

URLs in their native language: Opinions of Arab users of the Internet

Abstract: Contributions to a BBC news forum by 140 Arab listeners on “URLs in Arabic for the First Time” were analyzed. The analysis identified a wide range of views on the usefulness of Arabic URLs and showed a general uneasiness towards changing the familiar way of browsing and accessing Internet resources.

Résumé : Cette communication repose sur l'analyse des contributions de 140 auditeurs arabes à un forum de nouvelles de la BBC intitulé « URLs in Arabic for the First Time ». L'analyse démontre une grande variation de l'opinion sur l'utilité des URL en arabe ainsi qu'un malaise généralisé à l'idée de changer un mode de navigation et d'accès aux ressources internet familier

1. Introduction

Although more than half of the Internet users are native speakers of languages written in non-Latin scripts¹, they have had to enter Internet addresses (URLs) in the Latin script. This has been true even when they are reading pages that do not have a single word in Latin characters. Only recently, a push has started to accommodate these users by allowing them to use the characters of their native languages when entering URLs. The push is meant to facilitate these users' interaction with Internet resources and allow them to use characters used by their languages to enter Internet addresses.

2. Background

In early 2009, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) started a series of tests on URLs in Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and a few other major languages. Later in the year, permission was given to assign URLs in Arabic and Chinese. Followers of this development see it as one of the biggest changes to the Internet since its conception and development. However, it still remains to be seen how this development will affect users and whether it would actually have a positive effect on the global use of the Internet. It is not clear how this development would affect the user interactions with Internet information and the concept of globalizing this information.

The research reported here sought to find some preliminary answers to this uncertainty, focusing on Arab users and the potential ramifications for their views of the Internet and for their interactions with its information. There are so many issues that need to be tackled in this regard that an exploratory study is necessary to investigate the initial opinions of Arab users on such an important development in the evolution of the Internet. Specifically, this research sought to explore: 1) what do Arab users think in general of using URLs in their native language and 2) how do these users think this use will affect their Internet experience.

3. Method

One of the best places to read Arab opinion on the Web is the news feedback forum provided by the Arabic service of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)². On this forum, Arab listeners of the BBC can voice their opinions on a variety of topics

suggested and posted by the BBC staff. After ICANN approved the use of non-Latin script URLs, the BBC posted on its forum, on October 30, 2009, a discussion topic to allow its Arab listeners to express their opinions on this important development³.

The description of the topic (Figure 1) informed forum users about ICANN decision to permit the use of non-Latin script URLs, starting with Arabic and Chinese. It mentioned that more than half of the Internet users (estimated to be a billion and a half users) speak non-Latin languages. As experts said that was the biggest change since the inception of the Internet 40 years ago, the introduction to the discussion topic asked whether Arab users welcomed this change and whether they thought it will increase the use of the Internet all over the world. From October 30, 2009 until November 9, 2009 (when the discussion was closed), the users of the forum posted 140 contributions expressing their opinions in response to the questions posted by the BBC.

تعليقاتكم: عناوين مواقع الإنترنت بالعربية لأول مرة



وافق المجلس العالمي المنظم للإنترنت على السماح بإنشاء عناوين على الشبكة الدولية للمعلومات بحروف غير اللاتينية، ستكون أولها بالعربية والصينية.

وتشير الإحصاءات إلى أن أكثر من نصف مستخدمي الإنترنت، الذين يقدر عددهم بحوالي مليار ونصف المليار شخص، يتحدثون لغات غير لاتينية.

ويقول المراقبون إن القرار سيكون التغيير الأكبر في وجه الإنترنت منذ اختراعها قبل 40 عاما.

فهل ترحب بهذه الخطوة؟ وهل تعتقد أن هذا القرار سيوسع دائرة استخدام الإنترنت في العالم؟

نُشر في: 30/10/2009 02:35 م GMT

Figure 1. Arabic introduction to the discussion topic on the news feedback forum

The 140 contributions were saved locally and categorized. The categorization was initially done to isolate contributions favoring the changes or opposing them, and to isolate those giving reasons for favoring or opposing. Then, categories were created to identify contributions with opinions on the ramifications of the changes in URL languages and how they would affect interaction with Internet information. The opinions were analyzed to identify common themes and attitudes, and to form a basic understanding of how Arab users view the changes.

4. Results

Of the 140 contributions, 55 (39%) favored the changes and expressed support for the new URL rules. The contributions that did not favor the changes were 31 (22%), while 29 contributions (21%) did not offer any opinions. The remaining 25 contributions (18%) were undecided or offered opinions preferring to wait before making any judgment.

Most of the users who favored the changes cited the advantages of using familiar scripts in URLs and the positive effect on promoting Arabic information on the Web. Those who opposed the changes were mostly concerned about how using Arabic and other non-Latin script URLs will diminish the influence of the Web as a globalization force and contribute to their isolation from those who do not understand Arabic.

A small number of users were worried about the technical issues that will be introduced with the use of Arabic characters in URLs and even mocked the potentially funny URLs that will need to be developed. They also predicted similar issues will arise in other languages.

5. Conclusion

Wide-ranging differences in opinion appeared as a result of categorizing and analyzing the opinions of Arab users on Arabic-script URLs. Some of the common themes and attitudes that were identified show that the views expressed by Arab users might be common in other language environments. As changes to the script used in URLs have the potential of affecting how hundreds of millions use the Internet, it is of crucial importance to study the ramifications of these changes for different linguistic groups.

6. Endnotes

1. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>
2. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/interactivity/>
3. <http://newsforums.bbc.co.uk/ws/thread.jspa?forumID=10251>