

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

*A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance*

*By Jeffrey Ghannam*

*February 3, 2011*



**National Endowment  
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*Supporting freedom around the world*

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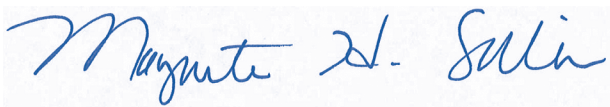
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# Preface

The Center for International Media Assistance commissioned this report, *Social Media and Free Expression in the Arab World*, several months before the unprecedented popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries of the region, which by all accounts were enabled by communication and citizen mobilization via social media platforms—Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube—as well as mobile technology. We have accelerated our production schedule to publish it now, as we believe that it will provide a useful backdrop to the events unfolding in the Arab world. We welcome comments on the report by e-mail at [cima@ned.org](mailto:cima@ned.org), with the term “Arab social media report” in the subject line.



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## Executive Summary

This paper was commissioned and largely reported in the period leading up to the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere in the region in early 2011. 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

***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.***

Worldwide, the number of Internet users by late 2010 was expected to exceed 2 billion users.

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> The Arab Knowledge Report 2009 placed the number of Arabic-speaking Internet users at 60 million.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.

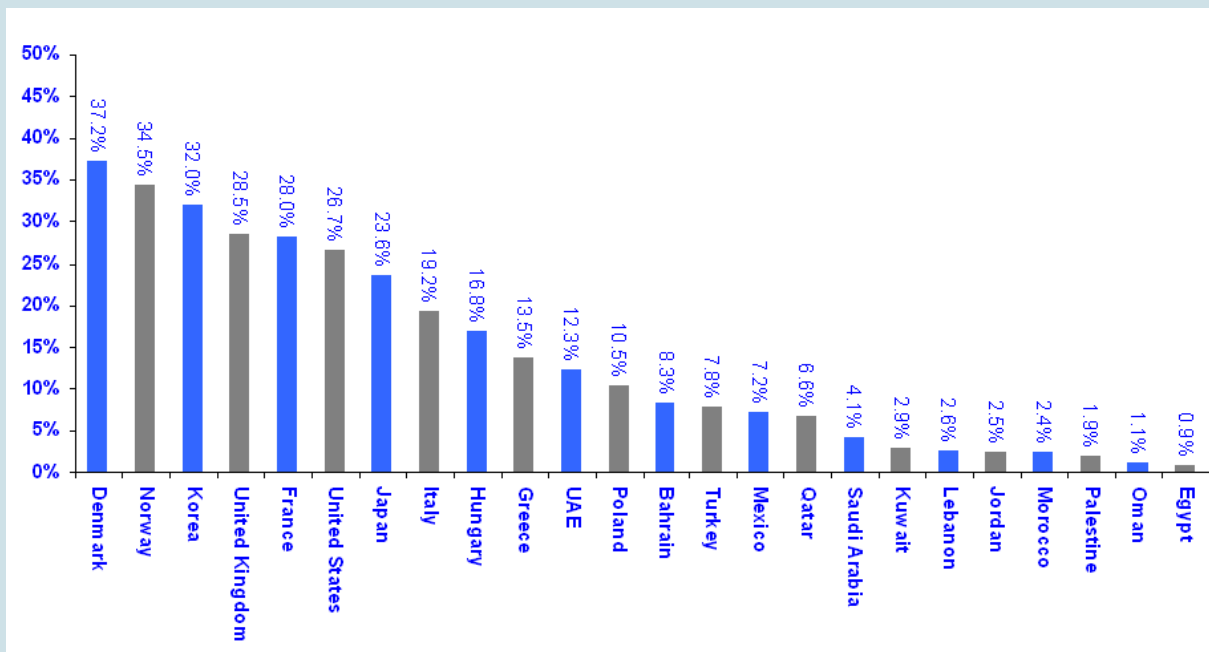
Hundreds of Arab activists, writers, and journalists have faced repercussions because of their online activities.<sup>6</sup> In Egypt, blogger Abdel Kareem Nabil Soliman, known as Kareem Amer, was released in November 2010 after more than four years in prison and alleged torture for

his writings that authorities said insulted Islam and defamed Mubarak.<sup>7</sup> Soliman returned to writing his blog shortly after his release.<sup>8</sup> In Syria, 19-year-old Tal al-Mallouhi was said to be the youngest Internet prisoner of conscience in the region and in December 2010 marked her first year in prison, mostly incommunicado, for blogging through poetry about her yearning for freedom of expression.<sup>9</sup> In Bahrain, a social networking campaign has called for the release of blogger Ali Abdulemam who has been imprisoned for allegedly posting “false news” on his popular site *BahrainOnline.org*. They are just three of the scores of Arab Internet users across the region who have faced arrest and incarceration and other repercussions stemming from their online writings.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

