

# Spreading the Word

The changing demographics of the internet are breathing new life into hundreds of languages and cultures. Based on international polls and census information, the technology research firm, InternetWorldStats, estimates that speakers with a first language other than English are the fastest-growing group of new internet users, at 1 billion out of a total online population approaching 1.5 billion people. And at pole position as the fastest growing language on the web is Arabic, which registered a growth rate in excess of 2000 per cent over the period 2000-2008. Second and third with 750 and 670 per cent, respectively, are Chinese and Portuguese. By stark contrast, English content on the web grew by just over 200 per cent over the same period.

Moreover, the rate of Arabic speakers among total internet users currently stands at 4.1 per cent, which compares favourably with the estimated number of Arabic speakers in the offline world, at 5.4 per cent.

However, a significant portion of this growth stems from Arabic speakers – and Arabic content – outside the Middle East. The battle for Arabic cyberspace supremacy began several years ago, with Google, MSN-Middle East, Arabia.com and BBCArabic, to name but a few, working to increase their Arabic niche either directly or through affiliates. Arabic content on the web has largely been driven in response to the multilingual boom over the years, thereby creating local versions of international sites and offering specialized information in the appropriate languages; Google, for instance, added Arabic to its personalized homepage service (iGoogle) last year to boost such customized Arabic sites as google.com.bh (for Bahrain) and google.ae (for the UAE). According to statistics by ESCWA – the UN commission for the Arab region and a strong advocate for Arabic content – these customized international sites accounted for approximately three-quarters of all Arabic content in 2005, which in turn constituted 0.1 per cent of total web pages for that year, or some 40 million pages in Arabic compared to an estimated 40 billion pages in all other languages.

Within the Arab region itself, internet usage has grown more modestly from 1.8 per cent of the world total in 2005 to the current level of 3.0 per cent, with some 42 million Arab users, including 5.3 million in the Gulf region.

But both the quantity of Arabic content and the e-balance are set to change as domestic and regional companies gear up to capture a nascent Arabic-surfing audience. In a very real sense, Arabic content is at the cusp of a great transformation – drawing clear parallels with satellite TV at the turn of the millennium when al-Jazeera, among others, spearheaded the proliferation of home-grown Arabic channels.

The principal reason for the Arabic-content jamboree – expected over the course of the next two years, according to most analysts – is a ruling that was passed in June this year to allow domains to be registered in scripts other than Latin characters, including Arabic. This means that countries will be able to receive the equivalent of their two-letter country code, like Qatar's .qa in Arabic, and that it will soon be possible to have web addresses as well as content entirely in Arabic.

This ruling by Iccann (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers), which oversees the management of internet names and addresses, complements another move aimed at making available a host of new generic top level domains (gTLDs) – the suffix in a web address such as

.com or .org. Projected to come into effect by the second quarter of 2009, these technical innovations mean that Arab companies will be able to register any word in either English or Arabic so that, for instance, domain names ending with دبيّ (.dubai), أخبار, (.news) or سيارة (.car) will soon be for the taking.

While several home-grown projects and initiatives have already been successful in raising the level of Arabic content on the internet (see the table on the top websites visited by Gulf users), these are projected to multiply as the internet develops into a truly multilingual village.

But beyond the hype of a sizzling-hot technology – or at least the protracted debugging that was needed to hammer Arabic characters into Unicode and IP – Arabic content will pass the ultimate test only if it succeeds in generating revenues. This in turn translates into enticing more Arab consumers onto the web and into making online purchases.

Within the context of the former, the internet penetration rate of Arab users remains frail, at 16.8 per cent, compared to other non-English languages like Japanese and German, which currently stand at 73.8 per cent and 63.5 per cent, respectively.

The main inhibitor is education and a general lack of awareness regarding the importance of internet. For example, less than 10 per cent of Egypt's 80 million people have internet access; and those with access tend to speak and write English and prefer to communicate that way.

This has been compounded by censorship in several Arab states and weak regional e-commerce activities. Moreover, the majority of Arab internet users still expect information and Arabic content to be free, rather than having to pay a premium for them. This attitude has led to the failure of most Arabic websites that relied on sales of content as the main source of revenue.

Acknowledging this hindrance, some Arabic websites have resorted to offering free content while relying on advertisements for revenue. Unfortunately, until now, Arabic websites have competed for a small pool of users and, therefore, sceptical advertisers. For example, eMarketer, a global digital media research company, puts the total online advertising across the Gulf region at \$10 million. Compare that with the internet advertising revenues in the United States, which, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers, totalled nearly \$8 billion for the first six months of 2006; and the first half of 2007 saw a whopping increase of 26.4 per cent, registering almost \$10 billion. Similarly, the media research and consultancy firm, ZenithOptimedia, places the growth rate in online advertising at 28.2 per cent in 2007, far outstripping the advertising spend in other media, which grew by only 3.9 per cent.

Moreover, the investment in Arabic content is not pan-Arab; it is largely focused in the Gulf region owing to the wide divergence of ICT infrastructure and differences in both economic growth as measured by per capita GDP, and in human capital development and education as measured by the average number of years of schooling. In particular, Saudi Arabia is set to play a leading role in pushing Arabic content using its extra income from oil windfalls.

More often, the gap between the Arab region and the West is about knowledge rather than money or politics. Take, for instance, the woeful shape of Arabic Wikipedia, which – with fewer than 65,000 articles – is ranked 29th among the various Wikipedias, just behind Slovenian and well behind the artificial language, Esperanto. Rudimentary English will always remain the most convenient means of oral or written communication between strangers of different cultures. But,

with trips and stumbles, the Arabic internet might finally come of age in the Middle East in the way of Arabic satellite TV thanks to the fresh spin of being able to surf completely *bil-Arabiya*.

TOP 10 LANGUAGES ON THE INTERNET BY GROWTH RATE

Language	Language growth, 2000-2008 (%)	Internet users by language (millions)	Percentage of all Internet users	World population for the language (millions)	Percentage of world population
Arabic	2063.7	60	4.1	357	5.4
Chinese	755.1	276	18.9	1,365	20.4
Portuguese	668.0	58	4.0	240	3.6
French	458.7	68	4.7	411	6.1
Spanish	405.3	125	8.5	452	6.8
English	203.5	431	29.4	2,039	30.5
Italian	162.9	35	2.4	58	0.9
German	121.0	61	4.2	96	1.4
Japanese	99.7	94	6.4	127	1.9
Korean	82.9	35	2.4	73	1.1
All other languages	580.4	221	15.1	1,458	21.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>5601.2</b>	<b>1,464</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>6,676</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Sources: International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and InternetWorldStats.

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