This exploratory study employed uses and gratifications theory to understand Arab Americans’ salient motives for using the internet and whether the internet served as a functional alternative to other media to satisfy Arab Americans’ information-seeking and interpersonal needs. Spiral of silence theory also was used to investigate the relationship between Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion and their motives for using the internet. Results from an online questionnaire survey (N = 124) indicated that information seeking was the most salient motive for using the internet and that the internet did serve as a functional alternative, with a significant percentage of the internet sources used being foreign based. There was, however, no relationship between Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion and their motives for using the internet. The findings are discussed with respect to the use of the internet by members of this marginalized cultural group.


Introduction

Given the rapid development and diffusion of online communication technologies, with more than a billion internet users worldwide (Internet World Stats, 2008; Nielsen, 2005), computer-mediated communication (CMC) has attracted much attention from communication scholars. Researchers have focused on using CMC to accomplish, for instance, interpersonal communication (e.g., Anderson & Emmer & Sommer, 2006; Arvidsson, 2006; Duthler, 2006; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Henderson & Gilding, 2004; Parks & Floyd, 1994; Rabby, 2007; Ramirez, 2007; Rumbough, 2001; Stefanone & Jang, 2007;


Most studies of CMC, however, have focused on a homogenous group of internet users—White U.S. college students—and ignored cultural and intercultural issues, in general, and minority groups’ internet usage, in particular. Although there is an emerging literature on CMC and gender (e.g., Bimber, 2000; Ferris & Roper, 2002; Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006; Herring & Martinson, 2004; Herring & Paolillo, 2006; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Jackson, Ervin, Gardner, & Schmitt, 2004; Koch, Mueller, Kruse, & Zumbach, 2005; Lee, 2007b; Losh, 2003; Mitra, 2004; Mitra, Willyard, Platt, & Parsons, 2005; Ono & Zavodny, 2003; Pedersen & Macafee, 2007; Samp, Wittenberg, & Gillett, 2003; Stern, 2004; Vrooman, 2001; Waseleski, 2006), as well as intercultural/cultural/ethnic online communication (e.g., Abdulla, 2007; Appiah, 2003, 2004; Boyer, Brunner, Charles, & Coleman, 2006; Bretag, 2006; Brock, 2005; Byrne, 2007; Cassell & Tversky, 2005; Ellis, & Maoz, 2007; Ess, 2007; Ess & Sudweeks, 2005; Hargittai, 2007; Hewlingle, 2005; Jiali, 2005; La Ferle & Kim, 2006; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2001; Mitra, 2004, Miura & Yamashita, 2007; Pfeil, Zaphiris, & Chee, 2006;
Sarker, 2005; Stommel, 2007; Tan, Wei, Watson, Clapper, & McLean, 1998; Tateo, 2005; Vishwanath, 2003; Waipeng, Tan, & Hameed, 2005; Ye, 2006; Yum & Hara, 2005; Zhu & He, 2002), there has been little, if any, literature on Arab Americans’ use of CMC (or other media). The purpose of this research is to broaden our understanding of CMC by studying how Arab Americans use the internet.

Arab Americans are an important group to study because of their unique position in U.S. society. As Abraham (1989) noted, there is significant “political and cultural stigmatization of Arab Americans, and their related subjective experiences” (p. 36). For instance, mainstream U.S. media coverage of Arab Americans has been particularly negative, even before September 11, 2001 (see, e.g., Bing-Canar & Zerkel, 1998; Edwards, 2001; Hasian, 1998, 2000; Lind & Danowski, 1998; Little, 1998; Shaheen, 1984, 1994, 2001; Wilkins & Downing, 2002), portraying Arab Americans through four basic stereotypes: (a) rich and irresponsible in the way they spend money, (b) barbaric and uncivilized, (c) sex maniacs seeking Whites’ enslavement, and (d) terrorists. After 9/11, there was a noticeable increase in hostility against Arabs and Arab Americans by some segments of U.S. society, including hostility expressed toward them by the media and public figures (see, e.g., Merskin, 2004). According to a 2003 hate crime report released by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), there were over 700 violent incidents, including several murders, against Arab Americans, or people perceived to be Arab Americans, Arabs, or Muslims, in the first 9 weeks following the 9/11 attacks (see also Cainkar, 2002). Panagopoulos (2006, p. 609) stated that “the proportion of Americans who held ‘very favorable’ feelings toward Muslim Americans” before and after 9/11 never exceeded 15 percent, with the highest percentage occurring immediately after 9/11. In addition, Brennen and Duffy (2003), comparing portrayals of Japanese Americans in the wake of Pearl Harbor and Arab Americans in the wake of 9/11 in The New York Times, found that the coverage in both cases was that of “otherness.”

The systematic and continuous vilification of Arabs and Arab Americans by U.S. mainstream media potentially marginalizes Arab Americans and may lead them to search for alternative sources of news and information. Given the availability of the internet as an unregulated medium, it might serve as such a source, and, similar to other marginalized groups (see, e.g., Cresser, Gunn, & Balme, 2001; Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004; Mitra, 2004), as a means of meeting Arab Americans’ needs. This exploratory study, therefore, examines Arab Americans’ motives for using the internet and whether the internet serves, for them, as a functional alternative to other media, especially for those who perceive the U.S. public as holding negative opinions on issues important to Arab Americans.

Literature Review
To understand the possible motives of Arab Americans for using the internet, two theories from previous studies of CMC usage were employed: uses and gratifications theory and spiral of silence theory. These theories and their application to this study are explained below.
Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications theory is one of the most widely applied media theories. Before its emergence, some mass communication theorists ascribed to the magic bullet theory, which perceived people as passive receivers of media content (for a critical review of that theory, see Sproule, 1989). In contrast, uses and gratifications theory focuses on active choices that media users make to fulfill their needs. Research conducted from this perspective, consequently, focuses on how people use available media to fulfill their needs.

Uses and gratifications theory has been widely employed to study media users’ motivations. For example, researchers have studied people’s motivations for using newspapers (e.g., Blood, Keir, & Namjun, 1983; Tsao & Sibley, 2004), telephones (e.g., Auter, 2007; Leung & Wei, 2000; O’Keefe & Sulansowski, 1995), radio (e.g., Albarran et al., 2007; Towers, 1985, 1987), television (e.g., Harwood, 1999; Minnebo, 2005; Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007; Sherry, 2001), and MP3 players (Ferguson, Greer, & Reardon, 2007). Given the emergence of computers and growth of the internet, researchers began studying people’s motivations for, and satisfaction from, using the internet (see, e.g., Ebersole, 2000; Flanagin, 2005, Garramone, Harris, & Pizante, 1986; Kaye, 1998; Kaye & Johnson, 2002, 2004; Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005; LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Leung, 2001; Lo, Li, Shih, & Yang, 2005; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Parker & Plank, 2000; Perse & Dunn, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Wu & Bechtel, 2002). Indeed, Ruggiero (2000, p. 3) argued that “the emergence of computer-mediated communication has revived the significance of uses and gratifications” as a theoretical frame for studying media.

However, with the exception of the few studies cited previously, people’s motivations for using the internet have not been tied extensively to their membership in cultural groups. Therefore, the first goal of this study was to identify possible motives that Arab Americans may have for using the internet. Hence, the first research question posed was:

RQ1: What are the most salient motives of Arab Americans for using the internet?

