A Virtual Ethnographic Study of Online Communication and Democratic Behavior in the Sudan's Diaspora

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the Scripps College of Communication of Ohio University

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of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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This dissertation titled
A Virtual Ethnographic Study of Online Communication and Democratic Behavior in the Sudan's Diaspora

by

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ABSTRACT

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A Virtual Ethnographic Study of Online Communication and Democratic Behavior in the Sudan's Diaspora

Director of Dissertation: Steve Howard

This virtual ethnographic study was about online communication and the democratic behavior in the Sudan’s diaspora. It investigated the possibility of expanding the diasporic political public sphere among Sudanese diaspora by using the six requirements formulated by Lincoln Dahlberg (2001a) for a rational-critical discourse of online deliberation of political public issues. The Sudanese diasporic online communities was a product of migration of large number of Sudanese to the Gulf States, the United States, and other regions due to the repressive political environment and bad economic conditions in Sudan and their connection to the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in host societies. I used three methods of data gathering: online survey, online semi-structured in-depth interviews, and online participant observation.

The findings of this study have shown that online communication provided diasporic communities with current political information. Sudanese online diasporic members used this political information in holding online political deliberations that enabled them to have freedom of expression and to establish civil society associations. The study found that although some scholars claimed that the provision of political information was not enough to realize political change, the political information that Sudanese diasporic online users got from the website ‘sudaneseonline.com’ was crucial for depriving the current Sudanese Government from claiming democracy, for revealing
corruption, for recognizing the manipulation of the Constitution and civil service.

Undemocratic governments were keen to control the amount and the type of information their populations can get. The obtaining of political information was a significant factor in undermining undemocratic governments, which employ the resources of the state, including manipulated constitutions and judiciaries, to deprive their populations from acquiring political information, which is a human right according to international, regional, and local laws.

Political online deliberations among Sudanese diasporic users have shown some negative behaviors such as the usage of abusive language and defamation.

‘Sudaneseonline.com’ website was characterized by the sole proprietary ownership structure, which may affect the efficiency of the website in terms of freedom of expression, enforcement of laws and regulations of the Discussions Board, continuity, and technical advancement.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the true democrat, Ustadh Saa’eed A. Sheib, to my loving father, Abdelgadir A. Mudawi, to my great mother, Algamria M. Ahmed, and to my dearest sister, Salwa A. Mudawi, who passed away before I was born. Last but not least, I dedicate it to my gorgeous wife, Enayat A. Elhassan, and our beautiful children, Mahmoud, Abdelgadir, Amna, Ahmed, and Mr. Fixed Wrist, Ali.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Emergence of Sudanese Online Communities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Context: The Militarization of Sudanese Polity</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Context: Freedom of Expression</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Context: Civil Society Associations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Armed Conflicts in Sudan</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Failure of Democratization in Sudan</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Split of Sudan</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Creation of Sudanese Diasporas</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Emergence of the Information Society</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Evolution of Sudanese Web Sites</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The 'Sudaneseonline.com' Website</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democracy and Democratization</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Definitions and Clarification of Basic Research Terms</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Objectives of the Study</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of the Study</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Organizational Structure of the Study ................................................................. 27  
Chapter 2: Literature Review .............................................................................. 29  
  The Internet and Electronic Democracy ............................................................. 29  
  Freedom of Expression ....................................................................................... 32  
  Civil Society Associations .................................................................................. 36  
  Sudanese Diasporic Communities ...................................................................... 38  
    Sudanese Diasporic Community in Ohio ........................................................... 39  
    Sudanese Diasporic Community in Australia ................................................... 43  
    Sudanese Diasporic Community in Egypt ....................................................... 45  
    Sudanese Diasporic Communities in the Gulf .................................................. 48  
  Behavior of Sudanese Online Communities ..................................................... 49  
  The Theory of Communicative Action ............................................................... 50  
  The Concept of Public Sphere ........................................................................... 51  
  The Six Requirements of Rational-Critical Discourse ....................................... 53  
    Exchange and Critique of Reasoned Moral-Practical Validity Claims .............. 53  
    Reflexivity ....................................................................................................... 54  
    Ideal Role Taking ............................................................................................ 55  
    Sincerity .......................................................................................................... 56  
    Discursive Inclusion and Equality ................................................................... 56  
    Autonomy from State and Economic Power .................................................... 57  
  Justification of the Study .................................................................................. 58  
Chapter 3: Methodological Discourse and Procedure ......................................... 60  
  The Researcher .................................................................................................. 60  
  Methodology ..................................................................................................... 62
Virtual Ethnography .................................................................65
Data Gathering ........................................................................67
Online Survey ..............................................................................68
Online Participant Observation ..................................................69
Online Semi-Structured In-Depth Video Interviews ....................70
Email Interviews .......................................................................71
Face-To-Face Interviews .............................................................71
Data Analysis ............................................................................71
Techno-Ethical Problems of Online Research ...............................72
Online Identity .........................................................................73
Privacy .....................................................................................74
Confidentiality .........................................................................74
Informed Consent ......................................................................75
Presenting the Researcher’s Self ...............................................75
The Location of Fieldwork ..........................................................76
Chapter 4: Sudanese Virtual Communities and Democratic Behavior ..........78
History and Development of ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ .......................78
Online Discussions of Sudanese Social Sensitivities .....................80
Characteristics of 'Sudaneseonline.com' Users in Diasporas ...............84
Ownership and Management of 'Sudaneseonline.com' ...................89
Diasporic Online Freedom of Expression .....................................92
Diasporic Civil Society Associations ..........................................97
Sudanese American Women’s Organization (SAWO) .....................99
Appendix I: Semi-Structured In-Depth Online Interview Protocol - Participants Protocol– Participants.......................................................................................................................215
Appendix J: Institutional ReviewBoard Form ..................................................................................................................217
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>Conditions of Freedom of Expression in Sudan (1=best, 7=worst)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>World Internet Usage and Populations Statistics December 31, 3013</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>Rating Features of Competing Sudanese Websites</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4</td>
<td>Main Features of Irregular Emigration and Staying Abroad of Sudanese Nationals</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5</td>
<td>Research Questions, Objectives, and Data Gathering Methods</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6</td>
<td>Percentage of How Many Times Users of ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Website in Diasporas Watched Discriminative Actions during Discussions against Someone Based on Gender, Race, or Religious Beliefs</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7</td>
<td>Categories of Occupations of ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Users in Diasporas</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8</td>
<td>Most Usage of Information ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Users in Diasporas Get from the Discussion Board</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 9</td>
<td>‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Users in Diasporas and Unreadable Topics</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 10</td>
<td>Sudanese Refugees Arrived to the United States</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 11</td>
<td>‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Users in Diasporas and Access to the Internet</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 12</td>
<td>Total Percentage of Each Educational Level among ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Users</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 13</td>
<td>The number of Sudanese by Birth Whom were Naturalized by the United States (2003-2012)</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 14</td>
<td>Traditional and Internet-Based Fora of the Diasporic Public Sphere</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Number of Sudanese Obtaining Permanent Residence Status in the United States (1999-2012) .............................................................................................................................. 12

Figure 2: ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Interface Showing its Discussion Board in Arabic........20

Figure 3: Percentage of Visitors by Country for ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ ..........................20

Figure 4: The Creation of Diasporic Civil Society and Electronic Democracy ............37

Figure 5: Age Groups of ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Users in Diasporas ............................87

Figure 6: Number of Members Participated in the Discussion of Freedom of Faith and Their Countries of Residence ..............................................................110

Figure 7: Number of Members Participated in the Discussion of Freedom of Thought and Their Countries of Residence .............................................................113

Figure 8: Number of Members Participated in Reflective Comments on Sudanese-
   Egyptian Relations and Their Countries of Residence ...........................................115

Figure 9: Number of Members Participated in Reflective Comments on Diasporic Political Struggle and Their Countries of Residence .............................................117

Figure 10: English Version of the Discussion Board of ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ ..........119

Figure 11: Number of Members Participated in the Discussion of Cultural Alienation and Their Countries of Residence .................................................................121

Figure 12: The Number of Members Participated in the Discussion of Foreign Aid and Their Countries of Residence .................................................................123

Figure 13: The Number of Members Participated in the Discussion of Credibility of Radio Dabanga and Their Countries of Residence...........................................126

xvi
Figure 14: The Number of Members Participated in the Discussion of Names of Khartoum Neighborhoods and Their Countries of Residence .........................128

Figure 15: ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Page on Facebook ..............................................................131

Figure 16: Visitors of the Discussion Board Can Comment on Any Thread through ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Facebook Page .................................................................132

Figure 17: Commercials Appear on the Discussion Board of ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ .....140
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Emergence of Sudanese Online Communities

This study is about the impact of Internet communication on the emergence of democratic behaviors among the Sudanese diasporas. It uses the Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas, 1984) and the concept of the Public Sphere (Habermas, 1998) to explore how Sudanese immigrants practice democracy in Sudanese web sites. The study investigates the possibility of an incipient political public sphere emerging from diasporic public sphere, and how this contributes to comprehending Sudan’s difficult past and present. The study explores how Internet communication connects Sudan’s diasporas and contributes to facilitating democracy among them as a result of getting involved in the information and communication technology. This study focuses on the web site “sudaneseonline.com”, using the criteria for ‘rational-critical discourse’ established by Dahlberg (2001a) to examine how Internet communication expands the formation of public opinion among Sudanese immigrants. The rational-critical discourse is a platform where deliberative discussions take place. According to Black, Welser, Cosley, and DeGroot (2011), deliberative discussions are “decision-oriented conversations in which a group weighs pros and cons of different options, articulate core values, and makes choices in a way that is respectful, egalitarian, and open” (p. 597). The study addresses the following questions: What are the characteristics of online diasporic users of Sudaneseonline.com? How do discussions on public electronic bulletin boards contribute to rational-critical discourse among diaporic
communities? To what extent does the Internet expand the political public sphere among Sudanese diasporic communities?

**Context: The Militarization of Sudanese Polity**

During the period of 1898-1956, Sudan was a colony of both Egypt and Great Britain. When Sudan achieved its independence in January 1, 1956, it went through a series of civil and military regimes. Military coups and counter-military coups dominated the Sudanese polity for a time. Most of the coups d’états were bloody, such as the July Movement in July 1971, Brigadier Hasan Hussein’s Movement in 1975, the National Opposition’s Movement in July 1976, the Ramadan Movement on April 1990, and the Justice and Equality Movement’s invasion of Khartoum in May 2008. Three military coups did claim very few lives of people: November 1958, when the Prime Minister, Abdallah Khalil, surrendered power to General Ibrahim Abboud, Commander in Chief of Sudanese Armed Forces, in order to prevent failure of his government initiated by foreign political intervention, the May Revolution of 1969, when a group of liberal military officers led by Colonel Jaa’far Nimeiri seized power without resistance, and the National Salvation Revolution on June 30, 1989, when a group of military officers belonging to National Islamic Front deceivably seized power also without resistance. While General Abboud and Colonel Nimeiri succeeded in seizing power for six years and sixteen years respectively, Brigadier Omar Al-Basheer, who was used by National Islamic Front to lead the coup of June 30, 1989, is still governing Sudan. Some of these coups d’états’ goals were: 1) to impose ideological doctrine, the National Salvation Revolution’s vision was to impose Islamic Sharia’a laws, and the July Movement of 1971, attempted a Communist orientation, 2) to take down a government that they believed inefficient,
unfair and corrupt (the Justice and Equality Movement, the Brigadier Hasan Hussein’s Movement, and the Ramadan Movement), 3) to save the country from external powers (November 1958), and 4) to gain special interests for some Sudanese political parties (the National Opposition’s Movement).

In these military coups, thousands of Sudanese soldiers and civilians lost their lives, and Sudanese people missed many democratic opportunities. It is worth mentioning that the Sudanese people removed two aggressive military regimes from power (November 1958 and May Revolution) by popular uprisings (October Revolution, 1964 and April Revolution, 1985). The basic tools of these uprisings were the people’s consensus on change, civil disobedience, and the refusal of the military to use armed force against civilians. At the present time, several political parties and regional movements, backed by their own militias, occupy Khartoum and different regions of Sudan. Sudan’s purchases of weapons have gone up immensely in recent years (Wezeman & Wezeman, 2014). The Sudanese polity is dominated by a culture of violence and military coups.

Context: Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is maintained by the Interim National Constitution of the Republic of the Sudan, 2005, Article 39/1, which declares, “Every citizen shall have an unrestricted right to the freedom of expression, reception and dissemination of information, publication, and access to the press without prejudice to order, safety or public morals as determined by law” (UNRA, 2014, p.16). And in spite of the significant role of civil liberties in protecting freedom of expression and human rights in Sudan, freedom of expression has been repeatedly violated by successive governments.
In the Freedom House’s\(^1\) ranking of freedom in the world, Sudan is among ten of the worst countries in political rights and civil liberties. The following table explains the conditions of freedom of expression in Sudan.

The Press Council, which is appointed by the government, immensely controls publications and broadcasting of any materials. The Press Council utilizes the 2009 Press and Publication Act, which bestows extended permissions upon the Press Council to shut down opposing newspapers and media channels by imposing huge fines on them (Freedom House, 2014).

Table 1

*Conditions of Freedom of Expression in Sudan (1=Best, 7=Worst)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Freedom Rating</th>
<th>Civil Liberties</th>
<th>Political Rights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Free</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
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</table>


During President Nimeiri’s rule, a Sudanese intellectual, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, was publicly hanged in Khartoum on January 18, 1985 for speaking out against the implementation of traditional Islamic laws that he claimed distorted Islam and threatened the national unity of the Sudan (Howard, 2006, Mahmoud, 2001, Miller, 1985). He was convicted of apostasy during a fake trial, lasting less than three hours, which was then

\(^1\) Freedom House was founded in 1941 in New York City, U.S. by prominent American key figures including journalists, academics, civil rights leaders, and politicians. Its main mission focuses on democracy and freedom.
reversed by the government after Nimeiri’s regime was overthrown by a popular uprising supported by the army in April 6, 1985.

Press freedom is also restricted. Although The Interim National Constitution of the Republic of the Sudan, 2005, Article 39/2 states “The State shall guarantee the freedom of the press and other media as shall be regulated by law in a democratic society” (UNRA, 2014, p. 16), freedom of the press, including the Internet, has been continually restricted (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2013). Several human rights organizations have accused the current government of directly controlling the country’s radio and television stations, exerting great pressure on private newspapers and magazines, and preventing national and foreign journalists from working freely in the country (International Press Institute, 2012). According to Amnesty International (2012) freedom of expression is immensely restricted, human rights violations dominate the activities of The National Intelligence Security Services (NISS), journalists are harassed, jailed, tortured, and coverage of some issues such as corruption and ICC [International Criminal Court] is severely forbidden. Frere (2009) contends that “conflicts drive protagonists to control the media and to restrict access to information. Meanwhile, they make journalists unsafe, impoverish the population, and prevent audiences from buying newspapers, as potential advertisers vanish” (p. 223). In this research, I discuss freedom of expression as a holistic concept that includes speaking about political issues in public spaces, particularly the Internet.

Context: Civil Society Associations

The existence of vibrant civil society associations (e.g., political parties, trade unions, human rights associations) is a basic component of a modern democratic society (Sadiq, 2012, Jensen, Danziger, & Venkatesh, 2007). Successive regimes have eliminated most Sudanese civic society associations’ ability to create, enhance and formulate public
awareness by destroying, weakening, or marginalizing these associations (Sherwood, 2012, Human Rights Watch, 2013). Although Sudanese women participated in politics even before Sudan’s independence (Abbas, 2008), women are repetitively targeted and denied many basic rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of faith (Blosser, 2014). Moreover, political parties are manipulated and thus weakened in their potential role in the peace-building process (Abdel Ati, 2006). On December 6, 2014, the NISS arrested two political activists for their political participation in peaceful resistance of the regime (Al-Basheer’s security agents, 2014). One of them was the coordinator of Confederation of Sudanese Civil Society Associations.

Armed Conflicts in Sudan

Sudan has recently suffered extreme atrocities. Since 1955, the war in Southern Sudan has claimed the lives of 2.2 million people and displaced another 4.5 million (Nordlinger, 2005). The causes of this brutal conflict, in addition to the hostility between the North and the South, are “dualism, ethnic differences, religious differences, and economic differences” (Malwal, 2003, p. 163). Since 2003, the massive violence in the Darfur region has killed more than 400,000 civilians and uprooted more than four millions (Christian, 2013). Although the United Nations Commission of Inquiry’s report on Darfur claimed that the atrocities did not amount to genocide, some Western media and governments argued that the Darfur crisis was genocide (Abbas, 2005; Kasfir, 2005). On January 9, 2005, The Government of Sudan signed a comprehensive peace agreement with the Sudan’s People Liberation Movement (SPLM) (United Nations, 2005), under the supervision of the international community and regional organizations. The SPLM is the main opposing armed group in South Sudan, which was initiated and led mainly by
Christians. The movement gained support from many Muslims, particularly intellectuals, from Northern Sudan. On March 4, 2009, the International Criminal Court issued a warrant of arrest for the current Sudanese President, Omar Al-Basheer, charging him with crimes against humanity and war crimes (International Criminal Court, 2009). Moreover, on July 12, 2010, the International Criminal Court issued a second arrest warrant, charging President Al-Basheer with genocide. On September 2013, Sudan’s Government has brutally killed more than 200 people during demonstrations in Khartoum (Sudan Tribune, 2013). At the present time, several armed groups, including the Justice and Equality Movement, Sudan’s Liberation Movement, and Free Lions, have launched Internet websites (e.g., www.sudanjem.com and www.splmtoday.com), to extend their political agendas by publishing alternative versions of the government’s military operations that are reported on government-controlled mass media such as the Sudan’s TV.

Failure of Democratization in Sudan

While democratic regimes survived for only ten years, military regimes have ruled Sudan for forty nine years. The first democracy lasted for almost three years (January 1956- November 1958), the second one lasted for almost four years (October 1965- May1969), and the third one lasted for three years (April 1986-June 1989). Within these periods of democratic governance, many governments were established and failed due to the weakness of political parties, absence of trust among political leaders that resulted in dividing these parties to competing factions, and the intervention of the army.
in political processes. Anderson\(^2\) (1999) attributes failure of the third democracy to the absence of visionary leadership, the domination of Northern religious sects over Sudanese polity, and the United States’ weak support of Al-Sadiq Al-Mahdi’s democratic government (April 1986-June1989). The Sudan’s political history shows that sham elections and unconstitutional changes in the Constitution were widely practiced. Doebbler (2004) contends that undemocratic governments “legitimize” their governance through rigged elections and by manipulating constitutions. Political parties have failed to create sustainable democracy because they do not genuinely believe in democracy. They failed to establish a democratic system in these political parties themselves and they physically participated in military coups or relied on their allied army officers to wipe out their political foes. Although the only political party in Sudan that has never participated in a coup was the Republican Brotherhood, the party politically supported May Regime, which came to power by a coup in May 1969, because May Regime confronted what the party considered an immediate danger of democracy: sectarianism. The two major political parties are controlled by the two major religious sects in Sudan: The Umma Party is controlled by Ansar Sect and The Democratic Unionist Party is controlled by Khatmia Sect. The leaders of the two sects have been the leaders of the two parties for long periods of times and family members have leading positions in the two parties.

The Split of Sudan

In order to examine the impact of Internet communication on the emergence of political diasporic public sphere, we need to know a significant change that took place

\(^2\) G. Norman Anderson was the United States ambassador to Sudan (August 1986-October 1989).
recently in Sudan’s history: the split of Sudan. On January 9, 2011, Southern Sudanese voted whether to remain a part of The Sudanese state or to create their own independent state. Throughout the more than 50 year history of the Republic, the South never had an opportunity to determine its own destiny. In the referendum, almost ninety nine per cent chose secession (SSRC, 2014). On July 9, 2011, The Government of Sudan, according to The Comprehensive Peace Agreement, 2005, which was monitored by the international community, declared South Sudan an independent state.

On December 2013, ethnic violence erupted in South Sudan, leaving thousands of people dead, including large numbers of women and children, thousands of people wounded, and thousands of people in tragic circumstances, without shelter, water and food (Independent, 2014). The violent conflict was between the two biggest ethnic groups in South Sudan: The Dinka, to which President Salva Kiir belongs, and the tribe of his Deputy, Riek Machar, The Nuer. The armed conflict and peace talks to resolve it, which has been held in Addis Ababa, are still going on and off (BBC News, 2015).

Historically, there were many cases of secessions of political entities from original/larger states such as the State of Eritrea from Ethiopia on May 1991, the Republic of Estonia from the former Soviet Union on August 1991, Norway from Sweden on April 1905, and Belgium from The Netherlands on August 1830. Contrarily, some other political entities chose to co-exist with the original/larger states such as Scotland and Wales with the United Kingdom, Zanzibar Region with Oman Sultanate, and East Germany with Western Germany. In some original/larger states, attempts of some political entities to secede resulted in civil wars that eventually turned out to force seceding political entities to stay in original/larger states such as the United States with
the eleven Southern States, Nigeria with the Republic of Biafra and Yemen with South Yemen.

The Republic of Sudan, which claims to accept the referendum’s result as a democratic choice to split Sudan, still does not have democracy for its people in the North (Human Rights Watch, 2012, Amnesty International, 2012). The confiscation of freedom of expression for most people and the manipulation of civil society associations on one hand, and the recognition of some other people’s right to secede on the other hand, is a contradictory policy. Many civilians in South Sudan and even many people who were fighting for political rights, have lost more vital rights such as the right to live and the right to have basic needs such as food and shelter, in the new state. The split of Sudan may be a construct of the inability of Sudanese in both states to guard the Sudanese democratic project.

The Creation of Sudanese Diasporas

As a result of political instability, political harassment, economic stringency, low wages, unemployment, and increasing oil prices, large numbers of Sudan’s population have emigrated to the United States, Europe, Australia, the Middle East, and other regions (Fluehr-Lobban, 1995; Abusharaf, 1997; Al (2001); Sharkey, 2004; Nolan, 2011). Emigrants seek better standards of living, education, and to escape from the repressive political environments that resulted in wars in Southern Sudan, Darfur, and many other regions, including the capital, Khartoum.

The following figure (see Figure 1) shows that the numbers of Sudanese emigrants to the United States increased from 1999 to 2006 and then rapidly decreased. The reason for this rise in the numbers of Sudanese obtaining permanent legal resident in
the United States, particularly in 2005 and 2006, can be attributed to the increasing numbers of Sudanese leaving Sudan due to the deteriorating economic and political conditions and the United States immigration policies that encourage migrants to settle in the country according to rules and regulations. The decline in 2007 and following years may be attributed to two reasons. First, the United States adopted more strict immigration policies (e.g., visa procedures and security clearance), according to war on terrorism, given that Sudan is on the United States’ list of terrorist countries. Second, although economic and political conditions in Sudan are worse in recent years and consequently, more people, particularly youth, want to leave the country, travelling abroad is more difficult because of unemployment, poverty, and high costs of travelling expenses, taking into consideration that Sudanese need to have (exit visa) to leave their own country.
The Emergence of the Information Society

Many societies have experienced the change from industrial societies to information societies. The Internet is the cornerstone of the information society (Pantserev, 2010, Dordick & Wang, 1993). Khattak et. al. (2012) state: “the two terms [the information society and the information age] often are used to describe a cybernetic society in which there is a great dependence on the use of computers and data transmission linkages to generate and transmit information” (p. 258). The Internet covers every facet of science, politics, and media, and affects the cultural lives of millions of people who join online groups and create online communities. Rogers (2003) argues that “the Internet has spread more rapidly than any other technological innovation in the history of mankind” (p. xix). Governmental, academic, commercial and cultural websites
are set up every day, disseminating a huge amount of information. While many scholars consider the information sector as a fourth economic sector (following agricultural, industrial, and services sectors) (Zein Eldin, 2002, Wood & Smith, 2005), others have drawn a line between access to huge amounts of information and the realization of knowledge (Bonfadelli, 2002, Johnson, et al 1999).

In developed countries, the Internet is a basic component of work sites and a dependable companion in daily life. It provides information in any aspect of people’s lives and helps them to conduct online shopping and attain different services, from making a flight reservation to refilling prescriptions. Work from home is a growing phenomenon in developed countries (Wall & Williams, 2007). The Internet also assists people in communicating with friends, family, and people whom they may meet for the first time. The table below (see Table 1) shows world Internet usage by regions. The table indicates a digital divide, the inequality generated by the disparity in Internet accessibility and affordability (Rogers, 2003; Wilson, 2004). The Internet penetration rate in Africa and Asia is below the average. Africa has the least amount of Internet penetration rate (21.3%), but it has the highest growth between 2000-2014 (5, 219.6%). There are many types of digital divide (e.g., by gender, age, income, disability, and literacy) (Vicente & López, 2010; Ahmad, 2007). Digital divide is a considerable problem that hinders many developing countries from realizing development. It deprives these countries from access to information technology and multiplies global inequalities (Uğus, 2011). It increases poverty, reduces quality of education and health care, decreases life expectancy and political participation (Fuchs & Horak, 2008). The use of mobile phones and the Internet is a basic criteria used to measure the digital divide among countries (James, 2012).
Acilar (2011) argues that developing countries have gained huge benefits from the introduction of communication technologies such as increasing productivity in agricultural and industrial sectors, creating new job opportunities, attracting foreign investments, and increasing trade volume in international market and resisting oppression.
Table 2

World Internet Usage and Population Statistics December 31, 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>World Regions</th>
<th>Population (2014 Est.)</th>
<th>Internet Users Dec. 31, 2000</th>
<th>Internet Users Latest Data</th>
<th>Penetration (%) Population</th>
<th>Growth (%) 2000-2014</th>
<th>Users (%) of Table</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>1,125,721,038</td>
<td>4,514,400</td>
<td>240,146,482</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>5,220</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>3,996,408,007</td>
<td>114,304,000</td>
<td>1,265,143,702</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>1,007</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>825,802,657</td>
<td>105,096,093</td>
<td>566,261,317</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>231,062,860</td>
<td>3,284,800</td>
<td>103,829,614</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>3,061</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>353,860,227</td>
<td>108,096,800</td>
<td>300,287,577</td>
<td>84.9</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America / Caribbean</td>
<td>612,279,181</td>
<td>18,068,919</td>
<td>302,006,016</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>1,572</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania / Australia</td>
<td>36,724,649</td>
<td>7,620,480</td>
<td>24,804,226</td>
<td>67.5 %</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World total</td>
<td>7,181,858,619</td>
<td>360,985,492</td>
<td>2,802,478,934</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>676</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


According to Fuchs and Horak (2008), the digital divide refers not only to material access to information technology; it also refers to technical skills and patterns of use. Min (2010) claims that the digital divide has two levels. The first level is associated with how far the society succeeds in providing citizens with information technologies, making the Internet affordable, and develops citizens’ abilities through education to have
the knowledge required to use the Internet and deal efficiently with information technologies. The second level goes beyond the first level. It deals with the development of the usage of the Internet as a tool for social change. According to Fong (2009), developing countries may need several years to catch up with developed countries in terms of acquiring and adopting information technology, gaining the technical expertise, and developing skills to use it.

