

# Towards an Analysis of Rhetoric of Digital Arabic Discourse

Gameel Abdelmageed

**Abstract**—Arabs have a rhetorical heritage which has greatly contributed to the monitoring and analyzing of the rhetoric of the Holy Quran, *Hadith*, and Arabic texts on poetry and oratory. But Arab scholars - as far as the researcher knows - have not contributed to monitoring and analyzing the rhetoric of digital Arabic discourse although it has prominence, particularly in social media and has strong effectiveness in the political and social life of Arab society. This discourse has made its impact by using very new rhetorical techniques in language, voice, image, painting and video clips which are known as “Multimedia” and belong to “Digital Rhetoric”. This study suggests that it is time to draw the attention of Arab scholars and invite them to monitor and analyze the rhetoric of digital Arabic discourse.

**Keywords**—Digital discourse, digital rhetoric, social media, Facebook.

## I. THE STUDY GOAL

THERE are limited numbers of Arabic literary studies concerned with digital Arabic literature, and the novel in particular. This literature, as these studies themselves recognize, is limited or rare in Arabic. It is important to mention that the digital novel is only one simple part of the Arabic digital discourse which contains a variety of types. Some of these types innovate and have a strong effect on Arab society. However, this huge field of digitalized discourse has not been subject to any type of Arabic literary and rhetorical study, since it is seen to all, outside the field of literature and rhetoric. Consequently, it has been completely overlooked by Arabic literary and rhetorical studies. The researcher believes that these innovated and affected discourses can be considered as a new type of Arabic rhetoric. Thus, this study comes to draw the attention of Arab researchers to these discourses, hence calling for monitoring and analyzing their rhetoric.

## II. DISCOURSE/DIGITAL DISCOURSE

The key change that occurred in the study of language with the advent of discourse analysis was the transition from language study in its presupposed system to its natural manifestations, where people use it in order to communicate and interact. This means not limiting the analysis to the text but going beyond it to production factors and reception mechanisms with their relevant issues. This, accordingly, makes the term of Discourse denote linguistic communication, and that the approach of language study is the communicative approach.

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Concerning digital discourse, it includes, in general, each Computer-Mediated Discourse. But with the completion of discourse across the Internet World Wide Web, particularly Web 2.0, it deepened and expanded the circle of interacting, collaborating, participating, contributing, dynamic content, using of software applications and multimedia and innovation horizon. This is manifested in social media which became most prevalent, spreading all over the world. This spreading, according to Mayfield, is attributed to the human aspect of social media: “A good way to think about social media is that all of this is actually just about being human beings, sharing ideas, cooperating, and collaborating to create art, thinking and commerce, vigorous debate and discourse, finding people who might be good friends, allies and lovers – it is what our species has built several civilizations on. That is why it is spreading so quickly, not because it is a great shiny, whizzy new technology, but because it lets us be ourselves - only more so” [1]. Communication therefore is no longer relying on pure language, but it became multimedia (text, voice, image, painting and video clips, etc.). This is considered a historical event as proposed by Eyman: “Now, for the first time in history, the written, oral and audiovisual modalities of communication are integrated into multimodal hypertext systems made accessible via the Internet and World Wide Web” [2]. With regard to multimedia, the concept of discourse should be expanded to include all semiotic signs. This study uses the term discourse with this comprehensive concept and to refer to the methodology (communicative approach). Pluralism is not only confined to a medium, but also authorship, as articulated by Androutsopoulos when he clarifies the characteristics that the Web 2.0 provided, saying they are “characterized by processes of multimodality and multiauthorship: their content is produced by multiple participants, simultaneously and in part independently of each other” [3], which has to be considered in an analysis of discourse, such as this.

## III. USE OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ARAB WORLD

Reports and statistics indicate an increase in the number of Internet and social media users in the Arab world in recent years. In 2014, a fair number of Internet users in the Arab region amounted to more than 135 million, while the number was about 95 million in 2011 [4]-[6]. In mid-2015, Egypt was listed among the top 20 countries with the highest number of Internet users, ranking 13<sup>th</sup> rank with 48.3 million Internet users and with 54.6% penetration of the population [7]. The percentage of

Arabic users on the Internet also increased dramatically between 2000-2015 by 6,091.9%, according to statistics from a study conducted in mid-2015, to rank 4<sup>th</sup> among the top 10 languages used in the web, representing almost 155.6 million users, and 41.5 % penetration of the population, and 8.4% of all Internet users of worldwide [8]. With respect to using social media, in mid-2014 there were more than 71 million active users [9]. A questionnaire revealed that "Facebook and WhatsApp are the most used social media channels across the Arab world" [10], as shown in Fig. 1.