In 2009, the Arab region had 35,000 active blogs<sup>12</sup> and 40,000 by late 2010.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> On the

### Broadband Internet in the Arab World by end of 2008: UAE, Bahrain and Qatar lead the broadband adoption



Source: Arab Advisors Group and OECD

video sharing site YouTube, Arabic music videos attract hundreds of thousands of viewers. A Google executive said 24 hours of video are being uploaded every minute in the region.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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. A Lebanese Web-based drama, *Shankaboot*, produced in partnership with the BBC World Service Trust and Batoota Films, has captured 160,000 viewers who are invited to contribute to the series' storyline at Shankaboot.com where the series can be viewed as well as on YouTube.<sup>17</sup> These platforms, among many others, will continue to attract audiences among the region's more than 351 million Arabs.<sup>18</sup>

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 report also said that more than 50 percent of the populations of Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt are currently estimated to be under 25 years of age, while in the rest of the Arab region, the under-25, "net generation" makes up between 35 to 47 percent of total populations.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

Online news sites as well as bloggers are also serving as watchdogs on the official Arab press. When Egypt's state-run *Al-Ahram* daily published a doctored photo that showed President Hosni Mubarak front and center among heads of state at a meeting in Washington, D.C., in September 2010, it was blogger Wael Khalil who discovered and blogged about it, further revealing the power of social media as a check on government press. The unaltered Associated Press photo showed President Obama leading, flanked by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, King



Abdullah II of Jordan, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with Mubarak slightly behind the four on their way to a media event. Al-Ahram's editor stood by the doctored photo, saying it was meant to illustrate Mubarak's central position on the Palestinian issue.<sup>21</sup>

### Key Findings:

- About 17 million people in the Arab region are using Facebook<sup>22</sup>, available in Arabic, with 5 million in Egypt alone,<sup>23</sup> 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, arrest, and incarcerate activists or 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. Laws regulating the Internet are also being passed.
- Some Arab government officials and politicians are active contributors to social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Government ministers in Jordan have been engaging with constituents in ways that would suggest future citizen-government interaction and engagement and a more vibrant civic life built around clear rights and duties of free expression on the part of citizens and authorities, though it remains to be seen.
- 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.
- Indigenous social media platforms are striving to go beyond blogging, to bridge the virtual online world with the physical world by offering community-driven quality news, online video stories, and forums for greater interactivity around timely issues, as well as the showcasing of art and culture.

# Social Media and Challenges to Free Expression

Digital communications technologies have expanded the tools available to exercise individual freedom of expression, and Arabs are indeed finding space online to express their opinions and enjoy freedoms that would otherwise be closed off to most. But while Arab Internet users have gained communications and technical capacities to use social networks to mobilize, the real impact won't be felt for years, maybe even a few decades, observers say, when expectations and political regimes may have changed. For now, to express one's opinion online, even when not delving into subjects deemed sensitive or traditionally off limits, remains risky in most of the Middle East and North Africa.

Even in countries that do not block websites, Internet freedom is on the decline, according to Freedom House. In the Arab region, Internet-based platforms for information dissemination have had a positive impact, but the media environment is generally constrained by extremely harsh laws concerning libel and defamation, the insult of monarchs and public figures, and emergency rule. Egypt, Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, where journalists and bloggers have faced serious repercussions for expressing independent views, have been of particular concern.<sup>24</sup>

Advocacy efforts have been undertaken in earnest by indigenous Arab human rights organizations, including the Egypt-based Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, and international organizations, including Global Voices, Reporters Without Borders, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Committee to Protect Journalists, among many others. They have also used social media to champion the rights of Internet users, journalists, citizen journalists, and bloggers who have been arrested, imprisoned, or prevented from reporting irregularities, as many were during the Egyptian parliamentary elections in late November 2010.<sup>25</sup> Despite the attention and the social media campaigns, the arrests and crackdowns continue unabated.

