Short Stories and Interaction in

Short stories and poems have been, and still are, popular with readers and writers in the Gulf. They are distributed through websites, e-publishers, blogs, Twitter, Tumblr, forums and performed on YouTube. Online literary production shares similarities with traditional storytelling popular in the Gulf, but is also an enabler for a new degree of freedom and author-reader interaction.

By Nele Lenze, which has a PhD from the University of Oslo, entitled Telling Stories Online in the Gulf. This article is based upon fieldwork in Oman and the United Arab Emirates in 2009/10. She holds a master’s degree in Arabic literature from Freie Universität Berlin, and has also studied at Jordan University and worked in the West Bank.
Online distribution of literary texts is created all over the Arab world, but in some countries it is more common than in others. This is due to several factors, such as literacy and internet access, as well as other components of the digital divide. It seems that there are countries that produce more internet literature than others, namely Egypt, Lebanon, and several of the Gulf countries. Apart from online literary production, it is important to keep offline developments in mind too, as they preceded literary creation in new media. Even so, the development of literary production has proceeded differently in the various countries. Writing and distributing literature does not have the same traditions in all Arabic-speaking countries. In some countries, oral traditions were more important than in others. In Egypt for example, distribution of printed literature is much older than in Kuwait or the UAE. It is not surprising that distribution of digital literature also varies in its production, style and distribution in the Arabic-speaking world. Yet, in the Gulf as well as in Egypt, digital literature finds its way into mainstream media and is discussed in newspapers, on TV and on the radio.

In this paper I will mainly focus on the Gulf region and show some dissimilarities in printed and digital literature. Firstly, benefits of distribution are highlighted, and the three most used ways of publishing will be shown. The phenomenon of the short story published in forums will exemplify common features of online literature, such as the shortness of texts and interactive processes. In this respect, a connection between the past and the present of storytelling is presented as parallels appear when looking at forms of communication online and offline. Interactivity in communication as well as in the process of text creation is vital to participatory culture in the online lit-
erary sphere. In particular, the relationship between author and audience is worth close inspection. This relationship differs from print literature. Lines between audience and author are blurring, and in comparison to printed literature, online literary texts seem to be more oriented towards the readership. Forms of distribution in print and digitally are both growing in the Gulf and it is necessary to summarize the emergence of this phenomenon, in order to highlight challenges in contrast to the earlier presented benefits of the medium. A comparison of print and digital literature, as well as putting forms of communication in context with oral storytelling, helps to emphasize distinctive features of literature on the net.

Print vs. digital
Digital texts are fundamentally different from analogue texts. The most important aspect is that they are permanently changeable and deletable. Additionally, cultural products distributed on the net are potentially accessible for a worldwide audience. Another feature is that opposed to print literature, writers online have a rough conception of who their audience are. The author can actually see how many people have read his story or at least clicked onto it. Bloggers have access to user statistics, and writers who distribute in forums and e-publishing companies can read the comments of the audience. Sometimes interaction is initiated between the author and the audience in the commentary section. This, in turn, can lead to even more communication in private chats.

However, writers of print literature in the Gulf have been receiving increasing support over the last decade. Recently, publishing in some Gulf countries has become easier, as more institutions support literary production. The UAE and especially the Emirate of Abu Dhabi have established several organizations and state-run publishing companies that help young authors distribute their works. Additionally, prizes are regularly handed out, and authors are represented at book fairs and literature events in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah. Interestingly, short stories and short essays can be found also in printed distribution, e.g. in several editions from the publisher Qalam. Some of the authors published in this way also distribute literary works online. Research on Gulf literature is increasing as well, and one of the first researchers on short stories in the Gulf is Gail Ramsay, who focuses on short stories (in print) from the UAE and Oman. An emphasis in her studies is on globalization in the Gulf and the “post-structural concepts of cultural representation”.

Despite the new opportunities, publishing in print has restrictions by editors and publishers that are not present in a self-run blog. In some of the Gulf countries it is also necessary to get permission from the authorities in order to publish. This further limits the possibilities for distributing literary works in print, as compared to online distribution.

Restrictions of distribution
The freedom of publishing online enables distribution with less of the interference of censorship from governmental institutions. This is especially helpful for writers in countries

\[\text{\textcopyright 2017 Nele Lenze}\]
with a high rate of governmental censorship, as for example the Arab countries that experienced uprisings in the recent past. When restrictions get too tight, people start looking for alternatives. Bloggers and Tweeple from Jeddah emphasize the new possibilities of discussing art and literature they gained through Twitter and other online platforms.

