Digital Media in the Arab World One Year After the Revolutions

A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance

By Jeffrey Ghannam

March 28, 2012

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), at the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of independent media development throughout the world. The Center provides information, builds networks, conducts research, and highlights the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies. 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. The Center was one of the of the main nongovernmental organizers of World Press Freedom Day 2011 in Washington, DC.

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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Jeffrey Ghannam is a lawyer, writer, and development practitioner in Washington, DC, who has contributed widely to the analysis and debate over social media in the revolutions for CIMA, the *Economist* magazine debates, the *Washington Post*, the United Nations, Chicago Public Radio, and *Frost Over the World*, hosted by Sir David Frost. He served on the 2012 Freedom House committee analyzing freedom of the press in the Middle East and North Africa. Since 2001 he has served in numerous media development initiatives as a trainer and evaluator as well as a Knight International Journalism Fellow in Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Qatar. A media law specialist, he instructed on the intersection of law and journalism and on war reporting as the Howard R. Marsh visiting professor in journalism at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. As a journalist, he was a staff writer and editor at the *Detroit Free Press*. He also served as a legal affairs writer at the *American Bar Association Journal* in Chicago, and was on staff at the *New York Times* in Washington, DC. He has contributed to the *Boston Globe* from Detroit and *Time* magazine in Cairo.

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This study is based on more than 35 interviews in person, by telephone, e-mail, and Skype; primary and secondary documents; commentaries; websites; blogs; and other sources.

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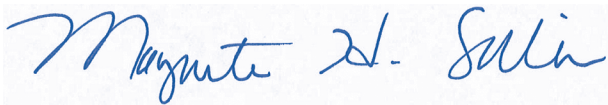
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Preface

CIMA commissioned this report, *Digital Media in the Arab World One Year After the Revolutions,* amid a rapidly evolving media environment and with the objective of documenting the continued impact of social and other digital media in the Arab region, focusing in particular on Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria. It builds on the findings of CIMA's earlier report by the same author, veteran journalist and media lawyer Jeffrey Ghannam, *Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011*, published February 3, 2011, early in the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt and protests elsewhere in the region. This report is available at http://cima.ned.org/publications/social-media-arab-world-leading-uprisings-2011-0.

We hope that this report will become an important reference for international media assistance efforts.

Marguerite H. Sullivan
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Executive Summary

The Arab region is experiencing a profound media shift.

The year following the start of the Arab revolutions–in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and violent uprisings in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain–was followed by continued repression and threats to the exercise of free expression online and offline. But the year also saw great strides in the numbers of Arabs across the region turning to social media platforms and the ascendancy of online engagement. This report traces and analyzes the enabling of tens of millions of individuals–as well as established news outlets–to attract wide global followings with Facebook and Twitter updates and YouTube videos about rapidly changing events. The widely diverse and pluralistic online communities in the Arab world are creating and sharing content, calling into question the future of the many state-owned or self-censored media that provide less in the way of engagement that Arab audiences have come to expect.

The Arab revolutions and uprisings that began in late 2010 and continue are arguably among the most chronicled civil movements in the history of the Internet.

To read the #Egypt and #Jan25 Twitter feeds among many others, could easily give the reader a slight case of déjà-vu: The one-year commemorations of the start of Egypt's revolution–and the flurry of online activity–recalled the historic start of protests against the military, the Emergency Law, and demands for eradicating corruption, improving job opportunities, and inclusion.

"Did we make it?" read the banner headline on the *Bikyamasr* online news portal on January 25, 2012. "One year ago, Egyptians rose up against torture, corruption and destitution. The cost was substantial, but Mubarak was ousted. Did the system change?"[1] A few clicks away on its Twitter page, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces of Egypt (SCAF) marked the anniversary of the revolution in terse statements that have become its hallmark on Twitter as well as Facebook, along with tens of thousands of responses, many of them pointedly critical.[2]

As the world commemorated the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt–and watched closely the developments in Syria, Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen, which entered their second year since the start of civil unrest–many of the deeply entrenched social and political issues continued to serve as rallying points, attracting Arabs by the millions to socialize, protest, and share news and information in rapid-fire exchanges that are irrevocably changing the nature of online engagement and media in the region.

The Arab revolutions and uprisings that began in late 2010 and continue are arguably among the most chronicled civil movements in the history of the Internet.[3] The anniversaries are routinely commemorated in flurries of tweets, Facebook updates, and YouTube videos.

Even before the spread of populist revolts that have gripped the region, Arabs with digital access were taking part in a social media revolution that enabled unprecedented freedom of expression. Over the previous decade of Internet access, activists, writers, and lay citizens built capacities and networks that ultimately played a role in enabling Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, Yemenis, Bahrainis, Syrians, and others to mobilize and voice demands for change.

To be sure, these were not Facebook or Twitter revolutions, however much cyberutopians would like them to be. However, the Internet's potential as a tool that can help the process of democratization is undeniable, and of course the Internet also can be used for oppression by authoritarian governments in the Arab world and elsewhere.[4] The enabling impact of social media networks and platforms–and the resulting vortex of bloggers, activists, journalists, lay citizens, and satellite networks that help disseminate online content for the majority of Arabs who are not online–has been firmly established.

Precise figures are hard to obtain, but according to the Arab Knowledge Report published by United Nations Development Programme and the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation, the number of Arabic speakers using the Internet stood at 60 million as of late 2009.[5] Egyptian activist Wael Ghonim, author of a memoir, *Revolution 2.0,* said in late 2010 that 100 million Arab Internet users are expected by 2015.[6] Based on the increasing number of Facebook users alone in the region, it appears that 100 million could be met sooner. The number has already been surpassed if one considers the estimates of the International Telecommunication Union; it reports about 29 Internet users for every 100 people in the Arab region, bringing the number to about 104 million[7] users among a regional population of 358 million.[8] Seventy percent of those using Facebook in the Arab region are between the ages of 15 and 29, according to the Arab Social Media Report.[9] Youth (those under age 25) are estimated to make up more than 50 percent of the populations of Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Oman and between 37 and 47 percent in the rest of the region.[10]

> *The Internet's potential as a tool that can help the process of democratization is undeniable. It also can be used for oppression by authoritarian governments in the Arab world and elsewhere.*

While the numbers of Arabs online represent a minority, the growing impact of the Arab cyberspace is serving as a counterweight, tipping the scales long dominated by state-owned media and propaganda. Communities with tens of millions of online contributors sharing their own selections of news, information, and opinions on a global scale are emerging. Consider the Twitter feeds of some Arab micro-bloggers, such as Ghonim, who has 362,701 Twitter followers and 6,484 tweets to his name,[11] and Sultan Al Qassemi, a self-described commentator on Arab affairs, with nearly 104,791 followers and 28,308 tweets as of March 2012.[12] Nabeel Rajab, chairman of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, has nearly 124,572 Twitter followers and has sent 17,393 tweets.[13] These Arab micro-bloggers have followings that exceed the circulation figures of some Arab national newspapers, highlighting the potential impact and reach of the

Arab micro-blogosphere. Media outlets, including newspapers and satellite networks, are also adopting multi-platform strategies to promote stories and engage with audiences and citizen journalists through various means to obtain and share news and information.