In Bahrain, social media sites found themselves on the front lines in the fall of 2010 when authorities arrested 23 Shiite men who were accused of terrorism and conspiring against the government; the government followed with the arrests of an estimated 230 more men.<sup>26</sup> According to news reports, the government alleged the detainees had been planning to carry out acts of terrorism and violence, while Bahraini human rights groups characterized it as a crackdown aimed at cementing control before October parliamentary elections.<sup>27</sup> Blogger Ali Abdulemam, who used his real name after dropping a pseudonym years earlier on *BahrainOnline*, reportedly testified during a court hearing in October that he has been tortured, his family's livelihood threatened, and he was barely allowed to see his lawyer.<sup>28</sup> Online campaigns for his release immediately followed his arrest, including a targeted Twitter campaign directed at Bahraini Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa who is also active on Twitter.<sup>29</sup>

*BahrainOnline* started in 1999 with lively debates on domestic politics and discrimination against the Shia, who comprise the majority in the island nation in the Persian Gulf of almost 800,000, ruled by the Sunni Muslim al-Khalifa dynasty.<sup>30</sup> A regional banking hub, Bahrain is of particular importance to the United States as host to the U.S Fifth Fleet. It has one of the more politically and socially open societies in the conservative Arabian Peninsula region.<sup>31</sup>

The island nation’s relative openness did not allow for a popular blogger to go unchecked. *BahrainOnline* attracted more than 100,000 daily hits and had thousands of members, despite being officially blocked for stretches by Bahraini authorities. Since Abdulemam’s arrest, his audience has turned to other sites, such as Facebook, said Nabeel Rajab of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights.<sup>32</sup>

“Bahraini activists are using the technology very well. The government fires back, but there are always back doors that the technology provides,” said Ahmed Mansoor, a prominent blogger in the United Arab Emirates. “Bahrainis are definitely more advanced than the rest of the Gulf countries in knowing, and demanding, their political rights.”<sup>33</sup>

Abdulemam is hardly alone. In Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Morocco, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the Palestinian Territory, authorities have incarcerated bloggers and others who have expressed their opinions, communicated on Facebook, or written poetry in ways deemed offensive to government authorities.<sup>34</sup>

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In the West Bank, Palestinian security services in October 2010 arrested 26-year-old Waleed Khalid Hasayin after an employee at the Internet cafe where Hasayin was spending a good part of his days, provided officials with snapshots of Facebook pages under the name of Allah. Hasayin allegedly wrote about the “fallacy of religions” in poetic stanzas that mimicked Koranic verses.<sup>35</sup>

The arrests are emblematic of what appear to be ever deepening control of the digital space and where encroachment—what one Internet free expression advocate calls interference by foreign governments, private corporations, and international donors—are part of the new media landscape. At the same time, vast telecommunications infrastructures are being built that will attract increasingly greater numbers of Internet and mobile phone users, especially among younger populations.

In Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia, WiMax (Worldwide Interoperability for Microwave Access) mobile Internet technology has been commercially available since 2009.<sup>36</sup> Broadband high-speed Internet is also widely available in Algeria, Egypt,

Morocco, and Tunisia. Third-generation mobile services known as 3G, enabling video and other multimedia applications, are available in Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Syria, and Tunisia. In 11 countries across the region, fiber optic technology is being made available to homes, enabling high-bandwidth applications and services.<sup>37</sup> While the latest technologies are building telecommunications and digital capacities, governments are also asserting control through laws and regulations.

Social media campaigns expressing outrage at the extent to which governments tried to exert control over the digital space, appear to have influenced government decisions to scale back proposed laws and regulations. Jordan's cyber crimes law is viewed as an example of more Internet-specific laws which are expected to increasingly define the space. But after a draft law approved by the Jordanian government was widely criticized by news websites and activists who alleged it would restrict media freedoms, the government in August 2010 amended it by royal decree, removing a controversial article that stipulated a fine for disseminating slanderous or defamatory information online.<sup>38</sup>

Also amended were articles that clarified that law enforcement personnel must receive permission from prosecutors before conducting a search in connection with an alleged cyber crime.

The law defined cyber crimes as intentionally entering a website or information system without authorization or in violation of permissions.

