

# IT Tools for Publishers Survey Report

Prepared for

Open Society Institute - Budapest

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January 2006

## **Introduction**

Societies can be measured by different scales and methods, they can be measured by their scientific achievements or their artistic works or their written words. In our case we are trying to understand the status and potential for information flows vis-à-vis IT (availability, usage, behavior, accessibility and problems) in the publishing sector. We are studying this in the context of a region which has seen one of the highest rates of conflict throughout modern history, is the intersection of three of the world's major religions and is the primary source of the world's energy. Therefore, it is important to note that reasons why the publishing industry is crippled are deeply rooted and are often the result of different factors dating back several centuries.

The "Arab world" is of course a vast and diverse place comprised of people and countries with widely different resources and means, governments and policies, histories and geographies - a fact that is reflected in the business, behavior and approach of Arab publishers. It is therefore, quite difficult to generalize amongst publishers in Syria versus United Arab Emirates, Morocco versus Jordan. Instead, as our survey results indicate, it is a publisher's location (in terms of country) rather than his/her position with the company or the size or nature of the company that has the greatest impact upon IT behavior, attitudes and usage.

## **IT in the Arab world**

It is widely acknowledged that IT in the Arab world lags significantly behind other regions even taking into consideration those countries where economic indicators are comparable with "the West". This is true both currently and historically, as using Arabic as a common language on operating systems didn't start until Internet Explorer 5 when the Unicode support was introduced. Sakhr software (Egypt) and Ariss computers (Beirut) were pioneers in this area. Over time Sakhr stopped producing Arabic software after all its programs were pirated while Ariss still produces very inexpensive software to prevent them from being pirated. The Arabic language and IT have proven to be rather incompatible because of these piracy issues and lack of anti-piracy legislation which has in effect strangled software production. In this environment, in effect, access to new technologies has facilitated copyright infringement by making copying and distribution much easier. Many fear that e-publishing would do the same for the book industry.

In Arab countries, internet penetration still lags behind the overall average internet penetration and at 8.3% is approximately half the average penetration rate (14.9%) of the rest of the world. There is little doubt that Internet penetration and growth has been hindered by state controls over information. For publishers this means that the culture and habit of using electronic communication and the internet as a resource to reach customers, book-shops or other publishers has not been developed and that in general the region has been slow to take advantage of the business efficiencies and growth that these tools could produce.

## **Overview of the Survey**

A 19 question survey querying publishers' attitudes, behavior, problems, IT usage, needs equipment was developed by Salah Chebaro in collaboration with Next Page Foundation and Open Society Institute - Budapest in August 2005

and the surveys were conducted by telephone during September and November 2005<sup>1</sup>. Over 100 publishers were approached and 32 publishers representing 12 countries (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, Egypt, Tunis, Algeria, Morocco, Yemen) agreed to participate. The aim was to reach a large number of respondents representing different countries areas of publishing and types of publishing houses. The majority of respondents were managers of publishing houses specializing in publishing paper books; while 2 were working in e-publishing. A broad range of publishers both in terms of company size (ranging from 4 to over 100 employees), type and scope of books published and business aims responded. On the latter point, some publishers claimed to be purely profit oriented while others had more altruistic aims in mind such as "Dar Kannan" who stated "We have an overall educational project which is concerned to support educational institutions and promote democracy which believes in human dignity and his right in freedom of thought and knowledge".

### **Difficulties in Conducting the Survey**

There were 3 major types of challenges faced in conducting the survey. First, technical difficulties in obtaining telephone access to some of the countries (specifically Tunisia, Palestine and Iraq) and reaching publishers who are frequently traveling. Second, in general, publishers were hesitant to participate and were skeptical and suspicious of the motives of the survey. Of those who agreed to participate, a large number gave very brief answers, found the list of questions too long and/or too intrusive. The Islamic publishers were more hesitant than others, and preferred not to give any information. Many suspected that the survey was for intelligence purposes rather than for their benefit. This reticence can likely be attributed to 1) the sensitivity of the publishing profession in censored environments 2) lack of understanding (or being convinced of) the motives of the survey 3) unwillingness to discuss topics in which they do not feel fully competent (exposing their perceived weaknesses).