In addition to studying salient motives of media use, uses and gratifications theory has led researchers to compare people’s motives for using different media, examining, in particular, whether certain media can serve as “functional alternatives” to other media. According to Ferguson and Perse (2000), as people select media based on their needs, they make choices among functional alternatives that can fulfill similar goals; for example, cable television is a functional alternative to broadcast television for meeting the need of “relaxing entertainment.” Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) compared motives for using CMC with those for communicating face-to-face (FtF), and concluded that people use CMC as a functional alternative when FtF communication is difficult or not preferred. Flaherty, Pearce, and Rubin (1998), however, found that the internet was not a functional alternative to FtF communication, as there were no differences discovered between CMC and
interpersonal communication motives. Similarly, Kayahara and Wellman (2007) concluded that the internet complemented interpersonal ties in terms of cultural information seeking, except when there was a strong interest in a specific issue, in which case using the internet was more gratifying.

Other studies have compared people’s use of the internet to their use of other media. For instance, to examine whether surfing the World Wide Web was a functional alternative to television viewing, Ferguson and Perse (2000) studied a group of computer-experienced students and found three major and two minor television-like reasons for surfing the web: entertainment, pass time, relaxation, social information (related to people’s social life), and information. They concluded that the internet might be functionally similar to television, especially in terms of diversion, but not with respect to relaxation. Hence, the question remains of whether and when the internet substitutes for other media.

It makes sense to assume that Arab Americans, who are stereotyped and vilified in mainstream U.S. media, may seek alternative media that provide, from their perspective, more appropriate coverage of, and information about, issues that are important to them. Online media do host web sites of some offline media, but the difference is that the internet is not regulated. The internet, thus, allows for many other types of information sources and, thereby, creates a large marketplace of ideas. In addition, the internet is unique in its interactive capabilities through chat rooms, blogs, listservs, and similar activities. Ryan, Carragee, and Schwerner (1998) explained why people resort to alternative sources of information, especially news, which they considered to be “a social construction of reality and . . . a political resource” (p. 167). As they explained, in today’s internet world, groups and organizations compete to control this “construction of reality” in the news for their benefit and to affect the public’s perceptions of reality. Unfortunately, those groups and organizations do not get equal representation in the mainstream news media because those holding institutional and political power have a far greater ability to shape the news agenda than do alternative groups or movements. The economic and cultural capital of the powerful provides significant resources for shaping journalistic definitions of the political world. (Ryan et al., p. 168)

As a result of the unfair distribution of news as a political/social resource in U.S. mainstream media, Ryan et al. focused on the importance of utilizing, creating, and sustaining “alternative media” as “forums to define political and social issues in their own terms” (p. 179).

Hence, one advantage of the new media over traditional media is their ability to fulfill citizens’ democratic needs by providing a space for self-expression, such as by joining listservs and other online communities, and by authoring web sites and blogs. Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmokle, and Sapp (2006), for example, found that Polish bloggers’ main motivation was self-expression (which was higher than the social interaction motive). The primary content discussed on those blogs was feelings or thoughts, followed by family and friends, and then by a “record of the day,” which
consisted of events that occurred in a blogger’s daily life. Moreover, new media facilitate “citizen-to-citizen” interaction, especially among people with similar goals and interests, and allow more direct feedback and interaction between citizens and public officials (Garramone et al., 1986). The emergence of the internet, thus, leads to a better chance of having more diverse information and opinions about a topic represented.

As another example of the internet’s democratic potential, Cresser et al. (2001) studied women’s motives for publishing e-zines (online magazines) and concluded that they use e-zines to discuss issues they perceive to be “newsworthy” as a result of their under-representation (or misrepresentation) in mainstream media. This liberating experience with e-zines provided the women studied with an “alternative forum” to “construct their identity, formulate their ideals, and build a community of support by networking with like-minded individuals” (Cresser et al., p. 464). Cresser et al. attributed the empowering characteristic of e-zines to two communication characteristics of the internet: its ability to offer many-to-many communication and both synchronous and asynchronous communication. These characteristics make the internet “an ideal medium for transmitting political information and potentially for facilitating political participation” (Cresser et al., p. 468). In addition, the women noted a third characteristic of the internet—the lack of censorship or editing in this medium—that made the experience of e-zine publication a “liberating one” (Cresser et al., p. 460).

The emergence and adoption of the internet as an alternative medium for obtaining diverse information may well play a crucial role in the political survival of marginalized groups in U.S. society (and elsewhere), including Arab Americans. Moreover, in line with Cresser et al.’s (2001) research, Arab Americans may act in the same manner as other marginalized groups in U.S. society by using media to fulfill their interpersonal needs. Therefore, the second research question posed was:

RQ2: Is the internet a functional alternative to traditional media for meeting the information-seeking and interpersonal needs of Arab American users?

*Spiral of Silence Theory*

The need for, and use of, alternative media by people who perceive themselves as holding a minority viewpoint is also explained by the theory of the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neuman, 1974, 1993). The spiral of silence theory is primarily concerned with how media shape people’s opinions and willingness to express their opinions or to remain silent.

The spiral of silence theory is based on several assumptions. The first assumption is that in any social gathering, the majority of participants believe that agreement or harmony is a goal that should be achieved, and, consequently, there is a pressure for individuals to conform to the group view. Noelle-Neumann (1993) referred to this form of social control as *public opinion*, defined as “opinions on controversial issues that one can express in public without isolating oneself” (pp. 62–63).
The second assumption concerns the potential fear of isolation by individuals who deviate from perceived group consensus. This fear of isolation (generally unconscious) pushes people to search for normative beliefs, opinions, and behaviors. Several studies have been conducted over the years to test this assumption. For example, Noelle-Neumann (1991) designed an instrument to measure people's assessment of threat of isolation in the case of the highly controversial issue of nuclear energy in both Germany and England. The survey results indicated that respondents perceived a threat based on their estimation of the majority opinion on that issue, and an association between the degree of perceived threat and the size of the gap between the majority and minority opinions.

The fear of isolation results in individuals striving for consensus by scanning other people's views; this scanning—which Noelle-Neumann (1991) called the quasi-statistical sense—is the third assumption of the theory. The quasi-statistical sense influences people's behaviors—specifically, their willingness to speak out. Gonzenbach and Stevenson (1994) explained the quasi-statistical sense as a process of scanning the environment to determine what opinions others hold (called the climate of opinion) and, in particular, the dominant opinion on an issue. Noelle-Neumann (1991) tested this tendency when she asked survey respondents the question, “What do most people think about [nuclear energy]?” (p. 268). Most respondents’ answers demonstrated a distortion of public opinion, referred to as pluralistic ignorance. Such ignorance stems from two sources: observations individuals make in their daily life and their exposure to media. Therefore, the climate of opinion, according to S. Perry and Gonzenbach (2000), depends, in large measure, on which views are represented to a greater degree in the media to which people are exposed. Moreover, Gonzenbach and Stevenson contended that the spiral of silence theory views the media's role in shaping individuals' perception of public opinion as having greater importance than individuals' direct observation of public opinion. This difference may result in a gap in the perception of public opinion, termed a dual climate of opinion, which usually depends on the amount of media to which people are exposed.

Gonzalez (1988) explained how media can affect their audiences according to this theory: The spiral of silence theory claims that the mainstream media can overcome any differences in how their audiences process communication if they fulfill the following three conditions for “powerful effects”: consonance, or congruence in media content and journalistic values; cumulation, or the repetition of similar messages across time and media; and ubiquity, or their presence as public sources of information. (p. 33)

Thus, media sometimes have the power to alter people's perception of the majority opinion. In addition, the relationship between media and their audiences, according to the theory, is more complicated than full dependence; it is a sophisticated process of negotiation in which receivers sometimes depend on mainstream media and, at other times, employ alternative media to satisfy their needs.
Researchers using this theory, however, are divided into two camps: One camp is interested in the effects of media on shaping perceptions of public opinion and the other focuses on ways that people maneuver around mainstream media and seek alternative media.