Penalties include serving between one week and three months in jail and a fine of between 100 and 200 Jordanian Dinars, or about \$150 to \$300.<sup>39</sup>

A similar blogger campaign in Lebanon led to a repeal of a proposed law that would have limited online freedom of expression.<sup>40</sup>

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Helmi Noman, who has written on the subject of laws and regulations governing the Arab cyberspace for the OpenNet Initiative at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, said that access control in the Middle East and North Africa is multilayered: Governments and authorities use different measures to regulate Internet access and online activities. They include print and publication laws, penal codes, emergency laws, anti-terrorism laws, Internet service providers' terms and conditions, and telecommunications decrees.<sup>41</sup> Arab governments also continue to introduce more restrictive legal, technical and monitoring measures. These governments are investing in vast infrastructures to enable economic development through the use of Internet technology while also investing in censorship technologies, which have been supplied, at least in part, by American firms.<sup>42</sup> Censorship in the region spans attempts to control political content using technical filtering, laws and regulations, surveillance and monitoring, physical restrictions, and extra legal harassment and arrests.<sup>43</sup> According to Noman: "Though many governments acknowledge social filtering, most continue to disguise their political filtering practices by attempting to confuse users with different error messages. Many ISPs block popular politically neutral online services such as online translation

services and privacy tools fearing that they can be used to bypass the filtering regimes.” The censors also block websites and services such as social networking and photo and video sharing sites because of the potential for content considered objectionable.<sup>44</sup> In Tunisia under President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, video sharing websites were blocked, including YouTube, Vimeo, and Blip.TV, hindering the sector’s growth and competitiveness.<sup>45</sup>

According to United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Arab Knowledge Report, published in 2009, the Arab states, as a whole, have made no tangible progress with respect to freedom of thought and of expression.<sup>46</sup>

Apart from the proliferation of Arab satellite channels and Internet blogs, which have provided a safety valve for a noticeable upsurge in activity by the region’s youth, the outlook for freedom of thought and of expression remains gloomy. Some Arab governments have imposed restrictions on Arab satellite broadcasting. Additional broadcasting and media legislation and laws have been enacted which have strengthened governments’ grip on the media, press, journalists, internet blogs and bloggers, as well as intellectuals. Most media and knowledge-diffusion mechanisms remain state-owned and operate alongside a limited number of large media and entertainment companies transmitting to the Arab countries from the countries of the Gulf or from outside the region.<sup>47</sup>

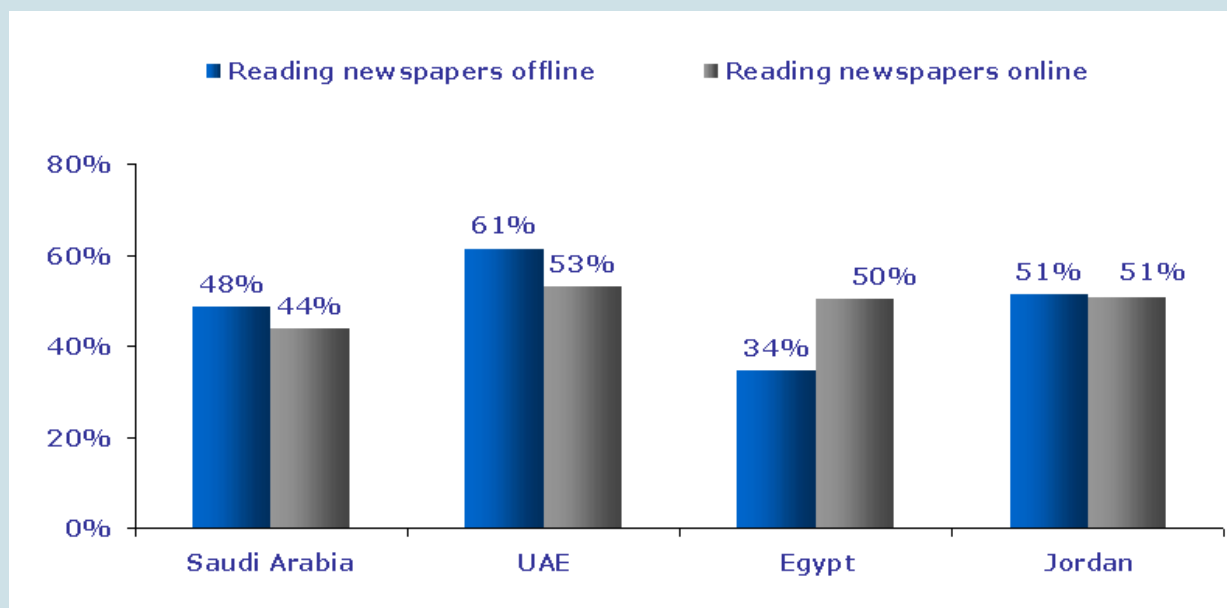
## Online News Gaining Readers

Internet users are steadily turning to online news, and the numbers may soon surpass those who seek offline news sources, according to one survey by the Jordan-based Arab Advisors Group. And the number of users who turn to online platforms to create their own diet of news, rather than rely on editors' selections, is only expected to grow. The number of Facebook users alone, about 17 million in the Arab world,<sup>48</sup> have already surpassed the 14 million copies of newspapers sold in the region.<sup>49</sup>