### **Overview of key findings**

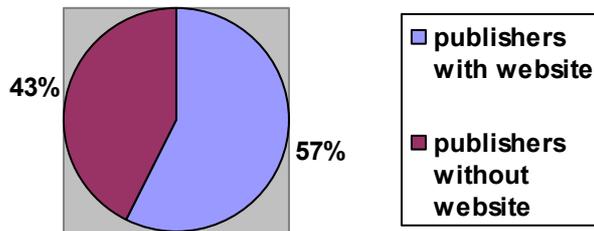
Some of the major findings (written as in absolute numbers) were as follows:

	<b>Email</b>	<b>Website</b>	<b>Fax</b>	<b>Phone</b>
Respondents who have	21	12	32	32
Respondents who don't have	11	21	0	0

The pie-chart below shows the break-down of publishers with and without web-sites

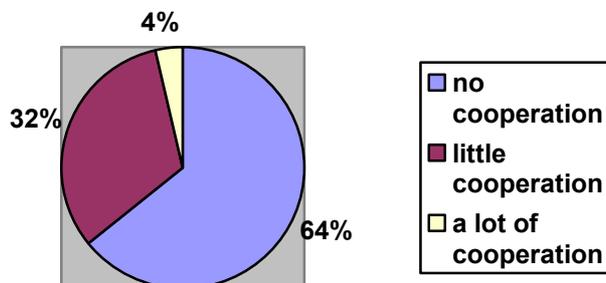
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<sup>1</sup> Very few surveys were conducted during October due to the Ramadan holiday

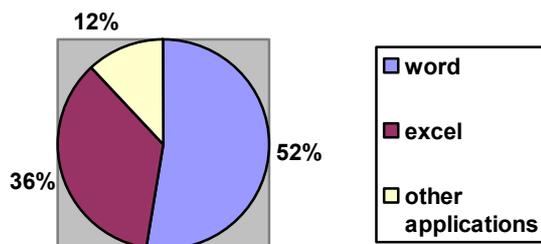


Many of the publishers used web-sites simply to communicate basic company and contact information. Of the 57% with web-sites about 1/3 have their catalogs posted on-line. Interestingly, a handful of publishers have their catalog available on CD but not on-line.

The pie-chart below indicates the break-down of publishers cooperating with other publishers. For the most part, those publishers who do cooperate do so for sale and acquisition of rights. A small number of publishers stated that they cooperate beyond this level by collaborating on exhibitions or discussing future books (to collaborate on rights acquisitions and to lower Paper, print and binding (PPB) costs by sharing a (larger) print run. Lack of trust amongst publishers was most frequently cited as the reason behind limited cooperation.



Breakdown of most commonly used software is as follows:



## **Description of the main problems and obstacles**

Discussions with the publishers revealed a range of problems ranging from those at the macro/government level (related to the legal, regulatory and financial environment) and those at the corporate level. Although problems at the national and regional level were not the focus of the survey they must be mentioned since they play the biggest role in affecting a publishers' business and provide the context for publisher specific issues.