In spite of the technical and financial hindrances that inhibit accessibility in developing countries, the Internet has become a recognizable mode of communication. Most Africans access the Internet through Internet Cafés, or by computers operating in government offices and private companies (Ajuwon & Rhinet, 2008). Moreover, people have overcome spatial barriers by forming online communities, where they meet people with whom they share mutual interests.

Online communities are a growing global phenomenon. The number of current Internet users is more than three billion people (World Internet Statistics, 2014). Lord (2002) states that “virtual communities will continue to grow and develop, becoming an increasing part of the identity of many people” (p. 206). Williams and Williams (2009) contend that the features of the Internet help in increasing the number of people participating in online communication. The number of Internet users in Sudan increased from 16.7 per 100 people in 2010 to 22.7 in 2013 (World Bank, 2014), and Sudanese diasporas are increasing in numbers and developing a trend of permanent residence, or at least staying longer period of time out of Sudan. Consequently, Sudanese online communities are increasing.
The Evolution of Sudanese Websites

In the past, the Sudanese diasporas connected with their family members, relatives, and friends through letters delivered by hand, due to deteriorating communication infrastructure of postal services and telephone lines. As a result of the growing need to communicate with people in the homeland, several websites have been created and maintained that provide Sudanese emigrants with a sense of connectedness to their country. Examples of these websites are www.sudaneseonline.com, www.sudan.net, www.sudan-forall.org, and www.sudaneseonline.org. These websites are open for all Sudanese, regardless of discrepancies based on political affiliations, religious commitments, ethnicities, gender, age, or professions. These are dynamic spaces in which Sudanese emigrants and Sudanese in Sudan actively participate. Participants, who reside in Sudan, and in the diaspora, utilize their physical existence in these diverse locations to provide each other with current news taking place in Sudan and in other regions. Public Sudanese web sites are designed with structurally similar sections, such as electronic bulletin boards, news, digital libraries, Sudanese music, commercials, articles and commentaries, press releases by political parties and individuals, photo albums, poems, archives, and cartoons. These websites, which are mostly managed by Sudanese nationals residing outside Sudan, succeed in pulling together thousands of Sudanese people who belong to different social, political, ethnic and religious groups. Sharkey (2004) states that “In the 1990s, the Internet helped Sudanese in the diaspora to build communities across distances. At the same time, hampered by the weakness of the Sudan international communications, particularly outside Khartoum, migrants managed to keep in touch with home communities and to send remittances to them” (p. 136).
The Sudaneseonline.com Website

Sudaneseonline.com website was launched in November 17, 1999, and is based in the United States. According to Alexa.com, a company based in the United States that specializes in rating websites, sudaneseonline.com has the international traffic rank of 9,791 and 23rd traffic rank in Sudan. The website has 5.4 daily page views per visitor and 9,100 subscribed members residing around the world (see Table 3). The website’s worth is estimated at $336,068, based on qualitative factors that reflect the website’s credibility and accordingly its market price. I have chosen ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ for the primary case study because of its high national and international traffic rank, for its sufficient daily page views, and for its high website worth (compared to other Sudanese websites). The website ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ is the only Sudanese website that its participants come together in many cities around the world and perform social activities. In addition, many ‘sudaneseonline.com’ participants are simultaneously active on other Sudanese websites. Klein et al (2010) assert that “researchers who plan to develop an Internet-based study must realize that many of the people they will wish to include in their studies are members of more than one targeted website” (p. 377). Sudaneseonline.com participants, who simultaneously have memberships in other Sudanese websites, have rich online experiences, which make them good informants for this study.
Table 3

*Ratings Features of Competing Sudanese Websites*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating feature</th>
<th>Sudaneseonline.org</th>
<th>Alnilin.com</th>
<th>Sudaneforell.org</th>
<th>Sudaneseonline.com</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Global traffic rank</td>
<td>98,016</td>
<td>4,274</td>
<td>453,222</td>
<td>9,791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic rank in Sudan</td>
<td>835</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>9,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sites linking in</td>
<td>353</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily pageviews per visitor</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The discussion board is the name given in sudaneseonline.com website to the public electronic bulletin board. The website, including the discussion board, is published in both Arabic and English languages. On the topics of electronic bulletin boards (i.e., threads), while first numbers (e.g., 10 in the first thread) indicate people who read the thread and posted comments (responses), second numbers (e.g., 1945 in the first thread) show the number of people who read the thread, but did not participate in the discussion (readings) (see Figure 2). About 44.4% of sudaneseonline.com website’s visitors reside outside Sudan (see Figure 3).
Figure 2. Sudaneseonline.com website interface showing its Discussion Board in Arabic. Retrieved October 14, 2014 from http://www.sudaneseonline.com/board/470.html.

Democracy and Democratization

Democracy is a widely accepted political concept among both academics and the public for its value as a tool to achieve good governance and individual happiness. Good governance is defined as “a set of social institutions that fully represent the people, interlinked by a solid network of institutional regulations and accountability ‘with ultimate accountability to the people’, whose purpose is to achieve the welfare of all members of society” (UNDP, 2002, p106).

In the last decade of the twentieth century, there was an increasing trend toward democratization and human rights in the world, partly because of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the spread of the capitalistic paradigm in Eastern European countries (Ake, 1996). In addition to this, the development of information and communication technologies, particularly satellite TV and the Internet, contributed to democratization by shedding light on human rights violations committed by autocratic governments and by exerting pressures on these governments by international and non-governmental specialized organizations, e.g., Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (Aajwa, 2004, O’Neil, 1998). The process of democratization is a continual challenge. Each country faces this challenge on different levels, whether political development and/or democratic transformation. For instance, although the United States is considered one of the most democratic nations, the election of President Barack Obama in 2008 was a new democratic development because he was the first African-American president. This achievement demonstrates how democracy is a social process that can empower marginalized groups to express their views about public issues in order to improve their quality of life.
African countries are experiencing internal and external pressures to initiate
democratization. Many experts argue that, while liberal democracy may be the core
political value in Western countries, African countries need to develop their own
versions of democracy that can accommodate various social structures, local heritages,
contend that Africans learn about democracy through developing skills to understand
how governments operate. These skills enable them to have political information and
engagement, and to use new media (Internet). In most developing countries, due to
cultural and political factors such as religion, social norms and traditions, and dominance
of political violence or patriarchy, governments tend to deprive women and youth from
their political and cultural rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of
association. In order to address this marginalization of women and youth in developing
countries, Ake (1996) argues that Africa needs to apply “A democracy of incorporation.
To be as inclusive as possible” (p. 132).

Definitions and Clarification of Basic Research Terms

Many terms have been used to describe computer-mediated communities vis-a-vis
conventional geographic proximity. These include “online communities” (Josesffon,
2005; Jones, 2002; Hew, 2009), “virtual communities” (Cole, 2002; Hunter, 2002; Lord,
2002; Gupta, Kim, & Shin, 2010), “network-based communities” (Levin & Cervantes,
(Winerman, 2009), and “mediated communities” (Gooding, Locke, & Brown, 2007). I
choose to use the term “online communities” because of its wide usage among academics
and the public. Although Nolan and Weiss (2002) state that “the term ”virtual
community’ has become so widespread in its use that there is a tendency to conflate all social activity into a single concept and ignore the diversity of virtual contexts” (p. 293), I believe that, since then, ‘online communities’ has become the standard term. In this study, I use Rheingold’s (1993) definition of online communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (p. 5). I also use Hine’s (2003) definition of public electronic bulletin boards: “A forum accessible over a network, where messages can be placed. Users can access the bulletin board to leave messages or reply to those of other users. The bulletin board can be a discussion forum or information source” (p. 157).

In this study, since subscription to sudaneseonline.com isn’t a condition to browse the website, particularly the discussion board i.e., public electronic bulletin board, the subscription is not a condition to participate in this study. Any person who visits sudaneseonline.con can participate in this study.

By freedom of expression I mean individuals have the space to freely express their opinions about different political, social, economic and cultural issues, by any democratic means. They can participate in discussions in blogs and other forms of virtual community, without being harassed, detained, or punished by the government or any social group for expressing their opinions. By civil society associations, I mean social or professional groups that pursue a public interest by organizing themselves in known societies. I chose these two components of democracy i.e. freedom of expression and civil society associations, for their direct relationships with individuals and for their
significant role in realizing other components of democracy such as the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, and free and fair elections.

Virtual ethnography is a research methodology approach to understanding the Internet (Hine, 2003, Beaulieu, 2004). It adapts a number of conventional research methods (participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and surveys) by using information technologies in parts or in all of the stages of conducting research. The basic feature of virtual ethnography is to cope with the emergence of a new form of communities (virtual communities). It provides scholars with the possibility of gaining access to larger populations (e.g., diasporas) or to certain communities, that are difficult to reach because of their characteristics (shy people, people with disabilities, people who are afraid of stigmatization), and for its minimal intrusion. A number of methodological and ethical considerations make virtual ethnography a challenging task (e.g., field site, identity, getting informed consent, protecting research participants). Virtual ethnography enables scholars to be more reflexive because it requires intensive interaction with research participants (Lopez-Rocha, 2010).

The term ‘diaspora’ is associated with cultural dualism, identity, longings for family and friends, and having an involuntary perspective on the homeland’s challenges from a distance. Diasporic communities make cultural choices regarding their norms and traditions, values, technology, and the role they can play to improve the socioeconomic and political conditions they left behind. Scholars have infused the term ‘diaspora’ with many meanings according to their cultural and political purposes (Brubaker, 2005). In this study, I use Manning’s (2009) definition of diaspora “migrants who settle in distant lands and produce new generations, all the while maintaining ties of affection with and
making occasional visits to each other and their homeland” (p. 2). Bongila (2012) contends that those in the African diaspora should have the right to participate in the homeland’s political system (e.g., to vote in elections), because they are such economically and politically active citizens.

Statement of the Problem

Although studies on the relationship between the Internet and democracy are steadily accumulating, the existing literature suggests that there is some disagreement about the role the Internet in democratization and political participation (Hirzalla, Zoonen, & Ridder, 2011; Boulianne, 2009; Wang, 2007; Burns, 2006). Internet communication among the African diaspora remains under-researched (Langmia, 2008), and scholars have different views about the function of the Internet in expanding the virtual public sphere. While Habermas (1998) claims that virtual communities can only undermine undemocratic governments, he doesn’t address the capacity of the Internet to create new political spaces in the 21st century. Dahlberg (2001b) argues that the expansion of the public sphere for any virtual community depends on to what extent this community is committed to what he calls “rational-critical deliberation” (p. 617). Tettey (2001) argues that, while the Internet can provide information to people, information alone is not enough to change the prevailing political environment in Africa. More research is needed to address the role of the Internet in diasporic political participation, particularly for those people who come from countries dominated by undemocratic governance and armed conflicts.

This study investigates how Sudanese online communities expand the public sphere among Sudanese diasporas across the globe. It considers how participants in these
Sudanese virtual communities express themselves, form civic society associations, and establish publishing spaces with stories and articles previously forbidden by government authorities. How does the virtual public sphere contribute to the larger process of democratization? In this research, I specifically focus on how the Sudaneseonline.com website’s public electronic bulletin board i.e., the discussion board, expands the public sphere among Sudanese diasporic communities. I apply the set of requirements established by Dahlberg (2001a) to examine rational-critical deliberation among a variety of online participants. The set of requirements are: 1) exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims, 2) reflexivity, 3) ideal role-taking, 4) sincerity, 5) discursive inclusion and equality, and, 6) autonomy from state and economic power (Dahlberg, 2001b).

This study is based on a naturalistic approach, which views the researcher as an inseparable part of the society s/he studies and who tries to understand the everyday world of a community (Siitonen, 2011; Robin & Robin, 2005 & Mason, 2004). I utilize virtual ethnography for its suitability in exploring social Internet-based networks (Hakken, 1999 & Howard, 2002). I use online participant observation, online semi-structured in-depth interviews with leaders and key informants (of Sudanese online communities and online activists of civic society associations), and online survey as primary sources of data. Other sources of information (e.g., books, journals, and websites) will be used as needed.
Objectives of the Study

This study is intended to realize the following objectives:

1) To identify the characteristics of sudaneseonline.com users who live outside Sudan and are responding to the repressive political environment, internal armed conflicts, oppressed freedom of expression, constrained civic society associations, and state-controlled media in Sudan.

2) To strengthen the understanding of Sudanese diasporic online communities and how participation in these online spaces contribute to the expansion of the diasporic public sphere.

3) To explore how participation in Sudanese diasporic online communities contribute to freedom of expression and civil society principles.

Importance of the Study

This study aims to understand the role of computer-mediated communication in social change. It sheds light on the capacities of online communities to extend spaces for democratization, particularly for people from undemocratic societies and who experience internal armed conflicts and large-scales diasporas. The study is also intended to clarify how online communities can strengthen the sense of connectedness and belonging among diasporic communities. The study will elaborate a more comprehensive understanding of the diasporic public sphere.

Organizational Structure of the Study

The study is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the current conditions of the Sudanese context regarding freedom of expression, civic society associations, and the failure of democratization. It also examines the emergence of
Sudanese diasporic communities and websites from 2000-2012 and further explores the problem. The second chapter explicates a theoretical framework and a review of the literature on the interactive dynamics of the Internet, democracy and human rights, and diasporic communities. The third chapter discusses methodological issues and procedures. It explains in details how research questions are raised, implemented, and answered. The fourth chapter presents and discusses the research findings derived mainly from the online survey. The fifth chapter presents and discusses the research findings derived mainly from the online participant observation. It discusses the six requirements of rational-critical discourse within the Sudanese cultural context. The sixth chapter presents conclusions and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter introduces concepts related to the emergence of electronic democracy and online diasporic communities that came out of traditional societies that lack democracy, experience armed conflict, and large-scale emigration. It shows how freedom of expression and civic society associations are indispensable requirements for democracy and how these concepts are related to the concept of the public sphere. It also presents a theoretical framework of how diasporic communities communicate in order to maintain ties to their homeland. The chapter discusses how developing more effective modes of communication within a technological context contributed to the emergence of Sudanese websites that allowed Sudanese diasporic communities to participate in public deliberation of political issues.

The Internet and Electronic Democracy

Researchers used different terms interchangeably to describe the kinds of democracy practiced by individuals and groups using communications technologies: cyber democracy (Wilhelm, 2000), electronic democracy (Dunne, 2011; Lee et al, 2011), digital democracy (Lăzăroiu, 2011; Loader & Mercea, 2011), and teledemocracy (Bronstein, 2011). Hacker and Dijk (2000) defined digital democracy as “the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in all kinds of media (e.g., the Internet, interactive broadcasting and digital telephony) for purposes of enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication” (p.1).

Large numbers of people nowadays keep contact with their friends, family members or even with people whom they meet for the first time through information and
communication technologies, and also participate in the wide public sphere (Wilhelm, 2000). Lemos (2010) argued that the role of mass media has recently changed from merely providing people with news and public knowledge through public online websites such as online news channels and online commercial websites to enabling people to get connected to their friends, peer groups and the public through social media such as Facebook and Instagram. He explained that “the new tools of post-mass media functions insist of conversation, interaction, [and] communication processes” (Lemos, 2010, p. 404).

In 1995, large number of people began to use the Internet as a tool of communication (Frechette, 2005), however, many studies debated its social effects. Burns (2006) was skeptical about the possibility of the Internet to provide people with more liberties and democratic communication opportunities because the same medium, the Internet, was used by many groups who spread hatred, racism, abuse, and human rights violations. He also claimed that millions of people could not afford having computers or access to the Internet. Mohamed (2011) stated that “the Internet and blogs are helping to transform traditional journalism, making it more susceptible to conservatism and state manipulation, enhancing political activism and expanding the reach of public sphere” (p. 253). Kobayashi et al (2006) related Internet use with social capital and political participation. They claimed that the study supported the theory of social capital in the sense that, when masses of people used the Internet, the social capital of the society in terms of skills and technical abilities would increase. Furthermore, the authors stated that “collective use of the Internet can be a lubricant for democracy” (Kobayashi et al, 2006, P. 582). However, the authors admitted their limitation about what forms of democracy
could be generated in online websites. In their study of British websites used by Chinese young people, Parker and Song (2006) argued that the feature of the Internet as a public space made it an attractive way of having informal relationships and participating in many activities. Nisbet, Stoycheff, and Pearce (2012) claimed that the more the society was willing to have democratic rule, the more the society utilized the Internet in public deliberation, seeking information, and facilitating democracy.

Since electronic democracy goes beyond geographical boundaries, its practice is characterized by heterogeneous and even contradictory opinions (Vedel, 2006). According to Vedel (2006), electronic democracy passed through three stages. The first stage began after the World War II when governments needed to process huge amount of data and get more accurate analyses. By that time, governments used to control computer industry, which was related to security and war. The second stage appeared with the introduction of TV channels and the computer industry started to find its way to normal people, who started to use computers for online communication and political engagement. During this stage, although there were technical challenges such as bad connectedness to the Internet, which restricted the political public sphere to some extent, this stage was a revolutionary development of the Internet as well as of political participation. The third stage started in the 1990s with the huge expansion of electronic democracy and the conceptual revolution of politics regarding freedom of expression, civic engagement, human rights, and the unprecedented expansion of the Internet in the globe.

At the rhetorical level, all political regimes claim democracy. At this level, democracy is a relative experience, ranging from liberal democracies to brutal
dictatorships. Internet communication also ranges between democratic and non-democratic practices. For instance, websites that allow people to freely express their views and have discussions can be classified as more democratic. Websites that are only informative and not technically designed to allow people to express their views and communicate with each other, can be classified as less democratic. Hence, democracy and electronic democracy are relatively different versions rather than static concepts. Dahlberg (2011) described four types of ‘digital democracy’: 1) liberal-individualist, which focused on digital democracy as a tool that helped individuals realized their personal agenda through communication, organization, and competition, 2) deliberative, which used online communication as public spaces for intensive logical deliberation that produced collective outcomes such as the creation of public opinion that exercised pressures on government’s official to make good decisions and the creation and expansion of public sphere in which people could practice democracy, 3) counter-publics, which referred to online communication as a basic tool that enabled organization of groups for a specific purpose, including political competitions, and, 4) autonomist Marxist, which produced a political revolution that radically changed the status quo through collaborative and decentralized social networking.

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is an indispensable element of a democratic society and cornerstone of political thought, human rights debates, and the marketplace of ideas. Trager and Dickerson (1999) claimed that freedom of expression was a major challenge to democratic societies such as the United States and Canada as well as to undemocratic societies such as Sudan, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia.
Karikari (2004) contended that media freedom was a necessary requirement for democratization, efficient governance, human rights such as development and decent living, preserving local cultures, and education. Mukhongo (2010) stated that “respect for the right to freedom of expression in society is fundamental for the capacity of media to deliver on governance and development, and a free press is the foundation of democracy and good governance in Africa” (p. 345). Since freedom of expression can take different forms (e.g. giving a speech, writing an article in a newspaper, holding a discussion in a public space, publishing an online blog, or expressing point of views on radio and TV channels, in this study, I consider freedom of expression as one broad category that includes all these forms.

Freedom of expression has been recognized internationally for many years. On December 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 of this declaration stated that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (United Nations, 2009). Article 24/1 of the Transitional Constitution of the Republic of the Sudan (2011) protected the freedom of expression. It stated: “Every citizen shall have the right to the freedom of expression, reception and dissemination of information, publication, and access to the press without prejudice to public order, safety or morals as prescribed by law (Sudan Tribune, 2014, p. 8). In addition, the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (Banjul), which Sudan also ratified in 1986, guaranteed the freedom of opinion and expression in Article 9 as follows: “(1) Every individual shall have the right to receive
information. (2) Every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate his opinions within the law” (ACHPR, 2014, p. 4).

The Internet has opened new avenues for individuals and social groups to practice freedom of expression. Amin (2002) believed that the Internet prevailed in the African continent because it provided citizens as well as professional journalists with opportunities to get and publish news and information, participate in online communities to discuss public issues, and get connected with their peers and friends, regardless of locations. Agren (2001) stated that “One crucial condition for creating virtual forums with the purpose of strengthening democratic dialogues is one of the fundamentals of democracy itself—freedom of expression” (p. 36). Marlin-Bennett (2011) argued that information and communication technologies may produce more efficient governance and communication, but both of them did not necessarily lead to democratic outcome. Bernal (2006) contended that the Internet significantly helped diasporic communities to get connected to each another, get news and information, organize collective actions, and have deliberative discussions of public issues. Kozhamberdiyeva (2008) argued that the absence of legal protection of freedom of expression and the wide range of private and public interests to control information might eliminate the right of freedom of expression, even though it was protected by the constitution. Marsoof (2011) believed that in order to get the most benefit from the internet communication, governments needed to find equilibrium points between protecting personal privacy and freedom of expression, particularly in online communities. Koolaee (2009) argued that both private spheres (such as women’s organizations) and public spheres (such as online communities) were required to exert great efforts in order to have sustainable democracy. Shaw (2012)
argued that “the study of politics online must take exclusion, effect, identity, power and inequality into consideration, and therefore cannot require an ideal public in which these things do not exist” (p. 43). Dahlberg (2007) concluded that “while specific sites and experiments have been shown to foster deliberation, the social context of the Internet’s development and use is driving online politics towards pluralist interest group competition and individualist participation” (p. 51).

There is a demarcation line between freedom of expression and violating people’s privacy and public image. Different societies draw this line in different spots. Where to draw this line depends on the characteristics of the society such as the dominant social values, to what extent the society values freedom of expression, and the civility of the society. By the civility of the society I mean to what extent the members of the society are saturated by civic values such as tolerance, patience, respect of members’ right to express their opinions, and deep understanding of the consequences of oppression on individuals and on the society, and to what extent the public opinion can exercise pressures on individuals who violate public decency. Article 10/2 of the European Convention on Human Rights (2014) stated that:

The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information
received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary (European Court of Human Rights Website, 2014).

The highly-respected goals that constitutions and subsequent laws and regulations in democratic societies attempt to preserve such as national security, public safety, public interest, protection of health, and protection of the reputation or rights of others, are the same goals that are intensively used by autocratic governments to deprive people from freedom of expression (Byom, 2014).

Civil Society Associations

While freedom of association is theoretically a core value of a truly democratic society, vibrant civil society associations are the practical materialization (physical representation) of this value. Many scholars related civil society associations to democracy. For instance, Rossteutscher (2005) argued that civil society associations cured democratic deformations like counterfeit elections that were widely practiced by African governments. Moreover, it was “the outstanding guarantee of democracy’s survival” (Rossteutscher, 2005, p. 3). Molenaers (2005) was skeptical about the relationships among civic society associations, social trust and informal networks, and hence to the social capital in developing countries. She contended that civil society associations in third world countries might not have the characteristics of social capital that prevailed in the literature. Moreover, she recommended that “The link [of civic society associations] with trust, reciprocity and horizontal co-operation is not to be generalized” (Molenaers, 2005, p. 164). Murphy (2009) argued that there was no guarantee that new technologies facilitated independent growing of civil society
associations from the state. She believed that associations in the Arab world could not constitute a civil society because they were restrained by the state.

*Rossteutsche (2005) explained that in the diagram above (see Figure 4) political systems, features of civic society associations and the fabric of social life contributed significantly to the formation of the nature of the civil society which would determine the health of democracy in the society. In my modified diagram, due to the decayed political system in Sudan, weakened civil society associations, and the worn out fabric of social*
life, the split of Sudan in two states, and the continuation of conflicts, the democratic project in Sudan has failed (Cockett, 2010, Anderson, 1999).

This democratic failure ultimately contributed to the rise of Sudanese diasporic civil society and the digital democracy practiced by these diasporas in online communities. This research focuses on public electronic bulletin boards, specifically the discussion board of sudaneseonline.com website, as a forum for freedom of expression, a communication tool for civil society associations, and how these two requirements of democracy expand the public sphere among Sudanese diasporas.

Sudanese Diasporic Communities

As a result of the immense increase in the numbers of Sudanese moving out of Sudan and into Western countries and oil-producing Arab states, and the telecommunications revolutions, Sudanese diasporic communities are on the rise (Este & Tachble, 2009; Sharkey, 2004; Abdel Halim, 2003; Al, 2001; Abusharaf, 1997; Fluehr-Loban, 1995). Este and Tachble (2009) estimated that the number of Sudanese living in Canada (especially the Greater Toronto area) ranges between 15,000 and 20,000. Increasing numbers of Sudanese migrants were in Australia, approximately twenty seven thousand (CARIM, 2012; Murray, 2010). They settled temporarily in small groups for access to higher education and better wages. The “small group” trend has changed to larger waves of Sudanese migrants who sought permanent residence in other countries because of political upheaval, human rights violations and economic crisis (Abusharaf, 1997).