“Facebook and other social media platforms are now beginning to define how people discover and share information, shape opinion, and interact,” said Carrington Malin, an executive at Spot On Public Relations in Dubai in May 2010. “Facebook doesn’t write the news, but the new figures show that Facebook’s reach now rivals that of the news press.”<sup>50</sup> According to a Google Middle East North Africa marketing manager, news has been the most frequent Google search category for Egyptians, followed by images, music, and audio clips.<sup>51</sup>

Among 3,348 people surveyed in Egypt, the number of online newspaper readers is at 50 percent versus 34 percent for offline sources. Among 555 people surveyed in Jordan, half got their news online while the other half read news offline. While the shift from offline to online readership has not been en masse in the Gulf countries, according to this particular survey, the gap appears to be narrowing. Among 355 people surveyed in Saudi Arabia, offline newspaper readership still surpassed online sources, 48 percent to 44 percent.

### Internet users have adopted online newspapers with zeal



Source: Arab Advisors Group's Survey of Internet Use and Online Advertising Consumption and Effectiveness in Egypt (September 2009), Survey of Internet Use and Online Advertising Consumption and Effectiveness in Jordan (August 2009), Survey of Internet Use and Online Advertising Consumption and Effectiveness in Saudi Arabia and the UAE (April 2009)



Recognizing that the future is online and at a considerable cost savings, some print publications are switching to online formats, according to the *Arab Media Outlook, 2009-2013*. Saudi Arabia's Al Majalla newspaper dropped its print edition to focus on an online newspaper format in 2009. Similarly, the UAE sports magazine, Super, dropped its print edition in 2009 to become an online publication.<sup>52</sup> For those media outlets that maintain both print and online editions, about 80 percent do not differentiate content between the editions, but the trend is shifting toward more differentiation.<sup>53</sup> *The Gulf News* is among the first to offer video news on their websites.<sup>54</sup> Lebanon's *An-Nahar* daily is attempting to expand into online TV with a branded channel on YouTube, though the offerings appear random.<sup>55</sup>

Online advertising is currently only one percent of total advertising spending in the region, due in large part to low penetration of broadband Internet connections and the largely undeveloped search advertising sector.<sup>56</sup> According to Google, online ad spending in the MENA region is currently between \$110 and \$130 million annually, up from \$100 million in 2009.

<sup>57</sup> In what is apparently an attempt to burnish Jordan's image as a leader in the ICT sector, King Abdullah recently signed a \$10 million advertising deal with Google to promote the government-owned Royal Jordanian airlines and the country's image abroad as a tourist destination.<sup>58</sup> As part of the deal, Google will reinvest \$2.5 million in training for digital media startups and in online advertising.<sup>59</sup>

The region's media industry is also starting to attract international investors, as seen in Yahoo's 2009 purchase of the largest Arab web portal, *Maktoob*, based in Jordan, for a record \$164 million even though at the time of sale, *Maktoob* had less than \$1 million in cash and less than \$2 million in contracted revenues leading analysts to point to Yahoo's recognition of the region's huge potential for growth.<sup>60</sup>

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*— Carrington Malin, an executive at Spot On Public Relations in Dubai*

## Impact: Social Media's Youth Focus

Amman is arguably the epicenter of Arab regional social media innovation. Indigenous social networking and media platforms are serving as a bridge to build communities in both the virtual and physical worlds, using video, written content, animation, and comedy as well as online efforts to promote local and regional arts through the Alhoush Community Channel on YouTube.

*Aramram.com* is one of those sites, established by a small group of young Jordanian media entrepreneurs with help from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The website produces original youth-oriented video and written content built around themes such as the environment, Jordan's ethnic minority communities, encouraging civic responsibility, music, dance, and the views of a progressive professor at the University of Jordan who offers religious perspectives of everyday events.