Rimmer and Howard (1990) were among those interested in the effects of media on people’s perceptions of prevailing public opinion. In 1984, they conducted a public opinion survey on the toxic waste issue of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in Monroe County in southern Indiana. The results showed no association between people’s television news use and the accuracy of their perceptions of the climate of opinion. Noelle-Neumann (1991) explained this misperception process created by media as a transformation of individual opinions into public opinion, claiming that it is “constant interactions among people, due to their social nature, that account for the transformation of the sum of individual opinions into public opinion” (p. 280). Noelle-Neumann (1991) believed, however, that the silence of those who fear isolation will help those whose opinion is presented by mainstream media as the dominant one to publicize their opinion more and to obtain more support for it.

Applying the spiral of silence theory, the marginalization of Arab Americans in U.S. society is a result of a number of factors, including their small number compared to other minorities, conflicts between the U.S. government and some Arab countries, the unpopular view that most Arab Americans hold about the U.S. government’s foreign policies in the Middle East, and, especially, the government’s latest measures against “terrorism,” which affected them more than any other group in U.S. society. In addition, Arab Americans are marginalized by U.S. traditional mainstream media, which stems from their under-representation and/or negative stereotypical portrayal by those media, as previously discussed. Consequently, if Arab Americans engage in quasi-statistical scanning of the climate of opinion, they should form certain perceptions about U.S. public opinion on the most controversial issues related to them. Therefore, the third research question posed was:

RQ3: How do Arab Americans perceive U.S. public opinion on the most controversial issues related to them?

Another group of researchers, as previously mentioned, have asserted a more complicated relationship between media and audiences, seeing people as active users who select from options. For example, Gonzalez (1988) found that alternative media played an important role in attracting the attention of mainstream media to events prior to the 1986 revolution in the Philippines that those media had ignored or distorted. He argued, consequently, that one shortcoming in research using the spiral of silence theory has been the tendency to ignore the role of alternative media in shaping public opinion. Gonzalez added that alternative media, which often represent the views of marginal groups, become a vital source of new ideas for both mainstream media and the public agenda. For example, as achievements of the civil rights and the feminist movements were publicized by alternative media, mainstream U.S. media were forced to change their coverage of those movements. However, the
adoption of alternative media by marginalized groups does not necessarily mean that those media report the truth and that mainstream media do not. Therefore, a quasi-statistical scanning by an opinion minority does not always result in the members of that minority keeping silent; they sometimes may seek alternative media to obtain information and express their views.

Slater (2007), using both the spiral of silence theory and uses and gratifications theory to investigate the reciprocal relationship between media selection and media effects, concluded that given the presence of alternative media, including the internet, the tendency by individuals in the perceived “minority opinion” to keep silent or avoid using mainstream media is unlikely. Instead, those individuals often seek media sources that confirm their beliefs and opinions.

Other researchers also have tested individuals’ tendency to express themselves using alternative media. McDevitt, Kiousis, and Wahl-Jorgensen (2003), for instance, conducted the first experimental test of the spiral of silence theory in a CMC context based on observations of internet forum discussions, during which the majority opinion about abortion was manipulated by two confederates. The researchers repeated the experiment in an FtF setting and found that the unique characteristics of the internet, particularly its lack of social context cues and low level of social presence, encouraged opinion minority group members to speak up but not to speak out. Minority group members, thus, expressed themselves more in the CMC context than in the FtF context. They did not, however, necessarily express what they believed but, instead, modified their opinions toward a more moderate opinion.

The research conducted from a spiral of silence perspective suggests that minority members often seek alternative media sources to counteract the views expressed by mainstream media sources. Hence, if Arab Americans perceive themselves to be part of the minority opinion (at least on issues that relate directly to them), they may seek alternative media. Therefore, the fourth research question posed was:

RQ4: Is there a relationship between Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion on issues directly related to them and their motives for using the internet?

Methods

Sample
The population for this study was Arab Americans who were either citizens or permanent residents of the United States and who had access to the internet. Dr. Samia El-Badry (personal communication, June 12, 2000), President of International Demographic and Economic Associates (IDEA) and Vice President of Teknecon Energy Risk Advisors (TERA), defined Arab Americans as people who trace their ancestry to any Arabic-speaking country. Those countries include the northern African countries of Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Sudan, and Egypt, and the western Asian countries of Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Bahrain, Qatar,
Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. According to the Arab American Institute (n.d.), the 2000 Census showed that there were approximately 3.5 million Arab Americans living in the United States.

Participants for this study were obtained using a network sampling procedure. Three Arab American organizations and two Arab American listservs spread the word about this online questionnaire study to their members. A total of 124 participants (56 females and 65 males) completed the questionnaire (see the Appendix), posted on the first author’s web site. The average age of the sample was 37.2 (SD = 12.2), with a range of 18–73. The majority of respondents (54%) had a graduate degree, with 24.2% of respondents reporting a household annual income of $100,001 or more, followed by 21% with an income of $75,001–100,000. All respondents reported the United States as their place of residence for the last 3 years. The majority of respondents (34.7%) were of Palestinian origin, followed by Lebanese (14.5%) and Egyptian (12.9%) origin. Some respondents (13.9%) reported the United States as their country of origin, which means that they were, most likely, second- or third-generation Arab Americans.

When asked about their internet usage, 67.7% of respondents had had internet access for over 6 years, with the remainder having had it for 3–6 years. About 70% had internet access both at work and at home, most used it for personal-related (M = 51.6%, SD = 28.3%) and work-related (M = 49.1%, SD = 27.6%) activities almost equally, and the largest percentage (27.4%) used the internet for more than 30 hours a week.

Procedures
The online questionnaire contained a series of scales. Each of these scales is explained below.

Internet motives scale. To measure Arab Americans’ motives for using the internet, Papacharissi and Rubin’s (2000) internet motives scale was employed with some modification. Using concepts from uses and gratifications theory, these researchers combined interpersonal (affection, inclusion/companionship, and control), internet (time control, convenience, economy, and expressive need), and media motives (entertainment, habit, information, social interaction, escape, surveillance, pass time, and relaxation) to derive 27 motive statements that comprised their internet motives scale. A factor analysis of these internet motive statements yielded five interpretable factors: (a) interpersonal utility, (b) pass time, (c) information seeking, (d) convenience, and (e) entertainment. After dropping three items that were too specific or not relevant to the present study (e.g., “It is easier to email than tell people”), respondents were presented with the 24 items corresponding to these 5 factors (see Table 1 and Question One in the Appendix) and asked to indicate how much each item applied to their internet use on a 5-point Likert-type scale (5 = A Lot, 4 = Much, 3 = Some, 2 = A Little, 1 = Not at All), with higher scores indicating more application. In line with Papacharissi and Rubin’s factor analysis, relevant items were added together to obtain a total score for each motive, and this total...
score was used in all subsequent analyses. Cronbach’s alpha of internal reliability of the items measuring these needs were: interpersonal utility = .90, pass time = .93, information seeking = .76, convenience = .68, and entertainment = .85.

