

Browsing In Cairo

Amanda Steggell, June 96

In the May 1996 edition of "Wired" magazine, Negroponte describes the future development of the Web, where software agents, Web crawlers and other computer programs will completely take over the job of browsing. Agents will learn about you, your interests and needs, and present you with just the information you 'require'; you may not even need to ask them to do the job. He suggests that this development is evolving due to the increasing pressure of time on our everyday lives. Negroponte divides the American population into two main groups: the digital, and the "digital homeless" (whom he describes as being "born too early, or not early enough to explore the possibilities of being digital"). Among the digital group, the availability of time to spend defines two sub-groups. There are those with either flexi-time or loads of time to spend browsing through web pages, and those, like him, without.

I personally will welcome an efficient personal agent to hunt down the juicy information that I may never uncover alone, and an agent who knows me sounds very appealing on the surface of things. I'm just a little sceptical however, that my super-effective agent, my net-guide, may rob me of the chance experiences encountered by so-called inefficient browsing. I really wonder to what extent I will be able to form my agent, and to what extent my future guide will start to form me. Am I born too early to adapt to being driven blindfolded, at full speed, through the digital highway, by a bot who knows wots best?

So, what does all this have to do with Cairo? Well it has to do with the fact that Cairoese, for one reason or another, do seem to be expert browsers in real life, and as a visitor to the city, one encounters various types of guides of exceptional eagerness and caliber - which got me thinking about the type of personal agent I would like to mingle myself with I will try to explain.....

I am a browser by nature, I am also a seeker. I have joined #islam (IRC netchat) - which is, as far as I can see, the most interesting chat-line to join, and, in anticipation of my trip to Cairo I visited the Islamicity website. I entered through the guest house, filling out a form with my name, address, telephone no. email address, etc. I pressed submit, and a welcome page popped up

Welcome guest no. 5345, he is called Amanda Steggell (!)

(:thinks, is Amanda a masculine Arabic name, or do I have to become male to enter this city?)

I visited Cairo for two weeks as a tourist with a mission: to physically experience a real Islamic city, and hopefully make connections to Cairoese with Internet access (muslims, christians, whatever) for future discourse. In this respect, I suppose that during my two week stay I was a prime candidate for Negroponte's "digital", with both flexi-time and time to spare : time to browse - but I left my computer at home!

I encountered three types of guides during my stay (apart from the castrated clickable information computers placed in the lobby of the more top -notch hotels). They endeavour to help tourists with their holiday browsing time, and are mostly self appointing. Common to all is an unbelievable

stamina, and a standard opening phrase

"Welcome to Cairo!"

So - there are guides demanding 'baksheesh' immediately (baksheesh being the unofficial backbone of the Egyptian economy: a monetary donation for services rendered). They generally want to take tourists directly to The Pyramids - and to "Sphinky", and will inform you that things are 'very old'. Then there are the ones who follow the standard 'welcome' phrase with, for example;

"where are you from, Scandinavia? Yes? I have a brother in Sweden. Come with me. You must send my brother a postcard from me. Just around the corner."

The conversation seems tailor-made to suit just little you, appealing to your weakspot, your compassion, your wallet-consciousness, or your sense of adventure, and you consequently follow your guide into a small shop, or to an awaiting taxi. By gentle probing, this guide finds out what service you are most likely to buy and strives to accommodate to the best of his means. Baksheesh is not the first words on his lips, but seems to be the ultimate aim.

The third variety is much more difficult to define, blending the qualities of the types described above with those of a true friend. At first you will not notice his approach, but after a short time you will be vaguely aware of being followed. He will approach you subtly, so subtly that you may not connect his approach with your sensation of being followed. He will ask how long you are staying. He will invite you to drink tea at a café and engage you in conversation, drawing you into discussion. He will most probably preach Islam, subtly and intelligently. You will be fascinated. You will learn a great deal, and you will also pay for his tea. He will show you photos of his family and friends, and you will talk about yours. He will slag off the tourist industry and guide you to sites of interest and wonder that you would not have found otherwise. He will arrange good prices for taxis, café bills and entrance tickets, but you will pay for his friend as well. He is efficient. He offers sound advice at all times. He will notice that you are weary, or hungry, or thirsty and will provide a suitable resting place. He anticipates the next move, the next ten moves, drawing all the time on your interests - the information you feed to him. He is in total control.