Table I below shows the number of Facebook users in the Arab world (June 2011 - May 2014).

TABLE I  
FACEBOOK USERS IN THE ARAB WORLD (JUNE 2011 - MAY 2014)

| Jun 2011   | Jan 2012   | Jun 2012   | Dec 2012   | Dec 2013   | May 2014   |
|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 29,845,871 | 37,390,837 | 45,194,452 | 51,000,000 | 71,000,000 | 81,302,064 |

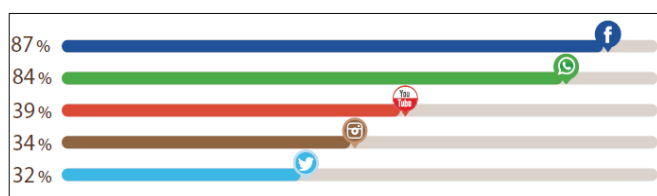


Fig. 1 Percentage of social media use in Arab countries

The researcher deduced the statistics from multiple sources [11].

It can be observed that there is an increase in the number of users during these three years of more than 51 million, and the researcher thinks that the role of Facebook in the Arab uprising in early 2011 had the greatest impact on this large increase. The Arabic language is not the only language used by the population of the Arab region on Facebook. They use other languages mainly English and French. However, the Arabic language has become in the 9<sup>th</sup> ranked in the list of the top 10 used languages on Facebook in November 2012 in which the number reached a total of 20,161,280 users, while in May 2010, it was 3,457,160 with an average increase of about 480%, the second highest rate of increase in the top 10 used languages on Facebook [12]. The active users of Twitter in the Arab world reached 5,797,500 in March 2014 with estimated 533,165,900 Tweets produced in March 2014, making an average of 17,198,900 Tweets per day [13].

As for the Arab media, the number of high-profile media sites has reached 690 web sites in 2008 - the press accounting for about 50% of them; however, these press sites do not employ many of the digital technologies, such as hypertexts, in their electronic press. The number of Arab blogs on the Internet webs in August 2008 also reached about 490,000 blogs [14]. With regard to electronic advertising, according to a study that covers 17 Arab countries, there has been steady growth in the period from 2009 to 2014, where advertisement spending rose from 1% in 2009 to 9% in 2014 of the total spent on advertising, ranking it 3<sup>rd</sup> among other means of advertising. The same study predicted that the proportion of spending will increase to 10% in 2015 [15]. Many Arab advertising platforms have achieved

great success in electronic advertising. The platform (*Hassoub Advertisement*) is one of them, where "the number of ads that was published across it reached a billion advertising per month (Statistics mid-2014)" [16]. All above, accordingly, refer that there are millions of digital Arabic discourses, which are closely related to various disciplines of political, social, religious and economic life, etc.

#### IV.DIGITAL RHETORIC/ORATORY

Many of the digital Arabic discourses aim to achieve influence and persuasion, and these discourses certainly vary among themselves in terms of importance and artistic value according to many deferent considerations, including the quantity and quality of target audience of every discourse, quantity and quality of audience that respond to every discourse, as well as the quantity and quality of effect caused by each discourse. This is in addition to the extent of the exploitation of digital techniques in every discourse to achieve influence and persuasion. This purpose is the same purpose as oratory, from ancient times until today, and so, there is currently a new kind of oratory which can be called Digital Oratory. The forefront of these discourses is the Facebook discourse because it is a field of creativity and it has considerable influence on the political and social life of Arabs. It is enough to know that it was behind the Arab Uprising, especially in Egypt and Tunisia to the extent that the Egyptian revolution of January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011 is attributed to Facebook. Such an influence as this has not happened in any other country in the world. On the artistic level, this discourse has excelled in the utilization of digital technologies in the mobilization of the masses to take part in the revolution. The most prominent ideal of that is the Facebook page entitled (*Killina Khaled Said*), which led the Egyptian revolution of January 2011. It is full of multimedia which is utilized creatively to promote interaction, sharing, influence and persuasion, and then take action. The current situation probably does not allow to present different samples, and therefore, the researcher presents one sample, as shown in Fig. 2 [17], clarifying an aspect of visual rhetoric.