As the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions enter their second year, along with an increasingly violent uprising in Syria, the battle for the Arab cyberspace continues to mature, and bloggers, regime critics, opposition activists, and journalists continue to confront the risks of arrest or other severe repercussions. Meanwhile, demands for greater freedom of expression and media independence continue to be a rallying point in Tunisia,[14] Jordan,[15] Bahrain, and beyond.

Key Findings:

- Tens of millions of online contributors are creating and sharing content and influencing the news and information channels throughout the region.

- Digital media are enabling the blending of journalism, citizen journalism, media activism, and entertainment, often using various platforms, including traditional media, to reach and engage audiences. The common denominator is the use of digital technologies as platforms for news content and for engagement and mobilization.

- While social media tools have enabled greater freedom of expression, Arab governments and religious groups, such as in Tunisia, are targeting journalists and bloggers, including a recent death threat, against one popular blogger for reporting on issues related to religion.

- Following the revolutions, the battle for the Arab blogosphere has turned from being a competition over accessing the Internet and circumventing government controls to a cyberwar for the predominant narrative through Facebook, Twitter, and traditional media. Arab governments, and some political parties, are attempting to influence the narrative from the region, through the use of social media, cyberattacks, and Twitter trolls (persistent counter tweeters) against global critics.

- Social media is reinvigorating traditional print and broadcast media, including satellite networks, which are adopting multi-platform strategies. While satellite networks are attracting millions of views and some print media are also attracting hundreds of thousands of "Likes" on Facebook, other satellite and print outlets have attracted relatively fewer followers.

- Social media is serving as political cover: News outlets are recognizing the benefit of using social media to preempt official repercussions by disseminating sensitive stories first on social media sites and in other cases to gauge possible reaction before going to print or air.

- Numerous media observers and professionals have complained that professional journalists, citizen journalists, bloggers, activists, and pro-government contributors in the region lack ethics, do not understand libel, practice incitement, and fail to meet other international journalism and legal standards. Advocacy organizations and media outlets are in the best positions to champion accuracy, fairness, and ethical journalism through codes of conduct, online courses, and monitoring to help ensure information flows are fair and accurate.

- While user-generated content is plentiful, authenticating this content can take up valuable resources. Training for citizen journalists and non-journalists who are online would help established media outlets and the public to gauge the accuracy and authenticity of news and information. Media outlets and activist communities have undertaken this effort, but with ever-growing numbers of online users, more initiatives and support are needed.

Social Unrest + Social Media = A Vortex

The social media platforms and mobile technologies that helped mobilize mass protests and give voice to demands heard globally are enabling a vanguard of citizens, activists, and media outlets pushing the boundaries of free expression. Arab governments in transition are facing criticism from opposition figures, citizen journalists, and activists emerging from decades of authoritarian rule.

It is a social media vortex that is ever-expanding and gathering speed.

Online communities set their own agendas, create their own content, share and retweet content, giving rise to a hierarchy among the twitterati: Those whose tweets are retweeted at higher rates are viewed in greater numbers and perceived to have more online influence. The ever-increasing numbers of Arabs joining Facebook and Twitter include hip young people whose profiles and handles evoke celebrity status, with enviable numbers of followers. They partake in a news and information exchange with satellite networks that continues to shape the television news agenda for tens of millions across the region, where satellite dishes are a part of the landscape.

Abderrahim Foukara, Washington bureau chief for al-Jazeera Arabic satellite network, characterizes the interplay as a marriage between social media and satellite television. "Social media has allowed satellite television to go places where it would not have the ability to go," Foukara said. "In Syria, where media are not allowed inside the country, satellite television relies on the images that are sent to them via social media, then relays the messages on a wider scale that would not have been possible. Social media have added a new layer of communication in the Arab world." Still, because illiteracy remains substantial in the region, satellite television will remain central to news and information dissemination.[16]

Multi-platform productions are the new business model. For example, *The Bassem Youssef Show*, an obvious riff on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, can be seen on YouTube.[17] The show began online in Egypt after the revolution, and its success led to a slot on the independent network ONtv.[18] A popular Tunisian online news site that delivers the news in Arabic, *AtTounissia*,[19] has also migrated to a print edition, a move that is emblematic of Tunisia's thriving print sector, which is no longer constrained by government control over advertising. The Tunisian Agency for External Communication, which used to direct advertising to state media, has suspended operations.[20]

The new and innovative Egypt channel 25TV, named after the symbolic day of January 25, 2011, represents an increasingly populist media and a surge in the number of privately run media outlets and independent voices.[21]

"Social media is people's media, everyone carrying a phone became a producer," said Mohammed Gohar, a veteran media professional and founder of channel TV25, which was

launched a few months after the revolution began. "Twenty-five is a mix between classic media and social media. It's not fancy . . . we did not build one set. We get singers and we sit on the banks on the Nile. It's closer to people.

"The business model is clear," Gohar told an interviewer. "I'm betting on a brand which has become the most famous and most appreciated brands. The young Egyptian way of thinking of the revolution. This is the brand. It will take time, but I am sure we will get advertisers."[22]

The blend of new and traditional media is likely to bring new voices and multi-platform offerings to audiences. "What we will see happen in the coming year is even more of a blurring of the lines between social media, citizen journalism, and mainstream journalism," said Lawrence Pintak, dean of the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University. "We are already seeing in Egypt, for example, people who were bloggers, who were social media activists, who are now morphing into transforming their blogs into news sites."[23]

The social media platforms and mobile technologies that helped mobilize mass protests are enabling a vanguard of citizens, activists, and media outlets pushing the boundaries of free expression.

Print media are also enabling citizen journalists to start careers as reporters working for media outlets to help develop contributions from citizen journalist and online news sites, said Courtney Radsch, program manager for Freedom House's Global Freedom of Expression Campaign.

Bloggers across the region working in environments with limited Internet access or low bandwidth have managed to develop strong networks with other influential online activists globally, Radsch said. Yemeni journalist and activist Tawakul Karman, 32, hailed as the "mother of the revolution" is the youngest Nobel Peace laureate. Yemeni blogger and activist Maria al-Masani is now serving as Web consultant to Yemen's National Transition Council. Their connections change the meaning of community in more under-developed parts of the region, where community may be characterized by familial, tribal, and religious identities.

