective) in children's back bags and cell phones in their hands are a routine matter. Children used to go to café nets and spend some time to play computer games. Educational system should make an attempt for not being retarded from children and young people.

V. CONCLUSION

We could not forget this reality that many children and youths in the Middle East appreciate Internet contents that deal credibly with topics they may find difficult to discuss with parents or adults, such as personal relationships, sexuality, AIDS, drugs, self esteem, etc. In addition, the youth in countries with widespread poverty, corruption and political turmoil also seek realistic, relevant and meaningful content to help them understand and cope with hardships they face in their daily lives [28]. This fact demonstrates that youths do not bother more about parents, political or religious leaders' confirmation.

Therefore, through avoiding any exaggeration – either positive or negative – on the effects of Internet, regional differences should be taken into account. For example, it is difficult to find incidents like armed attaches to schools and universities, killing of innocent students, using technologies - web, emailing, making movies- and reciting public announcements in the Middle East, unlike what happened in Columbine High School in Denver, Colorado, in which 12 students and their teacher were killed. So, with attention to regional, cultural, social and political differences we can see the negative impacts of information and communication technologies on children and youths. These impacts are confined to three areas of computer games and amusements, browsing immoral websites and access to political information of opposition parties. Parents, religious leaders and teachers in the Middle East as the most concerned people about children's access to the World Wide Web are fully aware that it is an exciting place for inquisitive young minds and [that] it does not take long for children to pick up the skills needed to go online. Most of them believe that without proper precautionary measures, cyberspace can be a potentially threatening environment in which children and young people can be exposed to hate messages, sexually explicit material, graphic violence and even predators who roam chat rooms in search of innocent prey [29]. As a matter of fact, there is one popular question from hundreds of children and youths, where do Internet users go when they are using Internet? With regard to the Middle East, the answer is those youth people who are online addicts are often attracted by these kinds of websites which come as follow:

- ❖ Playing computer games
- ❖ Online pornography
- ❖ Adult sex chat
- ❖ Chatting with online strangers especially opposite sex
- ❖ Searching for information relevant and irrelevant to their study and work

- ❖ Reading political news from banded websites
- ❖ Collecting information about political violence and terrorist actions.

Parents and teachers are very concerned about four of seven abovementioned cases. Teachers pay attention to the negative aspects of these internet games and their long run effects on the act of learning by children. They warn families about these negative effects. Religious institutes pay more attention to the immoral effects specifically about the relation between two sexes. They do believe that learning before due time about sex differences will damage moral and religious bases of society. All three groups of families, teachers and politicians are unanimous about this issue. In some countries, government has limited access to the political opposition websites. The main problem here is the lack of specific criteria for separating terrorists from political groups who are human right activists. The reason is States consider all their opposition parties as terrorist and these groups know themselves as democracy seekers. In such kind of situations youth people get confused.

Finally, although the young population in the Middle East countries creates a potential market for the Internet use, but presently the majority of students, especially in smaller cities and towns are deprived from enough access to Internet [30, 31]. As a matter of fact, family income has a major effect on the level of literacy of the people to information technology and also to their access to Internet. Use of Internet requires a fairly complex set of skills and technology which is not always available for many youth people. Therefore, we should avoid of exaggerating about Internet affects on youths in the Middle East.

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