Although I had experiences of living in Sudanese diasporic communities in Egypt and Jordan, my most profound experiences took place in the United States, particularly in
Ohio. What made these experiences profound might be attributed to my extended residence in the United States, which extended for twelve years, the huge cultural differences between Sudanese and American cultures, and my interactions with other diasporic communities in Ohio (e.g., Somali, Ghanaian, Mexican, and Iraqi). I visited several Sudanese diasporic communities in Virginia, Washington, D.C., Iowa, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Florida, and New York. I stayed with them for a period of time that allowed me to know how they live, appreciate their struggles, their modes of communication with each other and with other dispersed Sudanese, what topics they discuss, and the role of the Internet in their daily lives. I will present descriptive data about Sudanese communities in Ohio, Australia, the Gulf States, and Egypt as cases of diaspora.

*Sudanese Diasporic Community in Ohio*

The number of Sudanese residing in the state of Ohio was estimated to be around one thousand (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Most of them live in Columbus, with others living in Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Dayton. Some of them came to the United States through the Diversity Visa Lottery, a Department of State sponsored program intended to grant permanent residence to a limited number of qualified (and lucky) people from different countries. And some of them came for a reason (e.g., education, conferences) and decided to stay by gaining political asylum, an immigration status that leads to permanent residence, or by registering in Temporary Protected Status (TPS), a Homeland Security designed program that grants eligible immigrants from certain designated countries a temporary immigration status. This status provides immigrants with limited benefits such as work permits and travel documents, but does not lead to permanent
residence, though it is extendable by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), depending on the conditions in the designated country (USCIS, 2014). Sudan is still one of the designated countries because of internal conflicts.

Although diasporas are inherently associated with the separation from their homeland, the Sudanese in Ohio simultaneously adapted themselves to the surrounding communities and maintained connections with Sudan (Hatoss, 2012). They frequently visit Sudan to meet with their family members, to get married, to attend a funeral and, during summer vacation, giving the children opportunities to see their cousins, to master Sudanese Arabic, and explore Sudanese traditions (Fábos, 2012). Because of the strong social ties that characterize Sudanese, they need a mode of communication that is quick (for extended family emergencies) and visual (to see their aging parents and growing nieces and nephews).

In Columbus, they build social networks by living in the same neighborhoods and attending organized gatherings in metropolitan parks (e.g., Sharon Woods and Highbanks Metropolitan Park), and events halls (Ramada Hotel), particularly during the month “Ramadan” and “The Eid”, the high holy day. In these gatherings, Sudanese from different cities gather in Columbus, to share the celebration. The adult men discuss political issues and the information they find on Sudanese websites, mainly sudaneseonline.com and international news channels (e.g., CNN, BBC, and Al-Jazeera). Women share social news, cooking experiences, shopping sales, and their struggles to improve their lives such as getting a driver’s license or moving to another neighborhood that has a better school system for their kids. Women have much more urge of attending these social gatherings than men. They look to these gatherings as opportunities for
young generations to absorb some Sudanese traditions and to show off their families’
strong connection with Sudanese culture by facilitating access and preparing traditional
clothes such as Jalabia, Tagaia, and Shal for men and boys; Tobe for women; and Fustan
for girls.

Sudanese living in Ohio preserve their Sudanese rituals. They do their prayers on
Fridays in Noor Islamic Cultural Center and Omar Ibn Alkhattab Mosque. When
someone passes away, they carry out the funeral according to Sudanese customs, and
gather in one of the Sudanese families’ houses receiving condolences and bringing food
to eat together. When someone is hospitalized, they frequently visit him/her, offering
food or candies, and sometimes paying donations to help out in medical expenses. Young
Sudanese, who came to the Unites States when they were teen-agers, keep playing their
favorite games (i.e., soccer, cards). The younger generations, who were educated in
Columbus schools such as Indian Run, Sells, and Coffman Schools, turned to American
sports such as football, basketball, and video games. Large families are common in
Sudan. In Ohio, Sudanese still keep this cultural norm. As a result, the spaces between
siblings are relatively small. While most of Sudanese in Ohio work in low-skill jobs (e.g.,
taxi drivers, warehouse workers,), some of them have professional jobs such as university
professors, medical doctors, pharmacists, and medical technicians. Some of them operate
businesses (e.g., vehicle repair workshops, cell phone stores, and family dollar stores).
Sudanese living in Ohio belong to diverse political affiliations such as Umma Party and
Unionist Democratic Party, but most of them are progressive and anti-government.

The Internet requires a degree of technical literacy that many Sudanese
immigrants in Ohio have developed, given that the Internet is easier to access and more
affordable than in Sudan. Most of them browse the Internet on personal computers at home, in public libraries, and in educational institutions. They can go to YouTube and watch “Aghani wa Aghani,” they can watch Baitna on Sudan’s Satellite T.V, listen to Huna Omdurman, read sudaneseonline.com website and Alrakoba online newspaper, and learn how to use substitutes of unavailable ingredients to make favorite Sudanese foods. The Internet also enables Ohio Sudanese to access current news reports from Al-Jazeera Channel and BBC and participate in online discussions. They use Skype, Whatsapp, Viber and Line to talk with their families and friends, which allow them to renew old relationships that may have been cut off by geographical remoteness, and share interests with other Sudanese. Dahan and Shefer (2001) stated that, “Primarily, diasporas create trans-state communication networks because of their members’ existential need to maintain contacts with their homelands and other dispersed communities of the same origin” (p. 92). Mano and Willems (2008) contended that many diasporic communities intensively used the Internet for several significant goals such as participating in online political discussions. The Internet was available for Sudanese diasporic community living in Ohio, regardless of gender, race, and class. With little variations in access, the digital divide was almost eliminated.

According to “alexa.com” (2012), 23% of sudaneseonline.com participants lived in the in Sudan, 29% in the Gulf, 11% in the United States, 6% in India, 5% in Pakistan, 4% in Egypt, 4% in China, 3% in Australia, 3% in Norway, and the rest of them lived in other regions. The main electronic mail list on sudaneseonline.com included both men and women.
The process of migration has had a profound impact on Sudanese diasporic community in Ohio. I observed traditional gender roles were changing, professions have shifted, new cultural rituals were adopted and old ones were abandoned (Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011; Mwaiteleke & Buti, 2010; Sabar, 2010; Ndhlovu, 2009; Este & Tachble, 2009; Silvio, 2006; Abusharaf, 2002). Conversely, Sudanese diasporic community in Ohio affected the Ohioan society by adding highly motivated and young people to the labor force and by contributing to ethnic and cultural diversity, which empowered the Ohio society (Abusharaf, 1997; Abusharaf, 2002). This cultural exchange brought the seeds of change to Sudan, the most significant of which was the seed of democracy. Electronic networks contributed to civic culture by mobilizing diasporas to discuss public issues affecting their original countries (Tettey, 2001). These discussions of public issues by diasporas helped to bridge the gaps among local, national, regional, and international experiences, given that travelling abroad and living in other societies provided diasporas with rich experiences that enabled them to compare between the homeland and other societies. This study focused on how the Internet expands the diasporic public sphere among Sudanese everywhere.

Sudanese Diasporic Community in Australia

About three percent of sudaneseonline.com participants were Sudanese Australians (How popular is sudaneseonline, 2012). Over twenty-two thousand Sudanese moved to Australia between 1997 and 2007 (Mwaiteleke & Buti, 2010). Sudanese refugees’ community in Australia was growing fast (Milner & Khawaja, 2010). Most Sudanese refugees were resettled through the Australian Humanitarian Program, which is financed by the Australian Government.
When Sudanese immigrants arrive in Australia, they initially experience better living conditions and a democratic political system, but there are challenges as well (e.g., adaptation to new norms and traditions, a new language, and the level of technology prevailing in the Australian society (Nolan, Farquharson, Politoff & Marjoribanks, 2011; Milner & Khawaja, 2010; Ali & Heuven, 2009; Ndhlovu, 2009). Sudanese Australians also face unemployment and lack of housing (Hashimoto-Govindasamy & Rose, 2011). These stressors exacerbated the psychological problems brought on by the atrocities they had suffered both in Sudan and refugee camps. Although Sudanese Australians had deep attachments to their African identity, they were often treated as outsiders because of their physical features and accent (Hatoss, 2012). They lived homogeneously as one united community. While Muslims and Christians had separate cemeteries in Sudan, Australians had one cemetery for all religious faiths (Sneesby, Satchell, Good & Riet, 2011). Most Sudanese Australians came to Australia at a young age. The median age of refugees born in Sudan was about 25 years, compared with 47 years for all overseas-born and for the total Australian population (Hatoss & Huijser, 2010).

About four percent of sudaneseonline.com participants were Sudanese living in Egypt (How popular is sudaneseonline, 2012). The relationship between Sudan and Egypt is based on geographical proximity and shared cultural heritage. However, Sudanese tend to use Egypt as a temporary hub on their way to a third country by applying for resettlement through humanitarian programs (Mahmoud, 2011). In 2009, twenty-three thousand Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers were officially recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Mahmoud, 2011). The unofficial number was estimated to be at least five times as much (Meffert et. al., 2010, p.
They reside mainly in Cairo, which has one of the world’s largest resettlement operations (Lewis, 2009). The Sudanese diaspora in Egypt was more diverse than in Australia, in terms of age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Most Sudanese refugees, who came to Egypt for a brief temporary stay, ended up in limbo for ten years in Egypt due to UNHCR’s administrative burden and unavailability of funds (Meffert, et. al., 2010; Currie, 2007). In 2005, Sudanese refugees in Cairo protested in front of UNHCR’s office. The sit-in demonstrations ended after three months when the Egyptian police force, using excessive force, left 28 dead, tens wounded, and hundreds arrested and imprisoned (Moulin & Nyers, 2007). These circumstances made the Sudanese diaspora in Egypt unique for its simultaneous status as a refugee and diasporic community. Authority of the state (dictatorships) and the domination of economic powers (poverty) currently constitute two of most oppressive state apparatuses in Sudan. Table (4) shows that deteriorating economic and political environments were the main reasons that Sudanese moved away from the homeland.

*Sudanese Diasporic Community in Egypt*

About four percent of sudaneseonline.com participants were Sudanese living in Egypt (Alexa.com, 2012). The relationship between Sudan and Egypt is based on geographical proximity and shared cultural heritage. However, Sudanese tend to use Egypt as a temporary hub on their way to a third country by applying for resettlement through humanitarian programs (Mahmoud, 2011). In 2009, twenty-three thousand Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers were officially recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Mahmoud, 2011). The unofficial number was estimated to be at least five times as much (Meffert et. al., 2010, p. 161). They reside
mainly in Cairo, which has one of the world’s largest resettlement operations (Lewis, 2009). The Sudanese diaspora in Egypt was more diverse than in Australia, in terms of age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Most Sudanese refugees, who came to Egypt for a brief temporary stay, ended up in limbo for ten years in Egypt due to UNHCR’s administrative burden and unavailability of funds (Meffert, et. al., 2010; Currie, 2007). In 2005, Sudanese refugees in Cairo protested in front of UNHCR’s office. The sit-in demonstrations ended after three months when the Egyptian police force, using excessive force, left 28 dead, tens wounded, and hundreds arrested and imprisoned (Moulin & Nyers, 2007). These circumstances made the Sudanese diaspora in Egypt unique for its simultaneous status as a refugee and diasporic community. Authority of the state (dictatorships) and the domination of economic powers (poverty) currently constitute two of most oppressive state apparatuses in Sudan. Table (4) shows that deteriorating economic and political environments were the main reasons that Sudanese moved away from the homeland.
Table 4

*Main Features of Irregular Emigration and Staying Abroad of Sudanese Nationals*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Main Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sudanese entering countries irregularly and staying abroad</td>
<td>- Destination: neighboring countries: Egypt, Kenya,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudanese entering countries regularly but staying abroad</td>
<td>- Composition: Individuals and families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudanese entering countries irregularly but staying abroad regularly</td>
<td>- Reasons: economic, family reunification, internal conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudanese entering countries regularly but staying abroad regularly</td>
<td>- Destination: Gulf countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudanese entering countries regularly but staying abroad regularly</td>
<td>- Composition: individuals, obtaining asylum or taking part in Amnesty schemes once abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudanese entering countries regularly but staying abroad regularly</td>
<td>- Reasons: better political environment and opportunities, economic reasons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: adapted from International Organization for Migration, Migration in Sudan, a country profile, 2011, p. 60
Sudanese Diasporic Communities in the Gulf

The Gulf includes six Arab countries: the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait (Cooperation Council, 2012). Seven hundred thousand Sudanese live in the Gulf countries (CARIM, 2012). About twenty nine percent of sudaneseonline.com participants lived in the Gulf (How popular is sudaneseonline, 2012).

In the past, Sudanese migrated mostly to Makkah and Al-Madina in Saudi Arabia for religious reasons: to visit the prophet Muhammad and perform the Haj. Economic migration to the Gulf countries began in 1975, when Sudan’s economy collapsed (e.g., inflation; budget deficit; and deterioration of exports) and Gulf countries thrived due to the oil industry (Assal, 2007). Sudanese diasporas in the Gulf congregate in big cities such as Riyadh, Jeddah, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Doha. Since they share cultural norms, language, and religion with natives, and most of them have professional jobs (e.g., professors, engineers, and medical doctors), they lead a comfortable life. These better living conditions, in addition to proximity to Sudan, enabled them to have a profound socioeconomic impact on the homeland (e.g., increasing government revenues from taxes, building modernized homes, supporting families, and increasing wedding costs and celebrations). Because of their large numbers and their frequent visits to Sudan, Sudanese diasporas in the Gulf were politically active. They regularly participated in the elections through Sudanese consulates and had strong ties with politicians and affiliations to Sudanese political parties. Some of government-armed opposition talks were sponsored by the Qatari government (United Nations, 2012).
Sudaneseonline.com participants living in the Gulf, Boardab i.e., people who subscribed in the discussion board, engaged in online communities and used the Internet mostly to connect to other diasporic Sudanese rather than to Sudanese either in the Gulf or in homeland, where they mostly used cell phones. They share online and offline experiences. They frequently gather in public parks and restaurants (Daniel Restaurant Sharjah) to meet with their friends and discuss public issues that are posted on the website.

Behavior of Sudanese Online Communities

Studies about online communities are growing fast. The Internet emerged as a tool of communication among the masses in 1995 (Frechette, 2005). Many studies have been conducted on its social effects. The new cyber environments attract millions to share mutual interests with others in different continents. Online communities have challenged traditional definitions of community, which stressed the sharing of geographical boundaries as constituting a community (Wood & Smith, 2005). On one hand, and because of this challenge of conventional conception of community, many scholars believed that as a result of intensive engagement in online communities by large numbers of people, online participants might withdraw from using regular modes of communication that were used in real life interaction such as landline telephones, letters, and face-to-face gatherings (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). On the other hand, some scholars argued that participation in online communities was not separated from their offline life; it was a part or an extension of it. For instance, Wall and Williams (2007) asserted that “online communities are very real places inhabited by very real people who want, as they do in their terrestrial world, to be reassured of their safety while online” (p. 411). Though
members of online communities may not meet face to face with each other, they have a real sense of belonging (Lord, 2002). According to Wood and Smith, (2005) online communities were based on “a shared understanding of interrelatedness among its participants” (p. 123). Moreover, participation in online communities can support and solidify national identities (Eriksen, 2007). Communication technologies have spread widely across most societies. Since the early 1990s, the internet has been an efficient tool of communication among Sudanese. According to Internet World Stat (2012), Internet penetration of the population increased in Sudan from (0.01%) in 2000 to (9.3%) in 2009. Around (20%) of sudaneseonline.com participants were living in Sudan (How popular is sudaneseonline, 2012). Online communities have become a new phenomenon in democratic and undemocratic countries. Online communication and deliberation of public issues is getting more political attention as well as research interests.

The Theory of Communicative Action

The theory of communicative action (TCA) is an influential concept developed by Jürgen Habermas, one of the intellectual pillars of the Frankfurt School. The TCA focuses on how individuals coordinate their efforts and activities in order to achieve consensus on public issues (Eriksen & Weigard, 2003). Habermas (1984) concentrated on the role of rational dialogue in liberating individuals from misunderstanding public issues and social fragmentation. Rational dialogue also helps individuals shape their identities. Habermas (1984) developed this process of rational dialogue into what he calls “communicative rationality” The theory of communicative action highlights the interactive nature of society, rationality and modernity by focusing on the use of
language, social experiences, expectations, and many social dimensions of individuals that enable them to know who they are and to make claims.

The Concept of Public Sphere

The term ‘public’ is associated with the common interest and collective actions. Habermas (1998) introduced the concept in his efforts to identify the space of public debate that contributed to the formation of public opinion. The public sphere is the middle space between the state/government and citizens, with all their political, economic, and social interests, in which the public debate takes place. It refers to “capacities for social self-organization and influence over the state” (Calhoun, 2001, p.1897).

Advocates of a digital public sphere contended that the Internet, with its data retrieval possibilities, its capability to reflect diverse views, and the low cost of publishing, contributed significantly to the expansion of the public sphere and enriched the creation of public opinion (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010; Rasmussen, 2009; Chan, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002). Others argued that the Internet played a minor role in expanding public deliberation because of the characteristics of online communities (e.g., domination of limited number of participants of the discussions in public bulletin boards, the absence of respect in these discussions, the absence of weighing the individuals’ claims, and demagoguery) (Tettey, 2001). Ford (2011) argued that the terms “public” and “private” could no longer be treated as separate zones; they were structurally interrelated. Hence, the role of Internet communication in expanding the public sphere, particularly in developing countries, is still unclear. In this study, Internet communication not only provided its users with the space to practice freedom of
expression, it also secured vibrant discussions for people who were separated by geographical remoteness to form civil society associations. Freedom of expression and civil society associations are significant prerequisites for democracy.

Nagel and Staeheli (2010) defined diasporic public sphere as “a term that describes the realm of social interaction, discourse, identity and imagination associated with living as part of a diaspora” (p. 264). Another definition of diasporic public sphere was presented by Laguerre, (2005) as “the political arena where the diaspora expresses its political views, discusses its project for the homeland and the diaspora, interacts with the hostland and homeland government officials and politicians, and reflects on its contributions to the society” (p. 207). Gerhards and Schäfer (2010) argued that there was no difference between the Internet and print media in providing audiences with space for public deliberation. They also ensured that the Internet is an easily-accessed mode of communication and hence expected to be more inclusive and reflects more diverse perspectives and insights. Papacharissi (2002) is skeptical about the possibility of the Internet to enhance more participation in political activities and democracy. She believed that “The content, diversity, and impact of political discussion need to be considered carefully before we conclude whether online discourse enhances democracy” (p. 18). Dahan and Shefer (2001) contended that new communication technologies and ethnic groups were strongly related phenomena and each one had crucial effects on the other. They argued that while these ‘distance shrinking technologies’ enabled diasporas to express their views about homeland society and government and spread these views to their native citizens as well as to their national governments, these electronic networks gained momentum and liveliness by the existence of diasporas in these cyberspaces.
Dahlberg (2001b) contended that the expansion of the public sphere of any virtual community depended on the ability of this virtual community to create what he called ‘rational-critical discourse.’ And in order to create this ‘rational-critical discourse’, the debate on online communities should satisfy the following conditions “Exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity, discursive inclusion and equality, autonomy from state and economic power” (Dahlberg, 2001b, p. 625). Rationality is indispensible to create a society that develops and maintains good traditions and norms and encourage individuals to deepen their insights regarding public deliberation of political concerns (Eriksen & Weigård, 2003).

As Holub (1991) put it “Rational discourse that is free from both domination and linguistic pathology and oriented towards intersubjective understanding and consensus is precisely the type of activity appropriate to the public sphere” (p. 8). The existing literature poses the necessity of investigating the practicability and validity of these requirements of online diasporic communities that come from undemocratic societies. The answer to this question deepens the understanding of the role of electronic public bulletin boards in democratic behavior of diasporic communities and hence enriches the debate by posing other questions such as: What are the characteristics of these websites? Who participates on these discussions? And what types of political pressures they exercise?

The Six Requirements of Rational-Critical Discourse

*Exchange and Critique of Reasoned Moral-Practical Validity Claims*

Dahlberg (2001b) explained that claims, positions and criticisms exchanged by participants of online discussions should be supported by reasons and justifications. This
process of reasoning and validation enhances fruitful discussions that lead to persuasion or opposition that is based on identifying the views of each side and joining the side that reflects a more convincing argument. Sudanese cultural norms highly respect discussions that end with positive results. The positive result is evaluated by to what extent each side’s argument is reflected, comprehended, digested, and validated by the other side and by the audience. Dahlberg (2001a) stated that “It is clear then that the exchange of validity claims with reasons is taking place within many Internet fora” (p. xx). The case of electronic public bulletin boards of diasporic communities migrating from undemocratic African countries may be different from the case of electronic public bulletin boards of communities of democratic societies. For instance, though there was no difference in the theoretical understanding of the concept of democracy existing in African countries such as Sudan and democratically-advanced countries such as the United States, there was a huge difference in the practice and implementation of democracy between the two groups to the extent that it was difficult to comprehend that the two models of democracy were related to one concept. This fact suggested that the existence of democracy in online discussions taking place in diasporic communities coming from undemocratic societies was questionable. This research focuses on identifying these validity claims in electronic public bulletin boards of Sudan’s diaspora as a hope of practicing electronic democracy that leads to the expansion of public sphere among Sudanese diasporic communities.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a practice associated with the recognition of an individual’s position in social, political, and cultural contexts. It is an interactive bond between the individual
and the people whom s/he shares a specific situation. It is the capacity for thoughtful analysis of concepts, beliefs, norms and traditions, rights and duties, and the whole social environment (Dahlberg, 2001a). Archer (2007) defined it as “the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) context and vise versa” (p. 4). Several elements of online discussions make identifying reflexivity a difficult task such as manner of response and technological challenges such as using an English keyboard to write responses in Arabic, given that most keyboards do not show Arabic Alphabets, but Arabic users know where they are on the keyboard (Dahlberg, 2001a). This study examines how reflexivity operates in online public bulletin board discussions of Sudan’s diasporas.

*Ideal Role Taking*

Ideal role taking is the ability of online discussants to put themselves in other participants’ positions in order to understand their perspectives (Dahlberg, 2001a). The process of role taking requires participants of online discussions to be broad minded so as to imagine and recognize differences of intellectual philosophies and their outcomes. Dahlberg (2001a) found that many online participants lacked the ability of ideal role taking. This study examines ideal role taking and critical thinking in online discussions. Mayes (2009) concluded that there was no a common model of adopting the internet on political interaction. Bernal (2006) stated that, “More than simply refugees or struggling workers, diasporas online may invent new forms of citizenship, community and political practices” (p. 161).
Sincerity

Sincerity is the relative quality of credibility of claims and information posted by participants of online discussions (Dahlberg, 2001a). He explained that the concept of sincerity in online communities was related to the regulations of the website and the behaviors of participants that help participants feel safe and comfortable in dealing with other participants within the online environment. Sincerity is also about the boundaries between online and offline realities and how these two worlds interact. People participating in online discussions can feel and judge to what extent other participants are sincere or honest in their claims, particularly when participants are involved in several discussions. Carter (2005) asserted that, “Nevertheless, people in Cybercity are learning to actively trust each other. In many instances the free-floating nature of online friendship enables this trust to be achieved more easily, and this trust is a major contributory factor in maintaining the commitment and intimacy of online friendship” (p. 164). Participants are expected to mention the source of the information they bring to online discussions so other participants can verify these sources and evaluate the credibility and quality of the information. They are also expected to be honest about the information they chose to share with other participants such as their declared identities, personal information, and opinions.

Discursive Inclusion and Equality

In explaining the meaning of ‘discursive inclusion and equality’, Dahlberg (2001b) stated that “Every participant affected by the validity claims under consideration is equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever” (p. 623). Bruell et al (2012) asserted that “inclusiveness means, in the first, the possibility for everyone
concerned to take a part in the public sphere” (p. 47). The inclusion of everyone in the society in all levels of practicing democracy, regardless of gender, ethnicity, economic status, religious orientation, as well as the equality of all people in opportunities, value and before the law are central pillars of practicing democracy. The inclusion in online discussions is based, like face-to-face discussions, on reasoning and justification, and supported by sensible proofing. The Internet with its unique features as an open space is capable of enhancing this inclusiveness. All these differential factors that apply to offline democracy concurrently apply to electronic democracy. Witschge (2008) asserted that “the Internet is often praised for its ability to provide space to enable every person to present her or his view, thus (potentially) allowing for more inclusion and participation in the public discussion” (p. 75). Calhoun (1993) explained that democratic inclusiveness was not only the number of participants who had their voices heard in online discussions, but “it is also a matter of how the public sphere incorporates and recognizes the diversity of identities people bring to it from their manifold involvements in civil society” (p.279). But Bruell et al (2012) raised questions about the possibility of coexistence of diversity and equality, level of homogeneity required for democratic public sphere, and the possibility of looking to heterogeneity as a positive characteristic of public sphere.

*Autonomy from State and Economic Power*

To play a role in the process of democratization among the Sudanese diaspora, Sudanese online communities should be free from the control of the state and the hegemony of economic powers that are used to suppress people living within the geographical border of the Sudan. The Internet’s capability to cross geographical borders enhances a unique feature of the Internet, the difficulty of controlling and blocking the
Internet service. Recently, the website “sudaneseonline.com” was blocked by the state for participants’ powerful criticism of corruption among government officials. The website resumed working immediately next day through many different other social networks such as facebook. Murphy (2009) stated that “the concept of the public sphere has become a commonly used paradigm for understanding the impact of contemporary information and communications technologies (ICTs) on the political spaces of the Arab world” (p. 1131). The control of the state or economic powers over online communities will curtail freedom of expression and the creation of civil society associations by direct censorship or administrative procedures and will violate people’s personal privacy.