During the last year a lot of the publishing of political texts in Bahrain happened through online media. Twitter and blogs are an important source of distributing literary and non-literary thoughts. However, despite the fact that publishing online is less censored and freedom of distribution is greater than the offline alternative, it is not an anarchistic space that is free of surveillance. It frequently happens that activists and writers get arrested as their online actions are traced back to them. In Bahrain, the majority of online writers and activists use their real names, which makes it easier to trace them. Also, in Saudi Arabia, active online participants can get arrested if they are traced but they continue to post their messages because this still offers some room for more open discussions.

Writing online
A variety of factors lead to an increase of online literary production. Most important is that internet literacy is growing worldwide and access to computers has become more and more common. Additionally, the medium offers possibilities for publishing that have not existed before. One reason for writing online is that everybody is allowed to publish on the net. There are no barriers, such as editors and publishing companies. As writing for print media is often restricted in style and content, a considerable benefit of online publishing is a relatively limited interference through editors, publishers and governmental institutions.

The online sphere is, in comparison to printed works, open, and hierarchies are few. The medium is an enabler for everybody who has internet access and the necessary skills to use it for publishing. This is happening independently from major publishers and editors. The absence of these institutions of distribution naturally leads to massively varying quality. It is, however, difficult to generalize whether the literary quality of language and literature is poorer or richer in blogs and forums than it is in print, because quality in literature is subjective. One of the major issues here is that readers of digital works approach electronic literature with expectations that were formed by print media, trying to force criteria of forms, conventions and modes on them. Language and style are individually chosen in both printed and online literature. There is no one single definition of what constitutes good literature, and classification of something as high literature or trivial literature is often debatable. When looking at the literary quality of digital stories, Friedlander argues that the global phenomenon of digital stories is “not so much ‘bad’ stories as new stories suited to new kinds of times”.

My observation has been that blog literature differs from forum literature. While blog literature often seems carefully composed, with language playing an important part, in forums it appears that the intended message is considered more important than literary style, as measured by the aesthetic standards of earlier printed texts. Blog literature might not differ greatly from printed literature in the structure of its plots and its style of narration, but its interactivity and communicating function is something new.
Depending on the network of an author, literature that is popular attracts a wider audience and spreads fast. Literary texts that are not considered worth reading do not gain attention and therefore fade away in the wide space of the world wide web. In this way a natural selection of what is interesting or good and what is bad or not worth reading is more or less proceeding automatically. This means that the audience, and not a professional critic, decides on any further spread of the text. The audience also express their preferences for different text categories, such as shorter texts. The choice that an audience makes is not necessarily connected to the literariness of a text; it can be influenced by the topic that is addressed.

**Short texts: Introducing three main applications for distribution**

Means of publishing literature online are numerous. It can start from 140 characters on Twitter, where several posts form one story or poem, to Tumblr, where users desire to get their short statements redistributed as often as possible. Some writers may publish chapters of their novels or short stories on a regular basis on Facebook pages, whereas others recite their poetry on YouTube. In any case, this form of distribution asks for specially designed texts that visually speak to the reader, and most often need to be kept short. Online readers are used to short texts, structured in a few paragraphs, that are easy on the eyes. Therefore the internet is a suitable medium for short and very short stories. The layout and the reader-shaped perception of the medium themselves lead to an impetus for these shorter texts.

Three major tools are often used by authors to publish online: forums, blogs and e-publishing. The first, online forums, not only function as platforms for distributing and discussing thoughts on a variety of subjects, but also provide sections for publishing poetry and short stories. Forums are “considered older than blogs”. The Kuwaiti researcher Afraa Ahmad Alabtain (2008) points out that forums are “the most well-known and widespread application in the region”. Most forums offer a wide range of sub-categories such as family, politics, cars, religion and much more. They also offer categories on classical and folk poetry, short stories and very short stories and sometimes even longer stories that might be classified as novellas. Forums are actively used by several thousand people.

The second, more personal tool, is distributing literary works on a personal blog. Literary blogs are heavily linked and mostly published on blog hosts such as Maktoob.com, Blogger.com and WindowsLive.com. Some of the female literary bloggers from Oman and Saudi Arabia first published their works in forums and later changed to personal blogs. Writers do not need to stay with one medium only. Distribution methods can change according to the preferences of the author. A number of them also publish in newspapers and literary magazines, but this is a minority. Thus, writers distribute their works in a variety of media, depending on their needs. Relying on the circulation of newspapers, compared to the number of readers online, it might be possible to reach a wider readership in print, but one can write more freely online.

The third way to distribute is through online publishers. One example is Nashiri, a Kuwait e-publisher founded in 2003 by Hayat Alyaqout. It allows writers to publish short and long texts on the website, and also makes
them downloadable as PDFs. Nashiri is non-profit. The website offers categories such as articles, poetry, letters on culture, novels and stories. Podcasts and videos are also displayed on the website. Publishing texts through Nashiri is different from the more private approach of publishing on a personal blog and from distributing texts in forums. Authors here publish with their real names, and there are short biographies of the writers. As part of the contractual agreements between the writers and the publisher, all stories are published in modern standard Arabic and must not violate morals or the law. Nashiri is (well?) established within its cultural surroundings in Kuwait. The publisher has been portrayed in local newspapers and also won an award from the Internet Contest Award 2005 given by Sheikh Salem Al-Ali Al-Sabah of Kuwait.