The internet as a functional alternative scale. To investigate whether the internet was a functional alternative to traditional media for meeting Arab Americans’ information-seeking and interpersonal needs, the same internet motives scale developed by Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) was employed, with the minor modifications explained, to measure respondents’ motives for using six traditional media: television, books, magazines, radio, newspapers, and movies. Respondents rated their reasons for using each of these media on the same 5-point Likert-type scale just described (see Question One in the Appendix). Items for the information-seeking and interpersonal motives were summed to obtain a total score for each of these motives, and these total scores were used in all subsequent analyses. Cronbach’s alpha for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 Internet Motives Scale Factors and Items</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal Utility</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To participate in discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To show others encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To belong to a group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To enjoy answering questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To express myself fully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To give my input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get more points of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To tell others what to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I wonder what other people said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To meet new people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I want someone to do something for me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pass Time</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To pass time when bored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I have nothing to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To occupy my time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information Seeking</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it is a new way to do research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get information for free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To look for information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To see what is out there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Convenience</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To communicate with family and friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it is cheaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it is easier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entertainment</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Because it is entertaining</td>
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<tr>
<td>Because it is enjoyable</td>
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</table>

The internet as a functional alternative scale. To investigate whether the internet was a functional alternative to traditional media for meeting Arab Americans’ information-seeking and interpersonal needs, the same internet motives scale developed by Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) was employed, with the minor modifications explained, to measure respondents’ motives for using six traditional media: television, books, magazines, radio, newspapers, and movies. Respondents rated their reasons for using each of these media on the same 5-point Likert-type scale just described (see Question One in the Appendix). Items for the information-seeking and interpersonal motives were summed to obtain a total score for each of these motives, and these total scores were used in all subsequent analyses. Cronbach’s alpha for
the information-seeking motive scale for these media were: television = .87, books = .91, magazines = .92, radio = .92, newspapers = .91, and movies = .90; Cronbach’s alpha for the interpersonal motive scale for these media were: television = .76, books = .77, magazines = .83, radio = .83, newspapers = .84, and movies = .81.

The questionnaire also assessed respondents’ use of foreign media. Specifically, Question Two asked respondents to indicate the percentage of time (out of 100% for each medium) they used the seven media from countries outside the United States (e.g., “Percentage of television you watch that is not from the United States”).

_Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion scale._ To measure Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion on some of the most controversial issues related to them and the relationship of these perceptions to their motives for using the internet, Noelle-Neumann’s (1993) operational definition of public opinion was employed: “opinions on controversial issues that one can express in public without isolating oneself” (pp. 62–63). Noelle-Neumann (1993) also added morality as an important factor in understanding the salience of public opinion, such that when assessing public opinion, the issue(s) under consideration should be clearly controversial, emotionally charged, and morally loaded. Second, given Gonzenbach and Stevenson’s (1994) contention that the spiral of silence theory views media as the major source shaping individuals’ perceptions of public opinion, and given the negative representation of Arabs and Arab Americans, and their issues, by mainstream U.S. media, respondents were asked about their perceptions of U.S. public opinion on several important issues.

Specifically, respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed, using a 5-point Likert scale (with higher numbers indicating more agreement), with a list of statements about possible positions held by the majority of U.S. citizens on several controversial issues related to Arab Americans. These issues were selected based on a focus group session conducted by the first author with five Arab Americans to identify the most important controversial issues related to them that were frequently discussed at that time in U.S. mainstream media. These issues included statements about the U.S. war on Iraq, the Patriot Act, racial profiling against Arabs and Arab Americans, attitudes toward Arabs and Arab Americans, attitudes toward Islam, images of Arab Americans, terrorism, attitudes toward Saudi Arabia, U.S. world dominance and foreign policy, and stance with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Issues from that list that did not satisfy Noelle-Neumann’s (1993) four conditions of media coverage, controversy, moral loading, and emotionality were eliminated. The final scale (see Question Three) was comprised of nine statements, each of which started with the words “The majority of U.S. citizens”: (a) “hold a positive view of Palestinians,” (b) “are pro-racial profiling against Arabs and Arab Americans,” (c) “hold positive views of the Patriot Act,” (d) “are against the latest U.S. war on Iraq,” (e) “hold negative attitudes toward Saudi Arabia,” (f) “hold positive attitudes toward Arabs and Arab Americans,” (g) “view Arab Americans as terrorists,” (h) “view Islam positively,” and (i) “agree on U.S. dominance and foreign policy in the world.” The statements that reflected positive views of Arabs,
Arab Americans, and the issues important to them (items a, d, f, and h) were recoded with regard to the end points of the scale used to rate them, such that higher scores reflected more disagreement with those statements.

The results of a principal axis method of factor extraction based on participants’ ratings of these issues, using oblimin rotation (with eigenvalues of 1.00 as the criterion for selecting factors), yielded a two-factor solution that explained 54.9% of the total variance (see Table 2). The last two items (“The majority of U.S. citizens hold a positive view of Palestinians” and “The majority of U.S. citizens hold negative attitudes toward Saudi Arabia”) of the first factor were dropped because the first item did not load cleanly on only one factor and the second item had a low loading on the first factor. The first factor, which had an eigenvalue of 3.5 and explained 39.3% of the variance, examined Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion on issues that relate solely to Arabs and Arab Americans (Cronbach’s alpha = .78). The second factor, which had an eigenvalue of 1.4 and explained 15.6% of the variance, measured Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion with respect to political issues that affect all Americans, not just Arab Americans (specifically, U.S. world dominance and foreign policy, the war in Iraq, and the Patriot Act) (Cronbach’s alpha = .66). Respondents’ scores on the items of each factor were summed to create a composite score, with higher scores reflecting greater agreement with what the Arab American focus group members identified as a negatively perceived majority opinion of U.S. citizens. These two composite scores were used in all subsequent analyses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The majority of U.S. citizens hold positive attitudes toward</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab and Arab Americans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The majority of U.S. citizens view Islam positively</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The majority of U.S. citizens hold a positive view of Palestinians</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The majority of U.S. citizens are pro racial profiling against Arab</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabs and Arab Americans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The majority of U.S. citizens view Arab Americans as terrorists</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The majority of U.S. citizens hold negative attitudes toward Saudi</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The majority of U.S. citizens hold a positive view of the Patriot</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The majority of U.S. citizens agree on U.S. dominance and foreign</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>policy in the world</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The majority of U.S. citizens are against the latest U.S. war on Iraq</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring; Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.
Finally, Question Four asked respondents to provide information about themselves and their internet access and usage.

Results

Arab Americans’ Internet Motives
To answer the first research question about Arab Americans’ motives for using the internet, the means and standard deviations for each of the five motives were calculated. The results showed that the information-seeking motive had the highest score ($M = 4.55, SD = .67$), followed by the convenience motive ($M = 4.05, SD = 1.02$), entertainment motive ($M = 3.91, SD = 1.07$), pass time motive ($M = 3.63, SD = 1.23$), and, finally, the interpersonal motive ($M = 3.57, SD = .93$).

A repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedure was conducted to determine whether there were differences between participants’ ratings of these five motives. An initial test of the sphericity assumption (equal variance of difference scores in a within-participants design; similar to the homogeneity of variance assumption with a between-participants ANOVA) indicated that the Greenhouse-Geisser adjusted $F$-test (a relatively stringent $F$-test, which is also used when a data set is small) should be adopted because the assumption was violated. This test revealed a significant difference between the needs, $F(3.18, 352.67) = 36.77, \eta^2 = .25, p < .05$.

Post hoc paired $t$-tests showed that there were significant differences between all of the motives (see Table 3), except between the interpersonal and pass time motives, and between the convenience and entertainment motives. To control for Type I error that may result from performing several $t$-test comparisons, Dunn’s multiple comparison test (which adjusts the significance level by dividing the desired alpha level by the number of comparisons made) was employed ($.05/10 = .005$).