Justification of the Study

While many researchers found that participation in online communities positively affects political participation and democracy (Eriksen, 2007; Wang, 2007; Kobayashi et al, 2006; Lord, 2002), others believed that there was no evidence that the internet facilitated democracy (Vedel, 2006). Most of these studies were conducted in online communities who lived in well-developed and stable democracies such as the United States, Britain, India, and Indonesia (Loveland & Popescu, 2011; Carter, 2011; Boullanne, 2009; Jensen, Danziger & Venkatesh, 2007). By stable democracies, I mean countries that enjoy simultaneously media pluralism and democratically-elected governments. Dahan and Sheffer (2001) claimed that studies on how ethnic diasporic groups use information and communication technologies for political purposes did not recognize the differences among ethnic groups and their different environments and cultural settings. Gerhards and Schäfer (2010) argued that in well-developed democratic countries the Internet had the same level of freedom of expression as other traditional
mediums such as print media because offline freedom of expression was maintained by the constitution and public opinion. Kuhlmann (2012) described how Zimbabweans in diasporas used humor (political jokes and cartoons) to show their dissent against the Zimbabwean Government and to fight for their political rights such as freedom of expression. Alzouma (2009) argued that online forums helped people to regain their national lost identities. Tettey (2001) argued that electronic democracy provided African peoples with more information. However, it did not have any positive effects on political development of African countries. Shaw (2012) stressed that researchers of online political communication were significantly required to take into consideration cultural factors such as identities, power relations, and processes of inclusion and exclusion.

The existing literature suggested that there were no studies on diasporic online communities that emerged from societies governed by undemocratic governments, suffering from internal armed conflicts, and witnessing waves of outmigration. We need to have more understanding of the role of online communication in democratic behavior of diasporic communities that were created by lack of democracy, internal conflict, and migration due to political instability and failed economies in their homelands.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGICAL DISCOURSE AND PROCEDURES

Chapter 2 explains that there is a gap in the existing literature, which is that there are no studies on the role of online communication in the democratic behavior of diasporic communities that were created as a result of lack of democracy, armed conflicts, outmigration and economic deterioration in their homelands. This chapter details the methodological issues and procedures that I used to fill this gap.

The Researcher

I began using computers in 1988 as an undergraduate at the University of Gezira in Sudan. I started browsing the Internet in 1994, while working with a non-governmental organization. I had my first desktop personal computer in 1997. Internet service in Sudan at that time was scarce, and Internet connectivity was tremendously bad, so I purchased a private subscription with an Internet service company. Due to the high subscription fees, I would browse the Internet for only an hour per day. In 1998, I began visiting virtual communities as a lurker, a frequent visitor who, while really interested in what was posted on the web site, did not contribute. I spent considerable time monitoring online activities and familiarizing myself with new modes of communication. In 2002, I registered on the ‘Alsaloon.org’ web site, a closed virtual community of the socially progressive group, the Republican Brotherhood. After the execution of their leader, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, by ex-President Nimeiri’s regime in 1985, and the Islamists’ control of power in 1989, many Republican Brothers, like myself, left Sudan and migrated to different countries. We still have family members in Sudan, and intellectual and emotional attachments. Some of them settled in the United States, keeping their faith but, isolated from each other. They lost their institutionalized form of religion, by which
they used to meet every evening, chatting together, discussing political and religious issues, chanting spiritual songs (called in Arabic: Inshad), eating together, attending weddings and funerals, and receiving news of other brothers and sisters residing in other regions of Sudan or out of Sudan.

So, some of Republican brothers, who did graduate studies in the United States and benefited from their connections with the information society, established two websites: “assaloon.org”, which is limited to the members of the group, and “alfikra.org”, which is open to the public with the intention of extending Republican ideals to the world. From the French word ‘Salon’, ‘assaloon’ in the Sudanese culture is a large room, normally at the entrance of the house, in which people receive their guests and it is generally restricted to men. This website reminds them of their leader’s “saloon”, where he used to receive all of them, men and women, and guests. On this website, they post news about their community, discuss intellectual issues, and connect to other members in Sudan and elsewhere. When I was living in Sudan, members of the group would come to my residence in Wad Medani to meet their Internet friends. I also posted local social and political news, to be read and responded to by brothers and sisters in the diaspora. This experience deepened my understanding of the significance of computer-mediated communication. When I moved to the United States to pursue my education in 2003, I continued my virtual activities. I experienced virtual togetherness and became more aware of how Internet communication crosses geographical boundaries to make a global village. Being away from my homeland, family, and friends, and needing to keep up with news of Sudan’s volatile political environment, nurtured my interest in Internet communication. So, I continued my subscription with “assaloon.org” and registered on
several other Sudanese websites (e.g., sudaneseonline.com, sudan.net). These websites provide me with current news about Sudan, and keep me in touch with many friends and colleagues around the globe.

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha was aware of the significance of documenting the activities of the movement by written reports and by information and communication technologies available in Sudan at that time such as cassette tapes, photos, and reel films. These activities include publishing books, writing newspapers articles, holding public lectures, composing and conducting spiritual songs, conducting interviews with local and international media, meetings with Sudanese and foreign intellectuals and politicians, holding daily discussions of intellectual issues within the group, letters to politicians and government officials, conducting “discussion corners” in educational institutions (e.g., University of Khartoum) and in several public spaces (e.g., public parks), and sending groups of brothers and sisters to different cities and villages in Sudan to campaign for the movement. Brothers and sisters unloaded all these well-preserved materials into computer files with different forms (e.g., audio, video, PDF files) and uploaded them to “alfikra.org”. This process makes the website a major source of information about the principles and history of the movement. Taha published more than thirty four books and brothers and sisters published more than two hundred seventy one (Library of Republican Brotherhood, 2012). The website has Arabic and English versions. People from around the world post questions on the website and get answers from the group.

Methodology

This study uses a naturalistic approach, which views the researcher as an inseparable part of the society s/he studies. Wall and Williams (2007) claim that “online
communities are very real places, inhabited by very real people” (p. 411). The philosophical standpoint relies on constructivism, which enables researchers to understand the cultural contexts and practices of targeted populations (Siitonen, 2011). In order to understand people, researchers should use an approach that allows them to understand the motivations that keep people involved in doing what they do (Robin & Robin, 2005; Mason, 2004).

Having received the approval of conducting this study, which deal with human subjects, from the Ohio University’s Institutional Review Board, the following table (5) illustrates research questions, research objectives, and the methods I utilized to answer research questions and realize research objectives.
Table 5
Research Questions, Objectives, and Data Gathering Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Research objective</th>
<th>Method used to answer the question and realize the objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the characteristics of online diasporic users of Sudaneseonline.com?</td>
<td>To identify the characteristics of sudaneseonline.com users who live outside Sudan and function as a response to the repressive political environments, internal armed conflicts, repressed speech, constrained civic society associations, and state-controlled media in Sudan.</td>
<td>Online survey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do discussions on public electronic bulletin boards contribute to rational-critical discourse among diasporic communities?</td>
<td>To strengthen the understanding of Sudanese diasporic online communities and how participation in these online spaces contributes to the expansion of the diasporic public sphere.</td>
<td>Virtual ethnography (online participant observation, semi-structured in-depth video interviews, email interviews, and face-to-face interviews).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent does the Internet expand the political public sphere among Sudanese diasporic communities?</td>
<td>To explore how participation in Sudanese diasporic online communities contributes to freedom of expression and civil society principles.</td>
<td>Virtual ethnography (online participant observation, semi-structured in-depth video interviews, email interviews, and face-to-face interviews).</td>
</tr>
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</table>

In this study, I used online survey to answer the first research question. I used it basically as a tool to gather demographics data and opinions of sudaneseonline.com website users in diasporas. In answering the second and third research questions, I used virtual ethnography for its suitability and efficiency in exploring online communities and
to understand the role of the Internet in political culture of Sudanese diasporas. Hine (2000) claims that technology and culture are interlinked courses and the studying of the Internet enables researchers to make valuable meanings of these interrelated contexts. Lysloff (2003) argues that virtual ethnography is capable of investigating, interpreting, and analyzing cultural and technical effects of the Internet and its immediate social reactions and outcomes. Skågeby (2011) argues that online ethnography is an efficient research approach to understand why people do what they do and why they feel the way they feel. Virtual ethnography is especially appropriate for this study due to the geographical dispersion of the participants (Ribeiro, 2009; Garcia et al, 2009; Beaulieu, 2004). Moreover, Garcia et al. (2009) argue that although many studies were carried out on the Internet and online communication, few of these studies used qualitative methods, particularly ethnography. Tulbure (2011) contends that researchers use the Internet as data gathering method for its efficiency in terms of time and cost, the ability to contact large numbers of populations, its environment-friendly features (i.e., using fewer amounts of papers), and its computerized management and analysis of data.

Virtual Ethnography

Conventional ethnography is a research approach that studies and describes people’s cultural norms, styles of living, activities, and other aspects of their cultures by getting in physical contact with the target group and writing about the phenomenon under study (Fabian, 2008; Kendale, 2004; Beaulieu, 2004; Hine, 2000). It was initially used in cultural anthropology, but is currently employed in many fields such as communication studies, sociology, psychology, and history. Ethnographers live with the target group as
one of them, though he/she may reveal his/her mission as a researcher to the group.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) explained that:

   the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts - in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry” (p. 3).

In conducting ethnography, researchers use a variety of methods to collect data, such as participant observation, interviews, and surveys and they perform various online activities such as participating and observing discussions, reading posts, and monitoring communicative actions (Travers, 2009). Virtual ethnography appeared as an epistemological necessity to study online environments (Hine, 2000). Skågeby (2011) contends that virtual ethnography is an efficient method to collect data from online communities because it can analyze behaviors and discover hidden motivations that provoke these behaviors. Carter (2005) stated that “Ethically, cyberethnography is similar to conventional ethnography because the four main moral obligations of dealing with human subject research are the same: the principle of non-malificence, the protection of anonymity, the confidentiality of data, and the obtaining of informed consent” (p. 152).

While many researchers agree on the validity of conventional ethnography to study and analyze social phenomena, there is a disagreement on its objectivity (Griffiths, 2010). Ali and Yusof (2011) defined objectivity as “the extent to which the results are free from bias” (p. 30). In this study, the usage of multiple methods in data collection process, i.e. triangulation, is justified to three reasons: 1) the study includes different types of
research questions that need to be answered by using different data collection methods, 2) to get some sort of verification of conclusions by comparing the findings derived from each method with data derived from other methods, and 3) to get a reasonable amount of data that makes thorough description of democratic behavior among Sudanese in diasporas attainable. Most studies on information technologies, particularly the Internet, use quantitative approaches (Garcia et al., 2009).

Data Gathering

Data in conventional research is divided into primary and secondary data. While primary data is generated directly by the research participants, secondary data can be obtained from other sources, e.g., books, journals, reports of specialized organizations, or data gathered by other researchers for other research (Hewson et al., 2003). In online research, researchers use the Internet to recruit participants, administer research modes, and analyze primary data collected from online participants. Secondary data can be collected from online databases, online media, online archives, and websites of specialized organizations (Hewson et al., 2003).

In the data gathering process, my plan was to use three online methods: online survey, online participant observation, and online semi-structured in-depth video interviews (using Skype). I had to use two additional methods in responding to three requests from research participants, whom were supposed to have video interviews by Skype. Two of them, a man and a woman, requested to have email interviews because they believed that they can express themselves better by writing than video interviewing. The third participant requested a face-to-face interview because it is more convenient to him than video interviewing. We did the interview and recorded it by HD Camcorder. I
did nine online semi-structured in-depth video interviews (using Skype) with four men and four women, in addition to the sudaneseonline.com website administrator, who is also the owner of the website. In the nine interviews, I could use the full features of Skype, audio and video recording, in only four. I used Skype with only audio recording in five interviews for different reasons such as being busy with private event (getting married or the daughter was having a baby), not willing to show her/himself because she/he was doing the interview from her/his private sleeping room, and slow Internet connectivity that forced us to sacrifice the video recording. All interviews were in Arabic, except one in English, which was with a young man raised in the United States and did not mind doing the interview in English. All interviews were transcribed and translated by the researcher into English. Making appointments for the interviews took much more time than I planned. I experienced exactly the two problems mentioned by Kazmer and Xie (2008): worldwide differences of time and tight schedules of research participants. Despite the researcher’s reminding calls and emails to the dates and times of interviews, many scheduled appointments were missed several times, and we had to reschedule them due to participants getting involved in doing something, forgetting the time of the interview, and technical problems. Moreover, it was so difficult to get hold of research participants again, even by their personal cell phone numbers. The interviews were recorded by the software Supertintin and kept in the researcher’s password-protected laptop.

*Online Survey*

Online survey is a useful tool in virtual ethnography (Lobez-Rocha, 2010). Murthy (2008) explains that the online survey has the following advantages: easy to
retrieve and analyze; there is no need to transcribe data because they can be stored in different types of files; the availability of assigning different forms of questions that make responses easier for participants and less costly.

The online survey of this study was designed on www.jotform.com, which is a specialized website in surveys. I chose this website for its good technical features such as excellent connectivity, saving responses to a file, templates to form survey questions, and technical easiness to use it. I also chose it for its reasonable cost. I initiated a thread on the discussion board of sudaneseonline.com website explaining the study, exploring its importance, publishing the consent form, answering members’ questions and concerns, and requesting members and visitors of the website to participate in the online survey. A link that leads to the online survey was posted on the discussion board of sudaneseonline.com website. Responses go directly to my account in the www.jotform.com website.

**Online Participant Observation**

I registered on the website sudaneseonline.com in 2005. As a researcher and as a member of Sudanese diasporic community myself, I spent a considerable amount of time browsing different sections of the website, particularly the discussion board, where political discussions take place. I closely followed initiations and terminations of many discussions on the discussion board. Many of online researchers were long time lurkers. They used this method to initiate and develop ethnographic studies of online contexts (Garcia et al., 2009).
Online Semi-Structured In-Depth Video Interviews

Although most online interviews in the existing literature were carried out by asynchronous modes of communication such as emails (Garcia et al., 2009), I used video calls provided by Skype software to conduct online semi-structured in-depth interviews with the founder and administrator of the (sudaneseonline.com) website, and three key informants. This software is a completely interactive synchronous program that provides the interviewer with a full command of the interview with visual interaction that captures facial clues and body language. I used Supertintin software to digitally record the interviews. Supertintin software is not screen capture software. It is a digital recorder that captures high quality original multimedia data such as Skype video and audio calls and plays them back without losing any data (Supertintin, 2012). I saved these video calls recordings in a password-protected file in my personal computer. I transcribed and analyzed the recordings.

Some researchers believe that online interviews have an advantage over face-to-face interviews because they allow interviewees to keep anonymity and have more time to prepare their responses (Travers, 2009). But this is true only in asynchronous modes of interviewing such as emails. In synchronous modes of interviewing, such as video calls, online interviewing is similar to face-to-face interviewing. For instance, using Skype to conduct a synchronous online interview provides both the interviewer and interviewee with typical technical control of the interview, which is fair, from the interviewee’s perspective, and challenging, from the interviewer’s perspective, because the only way for the interviewer to lead the interview will be by using his acquired professional capabilities as an interviewer, and not through unreal control dictated by a technological
feature. It is fortunate that Skype can freely be downloaded from the Internet and its operating mission is not difficult. Skågeby (2011) argues that online interviews have the advantage of being less costly, faster, more capable of reaching remote populations, more convenient in terms of time and physical setting of familiar places, more encouraging to release information, and the researcher may not need to transcribe the interview because it can be digitally recorded.

**Email Interviews**

Email interviewing is an asynchronous method of interviewing. It is a convenient method because the interviewee responds according to his/her time availability. Although email interviewing doesn’t show facial gestures, it manifests other qualities of the personality such as spelling, organizations, and eloquence (Kazmer & Xie, 2008). Email interviews are ready texts to analyze. While the researcher doesn’t need to schedule appointments, problems of discontinuation such as participants don’t check their emails regularly or participants disconnected their Internet service, is a disadvantage (;Kazmer & Xie, 2008).

**Face-To-Face Interviews**

Many researchers choose to do face-to-face interviews for the reliable and rich data they provide (Cardamone, Eboli & Mazulla, 2014). Face-to-face interviews have the disadvantage of the need to arrange with participants the place of the interview and the mode of recording the interview (Kazmer & Xie, 2008).

**Data Analysis**

In this study, I monitored, as a member of the discussion board of sudaneseonline.com website, communicative practices of participants in online
discussions taking place on the website. Taking the six requirements of rational-critical discourse with me in every browsing of online discussions, I attempted to find out what these six requirements mean in Sudanese online context and how we can identify them. I introduced myself as a member of the group to sudaneseonline.com members in order to unearth meanings of expressions and viewpoints used by participants. The unit of analysis was social communicative behaviors. In addition, I analyzed audio and visual materials brought up by participants.

In conventional ethnography, researchers use field notes to realize two objectives: to record what they see on the field site and to record instantly their experiences, analyses, and meanings about what they had seen. In virtual ethnography, the virtual reality can be digitally recorded. Hence, the role of field notes to record the reality is almost resolved, though the field notes are still significant to realize the second objective: how researchers look to this reality (Garcia et al., 2009). The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze data gathered by the online survey. In order to identify the broad topics of data derived from online semi-structured in-depth video interviews, the researcher used Thematic Analysis for analysis and interpretation.

Techno-Ethical Problems of Online Research

Considering the Internet as a research tool, a communication facilitator, and a public space, several techno-ethical issues have emerged. By techno-ethical, I mean the ethical issues that arise as a result of using technology in conducting research. In this study, I focus on the problems I encountered including: online identity, privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, presenting the researcher to potential research participants, and the location of the site.
Online Identity

The Internet helps people discover, create, and manage their identities by getting involved in social networks (Gatson, 2011, Koschoreck, 2011). In conventional ethnography, researchers share physical proximity and experiences with the participants. They meet with them, converse with them, interact with them, and share with them all the nonverbal clues that face-to-face communication generates. In virtual ethnography, researchers share virtual experiences with the participants by meeting with them through the Internet. Lysloff (2003) argues that the nature of the Internet enables people not only to construct online identities, but to claim several identities. The techno-ethical problem of identity can negatively affect the authenticity and trustworthiness of online research because online identity can be manipulated by the participants or by other people who are not part of the research. The problem arises from two areas. First, to participate in online activities, every participant must have an account, appear in online spaces with a user name (identity) and protected by a password. However, people can gain access to others’ passwords, voluntarily (e.g., by family members and friends) or involuntarily (e.g., hackers). Hence, there is no guarantee that, for instance, an email is from the same person the researcher had exchanged emails with before. Second, participants hide their true characters by using online nick names (i.e., pseudonyms). Moreover, online participants can create two or more online user names (identities) (Ribeiro, 2009). This social and physical distance between online personas and offline characters and the possibility of the existence of participants who have multiple online identities may reduce the authenticity and trustworthiness of data generated by online methods.
Privacy

Privacy is related to the extent researchers immerse themselves into private spaces of participants. It is also related to the amount of information individuals would like to voluntarily share with other people. The website under study (sudaneseonline.com) allows the public to view all sections of the website, including the Discussions Board. However, those who would like to post comments are required to subscribe with their own user names and passwords.

Confidentiality

The techno-ethical problem of confidentiality is related to how to protect the research participants from any potential harm stems from the methodology they use or from computer files that contain personal information about the participants, which can lead audiences to identify them. This problem exists at two levels: the methodological level (how researchers deal with methodological challenges that can endanger research participants such as representation of observational data), and the technical level (how researchers secure research participants’ personal information). Another risk is potential hackers who may steal individuals’ personal information. It is the responsibility of the researcher to keep the research information in a well secured computer. For instance, the researcher can avoid or minimize using a public computer. Many software programs are available to protect privacy of research participants. While some sudaneseonline.com participants use their real full names, others use nick names, though their real names are only available to other participants by their profiles. In this research, I concealed participants’ online pseudonyms in order to eliminate the possibility of invading her/his privacy and to protect the participant from any possible harm.
Informed Consent

Online research is also confronted with a techno-ethical problem when a written consent form is required (Johns, Hall & Crowell, 2004). Although there is software that allows people to electronically sign papers, the question is still there: how can a researcher make sure that the person signing the form is the targeted participant?

In this study, regarding semi-structured in-depth interviews, I communicated with participants by emails and their personal cell phone numbers. I sent the Informed Consent as an email attachment with a message encouraging the participant to read and understand the information included in the form and send me back an email approving that she/he read and understood the form and she/he agreed to participate in the study. I followed up with the participant by phone to make sure that she/he was the one who was communicating with me by email.

Regarding the online survey, I published the Informed Consent with the online survey, with a message encouraging participants to read and understand the information included on the form and explaining that their participation in the online survey indicates that the participant read and understood the information included in the form and agreed to take part in this study.

Presenting the Researcher’s Self

Li (2008) explains that in virtual ethnography, the researcher can reveal or conceal her/his identity or the objective of the research to the research participants. I used an insider perspective by revealing my role as a researcher by using my account in sudaneseonline.com to post a thread introducing myself to the participants and explaining the study and encourage them to take part in it. I used my seven-year experience on the
web site to follow discussions, recruit key informants, and build and develop trust and relationships with participants. I provided sudaneseonline.com website’s members and visitors with my email address, telephone number, and Skype user name to enable participants to contact me if they have questions or information to share.

The Location of Fieldwork

The field site is significant to researchers because it is the space where social phenomena exist. In conventional ethnography, the location of the fieldwork, i.e., the field site is the natural site/place of the participants. In virtual ethnography, the location of the fieldwork is a methodological challenge (Walker, 2010, Lysloff, 2003). Burrell (2009) defines the field site as “the spatial characteristics of a field-based research project, the stage on which the social processes under study take place” (p. 182). Walker (2009) argues that it is difficult to determine the field site of an online ethnographic study due to the technological, social, legal, and cultural differences of the Internet in each country and the interception of online and offline worlds. Garcia et al (2009) argue that since online and offline worlds are complementary and connected to each other, the field site can be on any of them, according to the problem that the research investigates. They recommend that researchers first choose the research topic, and the field site will emerge according to the communicative practices and participants’ perceptions of technological spaces (Garcia et al., 2009; Burrell, 2009). Lopez-Rocha (2010) claims that the researcher probes the boundaries of the site during the ethnographic passage.

In this study, I consider virtual experiences as an extension to physical existence. Sudanese diasporas exist in every country. Although they have their offline gatherings and connections, this study is based solely on online environment because the Internet is
the basic tool they use to connect to many other dispersed Sudanese. My stance as a researcher is as an insider who attempts to examine the interaction between the Internet as a cultural artifact and democratic practices and communicative actions of Sudan’s diasporas. My field site, according to the phenomenon I investigate is the Internet virtual public space.
CHAPTER 4: SUDANESE VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AND DEMOCRATIC BEHAVIOR

In this chapter I present the findings and the discussion derived mainly from the online survey and online in-depth interviews on the impact of Internet communication on the emergence of democratic behavior among Sudanese in diasporas. I explain how the ‘sudaneseonline.com’ emerged from Sudanese diasporic communities. I introduce the characteristics of Sudanese online users, what types of topics discussed on ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website, and analyses of diasporic freedom of expression as well as diasporic civil society associations.

History and Development of Sudaneseonline.com Website

The website ‘sudaneseonline.com’ started as a mailing list that contained email addresses of old friends who migrated from Sudan to different countries in late 1980s for political, economic, and educational reasons. A Sudanese student at Boston University, who was studying Space Science, established the first Sudanese mailing list. The mailing list was a satisfactory means of getting and exchanging political and cultural news of homeland. Comments and discussions of this news started gradually to take place. In 1999, ‘sudaneseonline.com’ emerged as an interactive website that includes a public electronic bulletin board, which is called (Discussion Board) on the website, beside several sections. Although the main objective of establishing ‘sudaneseonline.com’ was to keep social connectedness of old friends together and to keep the group updated to homeland news, the website constantly gained momentum by having thousands of online users registered and millions of visitors who frequently use the website for several purposes such as disseminating political and cultural news, publishing personal and
public stories, listening to Sudanese songs, campaigning for group and individual interests, finding old friends, holding political debates, and discussing diverse public issues.

Documentation of Sudanese social, cultural, and political life has become one of the main objectives of the website. Many documentary materials have been posted by online political activists, eye witnesses or individuals who took part in historical incidents in Sudan (Al-Tag, 2014; Khalifa, 2008). A significant part of the website is a section called “libraries” that includes archives of members’ contributions by their names and articles written about social and political milestone stories of Sudanese society, including the government. For instance, there are sections on the Darfur crisis, works and stories of influential intellectuals, politicians, musicians, poets, atrocities and human rights violations committed by government security forces and armed militias, corruption sponsored by senior government officials, a flight attendant who lost her life when she was rescuing passengers of a crashed plane, and public issues of Sudanese diasporas and expatriates. Although some members of the website passed away, their contributions still exist and are reachable by online users through their archives (Abubakr, 2010).

A particular section titled min agwalihim (i.e., what politicians and community leaders say) was created to document speeches and opinions of politicians and community leaders on public issues that assist in holding them accountable by Sudanese public opinion. Visitors to the website had the opportunity to comment on discussions taking place on the discussion board by visiting the ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website page on Facebook. Visitors’ comments appeared at the bottom of the thread in the discussion board.
There were accusations that some members of the web site working for Sudan’s National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), and their assignment was to work from “inside” to defend the government’s image by providing false information, reducing the credibility of stories posted on the web site, and identifying how the web site operated to destroy it. When the web site was hacked several times, it kept working by directing members to temporary hosts until the website administrator re-controlled the original host (Yagoub, 2008). The next part of this chapter presented the descriptive data that tell us who the users of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website were.