Nothing is left to chance. You will become blind and he will give you the gift of sight. You may become exhausted. You may also become frustrated. You may long to wander, and explore the city alone - to browse once again. How do I know this? Because from what I can assess of you, (as a reader of F.eks, and baring in mind that you have continued to read this article) you are like me and if you disagree on this point, I can only say that I am the author (which maybe be fact or fiction, hopefully both). I am therefore deciding that from this point on, you the reader, are a woman and are about to visit Cairo for the first time. I am your personal agent, and I know what's good for you - basta! So let's get the show on the road.

I have decided that it is in your best interest for you to discover from the web that the American University of Cairo (AUC) is connected to the Internet with its own server. This marks the first post on our mission. Now. I think it is best for you to get on a plane to Cairo. I really do. We'll skip the flight and the first night at the hotel, etc,etc, and move straight onto the next day, remembering that you are a tourist with a mission. You will enter a car from among the swarms of honkytonk yellow, horn blowing taxis flowing across the streets and be driven to the AUC. You enter the courtyard of the AUC and discover an oasis in the midst of a dusty city, where students are watching a basketball game, sipping capochinos in their western garb, broken only occasionally by

a bescarfed female. Discover also that only one 14.4 modem is available for student use, and that all student projects must be approved by Dr Mona M. Kaddah, director of Academic Computing.

Even though you may not agree, I know that it will be good for you at this point to meet a brick wall in your mission to meet Cairoeans with Internet access. You have been censored. Keep yer pecker up, I know what I'm up to. Trust me. I will send you out on foot now. I do feel that you could do with some exercise.. As you navigate the crowded streets you will notice, from the corner of your right eye, an apple with undisputable horizontal stripes in red, green, yellow and blue hanging amongst the many hand-painted advertising posters and signs. With fingers itching for the clickety click sound of a keyboard (c'mon - I know what you're like) and a mission to purchase the Arabic system for Macs (you didn't mention that one at the beginning of this article did you. It slipped your mind, but I, your built-in agent, remembered) you scribble down the street name printed below the source of Eve's temptation.

Taxis hoot.

A girl-child, bare-footed, bedraggled and covered in dust, says

Welcome to Cairo

and grins. Baksheesh? Of course. You like to feel generous, don't you. You will stop a passer by and ask directions to the most profiled Mac trading centre in Cairo (the address you have scribbled down), and will be met with friendly, helpful response. No baksheesh this time.

O.k, let's move directly now to the Mac office. In the office a 'make -yourself -comfortable' Macintosh poster hangs on the wall. On the opposite wall an even larger Microsoft poster dominates the space. This IS a Mac trading centre? The desert sand has also crept in here, along with the pollution, coating the once white walls with a layer of gray. Notice the lack of computers? There is not one hint of a modem here. The book keeping is being carried out by clerks with small pencils and huge hard-backed accounting books. The Arabic system is being copied for you onto several discs from a harddisk held together with cellotape, by a reserved man with the title of don't be impatient, I'm getting to it. You ask;

Q. what's your job here? - *I'm a Customer Support.*

Q. How come computers aren't used for office work here? - *No, because they're not.*

Q. Does this office have Internet access? - *Yes. there is an account. It is not used in this office. At home I have a personal account. I have a homepage. I do not have Netscape. I can't see it.*

Q. What about Internet providers? Where do you have your account? - *there is the AUC. I worked there before. I have an account there. There is the government server which costs LE1000 a year with unlimited access. There is censor of Internet here.. There is "Touch", a private company run by Dr Mona M. Kaddah. (!)*