"We have to be careful not to get into the fallacy we had with Egypt when we thought, 'Oh, it's only 12 percent Internet penetration,'" said Radsch, whose doctoral dissertation is about cyberactivism in Egypt. "It's the key connectors, those opinion shapers among a certain educated class. They're learning from each other, they feel that they are part of a broader story, and the ability to tell their story is one of the empowering aspects of social media. These are the people who want to be playing a leadership role, and it's helping them participate in the public sphere, where women were virtually absent."[24]

Facebook and Twitter Penetration[1]

- As of November 2011, the total number of Facebook users in the Arab world stood at 36,016,664, up from 21,377,282 in January 2011, having almost doubled since the same time last year with 19,945,487 users in November 2010. It represents a 68 percent increase between January and November 2011.

- At the beginning of November 2011, the country average for Facebook user penetration in the Arab region was approximately 10 percent, up from just under 6 percent at the end of 2010.

- Youth between the ages of 15 and 29 make up about 70 percent of Facebook users in the Arab region, a number that has been holding steady since April 2011.

- Egypt still constitutes about a quarter of total Facebook users in the Arab region, and has added more users in the past year than any Arab country–at more than 4 million new Facebook users between January and October 2011.

- The percentage of female users is at a standstill since April 2011, at 33.5 percent. This is still significantly lower than the global trend, where women constitute roughly half of Facebook users.

- The estimated number of active Twitter users in the Arab region at the end of September 2011 was 652,333. Globally, 1 billion tweets are sent every four days.[2]

- The estimated number of tweets generated in the Arab region in September 2011 by these "active users" was 36,889,500. The estimated number of daily tweets is 1,229,650 per day, or 854 tweets a minute, or roughly 14 tweets every second.

- The most popular trending hashtags across the Arab region in September 2011 were #bahrain (with 510,000 mentions in the tweets generated during this period), #egypt (with 310,000 mentions), #syria (with 220,000 mentions), #feb14 and #14feb (with a combined 153,000 mentions), and #kuwait (with 140,000 mentions).

- Gulf Cooperation Council countries no longer dominate the top five Arab Facebook users as percentage of population. While the United Arab Emirates remains at the top of the Arab region, Kuwait is the only other GCC country in the top five, with Lebanon, Jordan, and Tunisia in the remaining spots.

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1. "The Role of Social Media in Arab Women's Empowerment," *Arab Social Media Report*, Dubai School of Government, Vol. 1, No. 3, November 2011, 12, http://www.dsg.ae/NEWSANDEVENTS/UpcomingEvents.aspx/asmr3.

2. "Tweets still must flow," Twitter blog, January 26, 2012 http://blog.twitter.com/2012/01/tweets-still-must-flow.html (accessed January 28, 2012).

Competing Narratives Amid Crackdowns

Bahraini journalist Nada Alwadi fled from her homeland in 2011 after she received threats because of her reporting on the protests that began on February 14, 2011. She said a social media war is unfolding between pro- and anti-Bahrain government bloggers, activists, and journalists online. Pro-government state-owned media predominate on the island nation.

"There is a race in social media now, among the activists and the political opposition to get more followers on Twitter or to be heard more on Facebook or to send information about what they are doing," said Alwadi, who is now based in Washington, DC. "People actually care about that. There is a race for the top retweet, and there are campaigns for that."[25]

So-called Twitter trolls are seeking out critics of authoritarian tactics in ongoing protests on social media. Jillian York, a blogger and director of International Freedom of Expression at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, advised bloggers at the Third Annual Arab Bloggers Conference 2011 in Tunisia last October to avoid using the country name in tweets about the country being discussed.[26]

"Arabloggers, a recommendation: Don't hashtag the name of the country we're discussing–you'll get the nastiest trolling . . . #AB11," York tweeted.[27] The message highlights the aggressive efforts of the trolls who send messages to harass and intimidate commentators and journalists who write about the protests. [28]

So-called Twitter trolls are seeking out critics of authoritarian tactics in ongoing protests on social media.

"We call them the Bahraini trolls," Hussain Yousif, a prominent Bahraini blogger and activist who resides in London, told the *New York Times*. Yousif said he had often been the target of attacks. "They told me that 'you are like an animal that we would kill and nobody would care for you,'" he said. "They have published my picture and my mobile number and said, 'Call this person and let him know what you think about him.'"

By some accounts, the trolls appear to keep the same set schedules, push one line of argument, and have few followers on Twitter, Yousif said, leading many to suspect they are more than simply government supporters. "'They start working and finish all together. Which means, it's like a job,'" he said. "'They talk about Iran, sectarian warfare–they use common words and they never discuss. They just come to fight.'"[29]

The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, established by Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa to investigate the events that occurred in February and March 2011, found that pro- and anti-government journalists were targeted through social media. Included in the 501-page report are findings that social media, websites and Twitter postings contributed to defamation, harassment, and in some cases incitement to violence. The commission, chaired by renown law professor and UN war crimes expert Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni, also reported:

It is clear that the media in Bahrain is biased towards the [Government of Bahrain]. Six of the seven daily newspapers are pro-government and the broadcasting service is State-controlled. The continuing failure to provide opposition groups with an adequate voice in the national media risks further polarising [sic] the political and ethnic divide in Bahrain. The lack of access to mainstream media creates frustration within opposition groups and results in these groups resorting to other media such as social media. This can have a destabilising [sic] effect because social media outlets are both untraceable and unaccountable, characteristics which present problems when such media is used to promulgate hate speech and incitement to violence.[30]

Without the digital technologies used by the devoted and courageous chroniclers of Syria's mass revolt, including the ability to live stream events, the narrative would have been reported very differently. Authorities in Syria have officially banned international news organizations from covering the violent clashes that have left more than 7,500 civilians dead according to the UN as of March 2012; since then the toll has mounted.[31]

In late February, the Syrian government blocked Bambuser, a live stream Web site a day after one of its users broadcast images of a bombing believed to have been carried out by President Bashar al-Assad's forces. Bambuser–a mobile live stream service based in Sweden– has been in close contact with activists on the ground in Syria for more than eight months. Dissidents use the service to broadcast streaming video in real time. With foreign media prevented from officially entering Syria, online citizen journalism has become crucial for the documenting of events within Syria's borders. Bambuser's executive chairman, Hans Eriksson, said that between 90 to 95 percent of the live video from Syria is streamed through Bambuser.[32] Some live video has continued to leak out of Syria, according to Bambuser, describing the methods used as "alternative approaches" but very intermittently because of the government block and electricity outages.[33]

Without the digital technologies used by the devoted and courageous chroniclers of Syria's mass revolt, including the ability to live stream events, the narrative would have been reported very differently.

"During the Hama uprising [in 1982] we had nothing more than rumors from travelers," said Pintak, a former TV correspondent based in Beirut at the time. "We had nothing in terms of television video, and now look at Syria. The world is completely different and the media environment in the Arab world is now completely different."[34]

Syria also is reportedly supporting cyberattacks against critics.