Online Discussions of Sudanese Social Sensitivities

Online discussions on the discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website contributed to revealing, speaking about, sifting and handling some social sensitivities in Sudanese political culture such as gender, tribalism, and Sudanese identity (Arabism/Africanism).

Although Sudanese women online activists have participated in online activities since the inception of Sudanese websites, their online existence was still much less than men. The survey results showed that only 19% of participants were female. Sarah, one of the research participants who left Sudan in 1993 with her husband for political reasons and still living outside Sudan, began engaging in online activities in 1997 in ‘Sudan.net’ website (personal communication, October 26, 2013). She argued that she could see what was going on in Sudan with new vision because she looked at it from a distance and with her new experience of women issues in the host society. She said “the ‘sudaneseonline.com’ administrator invited me to write for the website and as a result of using abusive language by some members, the administrator gave me my current
Another research participant, Fatima, who is a human rights activist and left Sudan in 2001 and feared to go back home for her political activities, said “I started my online activities in 2003. I use the Internet to communicate with other members of Sudanese diasporas and to keep my mental and psychological stability as an immigrant who has been uprooted from her loving home” (personal communication, October 14, 2013). She left Sudan for political reasons and settled in a western country and became a citizen.

Both female and male online participants get involved in ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website for several purposes: 1) to get and exchange news and information, 2) to get connected to their friends and peers, 3) to participate in online political and cultural discussions, 4) to arrange offline activities such as civil society associations and campaigns, 5) to reciprocate support in case of happy and sad events, and, 6) to get psychological security when they feel they are geographically far from homeland or their national identity is compromised in the host society.

Tribalism became a significant element in Sudanese polity when Sudan was colonized by Ottoman Empire in 1821 (El Zain, 1996). However, tribalism became a problem by current Sudanese Government, which used tribal affiliations to attain several purposes: 1) to plant antagonism among tribes so as to spread the Islamic and Arabic culture, 2) to strengthen tribal factions in the government competing to control power, and, 3) to increase tribal dominations of certain tribes in the civil service (Haynes, 2007; Sharkey, 2008). El Zain (1996) stated that “The co-optation of tribalism by religious fundamentalism stems from the state’s need to maintain itself and, in the final analysis,
the ruling groups which depend on it. It is a consequence and a reaction to the rising ethnic tensions that threaten the state with disintegration” (p. 529).

The new phenomenon of ethnic hostilities in offline Sudanese society was reflected on the discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website. Although Sudanese in diasporas were not directly affected by rising emerging tribalism in homeland for their existence abroad, they knew about it from the comments posted from homeland as well as from the news about ethnic armed confrontations. A new ethnic term was introduced by members from Sudan to describe some government’s officials: *wafid*, which means the person isn’t Sudanese. Fatima claimed that being outside Sudan enabled Sudanese in diasporas to keep their Sudanese prominent tradition of accepting the others, regardless of their ethnicity (personal communication, October 14, 2013). She also believed that the discussion board didn’t represent marginalized groups such as women, the Nuba, and Darfurians. Table 6 illustrates how many times users of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ in diasporas have read postings on the discussion board that were based on gender, race, or religious beliefs.

Table 6

*Percentage of How Many Times Users of ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Website in Diasporas Watched Discriminative Actions During Discussions Against Someone Based on Gender, Race, or Religious Beliefs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>So many times</th>
<th>Many times</th>
<th>Few times</th>
<th>Very few times</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So many times</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

82
The quantitative data derived from the online survey supported the data derived from participant observation and interviews that discrimination existed in online discussions. For instance, Mohamed, a member of the discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website opened a thread on October 22, 2014 exclaiming why people were scared to declare that the political system [Sudan’s Government] practiced racial discrimination (Mohamed, 2014). Another member commented:

First, I am not scared and I don’t deny that the political system is racist. And I think all people agree on this fact, even the political system itself. Its political figures are proud of being racist and they work for it. And by the way, racism isn’t only limited to the political system or a certain tribe, it is a social illness that exist in the whole society. Everyone humiliates the other because it is ethnically different (Al-Khidir, 2014, para. 3).

Sudan’s population is a mixture of Arabized Africans (Madibbo, 2012). While most Arabs lived in central and Northern Sudan, Africans were original inhabitants of Southern, Western, and Eastern Sudan. Sharkey (2008) claimed that although the process of Arabization began in Sudan after the independence in 1956, the problem of Sudanese identity was firstly manipulated by President Nimeiri (1969-1985), when he managed to raise the Arab identity as the national Sudanese identity by applying 1983 Sharia’ laws to save his corrupt rule from collapse. When President Al-Basheer came in power on June 1989, he continued the processes of Islamization and Arabization initiated by President Nimeiri, which is a domination of Arab identity over African identity (Haynes, 2007). Sharkey (2008) argued that the process of Arabization immensely contributed to the Sudanese conflict since independence in 1956.
Although the problem of identity appeared on the discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ on few threads, the discussions showed that the problem was deeply rooted in the Sudanese society. The few discussions of the topic might be an indicator that the topic was viewed by ‘sudenseonline.com’ users as a subtopic of the problem of ethnic tensions that recently started to dominate Sudanese polity.

Characteristics of ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Users in Diasporas

The quantitative data derived from the online survey showed that members of the discussion board had high educational levels. While half of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas had undergraduate degrees (50.4%), a third of them had masters (33.6%) and a small portion of them had doctoral degrees (8.4%). Around (77.9%) of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users who have had undergraduate degrees have been staying in host countries for 9 years and more without pursuing higher degrees, which suggested that they were immensely involved in making living. While (71.1%) of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users who have been residing in host countries for two years and less had undergraduate degrees, (15.8%) of them had master degrees and (7.9%) had doctoral degrees, which may indicate that migration deprived from Sudan its human capital, given that Sudan has been suffering from brain drain, particularly in last four years. According to Secretary General of Bureau of Sudanese Working Abroad more than 347,000 Sudanese left Sudan since 2009 and 50,000 professionally-specialized Sudanese left Sudan since the beginning of 2014 (BBC, 2014a).

The quantitative data derived from the online survey indicated that while (23.4%) of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users worked in educational services, (10.2%) of them worked in businesses, (9.1%) in engineering, (8%) in medical services, (7.7%) in management,
Almost a quarter of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users made incomes that ranged between $2001 and $3000 per month and (22.6%) of them earned between $1001 and $2000 monthly. Table 7 shows occupations of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas.

Table 7

*Categories of Occupations of ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Users in Diasporas*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of Occupation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational Services</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businesses</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical services</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Wives</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The quantitative data derived from the online survey illustrated that (44.5%) of the survey responses have come from the United States, (23.7%) from Saudi Arabia, (6.2%) from United Arab Emirates, (5.5%) from Qatar, (4.0%) from Canada, (3.3%) from United Kingdom, and (2.9%) from Oman. The high number of responses that came from the United States might be an indicator that Sudanese diasporas in the United States were more connected to the Internet than others for several reasons such as: the availability of the Internet, given that (77.4%) of respondents access the Internet from
home, the remoteness of the United States from Sudan and the complicated immigration procedures that normally take long time and negatively affect their vacations to Sudan, and, the high sense of freedom and public participation traditions that dominates Western countries, particularly the United States.

The quantitative data derived from the online survey showed that the most discussed topics in the discussions of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users was homeland politics (54.4%) and homeland conditions (35.4%). While about 89.80 percent of their discussions were about political and economic conditions in the homeland, 4.3 percent was about conditions of residence, 0.7 percent was about sports, and, 3.6 percent was about other topics, which indicated that Sudanese diasporas had immense concern about the political and economic challenges in their homeland. The following diagram showed the total percentage of the most discussed topics among ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas.

The quantitative data derived from the online survey indicated that ‘sudaneseonline.com’ online communities were dominated by middle–age users (43-53) and young users (32-42), which accounted for 48.9% and 27.7% respectively. Figure 5 demonstrates age differences among them.
Figure 5. Age groups of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas.

The qualitative data derived from interviews and online participant observation was consistent with the findings derived from online survey. Social interaction among participants of the discussion board was similar to offline situations. Online communities included participants from different age groups. Online participants often came across online peers who were much older or younger than them. Sarah attributed the difficulty for ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users to come to agreement on public issues to the Sudanese style of children upbringing that didn’t encourage children to listen, understand, and express their views about what other peers claimed (personal communication, October 26, 2013). Adil, one of the research participants who was raised and educated in the United States after his family came from Sudan through Diversity Lottery Program on July 1999, stressed the role of age in online discussions. He stated “As a young generation, we do not have this problem [difficulty for Sudanese to come to agreement on
public issues], I was touched by values of democracy, respecting other people opinions, in the US” (personal communication, October 12, 2013).

Many Sudanese left Sudan for political reasons such as fear for life, detention, torture, and dismissal from work or not being employed because of political affiliation. They stayed outside Sudan for these reasons in addition to new ones that arose at their host communities such as commitments to stay with their kids, who were born and grew up in the new (homeland) and strived to pursue their education, to continue living the style of life they get used to it, to seek job opportunities, and to avoid the fearful experience of adapting their lives to their old homeland which they have become unfamiliar to it according to the rapid economic and social deterioration. Sarah stated that:

My husband belonged in the past to the Islamic Movement and abandoned the movement in 1977. He was arrested and interrogated many times by National Security agents. Then we left Sudan. We do not want to go back to Sudan because the National Salvation Revolution is still in power. Additionally, our kids came here at young age and now they settled in this country and it is difficult for us to leave them here and return to Sudan (personal communication, October 26, 2013).

The research participant, Salih, was dismissed from his job in Sudan for political reasons. He migrated to Australia as a political refugee and then became a citizen. He has been living in Australia, with his family, for around 15 years. He stated “I can’t go back to Sudan because my life will be in danger. In addition, my kids grew up in Australia and they barely speak their mother-tongue language [Arabic]. They can’t fit in the
Repressive political environment and deteriorating economic conditions in Sudan pushed large number of Sudanese to leave the country. Political reasons blended with new circumstances in their host societies have forced many Sudanese in diasporas to stay extended period of time outside Sudan. Many families of diasporic Sudanese communities attempted to go back home and resume their old life. They came back to their host societies due to their inability to cope with the repressive political environment or deteriorating economic conditions in Sudan and started over their lives in their host societies. The increasing number of Sudanese in diasporas with their dispersion in different continents, the relatively better economic conditions they had in host societies, and the emergence of the information society have immensely contributed to pull many Sudanese in diasporas to online communities.

Ownership and Management of Sudaneseonline.com Website

The ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website was owned and managed by one person. The website users in diasporas viewed this phenomenon from two perspectives: the ownership perspective and the management perspective. The proponents of ownership perspective argued that the ownership of the website by one person was a direct threat to the continuity and progression of the website as an open online space for democratic dialogue. They believed that the website was supposed to turn into a share-holder company to guarantee the continuity and survival of the website. This procedure would preserve ownership rights of all share holders, including the current owner, and would advance the website by exerting more efforts on information and communication
technology and professional management. Gibreil, one of the research participants who fled Sudan for fear for his life in 1988 and settled in Europe, stated that “the inability to change the website into an institution is a main defect that may cause great damage to the website such as members may leave the website, particularly new social media spaces are out there such as Facebook” (personal communication, October 26, 2013). The proponents of ownership perspective raised the story of Steve Jobs with Apple as an example of success, survival, continuity and progression.

The proponents of management perspective focused on the efficiency of the website in terms of freedom of expression and perseverance of laws and regulations of the discussion board. They believed that the administrator alone couldn’t monitor what was posted by the members because postings constituted a volatile stream of threads and comments. Hence, the laws and regulations of the website have been violated many times. Moreover, the violations stayed on the website for long times before being removed from the discussion board. Fatima agreed on this point and asserted that ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website needed to have more effective management because the administrator had a limited time and energy as a human being to continuously monitor the online discussions on the discussion board (personal communication, October 14, 2013). The administrator of the website believed that members of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ suggested and made the laws and regulations of the discussion board in 2003. He argued that these laws and regulations aimed to minimize conflicts among discussants. He furthermore claimed that despite the existence and application of these laws, the discussion board was a platform on which people could still freely express their views and opinions. He stated “political dialogue on the discussion board of
‘sudaneseonline.com’ doesn’t need management; it needs technical facilitation and filtration of obscene language.” He also argued that he with the website members attempted to manage the website using several ways such as electing administrative committee for this purpose, but it didn’t work due to disagreement among the committee members. On the other hand, the research participant Sarah stated:

The discussion board doesn’t really have laws and regulations. The administrator made them for decoration. For instance, in September 2013, he suspended membership of members who belong to Islamic Movement (pro-government) without any rules or regulations to deprive them from any chance to defend the blood-shed that took place recently during peaceful demonstrations in Sudan. I met him in Sudan and talked with him about this issue (personal communication, October 26, 2013).

In offline political discussions, the existence of the constitution and law enforcement authorities guarantee the protection of individuals’ rights when they participate in public discussions. In online political discussions, although there may be some sort of laws and regulations, the lack of a constitution that can be a reference for online communities, the absence of law enforcement authority that can neutrally apply laws and regulations, and the physical existence of discussants in different regions, make deliberation the basic component of electronic democracy. Electronic democracy had huge benefits for members as well as visitors of these online communities, particularly for online communities coming from undemocratic countries. Some of these benefits were: 1) raising political awareness of members as well as visitors of these online communities in public issues by taking parts or watching these discussions, 2)
documenting political events, opinions of politicians and community leaders to hold them accountable by online and offline public opinion and hence provide members and visitors of these online communities with flow of information, 3) helping individuals understand their stands on political affairs, 4) helping individuals negotiate, discuss, build, and spread offline civil society associations, 5) helping individuals to arrange and conduct collective actions such as campaigns, and, 6) enhancing watching and discussing articles and materials that are prohibited by the government by members and visitors of these online communities.

**Diasporic Online Freedom of Expression**

In 1950s and 1960s, the existence of modest public coffee shops was a distinguished feature of big cities as well as of towns in Sudan. Supported by free political environment and good economy, Sudanese would sit in these coffee shops drinking tea and coffee, exchanging political and cultural news, and having intensive discussions about political issues or about what they had read on newspapers or books. These intensive discussions were characterized by good norms and traditions such as patience, respect, tolerance, and critical thinking. Privately-owned bookstores in Khartoum such as Dar Elgalam and Marawi Bookshop, and in Wad Medani such as Al-Fajr, acclimated to be full of books in different fields and magazines such as Al-Siad, Times, Akhbar Al-Yom, Sabah El-Kheir, and Newsweek, published at international and regional metropolitans. A proverb describing this phenomenon at that time was well-known to the elites as well as to normal people in Sudan and in Arab world said: books are composed in Cairo, printed in Beirut, and read in Khartoum. At the present time, the situation in Sudan is very different. Coffee shops disappeared and have been replaced by
modern Cafeterias that lack the prominent characteristic of traditional coffee shops: customer-friendship. The repressive political environment, poverty, and stagflation deprived the public from the purchasing power to buy newspapers or books. Famous privately-owned libraries shut down. Neither customer-friendly coffee shops nor political discussions are there. Massive migration from Sudan that created diasporic Sudanese communities around the globe and Sudanese online communities were direct products of this dramatic change in Sudan. The research participant Fawzi, who was a freelance journalist resided in Sudan and a correspondent of several foreign newspapers and TV channels, stated that “The problem is that people who migrate from Sudan never come back again” (personal communication, December 12, 2013).

The quantitative data derived from the online survey showed that (66.1%) of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas favored a certain member, which suggested that ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users and visitors highly regarded objectivity and logical arguments. And only (23%) of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users sometimes didn’t understand the arguments of discussants in online discussions. Table 8 shows how ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas used the information they got from the discussion board.
The qualitative data derived from the online participant observation supported
these findings. Members of the discussion board challenged democratic values such as
documentation and verification, consistency, and fairness. The actions and opinions of
peer discussants as well as public officials, politicians, and even government antagonists
were momentarily posted on the discussion board, analyzed, examined, and documented
by adversaries. For instance, when a young man, who has been living in Europe for
several years as a political asylee from Darfur, joined the National Front, which included
many opposing groups against the government, a thread in the discussion board has been
initiated to investigate who he was, his political background, and his opinions about the
political conflict in Sudan from his acquaintances (Khidir, 2014). Some members, who
didn’t have any relationship with the young man, requested verification of the
information posted about him. Having verified many of his suspicious actions and
connections by members who knew him, a discussion occurred questioning the National

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage of information</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To know the news and updates</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To explain the different points of view about the topic of the discussion</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To support your point of view</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other usage</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8

Most Usage of Information ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Users in Diasporas Get from the Discussion Board
Front’s decision to admit him in the opposition. Another example was that many threads have been initiated on the discussion board honoring the Kenyan President’s decision, who has been accused by International Criminal Court of crimes against humanity, to travel, as a regular citizen, to The Hague, The Netherlands, and meet with the ICC’s judge and defend himself (Gadat, 2014). Several discussions took place on the discussion board between opponents of President Al-Basheer and his supporters on the discussion board. Some members demanded President Al-Basheer to surrender himself to the ICC, while others praised his defiance to the ICC (Suleiman, 2014).

‘Sudaneseonline.com’ website users in diasporas also challenged the same democratic values in their host society. For instance, the research participant Toma, who was a human rights activist and a writer and left Sudan in 2001 for political reasons, although she was against the veil “hijab” in Sudan, she was puzzled by what she called “double standards” in Europe where women were prohibited to wear the hijab and hence deprived from their right to wear what they liked (personal communication, October 23, 2013). Another research participant, Hasan, who left Sudan in 1994 to pursue his higher education but decided to stay outside Sudan for political reasons, believed that freedom of expression among ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas was connected to the immigration laws applied in the host society (personal communication, October 16, 2013). He argued that Sudanese immigrants resided in Gulf States could never be a part of the society because immigration laws didn’t entitle them to have the country’s nationality, regardless of the years they stayed in the host society. In addition to this, Gulf States lacked democracy. On the other hand, in Western countries, particularly the United States, thousands of Sudanese immigrants were granted the nationalities of their host
societies. Consequently, their social integration in their host societies motivated them to absorb the culture of freedom dominating Western culture because they admired these democratic, prosperous, well-organized, and economically efficient societies. The culture of freedom was also dictated on them by many means. For instance, their children were raised in the new culture and they absorbed the culture of freedom. Parents had to cope with these new generations. Toma argued that Sudanese need to adopt more easy-going and practical skills in practicing freedom of expression because the Sudanese norms and traditions didn’t support democratic behavior (personal communication, October 23, 2013). She explained by giving an example that most Sudanese looked negatively to young people who expressed their views in the presence of old ones. She initiated a thread on the discussion board that challenged dominant proverbs in the Sudanese culture that sustained undemocratic beliefs such as racial discrimination and gender bias. The thread attracted 193 responses and 27,159 readings.

The website ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas adopted freedom of expression as well as democratic values as nationals of host societies and transferred it through the Internet to other Sudanese in diaporas living in other regions and even to Sudanese living in the homeland. For instance, Toma explained that she learned two important things from living in her host society: the significant role of institutionalization in the development of the society and tentative listening to people (personal communication, October 23, 2013). Table 9 illustrates that most suaneseonline.com users in diaspora didn’t read or abandoned certain topics such as unfruitful discussions that deviated from logical reasoning and common sense and topics that contained abusive language.
Writing on online communities is different from writing on other mediums such as newspapers. Computers are user-friendly machines by their interactive nature. Companies intentionally design computer softwares as user-friendly as possible to increase customers’ satisfaction and to reduce costs. Users get connected intensely to the Internet via computers, particularly personal laptop. Users get access to computers at home; work, and many other places. In all these spaces, they can watch and participate in their online groups. They read and respond. That is what made the Internet a highly interactive medium that was saturated by daily life conditions. Postings of online users were affected by their momentary psychological state. Hence, this interactivity changed the style of writing from structured articles to highly motivated interactive exchange of information and point of views. Fatima stated “The discussion board broke the traditional model of writing. Traditional articles do not have much readership today. On the other side, posts on the discussion board are very interactive and have many followers” (personal communication, October 14, 2013).

Diasporic Civil Society Associations

The qualitative data derived from online interviews and online participant observation illustrated that the discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website as a
huge virtual space in which members of Sudanese in diasporas interacted became the cornerstone of initiating and building diasporic civil society associations. While some civil society associations stayed outside Sudan, others moved, completely or partially, to Sudan. Some diasporic civil society associations stayed outside Sudan for two reasons: 1) the nature of their existence as serving units to their members in host countries such as Sudanese American Women’s Organization, which was basically established to serve women of Sudanese diasporic communities in Washington, DC and Virginia, and, 2) hostile responses of the Sudanese government against some associations such as Sudanese-Israeli Friendship Association. Diasporic civil society associations stayed outside Sudan for the nature of their existence as serving units to diasporas in host countries have become significant tools for collective actions of supporting Sudanese diapsoras in social activities such as building schools that responded to cultural needs of new generations (Arabic language, Quran, Sudanese culture), establishing premises in which Sudanese could regularly meet and hold their social events such as receiving condolences, weddings, and celebration of national events (e.g., Independence Day). The website ‘sudaneseonline.com’ has significantly become the virtual public space in which these activities were initiated, disseminated, discussed, and advertised. These civil society associations have also become a vibrant stage of discussing homeland public issues and practicing democracy through participating in planning, designing, conducting, and managing activities for the members of diasporic communities. The news of human rights violations in homeland such as flogging women, rapes, killings, in addition to deteriorating economic conditions and corruption posted on the Internet united Sudanese diasporic community members and multiplied their pain, rage and helplessness. Because
of their relative better conditions in host societies, they felt the responsibility of supporting the victims by establishing connections with the international community and human rights organizations. Institutionalization of their collective activities has become a necessity in order to raise their voices inside and outside Sudan. They utilized the basic feature of the Internet as a tool to connect them as dispersed people to create, maintain, and develop many diasporic civil society associations. The following civil society associations were some examples.

*Sudanese American Women’s Organization (SAWO)*

Sudanese American Women’s Organization (SAWO) was created in June 2002 by a group of female human rights activists in Washington, D.C., to serve Sudanese diasporic communities in Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Virginia. The main objective of the organization was to strengthen the role of women in developing their diasporic communities and in opening opportunities to face injustices and challenges that burdened women in the homeland (SAWO, 2014). Although (SAWO) had its own website, the organization published its formal statements, meeting invitations, and celebrations on ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website (Ibrahim, 2010). Many discussions occurred in the discussion board regarding SAWO’s activities, vision, and objectives and how the organization helped in sustaining democratic change among Sudanese in diasporas as well as in homeland (Mohamed, 2011). ‘sudaneseonline.com’ played a central role in introducing the organization to Sudanese diasporic communities in the United States and in other countries and in spreading women’s voices about human rights violations against voiceless women in Sudan.
Many online discussions have been waged on the discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ when a female political activist posted a thread on the discussion board that showed her intention of establishing an organization that promoted mutual understanding of Sudanese and Israeli peoples on November 2006. Since the Israeli-Arab conflict was a taboo in most Arab countries, particularly Sudan and its current government, many threads followed examining motivations, purposes, and sources of finance of the project. Many accusations have been made against the founder of SIFA such as she was a spy for Israel, non-Sudanese, and an agent of Zionist groups (Osama, 2012; Abubakr, 2011; Ghariba, 2006; Al-Khalifa, 2006). The founder of the association was hosted by TV channels such as Alarabiya to explain and defend her right and the right of Sudanese who were already living in Israel as refugees to establish the organization, to promote cultural ties with the Israeli society, and to defend their rights as refugees (7abanga, 2011; Ewis, 2006). Hostile video clips have been posted on the Internet, particularly on YouTube, that denounced the founder of SIFA (Ajarab, 2007).

The establishment of SIFA showed that the Internet could initiate something different in people’s lives. The internet was the main route used to spread and discuss the idea of SIFA among Sudanese in diasporas and to recruit new members. Israel began to receive waves of Sudanese refugees from Egypt in 2006, directly after the massacre of Mustafa Mahmoud Square in which tens of Sudanese refugees were brutally killed by Egyptian riot police in December 2005 (BBC, 2014b; Whitaker, 2005). Many of them were arrested and treated as illegal immigrants and imprisoned by Israeli authorities. Some Israeli human rights activists made huge efforts to help these immigrants to be
identified as refugees. SIFA was established mainly to defend the rights of Sudanese refugees, whom most of them were from Darfur and South Sudan, and who had already arrived in Israel voluntarily and needed help to apply for asylum, advocate their claims, and be integrated in the Israeli society. The establishment of SIFA waged online discussions among Sudanese in homeland as well as in diasporas and among Arab human rights activists, particularly who happened to live with Israeli/Jewish people and had positive experiences with them, about the possibility of Arab people to have good relationships with Israeli people (Ahmed, 2008; Matzav, 2006; Al-Zorouf, 2006). One of the research participants asserted that “Sudanese diasporas that had the opportunity to mix with Israeli people discovered the misleading stereotype they had had about them.” The stereotypical image of Israeli people in Sudan came partly from the separation of Sudanese from having connections with Israeli people. This separation was imposed on Sudanese mainly by their successive undemocratic governments and other cultural factors. The statement of (valid to enter all countries except Israel) was on Sudanese passport. As a result of increasing migration from Sudan to different regions, particularly western countries, Sudanese had the chance to meet and have connections with Israeli people. The experiences with Israeli people combined with other factors such as the existence of Sudanese refugees in Israel, deteriorating economic and political conditions in Sudan, and human rights violations in Sudan particularly in Darfur region, paved the way for (SIFA) to be accepted by a number of Sudanese in diasporas. The website ‘sudaneseonline.com’ was the medium immensely used to spread and get support for the idea of establishing (SIFA), which was registered in Israel.
Sudanese Liberal Party

Gibreil explained that Sudanese Liberal Party was created in 2004 by human rights activists living in the United States, Poland, Cairo, and Sudan. He asserted that the Internet played a crucial role among Sudanese diasporas in discussing issues of Sudanese political conflict and in expressing the need to create a party that can tackle the challenges of democracy in homeland (personal communication, October 26, 2013). In 2006, Sudanese Liberal Party moved to Sudan and in 2008 it merged with other small political parties and the name of the party became United Liberal Party. In 2010 the party changed its name again and became Liberal Democratic Party (Tilal, 2011). When the split of Sudan took place in 2011, members of Liberal Democratic Party from South Sudan formed South Sudan Liberal Youth Forum in the new state. As a result of the emergence of the party from diverse experiences of Sudanese diasporic communities and the significant role of online communication among founding members of the party, Liberal Democratic Party is characterized by secular vision and strong online presence (http://ldps.org/english/sample-page). Two elected presidents of the party were women, which is a new phenomenon in Sudanese male-dominated political culture (Tilal, 2011).

