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# Arab Readership

## The Failures and Future of the Arabic Publishing Industry

### Introduction:

The NextPage Foundation with the aid of Synovate Marketing Research Firm did a study entitled, What Arabs Read: A Pan-Arab Survey on Readership. Phase one of the study which spanned five Arab nations was conducted in January 2007 and included results from Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Morocco. The results were ulminating and frightening as it showed what an Arab book market is really interested in, but also proved that readership is quite low in the region. The following is an anaylsis of *part* of NextPage's findings, examining what I feel to be contributing issues to the lack of readership in the region, as well as some small steps we can take to better the overall situation.

### About Kotobarabia:

Kotobarabia was established in September 2004, becoming the first Arabic language e-book publishing house in the Middle East. Our mission is to Our mission is to create a single web-based source for Arabic literature, knowledge and wisdom, and to make this source available to Arabic speakers and enthusiasts the world over. Our vision

is to build a Library of Alexandria that cannot be burned down, preserving and distributing Arabic literature for people today and generations to come.

Through the Internet, Kotobarabia's books can reach Arabic readers anywhere in the world at the click of a button.

### Analysis of Problem:

When examining NextPage's findings in Egypt, one is struck by the following statistics: the majority of people do read and those that do read books regularly, read the Quraan or other religious titles.

Whereas there is little doubt surrounding the findings of Synovate – that is, that Egyptian readers prefer religious texts, namely the Quraan – it must be mentioned that Kotobarabia's findings on the topic include a good deal pertinent information not included in those of Synovate.

Synovate's research showed that most "book readers" in Egypt chose to read the Quraan. However, the report says little about what other than the Quraan was being read in Egyptian households. Any information on further texts was minimal and ultimately insignificant.

By contrast, people who read newspapers, magazines or online information preferred politics and current events. Of course there is an argument to be made that those topics are exactly the genres that newspapers, magazines and/or the internet lend themselves to, however there are other theories that must be mentioned and explored.

In exploring the reading habits of Egyptians, Kotobarabia found that, in contrast to the findings of NextPage, that the number one topic of interest for Egyptian readers is politics<sup>1</sup>. Religious texts fell to a surprising seventh place, preceded by hot topics<sup>2</sup>, literature, and philosophy. Although these findings do contradict NextPage's own field research in regards to the types of full text books read, it does not contradict the overall findings that can be extrapolated from their research.

Newspapers and magazines often focus on issues like politics, economics and current events. These genres overlap with Kotobarabia's own findings. The only distinction seems to be the medium on which the topic is explored. Magazines and newspapers provide readings periodically, in the form of short articles (less than 2000 words on average) and in variety. Alternatively, electronic full text books are much longer, and are delivered through a deliberate search on the part of the reader.

But there is a question that begs to be asked: why are Egyptian readers interested in these secular topics in the forms of newspapers, magazines, and electronic books, while the only physical texts they seem interested in are of a religious nature? In other words, why aren't more people reading books on politics? Why are the books that are read in the physical format those of a religious nature (or at least of overwhelming popularity), or rather, *the* book that represents *the* religious nature (The Holy Quraan)?

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the field research did mention that those who preferred to read online, many read politics, however, I believe that a distinction must be made between surfing the internet reading articles, blogs and websites, versus reading full-text eBooks online. I believe the research referred to the former, whereas our findings refers to the latter. The contrast in results is on what type of full text books do Egyptian readers prefer. Of course, the medium of the internet makes answering this question difficult and as a result some assumptions must be made.

<sup>2</sup> Hot Topics refers to a number of subject from current events to books that deal with interesting issues in popular media. For example, one of Kotobarabia's top sellers in this genre is a book called 'Night Confessions,' which is a non-fiction account of a radio presenters experience on a popular radio show of the same name.

I believe that the answer is multi-faceted and not easily answered or even understood. However, I also believe that elements of these reasons are readily available to even the most casual of observers.

### Market Atrophy

Given that the above findings from NextPage are true, then the only simple answer to the question of why people aren't reading more books on topics that they enjoy in other formats, is supply. The market simply does not have the titles that readers are interested in. Furthermore, the titles that *are* available in topics that stimulate and interested the average Egyptian reader are not easily found or well advertised.

Certainly this theory is supported by NextPage's own findings that amongst the most compelling of reading triggers, *more books in Arabic* is one of the reasons cited for what would make Egyptian readers more likely to read.<sup>3</sup> The report further states that the leading trigger for lack of readership is not enough titles in *topics that interest them*.<sup>4</sup>

From my own experience as an e-Publisher, I can testify whereas there is an abundant supply of novels, poetry collections and religious texts, books of a more erudite nature do not exist in surplus. The varieties of books available in subjects like politics or current events are simply not in the market. Readers would like to purchase them, however they can not find the titles or the subjects that interest them. Therefore it follows that supply does not meet demand and individuals are left wanting<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> NextPage's Readership Full Country Report, Page 36, Chart J

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> An interesting statistic on Kotobarabia.com is that amongst the most search topic is that of school texts, especially in economics and business studies, however the number of available titles are less than 10% of the sites catalogue. Such books, if available, I'm sure would sell extremely well in the market.