The Internet as a Functional Media Alternative
To answer the second research question about whether the internet was a functional alternative to the other traditional media studied—television, books, magazines, radio, newspapers, and movies—for Arab Americans’ information-seeking and interpersonal motives, the means and standard deviations for the information-seeking motive first were calculated for each medium. The results showed that the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pass Time</th>
<th>Informational</th>
<th>Convenience</th>
<th>Entertainment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>$- .51$</td>
<td>$-13.59^*$</td>
<td>$- 5.70^*$</td>
<td>$- 3.67^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass Time</td>
<td>$- 9.72^*$</td>
<td>$-3.75^*$</td>
<td>$- 2.94^*$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td></td>
<td>$6.81^*$</td>
<td>$8.52^*$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$1.60$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $df = 111$; $^*p < .005$. 
internet had the highest score ($M = 4.55$, $SD = .69$), followed by books ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.03$), newspapers ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.08$), television ($M = 2.50$, $SD = .91$), radio ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.03$), magazines ($M = 2.40$, $SD = .94$), and movies ($M = 1.60$, $SD = .77$).

A repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedure was conducted to determine whether there were differences between participants’ ratings of the information-seeking motive for the internet and the other media. An initial test of the sphericity assumption showed that the Greenhouse-Geisser adjusted $F$-test should be adopted; the results of that test revealed a statistically significant difference between the seven media for the information-seeking motive, $F(5.45, 588.68) = 137.69$, $\eta^2 = .56$, $p < .05$. Post hoc paired $t$-tests demonstrated significant differences in the information-seeking motive between the internet and each of the six traditional media of television, $t(108) = 20.37$, books, $t(108) = -11.27$, magazines, $t(108) = 22.56$, radio, $t(108) = 19.51$, newspapers, $t(108) = 18.67$, and movies, $t(108) = 31.86$ (Dunn’s procedure: $.05/6 = .008$).

After summing the items measuring the interpersonal utility motive into a composite score, the means and standard deviations across the seven media then were calculated. The results showed that the internet had the highest score ($M = 3.52$, $SD = .94$), followed by books ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .91$), newspapers ($M = 2.35$, $SD = .83$), radio ($M = 2.09$, $SD = .88$), magazines ($M = 2.04$, $SD = .77$), television ($M = 1.94$, $SD = .71$), and movies ($M = 1.66$, $SD = .68$).

After summing the items measuring the interpersonal utility motive into a composite score for each of the seven media, a repeated-measures ANOVA procedure was conducted to test for differences between participants’ ratings of the interpersonal motive for the internet and the other media. The Greenhouse-Geisser adjusted $F$-test, again, was adopted, with the results showing a significant difference between the seven media for the interpersonal motive, $F(5.25, 619.66) = 103.21$, $\eta^2 = .47$, $p < .05$. Post hoc paired $t$-tests demonstrated that there were significant differences in the interpersonal motive between the internet and each of the six traditional media ($p = .001$) of television, $t(118) = -16.29$, books, $t(118) = -8.31$, magazines, $t(118) = 16.25$, radio, $t(118) = 14.62$, newspapers, $t(118) = 13.26$, and movies, $t(118) = 19.28$ (Dunn’s procedure: $.05/6 = .008$).

To assess respondents’ use of foreign media, the means and standard deviations were calculated for the percentage of use from countries outside the United States for each medium. The results showed that the internet had the highest score ($M = 39.1\%$, $SD = 27.3\%$), followed by television ($M = 31.2\%$, $SD = 27.3\%$), books ($M = 26.7\%$, $SD = 26.6\%$), movies ($M = 21.6\%$, $SD = 23.2\%$), newspapers ($M = 20.0\%$, $SD = 29.0\%$), magazines ($M = 17.2\%$, $SD = 26.4\%$), and radio ($M = 12.7\%$, $SD = 25.8\%$).

Arab Americans’ Perceptions of U.S. Public Opinion and Relationship to Internet Motives

To answer the third research question about Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion about several issues considered to be important to Arab Americans,
the means and standard deviations were calculated for the two factors representing Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion on (a) issues related to Arab Americans, in particular; and (b) issues related to all Americans, in general. A post hoc paired t-test showed a significant difference between these two factors, \( t(123) = 6.70, p < .01 \). Specifically, Arab Americans generally agreed with the negative statements representing the hypothetical U.S. majority opinion on issues related to Arab Americans \( (M = 3.70, SD = .78) \), but were relatively undecided about the negative statements on issues related to all Americans \( (M = 3.20, SD = .82) \).

To answer the fourth research question about the relationship between Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion and their motives for using the internet, Pearson Product Moment correlations were computed between the two factors representing Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion and the five internet motives (see Table 4). The results showed only one significant low correlation between Arab Americans’ perception of U.S. public opinion on issues that were specifically related to Arab Americans and the convenience motive for using the internet, \( r(123) = .28, p < .01 \).

Discussion

The findings from this study, the first to explore Arab Americans’ use of the internet, showed that this sample of Arab Americans used the internet to meet particular needs and that the internet served, for them, as a functional alternative to other media. The following discussion explains the significance of the findings, identifies some limitations of this research, and suggests directions for future research.

In terms of motives for using the internet, information seeking was the most salient motive for this sample of Arab Americans, followed by convenience, entertainment, pass time, and interpersonal motives. Whether these internet motives differ from those of other Americans is a difficult question to answer for two reasons. First, this study did not compare the internet motives of this sample of Arab Americans with the motives of members of any other U.S. cultural groups. Second, previous research results are mixed regarding Americans’ most salient motives for using the internet.

Table 4 Correlations between Arab Americans’ Perceptions of U.S. Public Opinion and Internet Motives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motives</th>
<th>Issues Related to Arab Americans</th>
<th>Issues Related to All Americans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass Time</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
the internet. For instance, Papacharissi and Rubin’s (2000) study of midwestern U.S. university students demonstrated virtually identical findings to the present study, with the exception of the entertainment and convenience motives being reversed in priority in their study. In contrast, however, Flaherty et al.’s (1998) study of midwestern U.S. university students showed that four other motives (in order, entertainment, pleasure, meet people, and relaxation) exceeded information seeking for using the internet.

Arab Americans in this sample also used the internet as a functional alternative to other media to satisfy their information-seeking and interpersonal needs, which is in line with a core assumption of uses and gratifications theory that traditional and new media compete to fulfill the same human needs, which make them functional alternatives (E. Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch 1973–1974). Moreover, the functional equivalence principle states that an existing medium will be displaced by a new medium that fulfills the same needs equally or better (Himmelweit, Oppenheim, & Vince, 1958; see also Cai, 2004). This principle would explain why the studies conducted by Ebersole (2000) and Ferguson and Perse (2000) found that the internet serves as a functional alternative to other media. These Arab Americans respondents, therefore, may be similar to other Americans in using the internet as a functional media alternative.

Although Arab Americans may or may not be different from other Americans in using the internet and using it as a functional alternative to other media, the findings from this study showed that 40% of the internet sources that this sample of Arab Americans used were from outside the United States. We do not know the specific foreign web sites that Arab Americans frequently visited. However, based on articles posted and information discussed on various Arab American web sites, these sources might include satellite Arab television stations online (see Aikat, 2005b), such as Al Jazeera or the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International (LBC), and European newspapers online, such as The Independent and the Guardian.