Alustadh Mahmoud Muhammad Taha Cultural Center

According to the research participant, Ahmed, as a result of the existence of hundreds of members of Republican Brotherhood in diasporas, particularly the United States, and the continuous deterioration of political environment and human rights violations in homeland, intensive discussions arose among members of Republican Brotherhood on the necessity of remobilizing the party and participating in the political game in Sudan (personal communication, February 22, 2014). Since they lived in
different countries, the Internet was the basic tool of communication. Most online
discussions occurred on their password-protected website (www.alsaloon.org). They also
used other internet communication tools such as Paltalk and emails. Ahmed asserted that
the idea of establishing the center among members of Republican Brotherhood in
diasporas began in the United States and email communication was the first tool of online
communication to spread and discuss the idea (personal communication, February 22,
2014). Most members of the group in diasporas as well as in Sudan believed that the
party laid out the solution of the Sudanese political problem, did great efforts to present
and explain this solution to the Sudanese populace through intensive discussions in the
streets and public spaces, public speeches, and books campaigns, and nothing further can
be achieved, particularly after the absence of their leader. Some members of Republican
Brotherhood, who believed in the necessity of participating in the political game, began
to discuss the establishment of a civil society association in Sudan that bearing the name
of the movement’s leader. The establishment of the association enabled them to achieve
three goals: to raise the life of their leader as a model of the required democratic change,
to show respect to the choice of majority of the group who preferred to keep the party
stagnant by leaving the old name of the party unchanged and taking another name for the
new entity, and to cope with the development of political mechanisms in Sudan, i.e., to

3 Before January 18, 1985, male and female members of Republican Brotherhood used to publish books,
which were written, designed and printed by them, and sell them with modest prices to people. They also
discussed the content of books with people. The sight of women carrying books and discussing religious
issues with people was unique and unfamiliar scene to Sudanese. Some of the members were illiterate, but
they knew the content of books from the intensive discussions within the group.
work through an attractive, modern and legitimate form that was recognized by Sudanese laws such as a civil society association. Internet communication was the main medium used to discuss the idea of establishing the center among members of Republican Brotherhood in diasporas and the website ‘sudaneseonline.com’ was the medium used to disseminate its establishing and activities among Sudanese in diasporas.

Taha’s own home in Omdurman was turned into Alustadh Mahmoud Muhammad Taha Cultural Center. The center was opened on January 18, 2010 (AMMTCC website, 2014). The center’s officials frequently published the news and activities of the center on ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website. Some friends of the group and members of Republican Brotherhood who were also members of the discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ initiated and participated in many online discussions about the center’s role, vision, and legitimacy (Wadidi, 2010). The center carried out many workshops and seminars. Many confrontations with NISS’s agents occurred during these activities. On January 21, 2015, The Ministry of Culture and Information closed The Center and revoked the approval granted in 2009 by the same ministry (Sudan authorities closed down, 2015; Kheir Allah, 2015).

Chapter Summary

Large numbers of Sudanese left Sudan for political and economic reasons. When they left Sudan, most of them didn’t have any experience of the Internet or online communities. The availability of the Internet in host societies due to relatively better economic and technological opportunities, their exposure to democratic values in some host societies, particularly western countries, the development and expansion of online
communication, and the failure of democratization in homeland attracted Sudanese in diasporas to participate and visit Sudanese online communities.

The ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website became a platform on which political dialogue, documentation of social, cultural and political history of Sudan, and services are facilitated. In this chapter we introduced some characteristics of diasporic online users of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website and examined two pillars of democracy regarding Sudanese in diasporas: diasporic freedom of expression and diasporic civil society associations.

The discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website is an online public space that members and visitors from diverse political and cultural backgrounds participated in and watched online political discussions. Sudanese in diasporas were involved in online political debates that attracted large numbers of members as well as visitors. Abusive language, defamation and the interference between the discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website as an online public space for political discussions and the website as a private investment owned and managed by one person constituted challenging areas for diasporic freedom of expression.

The discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website as an online space in which large numbers of Sudanese in diasporas interacted became a basic tool for negotiating, building, and advertising offline diasporic civil society associations. In building and managing these civil society associations, Sudanese in diasporas practiced two types of democracy: electronic democracy and offline democracy. They practiced electronic democracy when they needed to contact other Sudanese in diasporas to explain and negotiate the need to establish an association, when they formed it, when they
published its activities, and when they needed to keep Sudanese in diasporas updated about associations. And they practiced offline democracy when they physically met with their diasporic community members and participated in the activities and management of these civil society associations. While some civil society associations continued staying outside Sudan, others moved completely or partially to homeland, according to their main purpose of establishment.

We have learned from the online survey that ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas are concerned about the political crisis in homeland. Women’s participation in online communities was relatively low due to specific conditions related to women’s social responsibilities and, to some extent, due to abusive language and negative portraits used by male members. Online encounters were similar to offline encounters, where people met and interacted with other members who had diverse educational attainments, incomes, occupations, and ages. Access to the Internet among sudaneseonline.com users in diasporas was mainly from home due to better economic conditions and technological environments in host societies. ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas tended to ignore online deliberations that lacked reasoning, justifications, and logical arguments. Alternatively, they were attracted to fruitful online communications. Online and offline worlds of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas were interlinked, which might suggest that the online communication was sometimes a complementary medium of communication. Many ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas used the information which they had gotten from the website in identifying the different aspects of discussed topics. Verification of information brought to online discussions and justifications of arguments were repeatedly requested from members, which might suggest the good
quality of online deliberation. Racial, gender, and religious discriminations that have recently penetrated the Sudanese community existed among ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas, though many members resisted and condemned these negative norms.
CHAPTER 5: RATIONAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE WITHIN THE SUDANESE DIASPORIC CONTEXT

In this chapter, I present the findings derived mainly from the participant observation of online discussions held on the discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website, and to some extent from the online survey and online interviews. I discussed the Sudanese cultural context of the six requirements formulated by Dahlberg (2001a) in order to have a rational-critical discourse. I monitored and observed social communicative actions of participants of these online discussions for almost two years. While the first four requirements of rational-critical discourse were specifically applicable to deliberations, the last two requirements were more related to the environment in which these deliberations occurred.

Having intensively studied the six requirements made by Dahlberg (2001a), I started my online participant observation on the discussion board to identify these six requirements within the Sudanese culture. First, I focused on finding deliberations because many threads did not contain deliberations. Second, I monitored communicative actions of participants of these deliberations in order to find out if these deliberations satisfy what I had learned about rational-critical discourse.

In order to identify the threads that contained deliberations, I could not claim that a thread contained a deliberation by only the number of members who participated in the discussion or by the nature of the topic of the thread. I have found that some threads, whose topics had a political nature, initiated deliberations; many did not. On the other hand, some threads whose topics had a cultural nature initiated deliberations and then...
politics showed up in the middle of the debate. The selection of these online discussions was an outcome of online participant observation.

Sudanese Diasporic Context: Exchange and Critique of Reasoned Moral-Practical Validity Claims

*Freedom of Faith*

Although the current Government of Sudan distorted the image of Sudanese people before the international community by convicting a Sudanese woman of apostasy and sentencing her to death penalty (Al-Bagir & Karimi, 2014), the discussion board of ‘sudadaneseonline.com’ was a stage to defend freedom of faith among Sudanese living inside Sudan and abroad. A discussion board member, who lived in the United Arab of Emirates, initiated a thread to congratulate another Discussion Board member, Deng, on Christmas (Ahmed, 2013). Another member, who lived in Qatar, opened a new thread on the same day condemning celebration of Christmas by Muslims (Mohamed, 2013). He argued “What are they doing? It is weird and suspicious!!”(para.1). Another member responded “Hi, do you think that all Christians in the globe are infidels? Do you think that the celebration of Christmas with them is forbidden (haram)? What evidences do you have to support this religious opinion (fatwa)?” (Khalifa, 2013, para. 5). Another member commented “Deng is one of the stars of this discussion board. He has huge contributions. He is a part of the whole [Sudanese people]. Merry Christmas to Deng and all Christians over the world” (Abbas, 2013, para. 6). The discussion attracted 42 members, including the author, 11,016 readings, and 95 postings. Figure 6 illustrates the number of members participated in the discussion and their countries of residence, according to their profiles.
Despite the fact that the discussion ended up with no change in participants’ points of views, it provided rich information about the need of reconciliation between traditional understanding of Islam, represented by one faction in the discussion, and human rights advocacy such as freedom of faith, represented by the competing group. For instance, some members criticized inconsistencies in some arguments such as how can people believe that it is *haram* to celebrate Christmas with Christians, and at the same time believe that a Muslim is allowed to get married to a Christian woman. Or how do people pay a lot of attention to celebration of Christmas by Muslims, while they say nothing about human rights violations committed by agents of National Intelligence and Security Services.
Freedom of Thought

Freedom of thought has been severely restricted by successive Sudanese governments; however, members of Sudanese online diasporic communities viewed it as a basic human right that cannot be alienated to any citizen, regardless of their position on the political debate. A Discussion Board member, who did not mention his residence, opened a thread in the discussion board on November 2, 2013 explaining the new position of one of the Sudanese scholars and elites, who used to oppose the Islamists and Sudan’s Government and recently defended them (Alkeik, 2013). The thread attracted 21 members, including the author, 19, 411 readings, and 150 postings. Members of the discussion board who defended his right of freedom of thought posted many of his articles published on electronic and print newspapers containing his position(s) on the Sudanese political crisis. Other members posted articles written by his political foes criticizing his contributions and his recent political support of Islamists. Nor the scholar, neither his political foes participated in the discussion, though all of them were members of the discussion board. The discussion was intense because each faction attempted to validate its position by posting articles, analyses, and even recorded public speeches, and challenged the position of the other group. Fageer (2013) stated that:

Abdalla is a human being. He has the right to adopt any position he believes that it is correct. It is the duty of everyone who respects democracy, to honor democracy and respect his opinion. On the other hand, anyone can objectively criticize his position, without humiliating him as a human being and without allegations that are not supported by evidences (para. 6).
The thread was characterized by lengthy contributions, rich information and deep discussions of several concepts that divided the Sudanese society such as secularism, Sudanese identity, accountability, and human rights. Although the discussion ended up with no change of participants’ positions, all participants were excited about the quality of the discussion. Ali (2013) stated in a response to another member:

My dear, my disagreement with you is a good thing. It is an addition to both of us. We are deliberating in a free space, without censorship of any Editor in Chief or policies of Board of directors or an ignorant government security agent (para. 149).

Al-Taib (2013) ended the discussion with a well-known statement used by Sudanese when they don’t agree with each other: our disagreement with each other will not corrupt our friendliness to each other (Ikhtilaf al-Rai la yfsid lil wod qadia). Figure 7 illustrates the number of members participated in the discussion and their countries of residence, according to their profiles.
Sudanese Diasporic Context: Reflexivity

*Reflective Comments on Sudanese-Egyptian Relations*

Sudanese-Egyptian relations have always been fluctuating according to the type of governments in power in each country and according to some historical conflicts between them such as territorial conflict over the border region’s Halaib Triangle, the distribution of water of the Nile River, and establishment of dams in the Nile Basin (Jameel, 2014; Salman & Abu-Shouk, 2014). Relations between the two countries recently became intense, basically because the current regime in Egypt, President Sissi, came to office as a result of overthrowing President Mursi, who belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization which is still controlling the political system in Sudan (Al-Disko, 2013). The topic of Sudanese-Egyptian relations was widely discussed on Sudanese and Egyptian mass media (Abdel Wahab, 2013; Sha’eib, 2014).

*Figure 7.* Number of members participated in the discussion of freedom of thought and their countries of residence.
A Discussion Board member, who lived in Sudan, initiated a thread on September 25, 2012 accusing Egypt of historical exploitation of Sudan (Mohamed, 2012). He claimed that several historical problems that happened in Sudan were directly caused by Egypt such as the Turkish and the British Occupations of Sudan in the 19th and 20th centuries respectively. He also mentioned the unfair distribution of the Nile River water between the two countries according to 1959 agreement (Wolf & Newton, 2007). He ended his first postings with “wake up [Sudanese]” (para. 1). Salama (2012) commented:

Dear brother, I agree with you on all what you said, but let me ask, do you mean the Egyptian Government or Egyptian People, if you mean the Egyptian Government, take them down, but I know Egyptian people and I love them, I have relatives there (para.3).

Osman (2012) posted:

Hi Hani, in addition to what Salama said, there is another side of the picture. Egyptians were the ones who sent educational missions to Sudan long time ago, they opened their universities to Sudanese, when Sudanese had very few universities and still thousands of Sudanese students are having their undergraduate education in Egypt (para. 3).

The author of the thread responded “they opened educational missions in Sudan for their interests, not for God. And I don’t differentiate between the Egyptian Government and the Egyptian people; the government is a part of the people.” (Mohamed, 2012, para. 11). Another member posted “don’t blame the Egyptian Government or the Egyptian people, our problem is our [Sudanese] leaders, they are responsible for this exploitation.” (Abu-Reesh, 2012, para. 36). Although most
contributions supported the allegations of exploitation of Egypt to Sudan, particularly the Sudanese Government, many members mentioned good things that Egypt did to Sudan such as education. The thread attracted 24 members, including the author, 7,977 readings, and 58 postings. Figure 8 shows the number of members participated in the discussion and their countries of residence, according to their profiles.

Figure 8. Number of members participated in reflective comments on Sudanese-Egyptian relations and their countries of residence.

Reflective Comments on Political Diasporic Struggle

As a result of the on-going conflict in Sudan, many war lords and opposition leaders lived outside Sudan, particularly in Western countries. And many political activists, who fled Sudan for political reasons, were carrying out political activities against The Government of Sudan from their host societies. Political Asylum and Temporary Protected Status, which were basically granted to citizens of countries that
suffered from political oppression and instability, became among the main reasons for Sudanese to settle in Western countries. United States Immigration records showed that the number of refugees from Sudan increased dramatically between 2011 and 2013 (see table 10).

Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Refugees</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>1077</td>
<td>2,160</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Consequently, the demarcation line between political diasporic struggle against the repressive regime in Sudan and diasporas’ struggle in host societies to get legal statuses in order to have better standards of living became indistinct. A Discussion Board member, Mahmoud, who lived in South East Asia, initiated a thread on September 1, 2012, accusing online diasporic members of pretending to be defenders of human rights and fighters for the Sudanese people to have a good governance, but in fact they were only pursuing their personal interests such as getting political asylum in Western countries or even running businesses (Mahmoud, 2012a). She stated:

I discovered that the political struggle against Khartoum Government is nothing, but money. My heart goes out to my country, which is ripped off by gangs, who live inside and outside of it. My country doesn’t have any true fighters for it (para.1).
A member responded “generalization isn’t right, is it? (Al-Mahdawi, 2012, para. 2).

Another member confirmed the point of view that generalization was not fair and brought some examples of the activities carried out by online diasporic users in their host countries (Mohamed, 2012). The author of the thread claimed that she happened to be in Khartoum when the opposition declared that there had been massive demonstrations in Khartoum, she did not see any demonstrations, though she visited many parts of the city on the same day (Mahmoud, 2012b). Another member brought several video clips and pictures of the demonstrations. Many members praised and appreciated the evidences and proofs of their claims (Al-Ajab, 2012). The discussion attracted 25 members, including the author, 12,426 readings, and 89 postings. Figure 9 shows the number of members participated in the discussion and their countries of residence according to their profiles.

*Figure 9. Number of members participated in reflective comments on diasporic political struggle and their countries of residence.*
Sudanese Diasporic Context: Ideal Role Taking

*Cultural Alienation*

Sudanese online communities became a platform of interaction between members of Sudanese diasporic communities, particularly new generations who were born and raised in non-Arabic speaking host societies, and Sudanese in homeland. The discussion board of ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ website has an English version. Some members of ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ website, who were fluent in reading and writing English, wrote on both Discussion Boards i.e., Arabic and English versions. And some members from diasporic Sudanese communities wrote in English on the Arabic version Discussion Board. This phenomenon, writing in English to Sudanese, who were supposed to be Arabic-speaking audiences, had its roots to the colonial heritage when Britain was colonizing Sudan. At that time, while English language was the official language of the state and the medium of instruction in schools, Arabic language was the lingua franca. In 1970, The Government of Sudan made major changes in the educational system including the educational ladder and the medium of instruction (Sudan.net website, nd). Writing in English to Sudanese initiated a debate on the discussion board about the problem of cultural alienation that affected some members of Sudanese diasporic communities. Cultural alienation is the psychological feeling of minority group members that their culture is subordinate to the culture of the main stream (Feng-Bing, 2009).
Ali, a Discussion Board member who resided in the United Arab of Emirates, opened a thread on April 17, 2014 condemning some members writing on the Sudaneseonline Discussion Board in English. She stated:

Yes, a lot of us migrated and resided outside Sudan, which is very scary. May be a lot of us were dominated by the culture of their host society. May be he/she became educated and aware of what is going on more than unfortunate people of Sudan, who didn’t afford having quality education and quality life. However, all this will not entitle you to write in English in a Sudanese website (Ali, 2014, para. 1).

Osman (2014) responded “Hi, I think what language is the person writing in isn’t the point. The point is to have quality education.” (para.2). Adam (2014) commented:
Hi Awatif, what you are saying is correct. But sometimes using some words and expressions in English seems to me more powerful than in Arabic. Additionally, the English is a living language. It is the language of economics, politics, communication, and scientific research (para. 3).

Abdalla (2014) flamed the discussion by commenting in English “Wow! It’s a nice article!” (para. 6). Abu-Sin (2014) commented “I don’t see any problem if writing in English if it is just for verification, and we know that some people reside in countries where they don’t have Arabic keyboard.” (para.11). Fageary (2014) argued “I work and reside in an Arab state; I have never written anything regarding my work in Arabic. All our correspondences and paperwork in the company are in English.” (para.12). Muhi-Eldeen (2014) commented in English, bringing the topic of Sudanese identity to the discussion “Most of the members here are not ‘Arab’ in the first place. So they have the right to use whatever language they want. That is more convenient for them” (para.59). Nobatia (2014) also commented in English “Where I came from (in Sudan), you will be labeled as a show off, if and when you are caught speaking Arabic :)” (para.60). The thread attracted 18 members, 6861 readings, and 65 postings. Figure 11 illustrates the number of members participated in the discussion with their geographical locations according to their profiles.
Other members of Sudanese diasporic communities had a completely reverse point of view about cultural alienation. They claimed that when they visited Sudan after staying outside Sudan for several years, they saw a new bad image of their country that made them feel that they were culturally alienated inside their own country. They were shocked by many new negative norms and traditions, which they hadn’t known before in Sudan. This cultural alienation mixed with political corruption paved the way to the emergence of a new phenomenon: renouncing Sudanese nationality (Imad, 2014). Al-Said (2014) stated “Those who gave up their Sudanese nationality had lost justice, protection, and love in their homeland and found all these indispensable factors of lives of human beings in other countries” (para. 12).

*Figure 11.* Number of members participated in the discussion of cultural alienation and their countries of residence.
As a result of the on-going conflict in Sudan, particularly in Darfur, and the deterioration of the Sudanese economy, Sudan became a destination of aid from many regional and international donors (Doces, 2011, Salih, 2012). Allegations of transferring foreign aids to personal or partisan interests were widely believed among Sudanese people (Transparency International, 2012). Acceptance of foreign aid, let alone corruption in foreign aid, was widely discussed on online communities and media.

A discussion board member, Abureesh, who lived in the United States, opened a thread on February 19, 2014, requesting the government to reject an aid from Japan to carry out maintenance works on the sewage system of the capital, Khartoum (Abureesh, 2014). He mentioned that while Sudan was endowed with huge natural resources, Japan did not have any natural resources. He claimed that the acceptance of this aid was humiliating to Sudanese people and a clear failure of the government in performing its duties. Another member, who was considered a pro-government member, commented “let me say something different. I appreciate what Japan is going to do. We know that we can’t do this work without foreign aid. I thank Japan for this and I request European countries to do the same.” (Franky, 2014, para.6). While some anti-government members expressed their fear that the aid would slip away to corrupt government officials, others argued that Japan knew how to protect the aid from being misused and that was why a Japanese company was going to carry out the project. The members who opposed the project mentioned that this was exactly why he opposed the project; he stated “Japanese Government is saying to us: your capital is dirty, and if we give you money to clean it,
you are going to misuse it, so, we are going to do the job by ourselves (Abureesh, 2014, para.15). Elhag (2014) commented:

Hi Abureesh, I read your posting many times but I couldn’t understand why you want us to reject this aid. I agree with you that our government is inefficient and we need to overthrow it forever. But we should thank the Japanese because they are focusing on the Sudanese people and they didn’t assign the job to dishonest government officials (para. 26).

The post attracted 23 members, 7177 readings and 51 postings. Figure 12 illustrates the number of members participated in the discussion and their countries of residence, according to their profiles.

![Figure 12](image_url)

*Figure 12. The number of members participated in the discussion of foreign aid and their countries of residence.*
Sudanese Diasporic Context: Sincerity

Interaction of Offline and Online Realities

Online and offline worlds of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas were interrelated. Around (20.8%) and (20.1%) of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ users in diasporas physically knew (1-5) and (6-10) members of the website respectively. Sarah stated “On ‘sudaneseonline.com’ I get acquainted to some people who became my dear friends. We meet offline, call each other, exchange emails, have family relationships, and arrange with each other to have vacations in Sudan” (personal communication, October 26, 2013).

‘Sudaneseonline.com’ website became a platform where online realities and offline realities of conflict-affected zones interacted. The Government of Sudan has been solely broadcasting stories about news of military operations in different areas in Sudan. Since there were repressive practices by the government against newspapers and its control over national radio and TV channels, a group of local and international journalists, human rights activists, and interest groups established Radio Dabanga on November 2008 (Radio Dabanga, 2014). Radio Dabanga began broadcasting news on December 1, 2008 from The Netherlands in Arabic language as well as in six local dialects. The service’s mission is to professionally broadcast news about the conflict in Darfur and challenging the government’s versions of stories. The radio operates two hours and a half seven days a week. The service is financed by many non-governmental organizations, Sudanese journalists, and private donors.

The discussion board member, Mohamed, who resided in the United States, opened a thread on March 16, 2014 accusing Radio Dabanga of fabricating news against
Arab tribes in Darfur (Mohamed, 2014a). Many members condemned the member of using ethnic terms such as Arab tribes (AlZain, 2014) brought to the discussion a comment posted on the Facebook page of ‘sudaneseonlin.com’ by a visitor, Abdu, who stated

I would be so glad if I can one time read your article without involving in it any tribe issues nor ethnicity… when are you gonna gain knowledge as you gain money from America?...i don’t wanna judge you but pls don’t be selfish..let your people live in peace as you do in here (para.10).

The deliberation focused on the professional ethics of Radio Dabanga and its relationship with the government and ethnic conflicts in Darfur (Mohamed, 2014b). The author of the thread commented:

I always support and defend our people cattle’s grazers and pastoralists, wherever they are and I don’t have any secret agenda. We are still waiting for Radio Dabanga to assure that it is going to publish the news of our people [Darfurians] with high professionalism. We ask only for professionalism. Is this too much for a radio that claims publishing news in Darfur? (Mohamed, 2014b, para.19).

The discussion attracted 7 members, 3960 readings, and 53 postings. Figure 13 illustrates the number of members participated in the discussion and their countries of residence, according to their profiles.
Many scholars explored the mixed Arab and African origins of Sudanese people and the problem of Sudanese identity: are the Sudanese Arabs or Africans? (Madibbo, 2012; Sharkey, 2008; Drima, 2007; Abusabib, 2001). In recent years, as a result of many emerging factors such as the usage of ethnic differences by successive governments, particularly the current government, in manipulating the conflict and the spread out of Sudanese in different regions such as Arab states and Western countries, the Sudanese identity crisis became a chronic problem. Online communities became an online space for discussions on Sudanese identity and emerging presentations of the crisis.

The discussion board member, Osman, who resided in Saudi Arabia, opened a thread on March 17, 2014, mentioning that new neighborhoods of Khartoum were named after cities in Arab States such as El-Taiff (Saudi Arabia), Al-Doha (Qatar), Al Riaydh
(Saudi Arabia), Abu Dhabi (United Arab of Emirates, and Garden City (Egypt) (Osman, 2014). He proclaimed this phenomenon as a sign of feeling of some Sudanese that their African culture is inferior to Arab culture. He also claimed that if these vicinities were given Sudanese pure names, their prices would sharply fall down. Another member agreed with him and added “this is a part of our Sudanese identity crisis. We are the only people of whom some are proud for having origins outside Sudan and look down to local inhabitants.” (Dongos, 2014, para.4). Mahmoud (2014) commented “don’t look at it from the inferiority point of view, but from an optimistic point of view. Our cities will be like theirs and even surpass them. Let us name Khartoum vicinities of modern names and we can name regional cities by Sudanese names” (para. 6). Another member emphasized the point of inferiority by bringing an article that mentioned that rich neighborhoods of Khartoum took Arab names and poor vicinities such as Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Abuja (Nigeria), Angola (Angola), Naivasha (Kenya), and Mandela took African names (Audo, 2014). Another member claimed that Sudan was gone forever and attributed the phenomenon to Arab satellite TV and globalization (Mahmoud, 2014). The discussion attracted 24 participants, 56 responses, and 4599 readings. The following figure showed the number of members participated in the discussion with their geographical locations.
The number of members participated in the discussion of names of Khartoum neighborhoods and their countries of residence.