According to Helmi Noman of the OpenNet Initiative, Syria is the first Arab country to have its own Internet army hosted on its networks to openly launch cyber-attacks on its enemies. Known as the Syrian Electronic Army, it appears to be an open and organized computer attack group that is targeting political opposition and Western websites.[35]

Despite the advances in freedom of expression, activists, journalists, and bloggers continue to confront serious risks to their personal security because of their online activism or writing.

Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, said that Egypt in 2011 "has seen a disturbing assault on free expression. Not only are direct critics of the military under physical and legal threat, but so are those who deliver these critical voices to the public."[36] Violations of the right to freedom of expression have included military trials of protesters and bloggers, interrogations of journalists and activists for criticizing the military … "[37]

A prominent Egyptian blogger and anti-regime voice, Alaa Abd El Fattah, was released in late December after being falsely accused of inciting violence for his writings. A former political prisoner under the Mubarak regime, Abd El Fattah was taken into military custody following public criticisms of the army's conduct on the night of October 9, 2011, when at least 27 people were killed during a Coptic Christian protest in Cairo. Like many other activists, Abd El Fattah accused the army of direct involvement in the bloodshed, a claim that appears to be supported by extensive witness reports and video footage, according to the *Guardian*.[38]
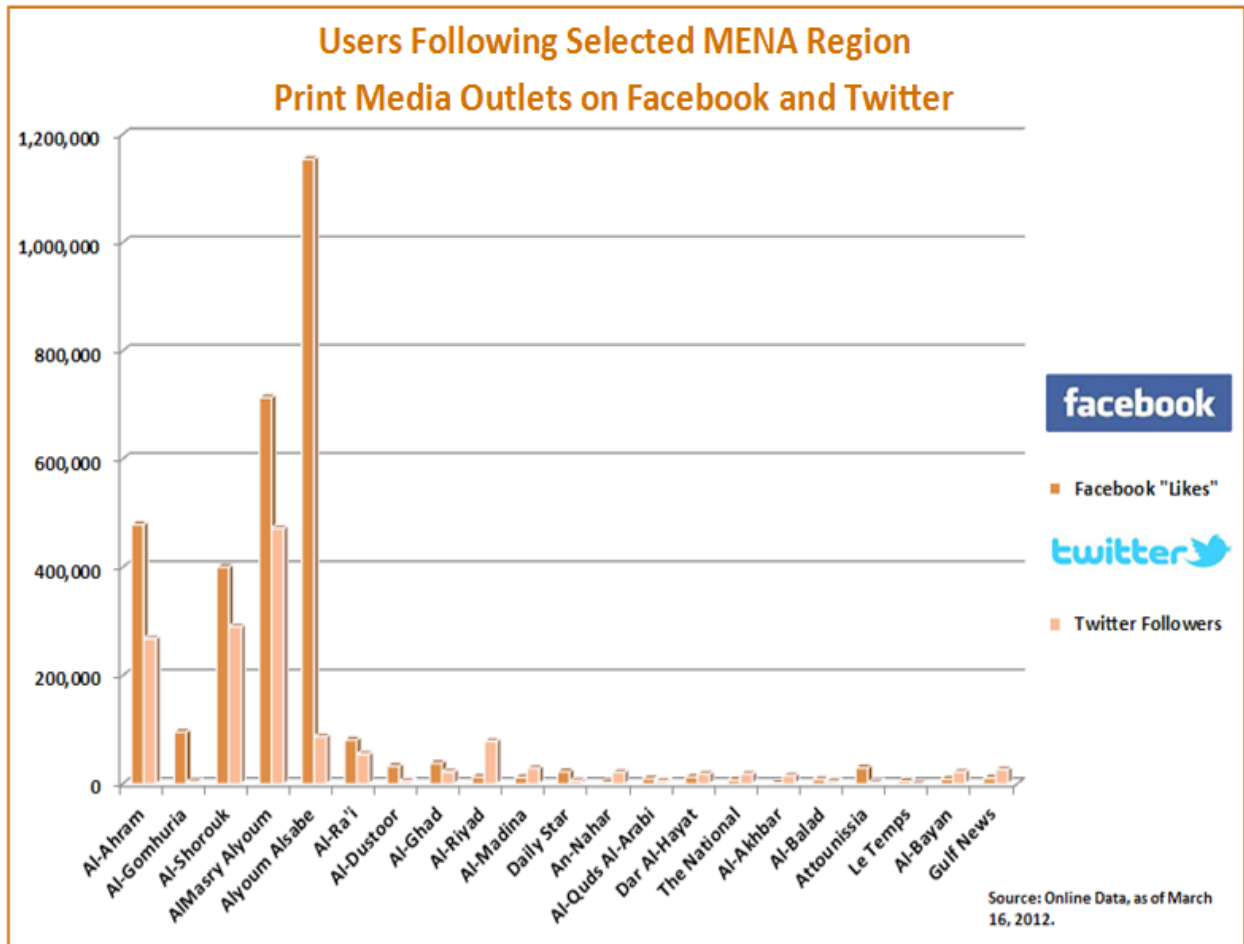
Another Egyptian blogger, Maikel Nabil Sanad, 26, a Coptic Christian whose cause was taken up by activists opposed to the post-Mubarak military government, was among almost 2,000 prisoners convicted by military tribunals over the past year. Egypt's leader, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, released Sanad along with the others who were convicted; the amnesty was announced three days in advance of demonstrations on the first anniversary of the revolution, January 25, 2012.[39]

Despite the advances in freedom of expression, activists, journalists, and bloggers continue to confront serious risks to their personal security because of their online activism.

Social media have also championed the rights of women and the needs for social change following several attacks against women journalists. Egyptian-American activist and journalist Mona Eltahawy suffered a broken left arm and right hand in an attack by Egyptian security forces in Tahrir Square November 23, 2011, a period of pitched battles between demonstrators and security forces that left almost 40 people dead and 3,000 injured. After the assault and while in custody, she borrowed a phone and tweeted of her ordeal to her followers.[40] She has spoken out about the attack online, in print, and on TV.

