@ Manshar

We're always fired up when young Arabs publish their blogs online. They question and challenge social norms and spark heated discussions.

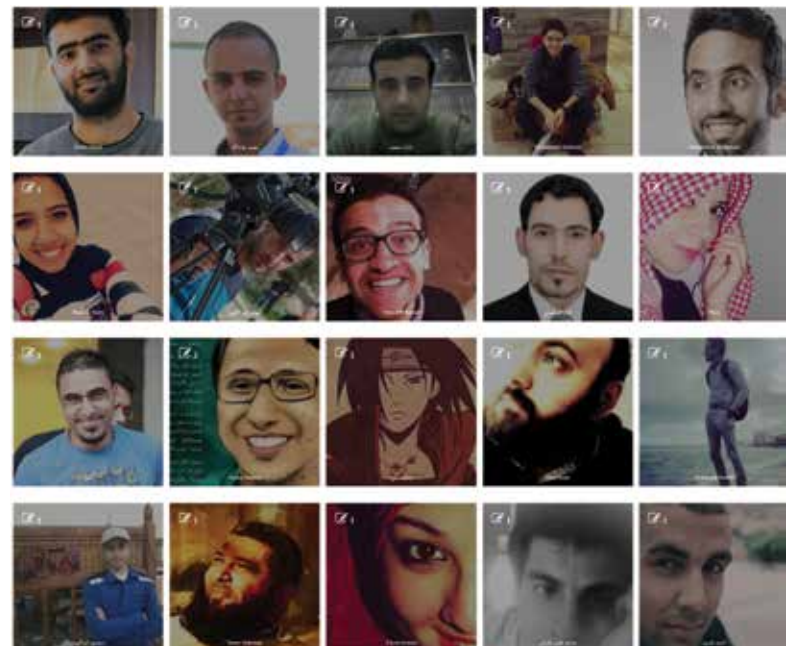**By Rasha Khatib**

Sharing information and experiences is awesome. Unfortunately not many people do it in Arabic, which is why we don't have enough Arabic content out there. So the Manshar team decided to encourage sharing by starting a blog night. Once a month we meet online to write blogs in Arabic about different topics, and we invite others to do the same thing at the same time, and to ask any questions they might have.

Manshar is an open-source project dedicated to providing a platform to write Arabic blogs easily in a "What You See Is What You Get" editor, where publishers and bloggers are able to view their articles during the writing process exactly as they will appear to readers. We make sure that all articles are attractive and clear.

Manshar is now in beta and still under construction; however, people are already using the platform and writing blogs. The best part about it is the lively interaction between those who share information and those who find that information useful, which then precipitates more sharing.

Many stories on Manshar can be categorized into basic themes: society, religion, education, and oppression; other posts can focus on building a career, sharing information on job hunting or good books, and even exploring in-depth technical issues.

We found out that sometimes people don't realize that their stories are worth sharing; they're not sure that there are people out there who are interested in reading them. They don't know that sharing them would help others learn from them or even find a connection, and maybe some inspiration, between the lines. Blog night is a way to encourage people to share their point of view on various topics or experiences.

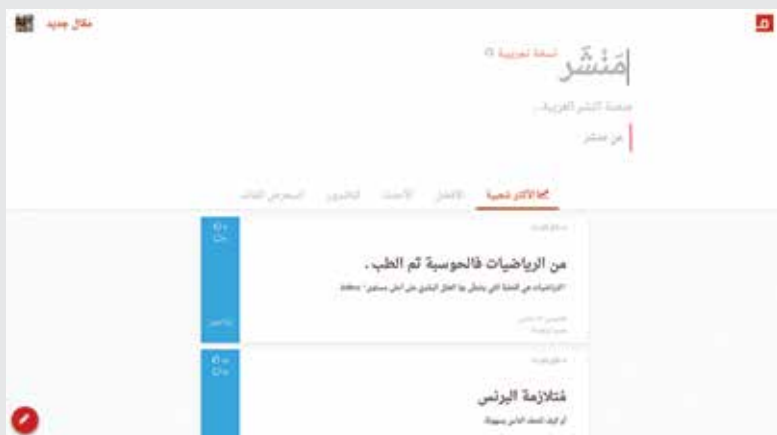We didn't know what to expect from the blog night or whether anyone would join us. Once we started the online hangout, people began to join the video call and thank us for doing this. Some of them were very excited because they had wanted to write about a specific topic for a while but never quite found the time for it, and having a fixed time for the online blog night helped them set aside that time to just sit and write.

The outcome of the blog night was so diverse that we ended up with blogs on entrepreneurship and the importance of money; Islam and the role of the Saudis; a change in lifestyle and why it happened; how to live our lives the way we want, not the way others want us to; a story about living life in a strict religious house; and even a post on how to build high-performance websites. We also had one blog that was written by a 9-year-old girl (my sister!). It was her first blog, and she chose to talk about how great a sister I was to her. :-)

We were really happy with the outcome and we spent some time reading the blogs and making comments on the paragraphs that we especially connected to. The diversity was great. Even greater the controversial ideas. And we wanted to do it again.

We tried a different form for the second online meeting. We wrote posts on a specific topic, education, and then met to discuss ideas in the published posts. I personally preferred the first blog night. I liked the diversity and the fact that people wrote what came to their minds about anything they liked. At the same time, I thought that the second night precipitated a good discussion about education, and that we wouldn't have had it if we had relied on random blogs.

A lot of ideas emerged on how we could help fix the broken education system relatively painlessly, without even playing with the rules or changing them – simple ideas that could help transfer knowledge from university students to high school students early, so that there would be more awareness about what university really looks like and what it needs, rather than remaining with the belief that it all ends at *Tawjihi*, the ultimate goal!

The overall discussion was great, even though we had some technical problems with the call. Some brilliant ideas emerged, and we're going to share them with everyone in a blog post in Arabic within the next few days. We hope to inspire people to adopt one or more ideas that would help students in their area.

We are planning more blog nights with different formats. We hope that many more people will join and share their awesome stories. We're eager to be part of a culture of sharing, and we believe that it is the first step towards a more creative, more tolerant society.

Manshar is also open source, meaning that the code is public and anyone can participate in building it. We want to build a community of developers around the platform as well, to have a culture of sharing on the code level, and we hope many more will join.

May we see more enlightening ideas, more inspiring stories, more experiences shared, more connections made, and more acceptance for the views of others. Let's help increase the Arabic content on the Web to more than a mere 3 percent. Let's encourage writing and reading so that the next statistics will show that Arabs read more than 6 pages a year*!

For more information, visit www. manshar.com. If you have any ideas or comments, please let us know at core@manshar.com.

Rasha Khatib is a Palestinian Web developer and blogger who loves a good book, especially if it involves understanding more about the human brain. She aspires to become a JavaScript Ninja!

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* http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/14/226290.html.