All of these internet platforms offer distinctive benefits to authors concerning freedom in writing, less censorship and interaction with the readership.

**Storytelling in forums**

Every medium requires and inspires a particular form of cultural production. Advantages of distribution in online media and the three possibilities for publishing mentioned above also lead to kinds of text creation that share characteristics. In the case of online media, texts need to be shorter than printed texts in order to get the readers’ attention. Additionally, the visualization and layout of cultural products online play a role.

I will here elaborate on the similarities that exist between short stories published in forums/message boards and oral storytelling. In some streams of literary production the past meets the present. Storytelling is an essential part of traditional Emirati culture but is also popular in other Arabic-speaking countries. It is recognized as worthy of preservation in the United Arab Emirates. A group of researchers at Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH) started to collect stories told by Emiratis in their grandparents’ generation from all over the seven Emirates. This is part of the idea of preserving national culture to shape a common identity. Several stories published in forums in the UAE and neighbouring countries remind the reader of this traditional storytelling. Structure, literary style and narration are especially close to oral traditions. It is interesting to find out in which way an online development can be seen as a continuation of oral storytelling.

Most of the stories published in forums have a personal introduction, and the audience is invited to comment.

Most of the stories published in forums have a personal introduction, and at the end the audience is invited to comment on what has happened. What strengthens this argument that they are like oral stories is the fact that the stories are sometimes changed a little when they get re-told on different platforms. Additionally, the language is very close to spoken language through the dialogue and not least in the use of colloquial language. Most stories in forums are completely written in dialect, and grammar seems to be less important than getting a message across. The structure of an average story posted in forums shows the interactive component of the stories as well as a “storytelling” character. It starts with an introductory statement. Generally, the
frame narrator points out that s/he has heard the following story somewhere, and felt the need to share it because it was interesting or entertaining. The narrators are mostly first person and omniscient. It is challenging to work out from which paragraph onwards an internal narrator is speaking, or if it is still the author who is speaking. Following this part, the actual story begins. A text might be decorated with emoticons, pictures or music. At the end of each story there is a comments section in which the readers may comment on what has been described. The number of comments varies from forum to forum and story to story. Usually the comments are very personal, and not critical in the same way a professional literary critique would be.

An additional distinction of online literature in forums is the changing of re-posted texts. Re-posting means that an existing text is distributed elsewhere in a new forum or blog.

It’s clear the author is not only inspiring the audience, but also get inspired by them.

The fact that stories just get transferred from one place to another, and that there is no safety for the author in order to protect their intellectual property seems to be mirrored in the stories themselves. The same stories can be changed a little from post to post, and sometimes the introduction varies. This action of re-posting could be seen as mimicking the retelling of stories as per the oral tradition. When it comes to authorship, it seems that in the same manner as in oral storytelling, the original source is not always known in forums either. The author is in the background, and the audience preserve the story, re-tell it and continue it.

It is important to clarify that despite the fact that literature is distributed in Arabic on the net, audiences are usually not from all over the Arabic-speaking world. User statistics show that readers of websites are mostly regional. This means that Gulf writers are often read by a Gulf audience, and writers from other Arabic-speaking countries also attract a readership from their own local surroundings.

Interaction between author and audience
A distinct form of interactive writing does not only appear in stories posted in forums, but on literary blogs as well. Here interaction also takes place in the comments section, or in a separately installed chatbox. The discussions in blogs are more elaborate than on message boards. In literary blogs the reader picks up on the style of the writer. The commenter tries to imitate the writer’s style, and in that way gets into a literary involvement with the original author of the text. This underlines the connection to earlier forms of literary communication which are popular in classical as well as in folk literature, where somebody writes a poem and another one picks up on the rhyme and continues the poem while reacting to the original poem.

A statement by the Egyptian author Ghada Abdel Aal may serve to explain the influence of this interaction. At the Emirates Airline International Festival of Literature in Dubai in 2011, she said that she was always interested in seeing what the audience suggested, and then changed her next blog post into a surprise for the audience. This is a use of the unexpected that helps to keep readers inter-
ested and returning to the blog. In print literature, such interaction is not possible – at least not at the speed that is so distinct for online participatory culture. This way of creating literature gives the audience the possibility of influencing and participating in the process of writing, and inspires the author to create unique content. It becomes clear that the author is not only inspiring the audience but also that the author gets inspired by them.