Sudanese Diasporic Context: Discursive Inclusion and Equality

The requirement of discursive inclusion and equality of rational-critical discourse concentrated on to what extent inclusion of any member in online discussions was facilitated and to what extent members’ rights were preserved. According to Dahlberg (2001a) inclusion and equality in participating in online discussions might be restricted by external and internal factors. While external factors were connected to offline reality, internal factors were associated with online environment. In this study, I focused on economic status and online registration as external factors and abusive language and defamation and technological expertise as internal factors that might affect inclusion and equality in participating in online discussions. These four factors were closely associated with Sudanese offline and online realities.
External Factors Pertaining to Inclusion and Equality

Economic Status

Although economic status might affect online activities, and hence inclusion and equality, by several ways such as preparedness of technological equipments, availability of leisure time, and affordability of Internet service, I accommodated all these factors in one common factor, which was access to the Internet. Table 11, derived from the online survey, shows where suaneseonline.com website users in diasporas got access to the Internet from.

Around 78% of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website users in diasporas accessed the Internet from home. The research participant Nada, who left Sudan for political reasons and was living in Europe since 1992, explained that she intensively used several types of online communication from home such as Hotmail groups, Chat groups, WhatsApp, and ‘sudaneseonline.com’ because they were affordable, efficient, and user-friendly (personal communication, November 7, 2013).

Fatima stated that:

I am happy that to have an Internet service is very easy in this country. I don’t want to say affordable, but it is a reasonable price compared to incomes in Canada. I am classified among the poorest social groups. Say, low income people. But still I have Internet 24 hours a day and with a good quality. In our country [Sudan], the Internet service is still very expensive. And that is wrong (personal communication, October 14, 2013).
Due to relatively better economic conditions in host societies, which were destinations of Sudanese migrants for better life opportunities, economic status helped members of Sudanese diasporic communities to participate in online communities. They had better opportunities to be included and thus had equal chances of participating in online discussions in terms of access to the Internet.

**Online Registration**

Most websites applied the requirement of online registration to participate in online activities. However, different websites made online registration a requirement for different reasons such as identity verification, facilitating of services, marketing, and even getting fees. Online registration was a significant topic in the case of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ for its relationship with inclusion and equality to participate in electronic democracy and freedom of speech in the discussion board.

In the past and as a result of the small number of Sudanese online users, people could subscribe in the discussion board by getting recommendations from two persons known to the website administrator. As a result of several incidents of using abusive language and identity theft that took place by using some members’ dead accounts (i.e., people who registered in the website but they didn’t use or monitored their accounts), the current procedure to register in the website required confirmation of identity by sending formal documents such as a copy of the passport or an identification card to the website.
administrator. While this personal information was kept confidential with the website administrator, the member could hide his/her identity by using a pseudonym and choosing the amount of personal information appeared in his/her profile that he/she would like to share with other members. Members’ personal profiles were accessible by members of the website as well as by visitors. Subscription to ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website was free. In order to provide more people with access to the discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website, the website’s administration established a ‘sudaneseonline.com’ page on the social media website Facebook. Figure 15 illustrates the Facebook page of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website.

Figure 15. ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ page on Facebook. Retrieved 2015, October 13 from https://www.facebook.com/sudaneseonline?fref=ts
The sudaneseonline.com page on Facebook had 353,307 total page likes, i.e., connections. When a person registered on ‘sudaneseonline.com’ Facebook page, he/she would automatically be connected to different sections of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ from the Facebook page. Members of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ Facebook page could post comments on Facebook that would appear at the bottom of the thread on the discussion board.

Registering on the ‘sudaneseonline.com’ Facebook page required much less strict procedures: creating an account using an email address and a password with the date of birth. Members could use the privacy settings to choose the amount of personal information to share with other members. Figure 16 shows comments of Facebook members on the discussion board.

Figure 16. Visitors of the Discussion Board can comment on any thread through sudaneseonline.com Facebook page. Retrieved 2015, October 13 from http://sudaneseonline.com/cgi-bin/sdb/2bb.cgi?seq=msg&board=470&msg=1412983991&func=flatview
On one hand, the requirement of registration was a necessity to administer electronic democracy and online deliberation in ‘sudaneseonline.com’ for two reasons: first, to protect members’ rights that could have been violated by usage of abusive language or defamation, particularly when it occurred against members who used their real names in online discussions or members who were well-known figures in Sudanese society and, second to protect the website from technical sabotage that could have happened from inside using personal information of members such as email addresses by online foes such as NISS’s agents and interest groups. For instance, Fawzi, who resided in Sudan, stated “the government established a new security unit called Unit of Electronic Security. It is in Khartoum 2 (i.e., district in Khartoum). It monitors all online activities and bloggers. They know their names and addresses” (personal communication, December 12, 2013). Noubi (2008) stated:

On Tuesday morning, ‘sudaneseonline.com’, Sudan's largest site on the Internet, was a target of the biggest sabotage and piracy by The Government of Sudan. The site has become a danger and strategic peril of the government and its plans as it threatens their existence through what is published on the site of the news prevented from publishing in the local print media as well as the site reveals the corruption of the government and the facts and figures in which one does not doubt (para. 21).

On the other hand, there were incidents where people had difficulties to get a membership in ‘sudaneseonline.com’ and others whose passwords have been taken away from them for what the website administrator considered to be violations of rules and
regulations of the discussion board. However, nobody could accept that only one person was entitled to make such a decision.

**Internal Factors Pertaining to Inclusion and Equality**

**Abusive Language and Defamation**

The qualitative data derived from online participant observation and interviews showed that online discussions on the discussion board were hindered by the usage of abusive language and defamation. By abusive language we didn’t only mean obscene language, but also the usage of terms that disgraced any social group. For instance, the research participant, Toma, believed that rights of people with disabilities were violated when online users sometimes described other people’s views as “blind”, “lame” or post cartoons of people with heavy weight challenges (personal communication, October 23, 2013). The research participant Batoul, who left Sudan in 1987 when she was seven years old as a result of her father’s political frustration about what was going on in Sudan, asserted that some members of the discussion board used abusive language towards other members, particularly women (personal communication, January 23, 2014). She and some of her female friends had to abandon the discussion board for some time. She returned to the discussion board, when the administrator made some steps to protect members’ rights, but her friends didn’t. She explained that some female members had to permanently leave the discussion board as a result of defamation campaign against them such as publishing their personal photos with negative comments on the Internet. Moreover, some female members have been pulled out of the discussion board by their male family members who didn’t want them to read obscene terms and to be targets of abusive language. On the other hand, some online users attributed the flinch of women
from participating in online discussions to reasons that were related to women themselves. The research participant, Nada, stated:

Women are scared of expressing their opinions publicly; they are keen on keeping their image as most men like to see them. Some men don’t like to see women expressing themselves openly; some don’t like women to challenge their ideas.

But it is also true that many women have their own causes for not being active in website; women could be busy with their social commitments, such as family and children. Women’ social commitment is higher than men, it would not allow them the time to have serious role, especially political role in websites (personal communication, November 7, 2013).

In many societies, the definition of obscenity was a dilemma because of natural differences among people in what terms were considered obscene and the effect of these definitions on the basic right of freedom of expression in societies that claimed democratic values. The laws and regulations of the discussion board forbid using abusive language, but no specific terms or definitions were made.

The discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website had a diasporic public opinion. In many threads, other participants intervened in the discussions and condemned the usage of abusive language. Moreover, sometimes mediating members requested participants who had used abusive language to remove it from the thread and apologize to victims, according to Sudanese traditions. When participants insisted on using abusive language, some members sent complaints by emails to the website administrator to remove it. Some participants of the discussion board have been temporarily forbidden posting comments for not abiding the laws and regulations of the discussion board.
Technological Expertise

The basic feature of information and communication technologies, particularly computers and the Internet was their customer-friendliness. Companies that produced hardware machines and software programs attempted to make operating ICTs easy for beginners and home/personal users for marketing and educational purposes. For instance, a computer company such as Hewlett-Packard (HP) and a software company such as Microsoft had home editions of their products designed for regular usage and professional editions for professional users. Although the Internet required literacy, the inclusion of other languages in the world of the Internet such as Arabic and Chinese provided millions of people the opportunity to take part in online activities (BBC, 2009).

The two main factors that affected people’s usage of computers and the Internet were literacy and availability of computers (Novo-Corti, Varela-Candamio & Garcia-Alvarez, 2014). The data derived from the online survey indicated that the literacy rate among Sudanese diasporic communities was high as illustrated by the following table.
Table 12

Total Percentage of Each Educational Level Among ‘Sudaneseonline.com’ Users.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Secondary</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>50.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>8.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Doctoral</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Around 94% of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website users had undergraduate degrees and higher. Additionally, almost all of the interviewees mentioned that they hadn’t had any experience in computers or the Internet when they left Sudan. They learned the technological skills of operating and browsing the Internet in their host countries. Salih stated:

In Sudan, I had very little knowledge and experience of the Internet, not more than knowing the very basic things. My Internet skills dramatically increased when I was living in Saudi Arabia. The party [the Communist Sudanese Party] played the major role in this advancement, when the leadership directed some members of the party, who are Internet Gurus, to take care of my Internet training. They were directed by the party leaders to train their comrades (K. Salih, personal communication, November 3, 2013).
Sudanese Disaporic Context: Autonomy from State and Economic Power

This requirement of rational-critical discourse focused on to what extent ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website was free from control of the state (basically The Government of Sudan) and economic power that could negatively affect online political deliberations. One of the main factors that motivated many Sudanese to leave the country was to be away from the repressive political system (The Government of Sudan) that used the state and economic powers to control freedom of expression and civil society associations.

Autonomy from State

In Sudan, the NISS monitors online activities, detains and tortures online activists and brings them to unfair trials. For instance, Fawzi stated:

There are a lot of pressures on bloggers and online activists. It is unbelievable.
The last journalist arrested was one from Darfur region. His name is Aidros. He was released just two days ago. I don’t have a job now. I just write on the Internet and on foreign magazines because most newspapers are owned or controlled by the government through Security Forces [NISS]. There is a daily censorship. And now on the online sphere, we are facing many difficult choices (personal communication, December 12, 2013).

By being geographically remote from Sudan and utilizing information and communication technologies, Sudanese diasporic communities were able to practice electronic and offline democracy and to create different civil society associations. Many Sudanese were granted citizenships of their host societies, which enabled them to stay away from the repressive environment in Sudan for long periods of times and carry out
political activities from abroad. For instance, when political online activists have to visit Sudan for a social event such as a departure of a family member, they abandon using their Sudanese passports. They alternatively use the passports of their host societies, which endow them with some immunity and protection, to enter Sudan and register as aliens. Other Sudanese political online activists, who aren’t granted citizenships of their host societies, meet with their family members in other countries such as Egypt, Ethiopia, and Saudi Arabia. Table 13 illustrates the number of Sudanese whom were naturalized by the United States during (2012-2003).

Table 13

*The Number of Sudanese by Birth Whom Were Naturalized by the United States (2003-2012).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>839</td>
<td>1,104</td>
<td>1,551</td>
<td>2,587</td>
<td>2,785</td>
<td>2,893</td>
<td>2,855</td>
<td>2,885</td>
<td>2,444</td>
<td>2,291</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In democratic host societies, such as the United States and Britain, Sudanese diasporic communities are encouraged by democratic traditions to organize themselves, practice online and offline democracy, and form civil society associations. For instance, Sudanese participate in presidential campaigns and work in polling stations. Also, executive committees of diasporic civil society associations hold their routine meetings in meeting rooms of public libraries and meetings of the general assembly at halls of university campuses. They exchange experiences of organization and regulations with other diasporic communities such as Ghanaians and Somalis. Computers with good
Internet connectivity are available in public libraries and university campuses. In undemocratic societies such as Saudi Arabia or Qatar, Sudanese diasporic communities do not have restrictions by the state to have online discussions of public issues of their homeland. In many countries, particularly Gulf States, members of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website have their local gatherings and offline activities, which are published on the website (Al-Saim, 2015).

*Autonomy from Economic Power*

‘Sudaneseonline.com’ website is a private investment. It finances its operation from commercials. The following figure shows commercials appeared on its Discussion Board. The commercials focus on the needs of Sudanese diasporic communities for services such as money transfer, airfares and education.

*Figure 17.* Commercials appear on the Discussion Board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website.
Due to deteriorating economic conditions in Sudan and relatively better economic conditions of Sudanese diasporic communities, members of the discussion board began many years ago to attract the attention of Sudanese diasporic communities to the economic distress of those still in the homeland. Members of the discussion board published many stories of people whom they knew and they were in need of urgent help because of particular circumstances such as requesting a medicine for a patient in critical condition and the medicine was not available in Sudan or the medicine was very expensive and the patient needed to use it for long time, families lived in extraordinary poverty, or schools that lacked very basic educational needs, or even Sudanese refugees who were passing through destitute conditions in other countries. The discussion board member Bint-alahfad initiated a thread on May 22, 2004 describing the bad economic conditions in Sudan and requesting members to donate money and send it back home (Bint-alahfad, 2004). Several Sudanese diasporic communities residing in different countries, particularly in Gulf States, did many charitable activities. Batoul explained that when large numbers of street boys (vagrants) mysteriously found dead in Khartoum on June 2011 (Mustafa, 2011), she and other ‘sudaneseonline.com’ members donated money and arranged two-days gathering in Khartoum to receive condolences on them (personal communication, January 23, 2014). One of Khartoum’s inhabitants volunteered to host the gathering. There were accusations that The Government of Sudan was behind the incident (Hurriyat, 2011).

Due to strong yearning of many ‘sudaneseonlin.com’ members living abroad to help people in Sudan and to organize the scattered charity activities carried out by different Sudanese diasporic communities, members of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website
supported the suggestion of establishing a charity organization that is based on *nafeer*, the Sudanese tradition of collectively helping people who are in need. Members of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ established *Tanadena* (we call each other to donate and help) Charity Organization, which was registered in Sudan on October 2009. All the members of the organization’s executive committee are members of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website.

**Chapter Summary**

Although the six requirements of rational-critical discourse made by Dahlberg (2001a) were intended to be applicable to any online community, the wide democratic practical gap between democratic nations such as the United States and nations that are ruled by military regimes and experience economic distress, massive migration, armed conflicts, and atrocities such as the Sudan suggested a necessity to address cultural contexts of these undemocratic nations in order to understand and anticipate the possibility of online political deliberations to contribute to have a rational-critical discourse, and to expand the diasporic public sphere.

I have found that human rights such as freedom of faith and freedom of thought, which the international community has adopted by several treaties such as Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, were controversial issues in the discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website. The debate of human rights pushed many members who believed in human rights to criticize and request reasoning and justifications of the intellectual positions held by other members who belonged to the status quo.

Recently, accessing the internet has become available through light and small devices such as cell phones, iPads, and tablets, with highly efficient operating systems including comprehensive keyboards and cameras that can take still shots and record. Also
the increasing availability and affordability of the Internet in many countries made the asynchronous mode of communication ‘semi-synchronous.’ The website ‘sudaneseonline.com’ is characterized by: 1) members can access the website and directly upload their comments at any time, without any censorship, 2) members can modify their comments at any time, and, 3) subscription to the website is free. The recent features of the Internet and the characteristics of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website enabled members of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website to momentarily watch and follow online deliberations and to instantly participate in these discussions within their daily life circumstances, which made members’ comments and contributions more reflective, natural and genuine. Many times, members brought to an online deliberation an evidence of an intellectual position instantly from what they were looking at. The uploading of many comments to online discussions and from different regions made the threads’ traffic fast and more interactive.

Ideal role taking is a significant communicative action of understanding and evaluating other members’ points of views. I have found that in many discussions, in order to deeply understand what other discussants claim, discussants repeated, asked questions and requested more clarifications about what other discussants said. Ideal role taking has positively affected the quality of discussions by requiring members to be honest, consistent, fair, and respectful.

I have found that although the nature of online communication provided online users with the possibility of using pseudonyms to participate in interactive forums, many members in ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website used their real names. Moreover, in their profiles, which are accessible by other members as well as by visitors, many of them shared more personal information and preferences. Additionally, rules and regulations of
the website require members to provide the website’s administrator with their real names and identity verification. The physical existence of members in different regions, particularly in Sudan and conflict-affected areas guaranteed the possibility of verification and the quality of information discussed in online discussions. The consolidating of online and offline social relationships made online communities extensions of offline communities.

Some characteristics of Sudanese diasporic online users such as that most of them had undergraduate education or above, around 40 percent of them had incomes $ 3, 000 per month and above, around 77.4 percent accessed the Internet from home that indicated a good level of technical expertise, have shown Sudanese diasporic online users were equally included in online deliberations and have equal opportunities to participate in online activities. However, some other factors, such as abusive language and defamation, may still prevent some members from participating equally in online discussions.

I have found that the physical existence of Sudanese diasporic communities outside Sudan, supported by the availability and features of information and communication technologies in their host societies enabled them to set themselves free, to large extent, from the control of the state (The Government of Sudan). Moreover, the research participant, Tariq, explained that when The Government of Sudan blocked ‘sudaneseonline.com’ from operating in Sudan, members and visitors of the website in Sudan got access to the website from other proxies (personal communication, December 13, 2013). Consequently, Sudanese diasporic communities did not lose their connections with homeland or with conflict-affected areas.
In order to finance its daily operations of the website, ‘sudaneseonline.com’
website posts commercials for services to its members and visitors such as travel
agencies, money transferring companies, and educational opportunities. The research
participant, Tariq, claimed that the ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website was not supported by
any government or corporate funds (personal communication, December 13, 2013). In
Sudan, The Government of Sudan deprives anti-government media channels from
publishing commercials as a tool of silencing them. On the other hand, it provides pro-
government media channels with financial resources and administrative facilities. By
being hosted and managed in a democratic country (i.e., the United States), the website
became free from the control of the economic power of state.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this virtual ethnographic study, I explore the democratic behavior of Sudanese diasporic communities. I attempt to find out the characteristics of Sudanese diasporic online users, and to what extent their stay outside homeland and their usage of online communication affected their online political deliberations and facilitated freedom of expression and formation of civil society associations. I examine to what extent the Internet contributed to create a rational-critical discourse and expanded the political public sphere of Sudanese diasporic communities. In this chapter, I present the conclusions derived from the findings of online survey, in-depth online interviews, and online participant observation and avenues to future research.

Push Factors and Pull Factors

Online communities became a significant phenomenon in the new media era. Many scholars explained that the intensive usage of information and communication technologies by millions of people in mass communication made online communities real communities that are full of life (Wall & Williams, 2007; Memmi, 2006). Dahan and Sheffer (2001) argued that more studies should be done to understand how ethnic diasporic communities used the Internet for democratic change. The creation of diasporic online communities came from undemocratic societies such as the Sudan was an outcome of the emergence of many push and pull factors as well as their connection to the information and communication technologies in host societies. While the push factors contribute to move people away from certain areas, the pull factors attract people to immigrate to certain destinations (IOM, 2011). In this study, the push factors were related to the developing/undemocratic societies and the pull factors grew in
developed/democratic countries or sometimes rich countries. The push factors emerged from developing countries, such as deteriorating economic conditions and repressive political environments, forced large numbers of populations to emigrate from their countries to economically and politically better countries in order to have better standards of livings, safe environments, and better education (Nolan et al., 2011; Sharkey, 2004; Saeed, 1999; Abusharaf, 1997; Fluehr-Loban, 1995). Dahan and Sheffer (2001) claimed that pulling factors arose in developed/rich countries as a result of the new international phenomenon: globalization. I have found that for the Sudanese diasporic communities, the push factors were the repressive political environment and bad economic conditions, that both led to the migration of large number of Sudanese to neighboring countries, Gulf States, the United States and other regions. And the pull factors were safe political environments such as in the United States and Britain, where many Sudanese apply for political asylum, better job opportunities such as in the Gulf States, and educational attainment in different regions. These findings are consistent with the features of irregular emigration and staying abroad of Sudanese national shown in Table 4 and with the existing literature (Nolan et al., 2011; Sharkey, 2004; Saeed, 1999; Abusharaf, 1997; Fluehr-Loban, 1995). The Internet was the main tool of communication among those Sudanese diasporic communities as well as the space where they had online deliberations on public political issues.

Online communication among Sudanese diasporic communities began as a social necessity of keeping ties with family members and friends, who were living in homeland or in other regions and grew to be an indispensible tool of getting news and information about homeland. As Lemos (2010) claimed that the role of mass media changed from
only providing people with knowledge about public issues to communication, Sudanese online discussions of public issues evolved from the online existence of Sudanese diasporic users and the flow of news and information posted by members residing in homeland or abroad. With the increase in the number of Sudanese diasporic online users due to the deterioration of political and economic conditions in the homeland that resulted in migration of large number of Sudanese, the online discussions gradually became online deliberations of public issues. The ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website thrived and added more sections that documented political and cultural realities of homeland, which provided diasporic online users with more and updated political information, which diasporic online users needed for political deliberations. The intensive usage of online communication by diasporic communities for political dialogue was also noticed by Mano and Willems (2008).

Political Information and Political Change

Although many scholars agreed that the Internet provided online users with political information (Nisbet, Stoycheff & Pearce 2012; Marlin-Bennett, 2011; Mohamed, 2011; Min, 2010; Boulianne, 2009; Willems, 2008 & Kobayashi et al, 2006), some of them argued that the provision of information only was not sufficient to make a political change on offline life. The Internet was not available to large numbers of populations in developing countries, the Internet was used by anti-democratic groups such as hatred and racism groups, and negative behaviors of online users (Marlin-Bennett, 2011; Burns, 2006; Tettey, 2001). Most members of diasporic communities had adequate access to the Internet due to their existence in host societies that were endowed with information and communication technologies. In this study, around 77.4% of
Sudanese diasporic communities accessed the Internet from home, 19.7% of them from work, and 1.8% of them from a public library.

Some scholars claimed that the provision of political information to online users was not sufficient to realize political change; however, access to political information was a significant factor in undermining undemocratic regimes. By having true and updated information, Sudanese diaporic online users knew that the claims of democracy made by undemocratic regime in Sudan were false. Informed diasporic online users were able to unearth and document corruption, to challenge news of military operations published only by the undemocratic Government of Sudan, to produce alternative versions of the stories, identify and document nepotism, and recognize and verify manipulation of national institutions such as the civil service, the judiciary and police forces. For instance, Tettey (2001) argued that the provision of political information was not enough to realize political change, however, he simultaneously claimed that political information that is secretly posted on the Internet by diasporic online users to online users residing in the homeland put much internal pressures on undemocratic governments by local populations as well as external pressures by human rights agencies and international organizations.

Burns (2006) stated “When one talks of democracy online, one must talk of the entire globe and not just politics relating to any one region. It is called the “World Wide Web,” after all” (p. 6). But it is important to point out that global online users practice electronic democracy within two different political environments: democratic and undemocratic societies. In democratic societies, people have abundant political information due to the freedom of the press and the freedom of expression, which are
guarded by sacred constitutions and independent judiciary systems. In undemocratic societies, authoritarian regimes utilize the resources of the state, including manipulated constitutions and the judiciaries, to deprive people from access to political information and to monitor, arrest, detain, and even torture online activists, online journalists and bloggers. While authoritarian regimes carry out harsh censorship on print media and confiscate any issue of a newspaper or a magazine that contains any unauthorized topic, they cannot confiscate or stop publishing any Internet materials. In such societies, the Internet, with its unique features such as the difficulty to control it, is a significant medium to provide people with political information. This difference between democratic and undemocratic worlds resulted in what Norris (2001) called ‘the democratic divide’ (as cited in Min, 2010, p. 25). By democratic divide she meant the difference between the haves and have-nots in terms of using the Internet in political participation. Mukhongo (2010) argued that African countries became aware of the decisive role of the Internet in political change. Fawzi stated:

I have now a legal suit against me from some government officials before the court. I had to write three pledges: the first one was not to write anything about the President or his family, the second one was not to write anything about the army or military operations, and the third one was not to write anything about corruption (personal communication, December 12, 2013).

Sudanese residing in homeland did not have opportunities to freely participate in political deliberations of public issues due to the heavy monitoring of online activities by The Government of Sudan. Sudanese diasporic online users, who became out of the control of The Government of Sudan, have become free discussants of public political
issues. On February 17, 2015, the Government of the United States has exempted telecommunications-related products from sanctions imposed on Sudan several years ago. The main goal of this exemption was “to promote freedom of expression through access to communication tools” (Booth, 2015).