In Egypt, the ruling Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) is known to issue news releases via its Facebook page, which revealed 1.746 million "Likes" in March 2012.[41] SCAF statements also inspire comments in the tens of thousands including protest messages.[42]

Journalist Leila Fadel of the *Washington Post,* reported that Egypt's military council, which retains strong public backing, has turned public opinion against the April 6 youth movement, which once had near heroic status but in recent months has shrunk in stature amid economic

**Users Following Selected MENA Region
Print Media Outlets on Facebook and Twitter**

Source: Online Data, as of March 16, 2012.

problems and instability, including clashes with security forces and demonstrators. The group has been portrayed by the ruling military as agents of a foreign-backed insurrection. Liberals have fared poorly in the country's parliamentary elections, outshone by Islamist candidates, who appear likely to claim three times as many seats.[43]

Fadel wrote: "To counter the narrative, April 6 is resorting to the tactics it successfully employed a year ago: social media campaigns, demonstrations, graffiti art, online statements and fliers recounting military abuses."[44]

Civil society is also engaging online, for example via Qabila TV, which informs Egyptian citizenry of the separation of powers or social disparities, along with rap music videos on social issues viewable on YouTube and through Facebook.[45]

The Arab Cyberspace Goes Mainstream

Mainstream media in the Arab world are attracting followers on social media platforms in droves. In surveys carried out in January, February, and March 2012 around the time of the anniversaries of the revolutions, the numbers of followers for some media outlets grew by the hundreds of thousands.

State-sponsored *Al Ahram*, the largest of Egyptian state-sponsored media monopolies with the country's largest newspaper circulation, is attracting less followers on Twitter than the well-established privately owned newspaper *Al Masry Al Youm* but more than privately owned *Al Youm Al Sabe*, which leads in Facebook Likes among 21 regional newspapers.

Around the time of the anniversary of the Egyptian revolution in January and February, the number of Likes on the Al Ahram Facebook grew rapidly from 320,443 as of January 28 to 443,037 as of February 26, a rise of 123,000. By March 16, Facebook Likes rose to 479, 221, an increase of 36,184 from February 26, possibly suggesting a slowdown in the pace of new followers, though still a notable increase.

On the same day of the March inquiry, *Al Masry Al Youm* showed 713,635 Likes on Facebook, a jump from 699,390 as of February 26, and 661,633 on January 28. The newspaper also showed 472,327 Twitter followers on March 16, a rise from 441,262 on February 26.

Al Youm Al Sabe had 1,154,027 Facebook Likes on March 16, a rise of just under 100,000 followers from February 26, when it had 1,056,824 Likes, which rose by 177,609 followers from the number of Likes on January 28. *Al Youm Al Sabe* also saw greater numbers of Twitter followers as of March 16, with 86, 968 up from 79,018 on February 26 and 61,284 on January 28.

While some media are attracting hundreds of thousands of followers others have relatively paltry numbers of followers, believed to be attributed to factors, including Internet penetration rates, bandwidth, literacy rates, online media sophistication, and socio-economics. Expatriate communities may also contribute significantly to the numbers of online followers of Arab region traditional media.

In a telling example of the migration of print readers to online news as recently as 2009, among 3,348 people surveyed in Egypt, the number of online newspaper readers was at 50 percent versus 34 percent for offline sources, according to Arab Advisors Group research.[46]

Social media platforms are likely enabling the process of helping media outlets attract readers who may have never picked up the print edition in the first instance, particularly younger readers. "A great many traditional media outlets use Twitter and Facebook in their own ways to promote their work to a wider (and assumedly) younger audience," said Tarek Atia an Egyptian journalist and managing director of the Egypt Media Development Program, a media training, consulting, and production company.[47]

Egyptian-American journalist Ashraf Khalil, who is a regular contributor from Cairo to the *Times of London* and *Foreign Policy* magazine and the author of a new book, *Liberation Square,* set during the 18 days of protests that culminated in Mubarak's resignation, said the privately owned media in Egypt are more compelling and attract younger audiences, including *Tahrir,* an online news site launched after the revolution that had more than 265,000 Facebook Likes and 300,108 Twitter followers as of March 16, 2012, as well as *Al Masry Al Youm* and *Al Shorouk.*

"I don't think you have regular *Al Ahram* readers below the age of 50; why would you? I make fun of my auntie for reading *Al Ahram*," Khalil said. "She's not going to tweet, but come on."[48]

Rasha Abdulla, associate professor and chair of journalism and mass communication at the American University in Cairo, gives low marks to the performance of state-sponsored media following Mubarak's ouster.

"They're used to covering things in a manner that is pro-regime," Abdulla said from Cairo. "They're used to having an entity to idolize. When Mubarak was gone, they turned their attention to the people, very briefly–February 12, 2011" the day after Mubarak was ousted. Headlines touted the success of the people in the revolution–an about face for state mouthpieces. "Now it's the SCAF."[49]

Users Following Selected MENA Region Satellite Hubs on Facebook and Twitter

Source: Online Data, as of March 16, 2012.
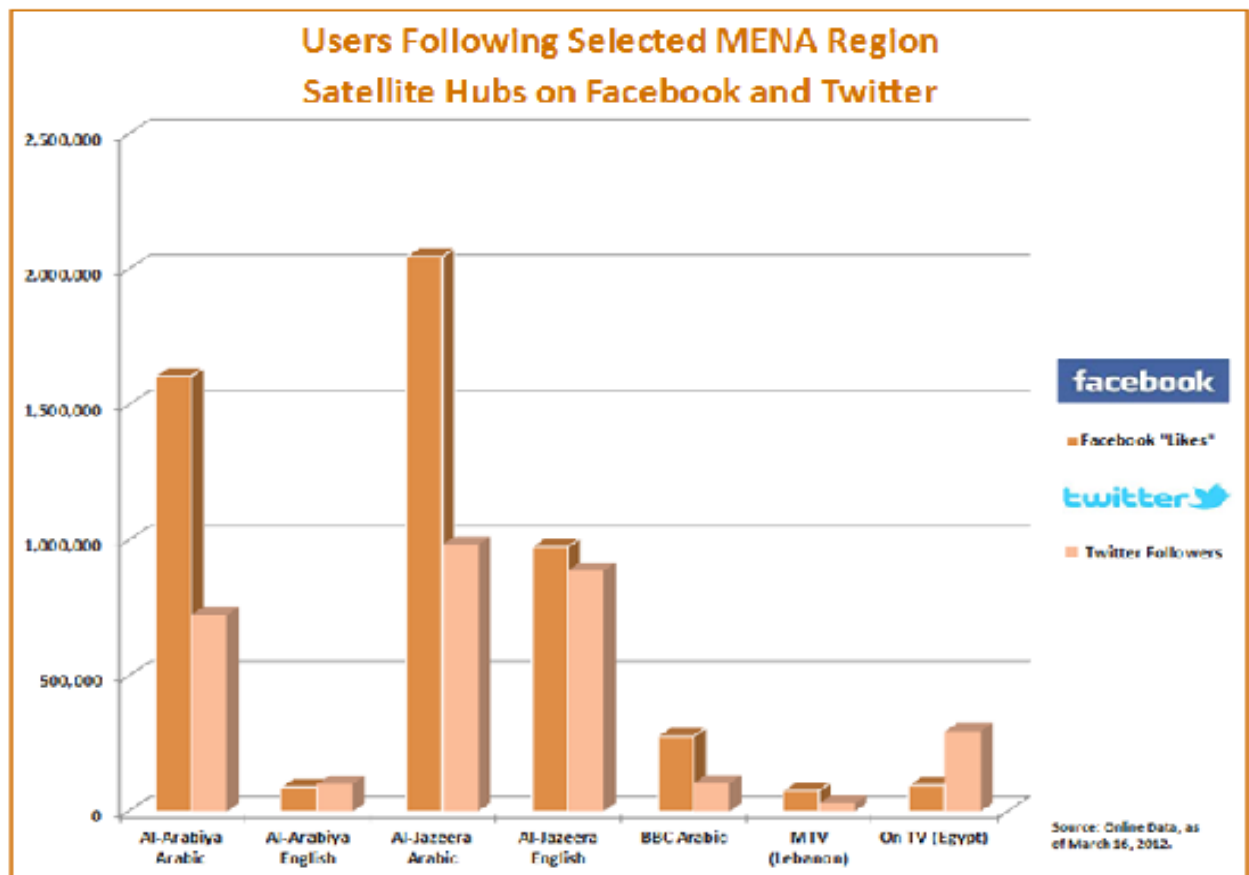
Throughout the media sector, social media has become an integral component to outlets' news cycles, whether as a source of tips and story ideas to regular features about what's being said in cyberspace on any given day.