“The concept was to create an outlet where people could interact. In Jordan, people don't interact, they are in small groups and they don't open up easily,” said Hams Rabah, 28, one of the partners in *Aramram* which is part of *Greyscale Films*, a production house and a grantee of the National Endowment for Democracy. “You feel people don't care a lot about civil responsibility. We tackle a lot of social issues, and we do it in a subtle way. We have managed to capture an audience among the young generation.”<sup>61</sup>

The *Aramram* partners recognized that youth in Jordan were largely underserved by the traditional print and broadcast media. Today about 10 websites target the youth audience, including websites that feature animation and comedy.

“Generally media in Jordan overlook the youth,” said Rabah, who received bachelor's and master's degrees in journalism from the University of Cardiff in Wales before starting her career in Jordan. “The newspapers and TV stations did not capture this audience at all or appeal to the younger generation.” But viewing *Aramram* videos may be a challenge for lack of bandwidth in Jordan, particularly at Internet cafes and community centers. Rabah added that 3G and 4G technologies are also too expensive for many young people.<sup>62</sup> *Aramram* provides training for disadvantaged youths and others in video production and two of their former employees went on to receive scholarships to film school in Aqaba, Jordan. The *Aramram* founders are strategizing to help ensure the site's sustainability and are considering advertising ventures to complement the donor funding it receives for training workshops.<sup>63</sup>

In Lebanon, gaining video viewership is also a challenge for the online news website *Now Lebanon*, whose Managing Editor, Hanin Ghaddar, said low bandwidth stands in the way of news

***Indigenous social networking and media platforms are serving as a bridge to build communities in both the virtual and physical worlds***



websites like hers from reaching their true potential. “The speed is really low and we know that there are cables ready to make the Internet faster,” said Ghaddar in late 2010, speaking from her office in Beirut. “We do a lot of features on the subject, we write editorials, we do blog posts, it’s a main hindrance to start a Web TV; you cannot do Web TV if you don’t have good broadband. There have been a lot of campaigns and petitions ... but there are other [government] priorities.”<sup>64</sup> The privately owned news site began in the spirit of the Cedar Revolution of 2005 has been attracting 30,000 unique visitors from Lebanon, the United States, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Europe, and Israel to English and Arabic news and features that are not translations of each other but independent pages produced by a multilingual team of 30 staff members.<sup>65</sup> “We are considered avant-garde in social issues; we are able to reach young people, civil society. Because it’s online, it provides a lot of interactions online with readers, tweets, and we have a blog. We are the only news website that has a blog so we can interact with different people,” Ghaddar said.<sup>66</sup>

In Lebanon, a nation governed according to confessional lines, political leaders have their own broadcast networks and affiliated media. Would established media interests prevent the rise of independent video news online? “I can’t say for sure that it would not happen, but the consequences would be huge,” Ghaddar said. “If they start banning the stuff on the Internet, people would go crazy.”<sup>67</sup>

## Social Media and Social Unrest

While it sounded like a catchy sound bite, Tunisian activists were not calling the uprising in their country a “Twitter Revolution.” Yet no one was denying the pivotal role of the micro-blogging site either, or the role that social media will continue to play in Tunisia, Egypt, and the rest of the Arab world. Protests in early 2011 also erupted in Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen. One Tunisian cyber activist interviewed on Radio France International, described it as alchemy—a mix of new media, Arab satellite channels and traditional media that informed and helped mobilize protests.<sup>68</sup> She added: “In my opinion, if new media were able to foster this revolution (alone), I think it would have happened long before.”<sup>69</sup>

Tunisian authorities blocked Twitter in its four weeks of protest that toppled the government,<sup>70</sup> yet proxies are regularly used in Tunisia, and Ben Ali did not shut down the Internet.

Tunisian blogger and Global Voices Advocacy Director, Sami Ben Gharbia, who operates the website Nawaat, an independent blog collective that gives voice to Tunisian dissent, said that much of the content from the revolution that appeared in traditional media originated on Facebook.<sup>71</sup> He said that a team of cyber activists would collect content from Facebook for translation, putting it in context and re-posting on Nawaat and Twitter for journalists and others. He said that if content remained strictly on Facebook, its audience would have been limited to those who are members of certain groups, and would not likely have been disseminated in ways that proved pivotal to the media coverage.<sup>72</sup>

***Platform is an increasingly important and varied factor in any discussion of citizen journalism. In some areas, the Internet rules. In others, lacking broadband, cellphones and text messaging dominate.***