Q. Is there a speech manager for the Arabic system? You know, a computer voice that reads written text? - *no. It is difficult. Many Arabic words look the same, but the way we say them makes their meaning. It is difficult to find shapes for words. IBM is working on it. To find shapes for words that look the same but do not sound the same. It is difficult.*

Customer Support softens up. You ask about IRC net chat and he positively glows. - My nickname is WCW - you will find me at #egypt, and #islam. I have many friends. You can always find me. At night. WCW - the all Egyptian boxing champion! Mostly at #egypt. Here is my email.

He smiles, hands you a card. You have made your connection! You have the Arabic system plus some bonus fonts on six disks. Doesn't that make you feel good. You should now join some Cairoians Downtown in their favourite passtime. Window shopping! Join the family groups and friend groups along the sidewalks. Proud fathers with babes in arms and wives at their sides stop to admire and discuss the wares in their favourite shops. They point and discuss and point again. Young men walk in couples or groups, arms placed affectionately around shoulders, hips, or holding hands. It is quite touching. The hardening economic times in Egypt have made marriage, and therefore heterosexual relations an unobtainable goal for many young people. Sexual experiences are restricted to members of the same sex - but homosexuality does not exist, apparantly. As you saunter down the road, and in addition to the cat calls, and welcome to Cairo's, men call after you; "Aids-aids". You seem to them to have the deadly western disease of decaying moral values that will obviously lead to an eventull horribly painful death.

I register that you are feeling uncomfortable with all the attention you're raising. Next time you go out alone, cover your blonde hair with that scarf I advised you to wear. The darkness closes in on Downtown Cairo, and the streetlights, neon signs and christmas tree lights that decorate the shop fronts, and backstreets are illuminated. Around 11pm the women and children disappear from the streets as if by magic. The Arabian nights feel like a constant male dominated tiviali. To you, anyway. I do know how you feel, you know. You watch men enter the dubious belly dancing joint on the opposite side of the street from your hotel balcony on the fifth floor. You watch as cars drive up, park.

Baksheesh changes hands, and guests are either welcomed with handshakes and kisses, or rejected. Hands gesture.

Men hang out, leaning against parked cars, scanning the streets for possible meetings.

Baksheesh passes from hand to hand and the sidewalk in front of the nightclub is swept clean.

A potential fight seems to be erupting between two men, and a policeman steps out of the shadows. He talks calmly to the offenders, and seems to resolve their conflict in a peaceful manner, eventually putting his arms around them and kissing them both. Again, it is very touching.

You sleep lightly, registering the call for prayer at five am, and again at sunrise.

You hear the soft buzzing of a mosquito around your head. Reaching down to the floor, you grasp the pink American and the green English March editions of "Wired" magazine and sandwich the mosquito between the two with a smack.

At dawn a woman is hanged for stabbing her mother-in-law to death. Tomorrow you will meet Mr Cairo 1957 in the bar of the Hotel Windsor and feel his iron stomach. A waiter will ask to borrow the pink "Wired" edition, which you previously purchased at the bookshop of the AUC. He will return it promptly, mistaking it for an interior design magazine. You will remember the leader of the student union informing you that "Wired" is not available in Cairo - censorship you know! (His agent knows what's best for him!) You will also remember (fondly) the timid Customer Support in his tiny office with his taped up harddisk, and look forward to meeting him again in the clandestine space of cyberland, as WCW -the all Egyptian Champion. (You've got me under your skin.

I will be with you in your dreams, on your screen, when you make love or war. Do not expect

paradise, do not expect an easy ride. We are still partly human, you know.) Welcome to Cairo. It is a strange and beautiful city. Did you enjoy your trip? I knew you would. Baksheesh? We'll talk about that later. Go home now, and connect.

[Islamicity](#)