It is also not possible to compare these Arab Americans to other Americans with respect to their use of non-U.S. internet sources. Moreover, Americans’ use of foreign internet sources may have changed significantly since September 11, 2001 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. According to Aikat’s (2004, 2005a, 2005b) analysis of web searches before and after 9/11, Americans significantly increased their information-seeking trends after that event. Indeed, Aikat (2005b) reported that “in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, news-related searches replaced the predominant entertainment-oriented queries on three leading search engines [Google, Lycos, and Yahoo!]” (p. 3). Similar results were reached by other researchers who analyzed data for the Pew Internet & American Life Project (see, e.g., Rainie, 2001; Rainie & Klasnes, 2001). In addition, Aikat (2005b) reported that according to the March 30, 2003 Yahoo! index weekly report, during the initial weeks of the 2003 Gulf War, Americans sought a significant amount of information from foreign online media, as reflected in their online searches. Specifically, Abu Dhabi TV was the second-most searched term (POW [prisoner of war] being the first), Iraq TV ranked third, Arab
TV was fourth, Iraqi TV was fifth, Al Jazeera English was sixth, Al Jazerra (mis-spelled) was seventh, and Iraqi Television was eighth. Although Arab Americans’ use of foreign media may also have changed in these ways after these important events, longitudinal participation by the first author on Arab American web sites that predates those events suggests that Arab Americans have routinely relied on foreign internet sources.

One reason these and other Arab Americans might consult foreign internet sources is because those sources often provide different perspectives from those represented in U.S. mainstream media (including Internet sources). E. Katz et al. (1973–1974) emphasized that “it is the combined product of psychological dispositions, sociological factors, and environmental conditions that determines the specific uses of the media by members of the audience” (pp. 516–517). The specific conditions of marginalization and misrepresentation of Arab Americans in U.S. society and by U.S. mainstream media, coupled with Arab Americans being connected to a region of the world that is experiencing several conflicts and where U.S. practices are often viewed as being hegemonic, may well lead Arab Americans to obtain relevant information from foreign Internet sources.

Such an interpretation would be in line with Ryan et al.’s (1998) general conclusion that new media (such as the Internet) disseminate information not available through mainstream media to marginalized segments of U.S. society. With regard to Arab Americans, in particular, Nagel and Staeheli (2003) found that web sites function as important networks for Arab American communities in promoting cultural awareness, conveying a sense of pride, and building a consciousness of Arabness through teaching about their language, culture, history, and society. Examining topics covered by some of those web sites, these researchers found that many topics concerned issues of civil rights, policies affecting Arabs in the United States, and issues related to the Middle East. Therefore, Arab Americans may well consult foreign Internet sources to obtain relevant information that is typically not covered by traditional mainstream U.S. media.

Nagel and Staeheli’s (2003) research also points to reasons that Arab Americans, in general, might use the Internet as a functional alternative to other media to satisfy their interpersonal needs. Perhaps Arab Americans are discouraged from discussing some of the topics covered on their web sites (see the study of discussions of the 9/11 attacks on Arabic-language online message boards conducted by Abdulla, 2007) with other Americans, especially mainstream citizens, given the current problems in the United States associated with being of Arab origin. Arab Americans, consequently, might seek online groups of like-minded individuals to express their opinions freely, especially if they do not have social networks of friends or family with whom they can discuss those opinions. Doing so would explain why correspondence was the second-most reported Internet activity by respondents in the present study, which included chatting and belonging to listservs, which may be considered online communities. Such an interpretation is in line with Cresser et al.’s (2001, p. 459) finding that women authors published Internet e-zines because they “allow space for creative
female expression that is perceived to be unavailable in dominant mainstream media,” as well as Mitra’s (2004) study showing how marginalized South Asian women used a web site to express their voice.

The characteristics of the internet itself also make it a potentially liberating medium for marginalized groups, including Arab Americans. For instance, the interactive nature of the internet potentially makes its users more empowered by the choices they have and the activities they can engage in online. In addition, because the internet is an unregulated global medium, it is open to perspectives and opinions not offered in U.S. mainstream media. The internet also does not offer many “social context cues,” especially because most online communication is not supported by audiovisual capabilities. Consequently, the risks that may result from expressing unpopular views when an individual’s identity is known are reduced in a CMC context that features anonymity. Such anonymity may encourage Arab Americans to freely express their opinions online, especially if they know that those opinions are not popular in the United States and may even be monitored by the U.S. government.

These interpretations of Arab Americans’ internet use certainly make sense with respect this sample of Arab Americans, whose perceptions of the U.S. majority’s opinion on issues related to them was somewhat negative. These Arab Americans also agreed with negative statements representing the U.S. majority opinion more than they did with issues related to all Americans, which is not surprising given the large amount of research showing that Arab Americans are misrepresented or stereotypically portrayed in U.S. mainstream media (e.g., Abraham, 1989; Hasian, 1998; Lind & Danowski, 1998; Little, 1998, Shaheen, 1984, 1994, 2001). Such media misrepresentation or stereotypical portrayals may lead to the type of social construction that Noelle-Newmann (1991) called pluralistic ignorance. One of the interesting findings of this study was that the issues selected by the focus group to create the scale of Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion—civil rights, policies affecting Arabs in the United States, and issues related to the Middle East—were the same issues covered by the Arab American web sites that Nagel and Staeheli (2004) examined.

There was, however, for this sample, no relationship between the two factors representing Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion on important issues and their motives for using the internet, with the exception of the convenience motive. This finding is not in line with previous research showing a relationship between people’s perceptions of their status as an opinion minority and their willingness to express themselves (although not necessarily their real opinions) in an alternative forum or medium (e.g., Cresser et al., 2001; Garramone et al., 1986; Gonzalez, 1988; McDevitt et al., 2003). This surprising result might be because the questionnaire asked for respondents’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion on important issues but did not ask for their opinions on those issues, assuming, instead, that their opinions would be opposite to U.S. public opinion on issues related to them. This assumption might be true for issues such as racial profiling and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it might not be true for the war on Iraq, for example, as
many Iraqi refugees and citizens of the Arab Gulf states were strongly opposed to Saddam Hussein’s regime and, therefore, might support the war. Hence, Arab Americans, like other Americans, may not all agree on the issues assessed in this study (or what U.S. public opinion is on those issues). Indeed, Sandoval and Jendrysik (1993) found deep cleavages within the Arab American community related to some important issues, with Arab Americans demonstrating a monolithic public opinion block only for certain issues. Some of the Arab Americans in this study, thus, may not have perceived themselves as holding minority opinions on those issues; perhaps they agreed with U.S. public opinion on all or some of those issues, which means there may not have been a spiral of silence effect on their media use. Future research examining the relationship between Arab Americans’ (or any minority group) perceptions of public opinion and their motives for using the internet (or any other media) should assess and compare both respondents’ opinions and their perceptions of public opinion.

Although this study revealed some important findings regarding internet use by this sample of Arab Americans, these findings need to be interpreted in light of some important limitations characterizing this research and suggested directions for future research. First, the online survey respondents constituted a convenience sample, which may affect the ability to generalize the findings to other Arab Americans. The sample, as mentioned, also was not representative of Arab Americans in that most respondents were of Palestinian origin, whereas those of Lebanese origin constitute the largest portion (56%) of Arab Americans living in the United States, with Palestinians constituting only 10% (Arab American Institute Foundation, 2002). This overrepresentation of Palestinians probably occurred because of the use of listservs of activist groups and membership lists of Arab American grassroots organizations. After all, it is well known that Palestinians are the most politically active among Arab Americans because of their special situation (e.g., many being refugees). In that sense, however, the sample may actually be representative of Arab Americans who use the internet. Moreover, the sample was representative of Arab Americans in terms of income, as 45.2% of respondents had an annual income of more than $75,000, which is in line with the percentage (43%) reported by a survey conducted by the Arab American Institute Foundation (2002).

