Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011

The Center for International Media Assistance at the National Endowment for Democracy commissioned this report, Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011, several months before the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, and it was completed just as they broke out. It is published as a stage-setter for the events that are rapidly unfolding in the Arab world.

The Arab world has experienced an awakening of free expression that has now entered the body politic of Tunisia and Egypt and has helped break down the stranglehold of state-sponsored media and information monopolies in those countries. Indeed, from Morocco to Bahrain, the Arab world has witnessed the rise of an independent vibrant social media and steadily increasing citizen engagement on the Internet that is expected to attract 100 million Arab users by 2015. These social networks inform, mobilize, entertain, create communities, increase transparency, and seek to hold governments accountable. To peruse the Arab social media sites, blogs, online videos, and other digital platforms is to witness what is arguably the most dramatic and unprecedented improvement in freedom of expression, association, and access to information in contemporary Arab history.

Worldwide, the number of Internet users by late 2010 was expected to exceed 2 billion users. The number of Internet users in the Arab world is ever increasing, but governments are said to exaggerate their numbers. Between 40 and 45 million Internet users were found in 16 Arab countries surveyed in late 2009, including Arab nationals and non-Arabic speakers in the region, according to the Arab Advisors Group, a research and consulting firm based in Amman, Jordan. The Arab Knowledge Report 2009 placed the number of Arabic-speaking Internet users at 60 million. Clearly, the region's vast potential is recognized by Google, which sponsored its first G-Days conference in Egypt and Jordan, in December 2010, gathering regional computer scientists, software developers, and technology entrepreneurs, among others. A Google executive told attendees that 100 million Arabs are expected to be online by 2015.

Yet the advances are not without considerable limitations and challenges posed by authoritarian regimes. Arab governments' reactions to social media have given rise to a battle of the blogosphere as proxies or other means are used to bypass government firewalls only to have those efforts meet further government blocking. Government authorities in the region also have waged widespread crackdowns on bloggers, journalists, civil society, and human rights activists.

Hundreds of Arab activists, writers, and journalists have faced repercussions because of their online activities. In Egypt, blogger Abdel Kareem Nabil Soliman, known as Kareem Amer, was released in November 2010 after more than four years in prison and alleged torture for his writings that authorities said insulted Islam and defamed Mubarak. In Bahrain, a social networking campaign has called for the release of blogger Ali Abdulelmam who has been imprisoned for allegedly posting “false news” on his popular site BahrainOnline.org. They are just two of the scores of
 Arab Internet users across the region who have faced arrest and other repercussions stemming from their online writings.

Government challenges and other impediments, notably low broadband high-speed Internet penetration rates as a percentage of population, stand in the way of wider and faster Internet access. According to the Arab Advisors Group, the top three countries in broadband adoption in the region as a percentage of population are the United Arab Emirates at 14 percent, followed by Bahrain at 12 percent, and Qatar at eight percent as of late 2009.

In 2009, the Arab region had 35,000 active blogs and 40,000 by late 2010. Although Egypt’s interior ministry maintains a department of 45 people to monitor Facebook, nearly 5 million Egyptians use the social networking site among 17 million people in the region, including journalists, political leaders, political opposition figures, human rights activists, social activists, entertainers, and royalty who are engaging online in Arabic, English, and French. On the video sharing site YouTube, Arabic music videos attract hundreds of thousands of viewers. Twitter also has a strong following, and the Jordanian micro-blogging site Watwet, with more than 25,000 followers, recently integrated its service with Twitter, so messages may appear on both platforms.

Locally created social media platforms such as NowLebanon.com based in Beirut, and Aramram.com, 7iber.com, Ammannet.net, and AmmonNews.net, all based in Amman, are offering a variety of socially driven news and online video stories often overlooked by government-sponsored or politically influenced media outlets.

Digital migration is still in its early years in the Arab region, home to a high proportion of Arab youth who are expected to drive growth. “Digital media will thrive in the Arab market because the market has a large, technologically accomplished demographic group—its youth—who are comfortable with it and will customize it to their own requirements,” reported the Arab Media Outlook 2008-2012, published by the Dubai Press Club.

The days of government-sponsored or politically allied newspapers having a media monopoly have been eclipsed by the advent and adoption of social media, particularly in countries such as Egypt, the leader in social media activism just by sheer numbers alone; followed by Jordan, which has a thriving information and communications technology (ICT) sector; the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with strong commercial adoption of social media; and Lebanon, known as an outlier in the Arab world for its liberal media environment. The tipping point, according to regional bloggers and activists, has been the growing availability of the technologies amid increasing desire to communicate. Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian blogger said: “Egypt and many Arab countries have gone through several media revolutions … and they have now been supplanted,” by social media. “Even a channel like al-Jazeera, where people have so much hope invested in, is not as open to all those views that social media has raised,” such as issues of sexuality, gender, and minority rights. Social media has enabled the masses to establish their own agendas, Eltahawy said.

Key Findings:

- About 17 million people in the Arab region are using Facebook, available in Arabic, with 5 million in Egypt alone, and demand is expected to grow on micro-blogging sites. Twitter announced it will launch its Arabic interface in 2011.

- Arab governments are developing, at varying rates, the telecommunications infrastructure for greater Internet connectivity through broadband, mobile Internet, and fiber optic cable to the home for increased Internet speeds and capacities to meet future demands of digital economies and youth, who comprise about half of the regional population.

- Along with technical capacities come increasing efforts to monitor, filter, and block websites, and harass and arrest citizens for their online writings. Sites of NGOs and others critical of government have withstood cyber-attacks on content and e-mail accounts.

- Even when Internet users are not breaching traditional red lines, authorities in the region call
upon emergency laws, cyber crimes laws, anti-terrorism laws, ISPs terms and conditions, and press and publications laws that provide justification for the arrest, fines, and incarceration of individuals for certain online writing or related activities.

- Popularity of online news is gaining audience share from traditional news media, a proportion that is expected to grow as some media outlets have ceased print editions to focus on electronic editions.

Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011 is a publication of the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA). The Center is an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy that works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA’s work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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