Online Shaming

The usage of abusive language and defamation was one of the significant factors that deprived some online users, particularly women, from participating in online deliberations. Online communities, including ‘sudaneseonline.com’, put pressures of online shaming on online members who used abusive language or defamation to violate other people’s right. Moreover, many Sudanese diasporic online users developed communicative skills with dealing with abusive language and defamation when they participated in online deliberations such as using emoticons to powerfully express their views without losing their respect and integrity. Other members have positive attitudes of human interaction such as tolerance, objectivity and focusing on the main points of the argument instead of following perpetrators’ wrangling, which are significant elements of online communication (Carter, 2005). Fatima, who was a victim of abusive language several times, explained that although her experience with being a victim of abusive language was a hard one, it made her a strong debater, increased her awareness of abusiveness and biasness, and gave her a trustworthy personality among an online audience (personal communication, October 14, 2013). The struggle of online users with online deliberations may suggest a rise of a form of participatory electronic democracy in online communities, or what Dahlberg (2011) called “deliberative digital democracy” (p. 859). The existence of groups that used liberal democracy in expressing their abusive or
racist views in offline communities did not prevent these democratic communities from being democratic. Many laws were made and enforced in democratic societies to criminalize using abusive and racist terms and expressions, without jeopardizing freedom of expression (Bleich, 2011). Discriminating practices existed in online deliberations held by Sudanese online users, particularly by online users who reside in homeland as a result of what Mukhongo (2010) called “ethnicization of national politics in African countries” (p. 339), which refers in this study to ethnic conflicts and the manipulation of ethnic differences by the current Government of Sudan (Sharkey, 2008; El-Zain, 1996). Since democracy is a behavior that can only be learned by practicing democracy (Agren, 2001), dealing with the misapplication of freedom of expression is a major component of learning democracy. Marlin-Bennett (2011) stated that “Democracy is also emotive. Democracy calls upon us to have a certain attitude or feeling for those with whom we disagree” (p. 130). As mentioned earlier in chapter four, one of the good aspects of online communication among Sudanese diasporic communities is that it enabled Sudanese diasporic online users to freely discuss sensitive issues such as discrimination based on race and gender, which are deeply rooted in Sudan as well as in undemocratic countries.

In addition to online shaming and members’ communicative skills and personal qualities in dealing with abusive language and defamation, online communities also establish laws and regulations to guard members’ rights. Victims of abusive language and defamation or other members who spotted any abuse send complaints of violating these laws and regulations to administrators. Sarah stated “My membership in the website was suspended many times as a result of pressures on the admin from communist members. I do not call names but I am sarcastic.” Many diasporic online users were positive in
dealing with abusive language, particularly against women, by supporting the victims, condemning negative behaviors, mediating and reconciling online disputes (personal communication, October 26, 2013).

Expanding the Diasporic Public Sphere

The findings of this study indicate that the six requirements of rational-critical discourse formulated by Dahlberg (2001a) characterized several online discussions took place in the discussion board of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ website. In spite of the existence of entertainment threads, abusive language and defamation, and discriminatory behaviors, the research findings of this study support that many online discussions represent rational-critical discourse as described by scholars who argued that online communication had a positive effect on political participation and civic engagement (Boulianne, 2009; Wang, 2007; Parker & Song, 2006; Dahan & Sheffer, 2001).

Vedel (2006) claimed that the Internet provided populations with a great opportunity to adopt democracy. I found that the participation of diasporic online users, as well as online users reside in homeland, in the formulation process of laws and regulations organizing online discussions, with the support of online public opinion, may result in a significant improvement of rational-critical deliberation or what Black, Welser, Cosley and DeGroot (2011) called “Idealized models of high-quality group deliberations” (p. 596).

When Gerhards and Schäfer (2010) analyzed the impact of online communication on the public sphere of online communities in terms of organizational prerequisites and openness for participation, they have found that while emails and messaging had low impact on the society, discussion boards and blogs had middle impact on the society. The
findings of this study claim that due to the nature of diasporic communities as dispersed populations and the availability of information and communication technologies in their host societies, in addition to their relatively high educational attainment and their geographical remoteness from homeland, email, messaging, and discussion boards had high impact on the public sphere of diasporic communities. The connection with the information society provided Sudanese diasporic members with more motivations and affordability to use information and communication technologies. Table 14 shows the characteristics of traditional and Internet-based diasporic public spheres in terms of prerequisite, participation, and impact on diasporic society.

Table 14

*Traditional and Internet-Based Fora of the Diasporic Public Sphere*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional public sphere</th>
<th>Internet-based public sphere</th>
<th>Organizational prerequisites</th>
<th>Openness for participation</th>
<th>Impact on diasporic society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encounters</td>
<td>Email, messaging, etc.</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public events</td>
<td>Discussion boards, blogs, etc.</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass media</td>
<td>Search engines</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Modified from (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010, p. 146).

The findings of this study sustain that the Internet has largely expanded the public sphere among Sudanese diasporic communities. Sudanese diasporic online users practiced freedom of expression by posting on the discussion board political news that take place in homeland. Diasporic online users receive political information from their
friends and family members through other Internet channels, such as social media, email or phone, and publish it to other Sudanese diasporic communities around the globe. They practice freedom of expression when they post on the discussion board articles that were prohibited from publishing on newspapers of homeland. Amin (2002) described the effect of the development of information and communication technology in the Middle East by stating “Information no longer flows only in one direction, from North to South, but also in the opposite direction, from South to North” (p. 132). Because of the Internet, any government needs to perform an arduous efforts to control the flow of information from reaching the right audiences.

Sudanese diasporic online users, who were scattered around the globe, were able to express their needs of establishing civil society associations that serve their interests. Online communication was the main tool of communication among them. The Internet enabled them to organize online meetings through Messenger and Skype. Sudaneseonline.com website was the space where Sudanese diasporic communities watch and discuss missions and goals of these civil society associations and participate in online discussions to set their agendas. By using online communication, Sudanese diasporic online users expanded the diasporic public sphere towards stressing the role of civil society associations and freedom of expression in creating a new reality that is anticipating fearless and responsible political environment as recommended by Amin (2002). The news of recent closure of some cultural centers in Sudan, such as Mahmoud Mohamed Taha Cultural Center, Sudanese Writers Union, and, Al-Khatim Adlan Center for Enlightenment and Human Development was published in sudaneseonline.com website and many electronic newspapers. The Government of Sudan was widely condemned for
this action by people inside Sudan, outside Sudan and by many human rights organizations. These civil society associations attracted large numbers of people to their activities in which they hosted thinkers, democratic activists, and opposition leaders to analyze the political crisis in Sudan and introduce solutions to the problem. The role of civil society associations in Sudan, whose establishments have been initiated or supported to large extent by Sudanese diasporic activists, to facilitate democratic change was strengthened by the new trend of the associations to make ties with international and regional human rights organizations and donors such the National Endowment for Democracy, which is an American organization focusing on facilitating democracy, and UN Women, which is a United Nation organization providing women with funds, training and human resources to liberate themselves from gender discrimination and unequal political and social rights.

The research findings of this study support the consistency of the Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) with deliberative online discussions that take place in the discussion board of sudaneseonline.com website. The TCA stressed the role of language in human interaction. It focuses on how people can discover themselves by promoting communication with other peers through dialogue and deliberation so as to reach an agreement on public issues and to enhance norms and traditions of consensus building among social groups. The discussion board of sudaneseonline.com is an interactive space based on text messages of members. Responding in writing normally takes more time to compose the message, log into the account and post the message on the discussion board. This time-consuming process of responding suggests in-depth reflections and thoughtful argumentation. The TCA emphasizes the voluntary involvement in deliberations, which
is liberated from any other effects that force people to participate in deliberation on public issues. Participation in online discussions occur on the discussion board of sudaneseonline.com website is voluntary. It depends mainly on the motivation and personal commitments of individuals to raise issues, which they may consider important to themselves and to the society.

Avenues to Further Research

In this study, around 42% of diasporic online users have used the information they got from the website ‘sudaneseonline.com’ in identifying the different views of the topic they were discussing in offline communities, and 31.8% and 22.3% to get news and updates of the news and to support their points of views respectively. When scholars study the role of information provided by the Internet in political change, the direction of future research should focus on two research areas: the extent to which the online users disseminate the information they get from online communities among offline populations and comparing between the types of information that online users get from online communities in democratic and undemocratic countries.

This study demonstrates how the six requirements that were used by Dahlberg (2001a) to have a rational-critical discourse can work in the Sudanese online communication diasporic context. Because there were many threads in sudaneseonline.com website that did not contain deliberations, I monitored the threads that contained deliberations and attempted to find out how the six requirements work in these deliberations according to the Sudanese culture. Future research may be guided by how to measure the quantity and quality of deliberations on political communication in
online communities, compared with other types of online activities such as entertainment, news, and social occasions and events.

According to Boulianne (2009), the use of the Internet increases political engagement of populations. Future research may investigate the effect of external and internal factors on discursive inclusion and equality on online users residing in Sudan so as to curb these factors and facilitate more political engagement and more efficient use of the Internet to change the role of citizens in politics. Furthermore, the studying of this effect may yield opportunities to adopt the information and communication technologies for larger numbers of people in developing countries.

The ownership form of sole proprietorship, in which one person owns the business, is a challenge in case of interactive websites that emerged from communities of undemocratic countries such as ‘sudaneseonline.com’ because it may affect how the website is managed in terms of freedom of expression, how laws and regulations of deliberations are made and enforced, continuity, and efficiency. More research is needed to explore the effect of the type of ownership structure of interactive websites on electronic democracy.
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APPENDIX A: ONLINE PARTICIPANTS REFERENCE LIST


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APPENDIX B: ONLINE SURVEY ON A VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND DEMOCRATIC BEHAVIOR IN THE SUDAN’S DIASPORA

(Focusing on the Website Sudaneseonline.com)

1. Sex: a) M b) F

2. Level of education: a) Elementary b) Middle School c) High School d) Bachelor e) Masters f) Doctoral g) Post Doctoral

3. Age: a) 18-31 b) 32-42 c) 43-53 d) 54-64 e) 65 and above

4. Occupation: (scroll down list)

5. Level of Income (per month in American dollar): a) 500 or less b) 551-1,000 c) 1001-2,000 d) 2,001-3,000 e) 3,001-4,000 f) 4,001 and more

6. Place of residence: (scroll down list)

7. Where do you most often visit the website sudaneseonline.com? a) Internet Café b) Home c) Public Library d) Work Site e) Other (specify)

8. How long have you been a member or a visitor of the website Sudaneseonline.com? a) Two years or less b) 3-5 years c) 6-8 years d) 9-11 years e) 12 years or more

9. Which section of ‘sudaneseonline.com’ you spend more time on it: A) Political News b) Religious topics c) Sports d) Cultural News e) Entertainment f) Other (specify)

10. Are there any topics you do not visit in a regular basis? a) Yes (why) b) No

11. How many members of sudaneseonline.com website do you know (scroll down list)

12. Is there someone whose postings you particularly admire? A) Yes (why) b) No
13. When you read the discussion board, do you have times you do not understand participants’ points of view? a) Yes (why) b) No

14. What topics do you frequently discuss with your Sudanese offline community members a) Conditions of Sudanese community in your residence b) Economic conditions in homeland c) Homeland politics d) Sports e) Other (specify)

15. How do you use the information you get from ‘sudaneseonline.com’ in your discussions with your Sudanese offline community members: a) To know the news and updates b) To explain the different points of view about the topic of the discussion c) To support your point of view d) Other usage (Explain)

16. How many times did you read a request to verify information brought to a discussion in the forum: a) So many times b) Many times c) Few times d) Very few times e) Never

17. Is there someone with whom you disagree with a lot of time? A) Yes (why) b) No

18. How many times did you read a request to explain evidences or justifications for opinions brought to online discussion on the discussion board: a) So many times b) Many times c) Few times d) Very few times e) Never.

19. How many times did you read discrimination against members during a discussion on the discussion board based on irrational reasons (such as gender, race or religious beliefs)? a) So many times b) Many times c) Few times d) Very few times e) Never.
APPENDIX C: ONLINE SURVEY ON A VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF ONLINE COMMUNICATION AND DEMOCRATIC BEHAVIOR IN THE SUDAN’S DIASPORA

(In Arabic Language)

واس تلقيعاتي على الأخرين عن النشر عبر الإنترنت تشمل الإجابة عن اسئلة الإثنيغرافيين السودانيين الذين خرجوا...

1. اللجنس: أ. شاب - ب. قديم
2. الديموغرافيات: أ. بدويم - ب. مواطن سبب دبلوماسي هاجمهم. وظف نور زفقة للفتورة.
3. العمر: أ. 11-30 سنة - ب. 31-42 سنة - ج. 43-53 سنة - د. 54-65 سنة - إ. فوق سن 65.
4. الوظيفة: (اختيار من القائمة)
5. الموقع: د. بيتي - ع. وسط المدينة - ن. اقليم شهر.
7. حلقة العالم (اختيار من القائمة)
8. اللجان الأخرى (اختيار من القائمة)
10. الدين الرئيسي (اختيار من القائمة)
11. أسئلة أخرى
12. هل هناك موضع معين عن التفكير أن التفكير؟: أ. إنك مدرسة بماذا إذا؟ - ب. لا.
13. الشكل الذي تنظر إليه تفكيرك: أ. إجابة على استمارة - ب. لا...
204

14 - ماهو الموضوع الذي نشأRESHQI من فضله وجمع البروتة في جولك؟ أ. أخوال المال معم

العواد B. أن الباب معم د. آفاق خاص مع الأحياء.

15 - ماهو أهم أفضل المعايير لتحديد وجود البروتة في 혹ك؟ أن نشر الأخبار في Import. ك: معلومات

ارة D. وجد معلومات ب. هنا.

16 - هل هناك أي أكثر بوضوح في بث الأخبار في البروتة؟ إ. أن يكون آفاق خاص مع الأخ

بار D. K. فيDDR (أيون الأخبار). ب. هنا.

17 - هل هناك أي أكثر بوضوح في بث الأخبار في البروتة؟ إ. أن يكون آفاق خاص مع الأخ

بار D. K. فيDDR (أيون الأخبار). ب. هنا.

18 - هل هناك أي أكثر بوضوح في بث الأخبار في البروتة؟ إ. أن يكون آفاق خاص مع الأخ

بار D. K. فيDDR (أيون الأخبار). ب. هنا.
APPENDIX D: OHIO UNIVERSITY CONSENT FORM

Title of Research: A Virtual Ethnographic Study of Online Communication and Democratic Behavior in the Sudan’s Diaspora

Researchers: Abuobeida A. Mudawi

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study

This study is being done because the Internet has become an important tool for political information and democratic dialogue. Sudanese diasporas use the Internet to get connected to their homeland as well as to other diasporic Sudanese communities. This study attempts to explore the experiences of Sudanese participants of online communities, particularly the website “sudaneseonline.com”, with online discussions and how participation in these discussions and watching these discussions contribute to the expansion of political awareness among Sudan’s diasporas. By “participants of online communities” I mean subscribed members of the website “sudaneseonline.com” as well as non-subscribed people who browse this website.
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to fill out the questionnaire posted on the website and send it back to the researcher by clicking on the button “Submit”. Some of subscribed members of the website “sudaneseonline.com” and non-subscribed participants will be interviewed. Some discussions on the website will be observed.

You should not participate in this study if you feel that your participation may cause any harm to you or to your family members by any means.

Your participation in the study will last for the time you fill out the questionnaire and submit it. Then, the information will be safely kept for around six months to be processed and analyzed. Then, all the materials will be destroyed.

*Risks and Discomforts*

No risks or discomforts are anticipated. Please, feel free to contact the researcher by email or by phone for any further information you may need to know.

*Benefits*

This study is important to science because it sheds more light in the role of online political communication in the lives of diasporic communities. It is also important to Sudanese society because it helps diasporic communities to understand many complicated issues of Sudanese politics and culture (e.g., political dialogue, transparency, diversity, role of religion in politics, and economic efficiency) from a broader perspective i.e., the traditional Sudanese perspective solidified by experiences from other communities. You may not benefit, personally by participating in this study.

*Confidentiality and Records*

Your study information will be kept confidential by saving it in the researcher’s personal password-protected laptop. Additionally, while every effort will be made to
keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU.

Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact [the researcher Abuobeida Mudawi at am147003@ohio.edu, abuobeidaa@yahoo.com, 614 5319126, or the academic advisor Dr. Steve Howard at howard@ohio.edu, 740 5931834]

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

☐ you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered

☐ you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.

☐ you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study

☐ you are 18 years of age or older

☐ your participation in this research is completely voluntary
you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature Date

Printed Name

Version Date: [08/15/2013]
APPENDIX E: OHIO UNIVERSITY CONSENT FORM

(In Arabic Language)

Title of Research: A Virtual Ethnographic Study of Online Communication and Democratic Behavior in the Sudan’s Diaspora

Researchers: Abuobeida A. Mudawi

أثر هكذا نقطة مثابة من انسحاب مسؤلية الشهادة Smith لمن يرى كيف أثرت تلك النقطة على ما كتبه من النتائج اللغوية في برنامج Smith

علو الممارسات: لا يوجد ملاحظات أو تعليقات أخرى

شرح الواسطة:

سرورًا حافئًا، هذه الواسطة لن تكون قد فُسّحت أداة هامًا، عميّة ومتنازل عنها، بل هو الموقف، عموميًا، ماجراً، فضلاً، هذا البريد، لهذا أول

أحيانًا، هناك، أن الإجابة على الأسئلة، في المقابل، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، وحالة جديدة، بينما، في، في برنامج Smith، عبر النتائج، 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هذه الدرس يحتوي على كلمة سو岔ر أخرى ماليوم. وأرسل ذا المباحة في جريري الفضي (عن طريق
الضخ مطوي على الزر الأساسي لماليوم). سوف أشرح بعض الفيديوات مباحة الأغضاء والزوار،سوف
بعض الفيديوات ودون ملاحظات حول ما أرجوك أن تلتقي تلفظي لهذه الدراسة أذن غر جرب أذي رأكل سوف
يودي لأنشطة أي ميت سوى من الذيل، أو أحتفظ أدائين ذلك أشيئا تلفظي هذه الدراسة سوف يخرق
الزمن لذي يبني القلائل ونفس جرب عن ذلك bénéficان الويتمات كيف يحب قحل عما من الأمتياز سوف وصف
ديفس لن أموز إن ممتدة أن يتويزها أبعدها سر وصف وسبرج جميع المعلومات من أن طيا.
المخاطر والتجريقات:
لتطلب جدوى مخاطر أو جريئات سريعة للاشتراكي الدراسية هذه الدراسة، أرجو أن تكون تفردين أطلق على طريقة
يتحين ويدري الذي الفيديو أرقام يفسيري أذنا أفعيات لشبكونة ملاحظات حول الدراسة، أو لأنشطة مقالات من الديدات.
الخطوة
هذه الدراسة مدة من الابناء، سطيFAST الزان، يزيد من المعرفة على دورات والمسار الأشر.
الموارد:
جمع من مجموعات الدراسات، التي يحتاجون خارج اليوان. يجب أن تكون هذه الدراسة متميمية إلى المعرفة باسوان أي لا
تمسح جميع مجموعات الدراسات، التي يحتاجون خارج اليوان. فهي تزيد على فئة عبور، على مصادر، عبد الناصر farkhar.
المؤسسات، الفضاء المستقلة، القوية، دور في سبيلية، اليمينية، الناشئة، الافتراضية، الألغسطية، من وجه القضاء، أشوب، بلج، ماب، الباحث
المبيدة من عالمية داخل اليوان، مصحبة، قد يتم تنميقها الفيديو، حتىipelة من الفيديو، مصادر أخرى، مع اعتياد، تنفيذ
القياسية والمضادات المثاليون. قد تشغيلبه، تحديد حسب الفيديو، من الاتجاه الفضي هذه الدراسة.
القطاع: المستخدمين:
الموارد: للموارد تهيئة جلس في تشاد، لكن، مستقلون رفيق، وليست مصطفى جي جاز للمحيطات الخشبي، والحق ميلاد.
العمليات: صيد في قاحة تحرير حتى الجو، محذوف، المخلص للجذب، جي مفتاحي للتحقيق في شيء مثاليون، في الفصوص الإجراءات
للتكبير، كما تطرأ ضعف الميداني الإطلاع في هذه الموارد تصل:
- جاذبة تقنيات تتم تشغيل حضية، الينار وال региона، والذي ييوه، حضية الأسنان من الأجسام، البالغة
تُمبري في مياء، مع قهر.
المشجّه لج اوع احلةوية بإلغاء (تجربة إصلاح تالبسمية) الذي يصقّد يشرف في الاحات

في لجاءحة.

عঃمسات الأصل:

أذان، تكبير، مسجّد، ينير الأمل بناءًا على الأمل، الاحترام، الأنتروني الأشياء:

abuobeidaa@yahoo.com أو am147003@ohio.edu

أو على إسمجّه: 5114145319124

أو تغيير إسمجّه: howard@ohio.edu

أو على إسمجّه: 5517455931134

مع شجّه شيردي ولتمان

أج لدم

بلوجوهية غلطة إسلامية إلى حنرى

211
APPENDIX F: SEMI-STRUCTURED IN-DEPTH ONLINE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

WITH THE FOUNDER AND ADMINISTRATOR OF “SUDANESEONLINE.COM”

1. General background (education, political affiliation, computer and Internet experiences in Sudan and abroad, media experience in Sudan).

2. When and why did you leave Sudan?

3. What is the history and developments of establishing sudaneseonline.com website?

4. What were the objectives of establishing this website?

5. How is the website managed?

6. What forms of censorship did The Government of Sudan attempt to carry out on this website?

7. What are the current objectives of this website?

8. What are the problems that face you as a website manager?

9. How do you look at the ranking of sudaneseonline.com in Sudan and abroad?

10. How do you look to the role of sudaneseonline.com in politics in Sudan and among Sudanese diasporas?

11. Rules and regulations of the website.

12. Why did you establish libraries on the website? What is the purpose?

13. Some members believe that discussions that take place in Sudaneseonline.com are no longer fruitful discussions, but battles that are dominated by personal prejudices. What do you think?

14. What do you think about commercials on the website?

15. What is Tanadaina Organization (i.e., we call each other to donate and help) and what is its mission?

16. The website security.
APPENDIX G: DEBRIEFING INFORMATION

Dear brothers and sisters members and visitors of sudaneseonline.com living outside Sudan. Peace is upon you. My name is Abuobeida Abdelgadir Al-Ubaid Mudawi. I am a graduate student at School of Media Arts and Studies, Ohio University. I am an immigrant in the United States, living in Columbus, Ohio, and a member of the website sudaneseonline.com for several years. I am doing this study about the role of the Internet in political communication among us, i.e., Sudanese living outside Sudan for many years and still keep ties with homeland. How political discussions on Discussion Board of sudaneseonline.com happen, how political issues are deliberated, and what is the political culture that dominates these discussions. The goal of this study is not to evaluate the website sudaneseonline.com, but to investigate democratic communicative behavior among us. I take this opportunity to thank Brother Bakri Abubakar, the administrator, who has been very positive about this study. Thanks you for all of you in advance for your cooperation.

The study will be conducted by several tools such as a survey and interviews. For any questions or concerns, please email me at am147003@ohio.edu or call me at my cellphone (614)5319124.

Thanks.

Sincerely

Abuobeida A. Mudawi
APPENDIX H: DEBRIEFING INFORMATION

(In Arabic Language)

خطاب توبيوري

الأخوة والأخوات الأعزاء أعضاء وزاروا موقع عياشي أون لينيال قومهن خارج السودان

السلام لكلم ورحمة الله

أثناء زيارة الفيلم الجاد الجريدة جريدة أهلي، أتى طالب دراسات في في تفسير قانون ودراسات الأعلام بجاوية

أول مرة. جمعت لمس المستخدم ماج يزبي في الحيثي لم يفهمه ومن بوريناو أون في لسنوات طويلة.

أجري الأن هذه الدورة على دور المخرجين في في الفيلم ياس يده لرجال السودان

فلمات طويلة وازن إسرائيل من قبل الأمة من أجل الوطن يهودية وما أهاليها في الفيلمية للفت بين في هذه الأفكار. أن هدف الدورة

ليس فقط في موقع عياشي أون بل أيضاً لفسح الظروف لتحقيق الفيلم الفيلم في في الدورة مع الدراسات الفيلم الفيلم ومقدم من يتم في

الغرض أن أهاليها يحاولون أجر 이런 الفيلمية في في الفيلمية والأفكار والملاحظة. إذا كان الهداية لمفصلة أو مسيلة للدود

منا شملة همس قد أن تكون الدوام في السياق الفيلمية ويأتي إلى حيوان الطبيعية لضوح أواج أو أفقاً في في

رقى همسي للدود ولا زال القارئ الفيلم دوري.

am147003@ohio.edu

abuobeidaa@yahoo.com

0016145319124

ونتهك

الملخص

ملف وثائقي يفوق العين جنوى

214
APPENDIX I: SEMI-STRUCTURED IN-DEPTH ONLINE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL—

PARTICIPANTS

1) What is your background in Sudan? (Education, political affiliation, profession, computer and Internet experience)

2) Why did you leave Sudan? How long have you been living outside Sudan? Why are you still living outside Sudan?

3) How was your relationship to the Internet, online communities, and sudaneseonline.com in Sudan?

4) Did living outside Sudan affect how you view political public issues in Sudan? How

5) How did your residency in other societies help you connect to the Internet, online communities and sudaneseonline.com?

6) Why do you participate in online communities and sudaneseonline.com?

7) How would you describe your experience with sudaneseonline.com participants? Do you know most of them? Where do they live?

8) What are your observations about the discussions that take place on the discussion board in the website sudaneseonline.com?

9) How would you describe the scope of identity, tribalism (race), and gender in online discussions in sudaneseonline.com?

10) Do you have relationships with civil society associations outside Sudan?

11) Do you think that Sudanese civil society associations outside Sudan are different from each other according to their existence in different countries? Why?

12) What do you think about laws and regulations adopted on the discussion board?
13) As an observant, or if you participate in a civil society association, how do Sudanese civil society associations abroad deal with the tradeoff between its potential roles as community organizers and/or political advocates (lobbyist)?

14) How do you look to the fact that there are some members of the discussion board defend the policies and actions of the current Sudanese government?
APPENDIX J: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FORM

The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies).

Project Title: A Virtual Ethnographic Study of Online Communication and Democratic Behavior in the Sudan's Diaspora

Primary Investigator: Abubekda Mudawi
Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Advisor: Steve Howard

Department: Media Arts and Studies

Rebecca Cale
Rebecca Cale, AAB, CIF
Office of Research Compliance

Approval Date 5/10/13
Expiration Date 5/9/14

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 5 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.