The second limitation concerns the scale used to measure Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. majority opinion on the issues addressed. That scale was based on the perceptions of five focus group members and may not be indicative of the way in which Arab Americans conceptualize U.S. public opinion on those issues. Moreover, as previously discussed, some of the statements that were assumed to carry negative valence for Arab Americans may not have been perceived as negative by respondents. Future research on Arab Americans from a spiral of silence theoretical perspective will need to ascertain the validity of this scale (and the procedure used to create it).

The third limitation was that this study tested only Arab Americans’ motives for using the internet, but uses and gratifications theory includes other important factors that need to be tested, such as predictors of media use, expected gratifications of media use, and gratifications fulfilled. It would be interesting, for instance, to see
whether Arab Americans’ motives predict their use of the internet. In addition, although the findings showed that this sample of Arab Americans used the internet as an alternative to other traditional media, especially to meet their information-seeking and interpersonal needs, the study did not examine whether this medium satisfied those needs, the websites used as information sources, or the specific online forums in which they participated to express their views. Hence, the internet may be a functional alternative to other media, but there is much we do not know about how it is being used by these and other Arab Americans.

The fourth limitation is that only Arab Americans were sampled, with no other group(s) studied for comparison purposes. Although previous research provides insights into how the findings from this study may show Arab Americans to be similar and dissimilar to other Americans, far more studies of internet use by various cultural groups in the United States and elsewhere are needed before confident conclusions can be drawn.

In addition to the future research suggestions already offered, five other directions are suggested for future research on Arab Americans’ online communication. First, scholars should explore whether and how effective the internet is in enhancing the position of Arab Americans in U.S. society. Such research is related to the study of the digital divide, not only in terms of access but also with regard to whether the internet increases Arab Americans’ upward mobility. For example, there undoubtedly are differences between those who use the internet mainly to play games or view pornography and those who use it to apply for jobs, conduct research, and manage financial transactions. Therefore, it would be interesting to know whether there is a digital divide among Arab Americans (and, if so, what type of divide exists), and to examine their online behaviors to see if they employ the internet to enhance their life position. In addition, demographic factors, such as age, education, gender, and socioeconomic level, should be taken into consideration in studying whether there is a digital divide among Arab Americans.

Second, this study focused primarily on Arab Americans as an audience (albeit as a proactive audience) of the internet and the other media studied, but future studies also should focus on effects that the internet and other media have on Arab Americans. For example, research conducted on other populations has tested the effect of CMC on social capital (e.g., Howard et al., 2001; J. E. Katz et al., 2001; Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001; Riedel et al., 2003; Wellman et al., 2001), with some studies showing that social capital increases but others revealing that the internet gradually is incorporated into people’s everyday life and does not necessarily affect social capital. It is important to know whether the internet has the same type of effects on Arab Americans by comparing Arab Americans who do and do not use the internet, as well as the level of their use.

Third, any future application of the spiral of silence theory should take into consideration not only Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion on relevant issues but also their perceptions of U.S. media. Although numerous studies have found the coverage of Arab Americans by U.S. mainstream media to be highly
negative, there are almost no studies that examine how Arab Americans perceive their coverage in those media. Such research may shed light on the relationship between Arab Americans’ perceptions of public opinion and their perceptions of media coverage. That research would be helpful for estimating the extent of pluralistic ignorance, forming a perception of public opinion on an issue based on media coverage—even if it is a false one—among Arab Americans, and the relationship of that perception to their media use.

Fourth, this study employed a quantitative survey questionnaire method to assess the extent to which Arab Americans used the media studied. Future research could include in-depth interviewing to obtain more detailed accounts of Arab Americans’ motives for using the internet, their internet activities, and their views on whether the internet meets their needs.

Finally, despite the limitations and need for additional research, the findings from this study may potentially have applied value to U.S. mainstream media decision makers with respect to reaching out to Arab Americans and demonstrating understanding of their needs and concerns. According to Zogby (2000), U.S. mainstream media decision makers do not realize (or perhaps they ignore) the prejudiced media coverage of Arabs and Arab Americans (see also Domke, Garland, Billeaudaux, & Hutcheson, 2003). Hopefully, mainstream media will change their coverage of issues related to Arab Americans to reflect a more balanced approach because there is a competing medium that provides Arab Americans (as well as other marginalized groups) with alternative information. Indeed, grassroots movements have been successful at times in changing mainstream media coverage of an issue through their use of alternative media that provide other perspectives on that issue (see Ryan et al., 1998). The relevance of this phenomenon to Arab Americans occurred when Al Jazeera television started broadcasting in the mid-1990s; with the attention it gained around the world (see the study of gratifications derived from watching Al Jazeera conducted by Auter, Arafa, & Al-Jaber, 2005), the U.S. media were forced at times to change their coverage of some issues. One famous example of such change was the coverage of the so-called “U.S. war on terror” or the war in Afghanistan. Al Jazeera (although not neutral itself) covered these events from a different angle than did mainstream U.S. media, and because it was the only television channel that was allowed to work in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime, CNN was forced to buy footage from Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera also recently launched both an English-language web site and television channel, making it easier for Arab Americans and other Americans who cannot speak Arabic to access this alternative medium. Hence, U.S. mainstream media decision makers may well be forced, through competition or limited access to information, to change their coverage of Arabs and Arab Americans.

Conclusion

The findings from this exploratory study of an important cultural group of Americans showed that this sample of Arab Americans use the internet to meet important
needs and that the internet serves as a functional alternative to other media to meet their information-seeking and interpersonal needs. Arab American respondents also perceived U.S. public opinion as being negative with respect to some significant issues related to them, although those perceptions were not related to their internet motives. This study, thus, provides important information about internet use by a highly marginalized segment of the U.S. population. Most media research on Arab Americans has focused on their portrayal in the media, which cast Arab Americans as marginalized, passive receivers. In contrast, this study examined Arab Americans as active participants who select and use media to meet their needs, and who, through their internet use, can refuse to accept U.S. mainstream media’s coverage of them and the issues important to them.

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References


Appendix

Online Survey Questionnaire

Question One:
Please indicate how much you use each medium indicated to accomplish each of the reasons given. In answering about each medium, please focus only on your use of the U.S. media (with the exception of the internet) using the following 5-point scale:
5 = A Lot
4 = Much
3 = Some
2 = A Little
1 = Not at all

Example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I use</th>
<th>TV</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Internet</th>
<th>Magazines</th>
<th>Radio</th>
<th>Newspapers</th>
<th>Movies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To relax</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please think carefully about each media channel before you rate it on the following items (Please make sure you click on a number from the drop-down menu for each box):
To show others
   encouragement
To belong to a group
To enjoy answering
   questions
To express myself freely
To give my input
To get more points
   of view
To tell others what
   to do
Because I wonder what
   other people said
To meet new people
I use
   TV Books Internet Magazines Radio Newspapers Movies
When I want someone
   to do something for me
To pass time when bored
When I have nothing
   better to do
To occupy my time
Because it is a new way
   to do research
To get information for free
To look for information
To see what is out there
To communicate with
   friends & family
Because it is cheaper
Because it is easier
Because it is entertaining
Because it is enjoyable

Question Two:
For each medium, please indicate the percentage (out of 100% for each) of your use
is from countries outside the United States (e.g., 40% of the 100% of TV you watch is
not from the United States?)