A process of interactivity leads to more creative production. Support for this form of interaction was also confirmed by online writers in the Gulf – as they emphasized in their answers to my online survey of 2010. On the basis of my findings, I argue that this new immediate interaction might lead to a democratization in literary production. That means writer and audience may exchange roles, and in that way influence the text.

However, observers’ opinions about the audience’s importance in online literature differ. Optimistic voices interpret audience’s increasing importance as an indication of an interactive process of democratization in literature. Others, however, judge the influence of the audience negatively because they fear that the quality of these cultural products will suffer if produced solely for the enjoyment of the readership.

Authorship and author
This interactive writing leads to questions concerning authorship. While the author is clearly defined in printed works, in online writing authorship can be claimed by many or by none at all.

When I asked the writers during my research in 2010 whether they see themselves in the tradition of storytellers, they all disagreed and explained that there is no connection between traditional storytelling at the tea house and what they are doing. This is obvious when it comes to the “anonymity” that is created on the net. Participants and actors are usually merely defined by the data they provide to the other users. However, similarities in communication processes can be observed.

Authorship, or rather the blurring of it, is a fascinating aspect of online literature, especially in forums because they offer a wide range of texts published by authors writing more or less anonymously. Carolyn Guertin points out that there are new forms of digital narratives that do not clearly separate between “us” and “them”, i.e. between the writer and the audience. This means that in the creative process, the borders between reader and writer become blurred - as the audience is participating in it. This might be compared to a live performance and the audience’s interaction with the poet.

Conclusion
Online literature in the Arab world, and especially in countries with easier access to the internet, is growing. In particular, authors write short texts in a range of applications such as blogs, websites or through social media. Distinct forms of writing have spread, such as short stories that are widely commented on in forums. One of the most important contrasts to printed literature is the opportunity for immediate interaction between writer and reader. This leads to a change of focus from the author to the audience. The reader is not passive any more, but may turn into an active participant in cultural production. The final text may be a creation that was influenced by many. Those interactive processes in writing are rather rare outside of the online sphere, and are therefore
one of the main characteristics of online writing in forums. Comparing online literature with earlier works in print makes a variety of differences become evident. But similarities can be seen to oral traditions.

The increase of literary production is due to more freedom in online writing when it comes to opportunities for the distribution of works – as it is possible for everybody (who has internet access) to publish online. On the other hand, restrictions by editors, publishers as well as governments do not need to be applied online. This freedom of publishing does lead to varying quality, but it also enables new forms of interaction in cultural production, which is necessary to convey and inspire discourses in society.

1 The digital divide is the gap between people who use online media on a regular basis, and those who do not have access, who are digital illiterates. This gap is due to many factors and can appear between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, old and young. These are merely the most common examples. Researchers such as Peter Benjamin Seel (2012), Mark Bauerlein (2011), Deborah Carr (2007), P. Norris (2001) go into depth on this question in their works.

2 There are no exact numbers on online distribution of literary works, as it is very hard to count every publication. But from an overall view from what is discussed at book fairs in Abu Dhabi and Dubai as well as on the net itself, it seems that these countries are distributing more online literature than others. It may be possible that distribution from these areas just get more attention in comparison to other distribution from elsewhere. On the other hand, more distribution might also be due to either longer traditions in literary writing or more internet access for the intellectual elites.

3 More on the different institutions can be found on the website of ADACH. URL: http://www.adach.ae. Last accessed September 13, 2012.

4 Examples are the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, the Abraaj Capital Art Prize, the Arab Creativity Award and many more.

5 The publishing concept of this publisher is introduced on its website: http://www.adach.ae/ar/portal/qualam.aspx. Last accessed September 13, 2012.


8 This can be observed on a variety of blogs, YouTube and Twitter.


12 Ibid.

13 To get an overview on the categories of distribution, http://www.alamuae.com/ serves as a good example.

14 This can be proofed by looking at the various statistics provided by Alexa.com. There are many reasons why Alexa.com results merely serve as a benchmark, as user statistics are easily manipulated by a huge variety of factors. However, this is a simple way of at least trying to place forums regionally. More on this can be found in: Baker, Loren: “Alexa: Worthless & Easy to Manipulate?” September 30th 2006, on http://www.searchenginjournal.com/alexaworthless-easy-to-manipulate/?p=47. Last accessed December 29, 2011. See also: http://www.searchengineeringhistory.com/ Last accessed December 29, 2011.

15 This was a result of an online survey that I conducted in 2010. Participants were online writers from different Gulf countries.

16 Ibid.

17 Rules for publishing are posted on their website. URL: http://nashiri.net/join.html. Last accessed January 2, 2012.


21 Vladimir Propp studied narratives in folk tales in Russia that can be applied to the stories told in forums: Liberman, Anatoly (ed.): Theory and History of Folklore, Minnesota, 1984.

22 This was a result of an online survey that I conducted in 2010. Participants were online writers from different Gulf countries.