The picture is very cynical, eye-catching and has great significance. All of that is achieved because of contradictions; having renowned political leaders formally dressed in ultra-stylish suits, meeting to discuss very serious political issues, and with them, a regular guy dressed in shorts and flip flops with a towel slung around his neck, and scratching his head on the way to beach, or to the bathroom. Also, there is great difference between the foreground and background of the picture, between the Egyptian ruling president and the ordinary submissive Egyptian citizen; while the ruling president is at the rear behind Obama and Netanyahu, reflects the decline occurring in Egypt with regard to its historical leadership role and its current subordination to the United States and Israel; whereas the submissive citizen is at the very front and center of the image followed by others, as if to say, 'I am the marginalized submissive person who should be the head ruler, and I will restore Egypt to its leadership role'. The user makes 'sarcasm art' from visual material through the employment of digital technology. Through this art, he addresses the Egyptian

character through one of the most prominent features; humor. As so many of the comments concur, such as: “*the way to bathroom Hahahahaha*”, “*Is he showing them the way to toilet?*”, “*Are they all in a rush to urinate at the same time?*”, “*No change and no power except by the Almighty of Allah - long live Egypt!*”, “*Oh boy, there is one guy on the left back side please offer him a very cold shower to wake up him since he is still dreaming*”. The user touches on an aspect of the gloomy Egyptian reality because of the decline in its role, and the subordination and marginalization of its youth. This image came to express this reality and reverses it at the same time in order to overcome it. Many of the comments express the public’s awareness of this status and their pleasure in this conversion, as some of these comments include; “*This means that Obama and America are the two great powers in the world, but the public are more powerful than the entire Obama and America's powers, so nice*”, “*Please give us a chance*”, “*a beautiful picture and a tribute to the president, who is in the forefront*”. This outlines how digital technology was managed to make ‘sarcasm art’, to make another virtual picture, to create a new meaning, and to weave a dream and hope for the future which is (Public Lead – Egypt is the Leader).

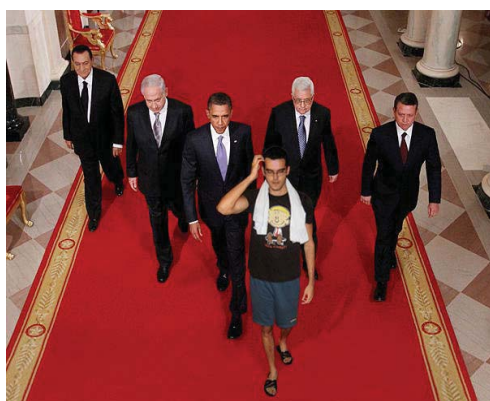


Fig. 2 The way to Sharm El Sheikh

Western studies have been concerned with digital rhetoric. Zappen looks forward to an integrated theory for digital rhetoric that might “contribute to the larger body of rhetorical theory and criticism and the rhetoric of science and technology in particular” [18]. This is a worthy goal and will enrich the theory of rhetoric. But Zappen and many of the researchers involved in digital rhetoric have linked the formation of digital rhetoric with “adapting a rhetorical tradition more than 2,000 years old to the conditions and constraints of new digital media”. Zappen also argues that the new digital media studies “suggest how traditional rhetoric might be extended and transformed into a comprehensive theory of digital rhetoric”. The researcher has reservations about this notion because it seems like simply making a modification to traditional rhetoric and applying that to digital rhetoric and this is contrary to the terms of knowledge production as they relate to the context of cultures and civilizations. Both traditional rhetoric and digital rhetoric are the product of cultural contexts and civilizations that are radically different. It is right that it can benefit from the ideas

or principles of the old rhetoric in some way and on some level, but the issue is not limited to this, it is larger and much deeper than that. Digital rhetoric is not just new rhetorical devices; it is a new way of thinking and a new world view. The theory of digital rhetoric, or the theoretical entrance to the study of digital rhetoric, can be built from different sciences and studies such as Rhetoric and Literary Criticism, Computer Sciences, Discourse Analysis, Semiotics, and Cultural Studies. In other words, it is an interdisciplinary approach.

## V.CONCLUSION

The study shows that there is a new type of oratory, which can be referred to as Digital Oratory. If it agrees with the old rhetoric in the purpose of influence and persuasion, it differs radically in many issues, most notably: the medium, and the nature of the relationship between the two parties of communication (sender and receiver). It is a very effective oratory in the Arab community; however, it has not been approached yet. An interdisciplinary approach is needed to analyze the rhetoric of digital Arabic discourse. This field of analysis is vast enough to involve dozens of studies which can address different questions such as: How this discourse is drafted? What is its strategy? What types and how are rhetorical techniques employed to influence and persuade?

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