The new media landscape includes traditional journalists, citizen journalists, and media activists. Writing on his blog, Pintak characterized it this way: Citizen journalists write fact-based articles about news events and issues, and thus commit acts of journalism; media activists, are political activists using journalism as a political tool, and then there are citizen witnesses who happen to capture a news event; this could be a citizen journalist or media activist or neither. These distinctions exist around the world, Pintak said, "but the line is particularly blurred in the Arab world and other places experiencing dramatic political change and media oppression." Media activists may be committing acts of journalism such as reporting stories beyond the red lines of traditional journalists. "But ultimately, their motive is different from that of a classic journalist."[50]

This blend of journalism, citizen witness accounts, and media activism has created an ecosystem that is changing the news and information channels in the region.

Nabeel Alkhatib, executive editor of al-Arabiya news channel, said in an October 2011 interview: "There is a new way of doing things. You need to think of how to hashtag, how to edit the story for Facebook updates, how to build networks with citizen journalists."

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— Nabeel Alkhatib, Executive Editor, al-Arabiya

Working with citizen journalists also meant a shift in production values, such as using Flip video cameras and working with footage that in the past would be rejected for failing to meet network television quality standards. "More than 50 percent of our user-generated content is Facebook quality" as opposed to network quality. While user-generated content is plentiful–the network received 3,000 videos during the 18 days of the Egyptian revolution–authenticating the user-generated content can take up valuable resources.

Alkhatib recognizes the impact of citizen journalists on network news and the needs to develop these networks and train them to help improve quality standards and credibility.[51] Social media has also given him more flexibility in floating stories online to gauge official reaction before they go to air. AlKhatib said it's akin to when he worked as a journalist in the West Bank, when Israeli military censors would cut stories deemed objectionable. Rather than have stories censored, journalists would find a way to get the story published by the Israeli press, which enabled it to be published the next day in the Palestinian press. Similarly, social media is giving editors in restrictive environments the same kind of latitude, he said.

International satellite networks, including al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya, are also integrating social media platforms into programs and news decisions.

Foukara, al-Jazeera's Washington bureau chief, said: "The use of social media and reliance on pictures sent via social media to satellite television have become a fact of life. It's part of the media scene and part and parcel of the political scene across the Middle East. That's one layer of it. Another layer is when you get these videos from an Arab country like Syria, where the international press cannot get in to verify a story, we are faced with the dilemma: What guarantee do we have that it's true? A lot of the time, we get it right. There's also the risk that you may get it wrong. In today's world, the compulsion to use the videos is too great. The bigger part of the moral responsibility lies with the governments that prevent the international media to see for themselves that what these videos purport is or is not actually happening."

Radio shows on state-owned channels refer to social media buzz on trending topics. Mohammed Gohar's channel TV25 features a show called #*HashTag,* a half-hour live show five days a week featuring news built around events documented on social media platforms. The target audience is traditional television viewers, "creating a bridge from the latest on the Web to TV screens across Egypt."[52] Tunisian media has also witnessed a similar phenomenon in the form of online news sites including TunisiaLive.com[53] and Kapitalis.com.[54] KalimaTunisie.com,[55] whose founders, activists Sihem Bensedrine and Omar Mestiri, fought numerous free expression and human rights battles under Ben Ali and suffered many personal and physical repercussions, are now able to disseminate news and information via a website without the use of proxies to circumvent restrictions by the authorities typically used in Tunisia before the revolution. Kalima also features radio broadcasts, banned under Ben Ali.

> *The use of social media and reliance on pictures sent via social media to satellite television have become a fact of life.*
>
> — Abderrahim Foukara, Washington bureau chief, al-Jazeera