Not that I put too much stock in supply side economics... I am not saying that should an army of legitimate, intelligent writers start flooding the market with books on a variety of other subject matters, that the Arab population would start reading excessively and the problem would be solved or, at least, be set on the path to rectification. The reality is that although texts on any one topic are not usually available in abundance, every genre is represented by at least a handful of authors writing legitimate, important, entertaining books. So why aren't they selling?

Other triggers for not reading are more books recommended on the Internet, on television and through promotional events.<sup>6</sup> That is to say those individuals may venture into a store and attempt to buy a book on politics or current events, but without titles that somehow reach their attention as credible, entertaining or of some other value, they are deterred from buying anything, and leave the store empty-handed.

Market atrophy, therefore, takes on two forms – that of a lack of supply and that of a lack of interest. Although these are not the only problems that face the Egyptian Publishing industry, I fear that they are two major players that require attention in order for the overall situation in the Arab Publishing world to be solved.

### Potential Solutions

One possible solution is the creation of a viable supply chain. That is to say those consumers who are interested in being able to enter one bookstore and find whatever title they are looking for, or browse a selection on whatever topic interests them, should be capable of doing so. The current situation in Egypt in regards to Arabic language titles is that publishers open their own bookstores that house their own titles. Famous examples

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<sup>6</sup> Synovate's Readership Full Country Report, Page 5, Chart J

of this are two prominent Arabic bookstores situated in the heart of downtown Cairo, in Midan Talaat Harb. Here, both Matbouille and Dar Al Sharouk, notable publishers, have their bookstores – right across the street from one another. Whereas both stores display titles from other publishers and have deals with foreign publishers, neither offer a wide selection outside of their own catalogue, with most of the Arabic titles being their own.

They are the famous examples, but there are other smaller examples throughout the downtown core. Furthermore, in relation to foreign books published in Arabic (i.e.: books published by Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, etc.), there are few titles available in any store. The reason for this is that tariffs to import these titles are high, causing foreign titles to be priced well above local market prices.

Thus the problem of supply becomes two fold – publishers only publishing their own content, and bookstores refusing to publish foreign titles because of high stocking costs.

A possible solution for this dilemma is something that is under our noses – trade fairs. Whereas the Cairo International Book Fair held yearly is the largest Arabic fair in the world, its primary activity is that of retail. If the fair reconstructed itself to be made more available for subsidiary and distribution rights trading, then more foreign titles could be made available in the fair. Furthermore, if the Egyptian Government or another funding organizations would be willing to front the money necessary to buy such rights, Egyptian publishers would be more willing to take a chance on foreign titles, thus diversifying the local pool of titles available. In addition, if print rights were also purchasable, Egyptian publishers could reprint the titles locally in order to have competitive prices.

Currently such a practice is not done because foreign publishers are skeptical that local Egyptian publishers will be honest about the number of copies published and/or number of print runs done. On the flip side, local publishers cannot afford to buy subsidiary rights for more than a single run - if that. Therefore, the investing body must be ready to do two things: One – purchase unlimited print runs (something that can be quite expensive) and two – guarantee that the publisher they are purchasing the rights on behalf of will not abuse their position. This is difficult to do, but if possible will diversify the foreign titles available.

As for the dilemma of bookstores owned by publishing houses only showcasing their own titles – the solution is simple. Independent bookstores willing to deal with any and all publishers are needed. We already have seen some success stories in the Middle East with the chain of Jarir Bookstores seen in the Gulf that originally started in Saudi Arabia. In Egypt, we have our own success story in Diwan Bookstore – although it showcases mostly English titles, its Arabic selection is respectable, and more importantly, diverse. However, there still is no Arabic bookstore with a wide variety of Arabic titles from multiple publishing houses. This is a development that I personally would welcome.

One possible way around this is what Kotobarabia is attempting to do – that is to say, in a market plagued by distribution problems, lack of cooperation and censorship, the internet is an invaluable resource where such obstacles can be avoided. The largest drawback, however, is that readers would be forced to enjoy books amidst the soft glow of a computer monitor, rather than have the full reading experience of interacting with a

physical book. However, considering the alternative of not having that title, it is a small price to pay.

### Conclusion:

After all is said and done, the major obstacles to increasing interest in reading are supply and diversification. Market atrophy based on lack of interest may be partially solved if there was a free-flow of ideas and an open market with affordable titles from all over the Arab World. Publishers, not only locally in Egypt, but throughout Arabic-speaking nations must learn to have a free-flow of ideas, and these ideas must come to the fore-front without judgement, discrimination or threat of being removed from bookstore shelves. Once this is achievable, the future of Arabic readership will look far brighter.