At the macro/government level, commonly cited obstacles listed by the publishers included 1) censorship which not only limits the titles a publisher may select but also discourages readership. Since the public is aware that the book has been state-certified, this often reduces its perceived value or their interest in the book; 2) copyright infringement – publishers are not ensured the integrity of their copyrights and piracy is common throughout the region; 3) lack of education and training – many publishers originate as printers or book-sellers and lack professional training and skills 4) market pressures – books can be produced more cheaply in some countries (e.g. Lebanon) thus limiting the potential for local players. Other key obstacles include limited readership and interest in reading, insecurity in financing new books, and low purchasing power in most Arab countries. At the corporate level, first and foremost is the fact that IT is not very ingrained in the business culture. This is of course a reflection of the business culture in general and not limited to publishing. One publisher even stated that with European associates communication is always via e-mail whereas with Arab publishers they communicate almost entirely by telephone, indicating that it is the location of the contact rather than the means most suitable for the type of communication that determines the technology/method used. A second issue is the lack of education and training – many publishers do not have the skills or means to develop the IT skills they need. Tight margins and limited availability of quality trainers further discourages professional training and raising of the overall standard. Furthermore, virtually no publishers have in-house IT expertise that can be called upon and almost all respondents stated that they out-source their IT (set-up, integration, maintenance, trouble-shooting etc.) as opposed to having an in-house technician. Lastly, many publishers cited revenue collection as their major concern.

## **Assessment of the readiness/interest in IT solutions**

The surveys indicate a broad range of publishers' readiness and interest in IT solutions. While some publishers lament the low standards amongst Arab publishers (according to Layla Chaoun at Le Fennec many publishers "don't even have computers") the majority of publishers are so entrenched in the daily challenges of managing their business, that they do not spend much time thinking about IT as a potential solution to improving and growing their business. Publishers were however receptive to the idea of training sessions and almost all said that they would attend such sessions. Furthermore, while still at an early stage, most publishers believe that Arab publishers will move towards adopting IT solutions. Nabil Saleh at the Jammaa Library stated that "Technology in order to be wide spread needs a knowledgeable and educated society, it is growing but very slowly." It is the opinion of this consultant that over time all the serious players will adapt IT

based solutions when they see others using it and the dynamics of the market and competition mean that those companies that survive will be those employing IT effectively.

### **Potential and market size for e-publishing**

E-publishing is still far away for the Arab markets. Even in the developed US and Western European markets this model has yet to prove itself as a preferred method for publishers and readers alike. For the Arab world it seems like rocket science. If we take a look at the 2 Arab companies presently working in this field, Arabicebooks and Kotobarabia (both of whom with work 40-50 publishers offering the full text of books for on-line viewing at a nominal fee), both are struggling to survive. During conversations with kotobarabia and Arabicebooks they openly stated that this market is still very young and more awareness is needed from both publisher and readers. That said, one of the major fears for publishers is piracy; this issue is major and laws are not sufficient to alleviate these fears since even if better legislature were introduced, it still might not be enforced. Another major issue is who is going to finance convert the all the book contents into electronic format? Is it the publisher or the electronic retail store or a third party? This is important since the large majority of books are still not available in electronic format. These are issues which should be solved especially given that Arabic book prices are low and the whole project might not be economically feasible. However, although the business model is extremely difficult Jamal Annouti from Arabic e-books states "we personally believe e-books could overcome certain obstacles in the publishing market, but they still have a long way to go before they are technically accepted by the reader"

One of the biggest areas growing in this sector is e-learning. Governments and corporations are interested in this domain and many projects are being made from various donors to support e-learning especially for people living in remote areas. The potential for this is quite big especially since young people are rapidly being connected and learning to use the internet – this could well be the new frontier on which education can rise to a new level in this part of the world.

### **Proposed Solutions and Recommendations**

To address the two levels of problems – government and corporate, steps must first be taken to influence government policy. Governments should understand that with the onset of the internet, they are no longer capable of monitoring publications and restricting access to information. Therefore, they should be persuaded to keep monitoring to a minimum. The most appropriate engine for these changes are the publishers' syndicates who through advocacy can show governments that such restrictions discourage reading and are not relevant in the internet age. At the corporate level, the quality of publishers both in terms of their skills and practices should be improved in all respects ranging from management, finances, marketing, distribution etc. Because publishers are generally not technical people and since they don't really know what technology can do their vision is blurred. However giving live examples of how technology can enhance their work will go along way towards demonstrating and convincing them of the power of technology. To start this process we need a full scale program to educate, train, implement, and test IT solutions for the different sectors of the industry. Publishers in rich gulf-states for example have the money to become more advanced but do not have the required

expertise, whereas publishers in Syria, Jordan, and Egypt have the necessary skilled people but not enough money. Cooperation across different Arab countries will help match skills to financial resources.