Derrick Ashong is host of *The Stream* on al-Jazeera English, a daily show that joins the growing number of programs built around what's being said on the Web. Ashong said that if the media model is not interactive, then it's missing the point.
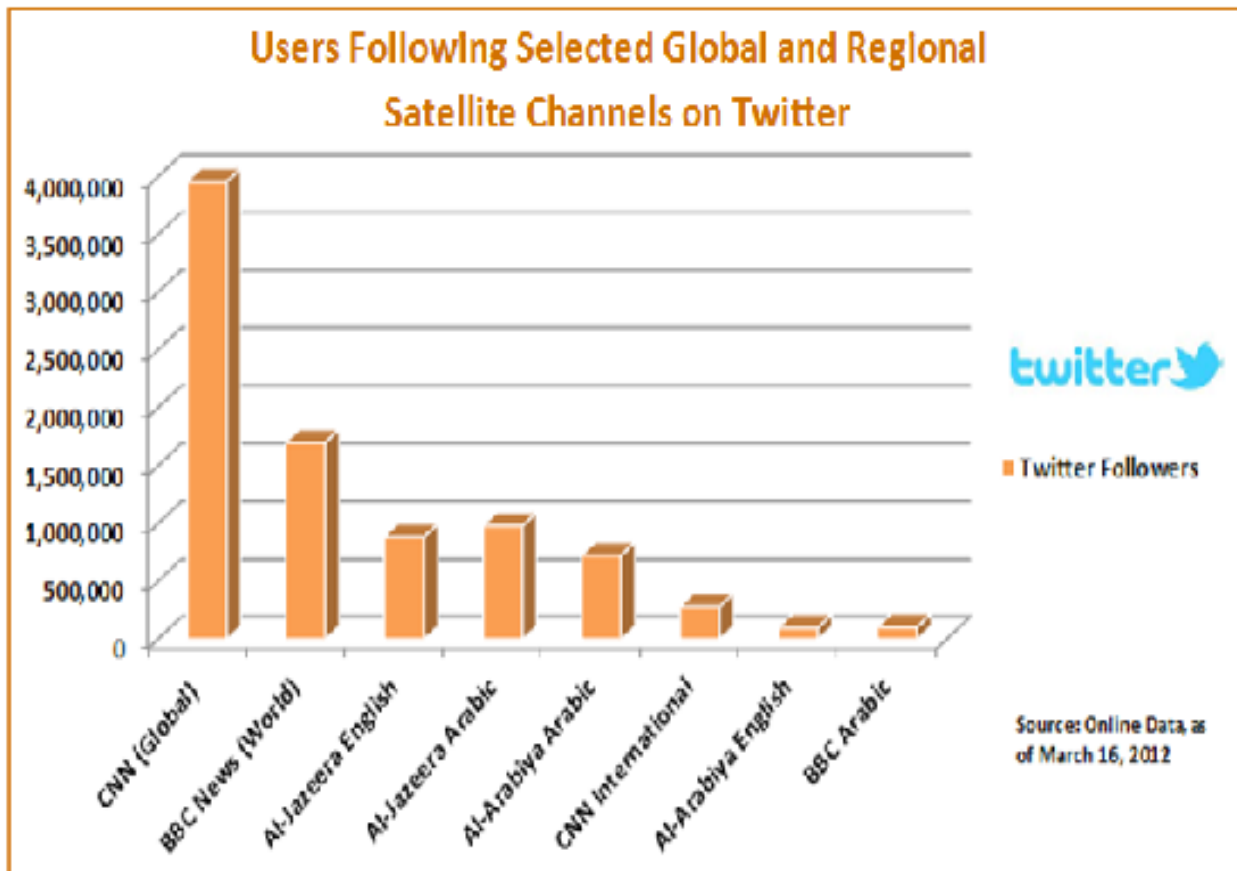
"Social media is the bleeding edge," said Ashong in Washington, DC, where *The Stream* has been broadcast globally from the Newseum and from al-Jazeera's headquarters in Doha. "Most other examples are using social media in a way that doesn't create communities but just adopts certain elements of social media. If it's not an interactive model they are not using social media for what the communities use social media for. What broadcast media has done is use social media platforms to aggregate and reach out to their viewer base, but they don't use it the actual way social media users use it. Until you have a two-way dialogue, it's simply indicative of a nascent stage and a nascent foray into the use of social media. It's cosmetic. They will sometimes build a community of people who want to watch the show, but they are not part of the show. What we are doing is literally . . . not using social media as a TV show, but as a social media community. We come from a radically different position."

Freedom of Expression, An Uncertain Future

As ever-increasing numbers of Arabs go online, the tension between online freedom of expression and the transitions underway in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and others may come to shape the nature and future of online engagement for some time.

The development of a vibrant Arab cyberspace is at odds with the strictures that govern the space. The specter of censorship, surveillance, harassment, arrest, or imprisonment cast a long shadow over free expression as new governments take shape and are challenged in protests, both online and in the streets. Across the region, governments and authorities use different measures to regulate Internet access and online activities. They include print and publications laws, penal codes, emergency laws, anti-terrorism laws, Internet service providers' terms and conditions, and telecommunications decrees.[56]

Facebook and Twitter may be blocked by governments, and the blocks may be circumvented by activists. But if Twitter, for example, has business interests or operations in a certain country, it must comply with local laws and regulations (let alone political pressures). Twitter announced on January 26, 2012, that it would be withholding tweets if they do not conform to legal standards in the countries where the tweets originate but will be made available elsewhere. By announcing that it would reactively withhold tweets that do not conform to laws, it would appear to be

Users Following Selected Global and Regional Satellite Channels on Twitter

Source: Online Data, as of March 16, 2012

eliminating some of the margin of free expression that millions have come to rely on under authoritarian regimes. How it affects freedom of expression in the Arab world remains to be seen. But Arab Twitter users were quick to comment about the new policy, appearing at times to dominate global tweets at #TwitterCensor, based on the preponderance of Arabic tweets and handles that appeared to be of Arab origin in the days following the announcement.

In making the announcement, Twitter said:

> One year ago, we posted "The Tweets Must Flow," in which we said,

> *The open exchange of information can have a positive global impact … almost every country in the world agrees that freedom of expression is a human right. Many countries also agree that freedom of expression carries with it responsibilities and has limits.*

> As we continue to grow internationally, we will enter countries that have different ideas about the contours of freedom of expression. Some differ so much from our ideas that we will not be able to exist there. Others are similar but, for historical or cultural reasons, restrict certain types of content, such as France or Germany, which ban pro-Nazi content.

> Until now, the only way we could take account of those countries' limits was to remove content globally. Starting today, we give ourselves the ability to reactively withhold content from users in a specific country–while keeping it available in the rest of the world. We have also built in a way to communicate transparently to users when content is withheld, and why.

> We haven't yet used this ability, but if and when we are required to withhold a Tweet in a specific country, we will attempt to let the user know, and we will clearly mark when the content has been withheld. As part of that transparency, we've expanded our partnership with Chilling Effects to share this new page, http://chillingeffects.org/twitter, which makes it easier to find notices related to Twitter.[57]

In a region roiling with protests and uprisings, Arab governments would likely find support in their efforts to curtail free expression under the guise of national security.

Last August's debate in the British parliament, would also lend support to some who would prefer more control over what is said over social media platforms. The government considered a ban on suspected rioters' use of social networks including Facebook, Twitter, and BlackBerry Messenger following several days of disorder early that month.[58]

The *Guardian* newspaper reported that the day after the riots subsided, Prime Minister David Cameron told parliament that the government was considering banning people from using Twitter and Facebook if they were thought to be plotting criminal activity.[59] Cameron ultimately put off

the plans for banning social networks. A *Guardian* study of a database of riot-related tweets cast doubt on the rationale behind government proposals. The study showed that social media were mainly used to react to riots and looting as opposed to furthering the disorder.[60]

At this stage in the development of the Arab cyberspace, freedom of expression is not guaranteed. As the legal enabling environments of Tunisia and Egypt are debated and analyzed, it has become common to hear of "windows of opportunity" to describe a limited time to enshrine protections for personal liberties through constitutional, legal, and regulatory reforms.

The urgency was highlighted by the parliamentary elections that took place in Egypt and National Constituent Assembly elections in Tunisia. Opportunities to pass reforms may be limited after new governments' priorities or views of freedom of expression shift toward more conservative positions or national security priorities, particularly now that the conservative Muslim Brotherhood and the moderate Islamist Ennahda party have won a near majority and a majority in Egypt and Tunisia respectively.