A. TV ——% of the 100% of my usage
B. Books ——% of the 100% of my usage
C. Internet ——% of the 100% of my usage
D. Magazines ——% of the 100% of my usage
E. Radio ——% of the 100% of my usage
F. Newspapers ——% of the 100% of my usage
G. Movies ——% of the 100% of my usage
Question Three:
Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements using the following scale:
5 = Strongly Agree
4 = Agree
3 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree
2 = Disagree
1 = Strongly Disagree
—— A) The majority of U.S. citizens hold a positive view of the Palestinians.
—— B) The majority of U.S. citizens are pro-racial profiling against Arabs and Arab Americans.
—— C) The majority of U.S. citizens hold positive views of the Patriot Act.
—— D) The majority of U.S. citizens are against the latest U.S. war on Iraq.
—— E) The majority of U.S. citizens hold negative attitudes toward Saudi Arabia.
—— F) The majority of U.S. citizens hold positive attitudes towards Arabs and Arab Americans.
—— G) The majority of U.S. citizens view Arab Americans as terrorists.

Question Four:
Please provide the following information. Remember that you should not provide your name and that all information you will provide will be kept confidential.
A. Do you have internet at
   1. Home
   2. Work
   3. Both

B. What is the number of years using the internet?
   1. Less than 1 year
   2. 1-2 years
   3. 3-6 years
   4. More than 6 years

C. How regularly do you use the internet?
   1. Less than 1 hour per week
   2. 1-2 hours
   3. 3-6 hours
   4. 7-10 hours
   5. 11-20 hours
   6. 21-30 hours
   7. More than 30 hours
D. What percentage of your internet use is for (please make sure the total for both a and b adds up to a 100%):
   ——% 1. Work-related activities
   ——% 2. Personal activities

E. What percentage of your internet use time is devoted to (please make sure that the total of the 5 activities adds up to a 100%):
   ——% 1. Fun activities (e.g., checking sports, hobbies, browsing for fun, playing a game, watching video clips, listening to audio clips, listening to or downloading music)
   ——% 2. Information utility activities (e.g., getting news and politics, for research purposes, reading newspapers or magazines)
   ——% 3. Major life-oriented activities (e.g., about health care, jobs, and housing, or taking online college courses)
   ——% 4. Transaction activities (e.g., buying products, making travel reservations, doing online banking, participating in an online auction, trading stocks/bonds/mutual funds shares)
   ——% 5. Correspondence activities (e.g., sending/receiving e-mail or instant messages, participating in chat room)

F. What is your gender?
   1. Female
   2. Male

G. What is your age? ——

H. What is your highest level of education?
   1. Some high school
   2. High school diploma
   3. Some college
   4. College degree
   5. Graduate degree

G. What is your household annual income?
   1. Less than $20,000
   2. $20,001-$35,000
   3. $35,001-$45,000
   4. $45,001-$60,000
   5. $60,001-$75,000
   6. $75,001-$100,000
   7. More than $100,001

H. What is your religion?
   1. Muslim
   2. Christian
   3. Jewish
4. Buddhist
5. Bahaee
6. Durzi
7. Other
8. No answer
I. What is your country of origin? ———
J. Where have you been living for the past 3 years?
———

K. Do you consider yourself Arab American?
   1. Yes
   2. No

Thank you very much for your cooperation; your input will help to enhance the understanding of the Arab American community in the United States. Please do not hesitate to contact me at rinad@memphis.edu if you have any questions or suggestions.

About the Authors

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Arab Americans’ Motives for Using the Internet as a Functional Media Alternative and Their Perceptions of U.S. Public Opinion

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Abstract
This exploratory study employed uses and gratifications theory to understand Arab Americans’ salient motives for using the internet and whether the internet served as a functional alternative to other media to satisfy Arab Americans’ information-seeking and interpersonal needs. Spiral of silence theory also was used to investigate the relationship between Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion and their motives for using the internet. Results from an online questionnaire survey (N = 124) indicated that information seeking was the most salient motive for using the internet and that the internet did serve as a functional alternative, with a significant percentage of the internet sources used being foreign based. There was, however, no relationship between Arab Americans’ perceptions of U.S. public opinion and their motives for using the internet. The findings are discussed with respect to the use of the internet by members of this marginalized cultural group.
Die Motive arabischstämmiger Amerikaner für die Nutzung des Internets als funktionale Medienalternative und ihre Wahrnehmung der US-amerikanischen öffentlichen Meinung

Los Motivos del Uso del Internet como una Alternativa Funcional de los Medios y las Percepciones de la Opinión Pública de los EE.UU. por Parte de los Árabe Americanos

Ahlam Muhtaseb
Lawrence R. Frey

Resumen

Este estudio exploratorio emplea la teoría de los usos y las gratificaciones para entender los motivos salientes de los Árabe Americanos para el uso del Internet y para saber si el Internet sirve como una alternativa funcional a otros medios para satisfacer la búsqueda de información y las necesidades personales. La teoría del espiral de silencio fue usada también para investigar la relación entre las percepciones que los Árabe Americanos tienen de la opinión pública de los EE.UU. y sus motivos de uso del Internet. Los resultados de un cuestionario de encuesta online \((N = 124)\) indicaron que la búsqueda de información fue el motivo más saliente de uso del Internet y que el Internet sirvió como una alternativa funcional, con un porcentaje significativo de uso de recursos del Internet basados en el extranjero. No obstante, no se encontró relación alguna entre las percepciones de la opinión pública por parte de los Árabe Americanos ni de sus motivos para el uso del Internet. Estos hallazgos fueron discutidos con respecto al uso del Internet por miembros de grupos culturales marginalizados.
阿拉伯裔美国人将因特网当作功能性媒体选项加以使用的动机以及他们对美国公共舆论的印象

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摘要

本探索性研究使用适用与满足理论来理解阿拉伯裔美国人使用因特网的突出动机；以及了解因特网在满足阿裔美国人信息搜寻和人际交往之需求方面是否可以取代其他媒体。我们还使用沉默螺旋理论来探讨阿裔美国人对美国公共舆论之印象和他们使用因特网之动机两者之间的关系。网上进行的调查（124 个样本）结果表明：信息搜寻是使用因特网最显著的动机；鉴于所使用之因特网相当一部分源自外国，因特网因此的确被用作一个功能性媒体选项。然而，阿裔美国人有关美国公共舆论的印象和他们使用因特网的动机没有关联。在讨论这些发现的时候，我们参考了这个被边缘化团体之成员使用因特网的情况。
기능적 미디어 대안으로서 인터넷 사용에 대한 아랍계 미국인들의 동기와 그들의 미국 여론의 개념에 관한 연구

Ahlam Muhtaseb

Lawrence R. Frey

요약

본 실험적 연구는 이용과 충족이론을 이용, 아랍계 미국인들의 인터넷을 사용하는 현저한 동기와 인터넷이 기존의 미디어에 반해 아랍계 미국인들의 정보추구와 개인적 필요를 만족시키기 위한 기능적 대안이 될 수 있는지를 조사한 것이다. 침묵의 나선형 이론 또한 미국여론에 대한 아랍계 미국인들의 개념과 인터넷을 사용하는 그들의 동기사이의 관계를 이해하기 위하여 사용되었다. 온라인 설문조사 (N = 124) 결과, 정보추구는 인터넷을 사용하는 가장 현저한 유인이며 인터넷은 기능적 대안으로 기능한다는 것을 보여주고 있다. 그러나, 미국 여론에 대한 아랍계 미국인들의 개념과 인터넷 사용을 위한 그들의 동기와는 관계가 없는 것으로 나타났다. 조사 결과들은 사회적으로 뒤쳐진 소수 문화집단 구성원들의 인터넷사용에 대한 개념과 연계, 논의되었다.