Thinking of solutions for problems which have been around for a long time is not easy and there is no magic wand which can change the facts. The problem is definitely mixed and there is more than one reason so the solution should be on several fronts with each front consisting of several layers. Some immediate suggestions are as follows:

- Set the goals for the overall uplifting of the industry, maybe by coordinating with the Syndicate of Arab publishers to make it known that all publishers who agree to this upgrade will receive benefits. For example, an accreditation or certification procedure (similar to ISO but for publishers) could be established with the backing of an NGO working with the APU in cooperation with national syndicates.
- Create a specialized technical team to study and enhance the process of printing, pre-press and publishing. The team could consist of 2 people with experience and 2 new young technicians. The output of this process could be to create a manual, publicly available and to disseminate this information in order to point publishers to resources regarding the technical aspects of publishing.
- Tackle the problem from awareness level, give live examples by holding seminars that highlight companies using IT solutions and how they advanced their business via these tools. Such sessions could be held at the large book fairs (since many of the publishers are already convened in one place) and could be combined with publishers' training.
- Focus on improving marketing through training. Along with topics listed above, this training can cover topics such as developing a strategy, putting a catalog on CD, strategy, design, advertising etc.
- Begin a concerted effort to gather and record reliable statistics on what is being sold and what is not so that publishers will have accurate data on which to base their decisions.
- Introduce publishers to specialized websites which sell Arabic books with a view of encouraging their participation. Encouraging familiarity with and usage of on-line resources will bolster the entire market and facilitate IT exchange on other levels. In addition, supporting publishers' internet access and usage will pressure governments to loosen censorship and monitoring. Neelwafurat.com has done a lot of work in this field and in many ways is considered a leader in this field.
- Educate book-sellers on their rights and encourage them to exercise them. For example, when libraries in Saudi Arabia stopped accepting books without ISBNs a lot of publishers began adding ISBNs. Again this education could be covered in publishers' training.
- Advertise and distribute a tool for converting books into electronic format. Currently the books are physically transferred to the online bookstore and added manually to the database. Neelwafurat has created software to add books in a fast and practical manner for the book data entry.
- Create an on-line publishers' platform, which would be a hosted web-site where publishers can access information including best practices, technical manuals and guides, national statistics, plus examples for

professional communication and marketing, contacts to other publishers, news, links to other resources etc.

- Establish an on-line database of translations. Publishers could be encouraged to accept (and keep) electronic versions of the works and to post all or a portion of them on-line (they may or may not be downloadable for printing). This would develop the market for books and open it up to the internet savvy reader. Furthermore, publishers would have a better idea of what books are available and would make it easier to become familiar with the content of the books if they have an interest in publishing them in their own markets.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that the problems facing publishers are varied and multi-faceted. IT alone certainly cannot resolve them, yet well planned and concrete actions focused on advocacy, education/training, sharing of live examples and introduction of tools and resources, hold the greatest potential for catalyzing change with Arab publishers. Importantly, any wide-spread change must involve multiple actors particularly at the syndicate level and must be tailored to the needs of the local markets. Once a plan based on these four areas has been initiated (using a selection of the recommendations listed above), it is likely that the benefits of effective IT usage will naturally gain recognition and momentum as IT adoption and usage generally grows more rapidly in developing markets. Perhaps then Arab publishing will achieve the potential described by Amin Al-Zawi of the Library Algiers who states "the book market and publishing is starting to know some sort of advancements and there is a real renaissance in the book industry in the Arab world from Morocco to the gulf region" and "there is a hidden demand in the Arab world in publishing and we should discover it". Let us take small but measured steps to use IT as a tool to unlock this hidden demand, facilitate communication and cooperation and enable business efficiency and productivity to raise the overall level of the market and facilitate free exchange of thoughts and ideas.