In Tunisia, a new press code has been drafted but not yet passed. Journalists have also been attacked recently in protests demanding protection for freedom of expression.

Ashong of *The Stream* believes the old media systems need to be reformed while the new systems are established.

As the legal enabling environments of Tunisia and Egypt are debated and analyzed, it has become common to hear of "windows of opportunity" to describe a limited time to enshrine protections.

"If you focus on building the new space and not reforming the old, part of what happens is those in the old curtail the expansion of the growth of the new space, whether it's by shutting down Internet platforms, arresting bloggers, or the next level, which is acquiring social media platforms and shifting their editorial voices. There are lots of ways the old order can interfere," Ashong said. "You have to create a whole new system that allows peoples' voices to be heard that enables quality journalism. Part of what you will see is the convergence of the two."

"Social media definitely has an important impact and there is no going backward," Ashong said. "The march toward change is inexorable. You will have a struggle, especially because the stakes are very high. The new generations, the new technologies will win. There is a shift of the understanding that people have of old power. You cannot kill enough people to make people believe that they are powerless." But he admits, "It doesn't mean it will be free expression and goodness all the time."

In Tunisia, the lack of media structure in the form of a press code has given rise to social tensions, a problem of too much freedom. "It's a real vacuum right now," said Faouzi Chaouche, a media analyst, writer, and journalism educator in Tunisia. "The absence of parameters–we don't see any red lines anymore. There is freedom of expression, but not in the right way."

A wider margin of free expression has also led to increased incitement and attacks against the media. A lack of a professional code of conduct and professionalism among media contributors is creating an environment where even incitement to violence is repeated in the echo chamber of social media, print, and broadcast, according to Chaouche.[61]

Speaking from Tunisia, Chaouche related that in late January 2012, a member of the National Constituent Assembly called for the killing and assault of protestors–statements that were repeated throughout the media. The issue became one of debate on talk shows, despite the risks of incitement on personal and public safety. He described Tunisia's media scene as "an open debate, where everyone says what he or she wants. It's really chaos. This would not have happened if we had a press code."

Salafist groups in Tunisia have been using various intimidation methods, as well as incitement against journalists. The religious groups have also harassed media representatives in an attempt to intimidate them and stifle coverage of religion. In October 2011 legal proceedings were brought against Nessma TV and its leading shareholder after the broadcasting of the Franco-Iranian animated film *Persepolis*, which depicts a representation of God. The court adjourned the case against Nessma TV until April. Chaouche said the legal proceedings against Nessma TV have grown into a statement on free expression.

A lack of a professional code of conduct and professionalism among media contributors is creating an environment where even incitement to violence is repeated in the echo chamber of social media, print, and broadcast.

"It's no more a Nessma TV case, it's the freedom of expression which is now at stake," Chaouche said. "The government has been working on a case by case basis; it does not want to show the world that it can only use security solutions to solve problems."[62]

Salafist groups were also blamed for intimidation tactics against Nessma TV journalist Soufiène Ben Hamida, whose car was daubed with the words "non-believer."[63]

A religious fatwa, in this particular case, a death threat, has also been issued against popular blogger Lina Ben Mhenni, who wrote about the threat on her blog:

> The Salafis/Islamists announced that I am on a death list … I am not afraid because I am defending principles I strongly believe in. No one is paying me to do this. It is my own choice. I am not the victim of a brainwashing as many of them are. I won't stop writing and denouncing their instrumentalization of our religion for political goals. Nevertheless, if anything happens to any Tunisian or to me because of these cowards, the government would be the sole responsible [party] for this. Last year Tunisians had a dream and we are going to fulfill it. No one will steal our hopes and wishes.[64]

In addition to Tunisia, draft press codes and media laws are under review in several countries as in Algeria, Qatar,[65] and Saudi Arabia.[66]

In Algeria, journalists and civil society activists are calling for the revision of a new media law that was passed in December 2011 and went into effect on January 12, 2012.[67]

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), reported that the ambiguity created by vaguely defined terms under the new law can subject journalists and bloggers to unnecessary restrictions. CPJ research shows that "media" is defined as any publication, broadcast, opinion letter, or idea expressed by any written, audio-visual, or electronic means. The law also says that media personnel can operate freely but must respect the "Islamic faith and all religions," "national identity and cultural values of society," "national sovereignty and unity," "requirements of state security and defense," "requirements of public order," and "economic interests," among other broadly defined terms.[68]

According to CPJ research, of the law's 133 articles, at least 32 can be used to restrict coverage by stifling free expression. Several of the provisions are ambiguous and impose undue restrictions on access to information as well as heavy fines for violations of the law. It also subjects journalists to fines of up to 500,000 Algerian dinars (about $6,700) and potential publication closures for defamation and other violations including publishing information on a preliminary criminal investigation and insulting a foreign head of state or diplomat. Under the 1990 law, journalists were punished with up to 10 years' imprisonment for insulting or defaming the state.[69]

Algerian journalists told CPJ that although the new law was a step in the right direction, it offered only cosmetic changes.

Conclusion:
Social Media as Social Change Agent

Social media's potential represents the brightest hope for greater freedom of expression in the Arab region, enabling tens of millions of people, and ultimately many more, to actively pursue civic engagement, free and fair elections, political accountability, the eradication of corruption, as well as free, independent, and pluralistic media in a rapidly changing media environment.

Arab governments, with support from the international community, will be expected to adapt to the changing Arab media landscape as increasing numbers of Arabs go online. The growing checks on government power and the role of media in the democratic process are among the most encouraging developments in the region's contemporary history.

But the advances are not guaranteed. How successfully the emerging and legacy Arab governments reckon with digital technologies and the new media ecosystem propelled by the youth, journalists, citizen journalists, activists, as well as innovative transnational satellite networks and privately owned media outlets, may come to define the future of these governments and the region.

While the environment for freedom of the press and freedom of expression has improved, the potential impact of conservative majorities in Tunisia and Egypt and uprisings and protests elsewhere make clear that universally recognized protections will likely take time. Media environments may become more constrained than they were under deposed autocratic regimes, as greater official scrutiny and control is sought over what is said and disseminated online. Faced, however, with the reality that seeking absolute control of the Internet is futile, and that the critical mass of those who are demanding political, social, and economic change using digital media will likely find a way around the latest firewalls, a few Arab governments have recognized the benefits of using online platforms.

For now, it appears that the Arab cyberspace is primed to enable an evolving cyberwar, as emerging and legacy governments compete to influence the narratives unfolding across the region. For some governments and political parties, the attempts to dominate the narrative in any way possible may be an end in itself. The narrative in support of social change, however, appears inexorable, as evidenced by the growing numbers of Arabs online, millions of whom are influencing the news and information exchanges throughout the region and globally. It is their narrative, after all, that has also inspired protests and social movements around the world.

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