

R-Shief: Arabic for 'Archive' in the Cyber World

The emergence of digital media has revolutionized the functions of authorship, knowledge production and communication, and the processing of information in a manner that demands attention be paid to the medium as agent. Integrating art, technology, and reporting in the artistic production, the digital medium itself functions as a creative and dynamic *producer*, not just *reporter*, of knowledge. As a relatively new form, digital media's contributions¹ and potential in the field of knowledge production have neither been examined nor assessed fully in other disciplines. *R-Shief*, the project proposed in this paper, serves as an application of the theoretical premise concerning the agency of the medium, thus providing a case to illustrate its contribution in the production of knowledge.

R-Shief—a web-based archive—transforms the information that is present in Middle East studies, (in Arabic or Persian, for instance) which has been excluded from the arena of international discourse because of the alien nature of the languages, by combining them in an online archive with the immediacy of, and in parallel construction with, such research done in more “universal” languages like English.² By providing an online platform for this research, *R-Shief* allows for a reincarnation of this knowledge within the more universalized discourse that weaves together the different, discrete knowledge production that may otherwise remain isolated. The name *R-Shief* was chosen because it is the Arabic word for ‘archive.’ *R-Shief* itself is an Arabic-English website that integrates software to archive digital genres on the Middle East and its Diaspora. Notably, *R-Shief*—the website—is distinguished from the *R-Shief* Initiative— whose goal is to provide a cyber platform for digital genres in Arabic and English to be used for research, scholarship, and cultural production. The Arabic script and linguistic characteristics have traditionally isolated scholarship written in this language from the general international arena. *R-Shief*'s ability to incorporate the Arabic script and its semantics online is a primary reason for defining the scope of *R-Shief* in terms of the landscape of a 21st century, mobile, Arab imagination. In this paper, I chronicle the methods of design behind the development of the *R-Shief* prototype, as well as the theoretical underpinnings that explain how the twelve-member advisory board and staff-led initiative came to be.

The argument I make is that integrating digital arts into the field of Middle East studies would allow both interdisciplinary fields to enrich their terrain of knowledge production. Implicit in the conceptual design of *R-Shief* is the premise that the medium

¹ Digital theorists speak on the transformative nature of the digital medium. See Sharon Daniel “The Database: An Aesthetics of Dignity” in *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow*, 2009); Bruno Latour *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-network-theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; Kathryn N. Hayles *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999; Lev Manovich *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001; Brian Massumi *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002; and Warren Sack “Discourse Architecture and Very Large-Scale Conversations,” in *Digital Formations*, Robert Latham and Saskia Sassen, Editors Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.

² When I refer to language here, I am referring to the larger meaning of language beyond the written and spoken. I am referring to languages in terms of cultural codes, semiotics--just as music, or perl and php are considered languages.

itself becomes inseparable from the object—hence the digital form contributes to the manifestation of meaning in a significantly transformative manner. Since the otherness of the Arabic script and language has traditionally rendered its content (scholarship, popular culture, etc) inaccessible, it has remained outside the interaction of discrete bits of information that form knowledge production. The conceptual design of *R-Shief*, through its digital composition—its unique form—allows the integration of this body of output into conversation through which the various discrete parts enter into the universalized discourse.

In spite of the fact that digital genres have been adopted in place of other media in communication universally, digital media is often theorized within social science methodological frameworks under the rubric of ‘media studies,’ and therefore, as objects of study rather than vehicles of knowledge production. Often such scholarship within media studies is considered as “popular culture,” which arguably, further ghettoizes the field. That the digital form becomes a factor in the transformation of discourse has not been examined in the social sciences or humanities, particularly in Middle East studies. While contributions like Warren Sack’s “Discourse Architecture and Very Large-Scale Conversations,”³ and Bruno Latour’s essay, “Technology is Society Made Durable,”⁴ offer innovative theoretical approaches to digital medium that place technology and the digital form in the role of agents in knowledge production, institutional research on the region has been dedicated to the study of Arab media long before the advent of digital technologies, and has yet to incorporate an approach that considers the digital medium inseparable from its object. Projects like the *Transnational Broadcasting Studies Journal* out of the American University in Cairo, Arab Information Project from Georgetown University, or the Arab Media Centre located in the Communication and Research Institute at the University of Westminster dominate the production of scholarship in the field.

Unfortunately, however, the digital art world is often kept out of most of these exchanges of scholarship and is left for a smaller subset of art historians to discuss. For example, while Walid Raad’s conceptual art piece, *The Atlas Group*, a fictitious online archive, is quoted several times in art journals, it remains only recognized within the boundaries of contemporary art discipline and the methodologies of art practices.⁵ Positioning research on media as reporting vehicles (rather than a combination of art, media, and technology as agents of knowledge/meaning) has focused the investigations on truth-seeking missions—assuming there is a truth out there to be mediated and broadcasted.

The interdisciplinary roots of digital arts and new media require critics to consider the role of art practice as well as technology, in addition to the *matter* being represented in these media. As it is deployed in our contemporary context, digital knowledge

³ Warren Sack “Discourse Architecture and Very Large-Scale Conversations,” in *Digital Formations*, Robert Latham and Saskia Sassen, Editors Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.

⁴ Bruno Latour “Technology is Society Made Durable,” *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology, and Domination* (London: Routledge, 1991), 103.

⁵ In his essay, Niru Ratnam discusses Walid Raad’s piece in analysis of a major art exhibit, *Documenta 11* in 2002. See Niru Ratnam “Art and globalization” in *Themes of Contemporary Art*. Edited by Perry, Gillian and Paul Wood . Yale University Press: New Haven, 2004, 247. His name is listed in Rhizome’s digest of “Highlights from the New Media Art Field,” not in journals or public discourse concerning Middle East.

production can be transformative, and not only a vehicle. In this investigation, I will demonstrate the theoretical construction of this digital art practice by mapping out the conception and development of *R-Shief*—a web-based intervention in producing knowledge on the Middle East and its Diaspora. And I will do so by explaining the practice and methodology behind the development of the *R-Shief* Initiative. With an articulated art practice and technologies, *R-Shief* hopes to provide missing links in this post-national global order of shifting powers of domination.