

The Poor Representation of Arabic Websites on the Web

Introduction:

The Arabic language is spoken by over 250 million native and non-native speakers from around the globe, making it the fifth most spoken language in the world. (<http://www2.ignatius.edu/faculty/turner/languages.htm>). In contrast only less than 0.5% of content on the web is written explicitly in Arabic. Arabic on the web is written in two styles and two web formats.

Arabic Styles:

- ◇ Modern Standard Arabic (Fusha): This style is the formal language used in newspapers, magazines, books and news broadcasting. This style has a very strict grammar system where simple misreading can change the meaning.
- ◇ Colloquial Arabic: Almost every country in the Arab world has their own colloquial dialect which many Arabs find easier to use in speech as it is not as strict as the Modern Standard Arabic (Fusha). Colloquial Arabic is rarely used in newspapers but its usage in writing has grown dramatically through web chats and forums.

Web Formats:

- ◇ Arabic Keyboard: Writing Arabic using Arabic Keyboards and Arabic Language settings on the computer.
- ◇ ‘Arabilizi’: Writing Arabic using Latin alphabet and numbers to express Arabic letters for example: 3arabi= عربي=A’rabi / 5aleej= خليج= Khaleej etc..

Internet Usage Trends:

Internet penetration:

The internet became available to the Arab public since the mid 1990s and from then on internet penetration has grown rapidly over the years which Gulf Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and United Arab Emirates have reached near 40% penetration as late as 2008.

(<http://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#bh>)

Arabic website trends:

Arabic websites can be divided into several types based by popularity and abundance:

1. Internet forums: Although forums are considered quite an 'old' technology, they are still very popular with Bahrain (with a population of just over 1 million people) alone hosting an estimated 2,000 different forums as an example. These forums range in target and content mostly for general information, news, poetry or a soapbox for political means.
2. Chat rooms: Another 'old' technology but still incredibly popular between Arab youth as a way to find people of the opposite sex and have relationships in a society which forbids open dating and pre-marital relationships (Al-Ahmedi 2002).
3. Newspapers and News Broadcasters: Used mainly as a free means to the newspapers and a way to receive up-to-date news from around the globe. Only recently have these websites integrated blog functions where readers can interact with the writers.
4. Religious Websites: Websites covering Islamic topics with multimedia
5. Blogs: Used mainly to discuss politics and social matters in the Arab world. Bloggers write in Arabic and/or English. Some consider Arab bloggers as elitists or pioneers when it comes to using technology for activism.
6. Customized Web 2.0 applications for Arabic speaking users: These applications are quite few and not much known as Arab users opt to use the 'original' YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, Twitter etc.. Rather than their Arabic equivalents such as ArabTube, IslamTube, Watwet etc..

This is partly due to the fact the many users feel that these Customized websites are less reliable than the original applications and in many cases have less and much poorer content than the original applications. Others also find that these Arabic versions are not well utilized by uploading irrelevant, immoral and useless

content.

Web searches in Arabic:

Due to the poor Arabic content on the web, finding information on the web is an extremely difficult task. Keeping in mind, is that there are two web formats for writing on the web makes it more difficult as users may need to write the search terms in Arabic letters or in Arabilizi.

One innovation, Yamli.com has combated this problem by creating a smart keyboard which can 'translate' Arabilizi into Arabic letters thus helping users who do not have Arabic keyboards to search in Arabic in addition to searching the topic with both web formats. Yamli.com's search engine is powered by Google.com making it a powerful search tool for Arabic speakers.

MBR Foundation:

The [Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashed Al-Maktoum](http://www.mbrfoundation.ae) Foundation (www.mbrfoundation.ae) was created to start projects to help improve Arabic content on the web. The Arab Library is an online library where users can read some of the most famous books in Arabic Literature and poetry. Tarjem is an ongoing project to encourage young Arabs to become translators and translate essays to and from Arabic to the world. This foundation is a good example of how government can help improve Arabic content on the web.

Conclusion:

The Arabic language has very poor representation on the web, thus making Arabic content poor. Arabs and Muslims are the custodians of the Arabic Language and that must be reflected by creating original and informative content on the web.

Arabs must first gain confidence in using the language by learning it better to minimize their grammatical mistakes and save time in proofreading.

Applications like Yamli.com shows that there is a lot of creativity and forward thinking

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社会システム情報学研究科
名古屋大学
Graduate School of Social Informatics
Nagoya University
(The Poor Representation of Arabic Websites on the Web)

people in the Arab world and with foundations such as the MBR foundation as financial and technical support, eventually we will see better Arabic content on the web.