“That’s what we were doing: Aggregating, putting the story into context, amplifying and then using Twitter as a main broadcaster, because Twitter is the platform where journalists are following the story, and then pointing them to the right place to find video,” Ben Gharbia told an interviewer. “We rely on a network of activists from around the Arab world in the first instance. And those activists, from Mauritania to Iraq, they know each other. They are training each other on how to download video, how to use Google maps. These reports can be translated into multiple languages and resent for media around the world. That was the echo chamber of the struggle on the street.”<sup>73</sup>

Even weeks after Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia, the Twitter hashtag of #Sidibouid, the town where protests began, continued to update followers along with hashtag #Tunisie and others. Hashtag #Jan25 has come to define the Egyptian uprising along with #Egypt and #Mubarak.

Egypt began blocking Twitter and Facebook on January 25, to disrupt activists who would use the site to coordinate protests on the first day of protests, against rising prices, unemployment and demands for reform.<sup>74</sup> In an unprecedented move on January 28, Mubarak cut nearly all Internet access in the country.<sup>75</sup> It prompted President Obama the same day to ask Mubarak to restore his country's Internet,<sup>76</sup> a request that signaled the importance of free expression to the Obama administration's foreign policy. Internet service has since been restored.

Lawrence Pintak, former director of the Center for Journalism Training and Research at the American University in Cairo, wrote: "Even if governments could somehow put the journalistic genie back in the bottle, there is the army of media-savvy activists who have seized on tools like blogs, Twitter, Facebook and other forms of instant messaging as weapons—what Egyptians now call "Massbook"—in their battle with entrenched regimes." Pintak, now the founding dean at the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University, said: "Crusading journalists and digitally armed activists. It was a combination lethal to Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and proving toxic to Hosni Mubarak. The lightning speed with which the Tunisian revolution spread to the streets of Cairo is evidence that the term 'digital revolution' has taken on a whole new meaning in the Middle East. It also underscores the failure of Arab regimes to adjust to this new information reality. It is no longer possible for a country of 80 million people to go off the grid."<sup>77</sup>

# The Debate About U.S. Support of Social Media

To activists, bloggers, and academicians who study the field, donor-funded social media capacity building has led to its share of moral and ethical concerns. Some argue that donor funding essentially makes recipients targets in government crackdowns and encourages risky behavior, while donors remain on the sidelines as activists are arrested and imprisoned.

President Barack Obama's Cairo speech in June 2009 and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's Internet Freedom speech in January 2010 highlighted for Arab activists the pronouncements for Internet freedom with the struggles they confront under Arab regimes, many of them U.S. allies, with long records of taking draconian measures to control online dissent.<sup>78</sup>

"This phenomenon is not really publicized and people have trouble talking about it," said Ben Gharbia, the Tunisian blogger. "Getting arrested is a direct threat on activists ... and is only one aspect of the consequences of what I call government interference in the digital activism field."<sup>79</sup>

Ben Gharbia says the U.S. and other Western governments intervene by playing major roles in the Internet freedom field, which poses real threats to activists who accept their support and funding. "A hyper-politicization of the digital activism movement and an appropriation of its 'success' to achieve geopolitical goals or please the Washington bubble are now considered by many [activists and NGOs] as the 'kiss of death,'" Ben Gharbia wrote in a blog post in September 2010. "In a worst-case scenario, Western funding, hyper-politicization and support could also lead to a brutal alteration of the existing digital activism field and the emergence of a 'parallel digital activism' in total disregard to the local Arab context. We should also point out how hypocritical and unequal the online free speech movement is in its support for Internet freedom of bloggers and digital activists at risk."<sup>80</sup>

"When putting Internet freedom at the center of its foreign policy agenda, the U.S. will be disinclined to engage in any kind of action which might endanger the 'stability' of the dictatorial Arab order. And because it is unrealistic to expect the U.S. or any Western government aggressively working to boost political dissent against their closest Arab allies, the way they're doing with Iran or China, we cannot afford the risk of a potentially disastrous hijacking of the Internet freedom by powerful actors to serve geostrategic agendas that are not in our favor," Ben Gharbia wrote.<sup>81</sup>

George Washington University Associate Professor, Marc Lynch, writing on his Abu Aardvark Middle East blog, questioned the wisdom of support to Internet activists if the support does not extend to helping them when they suffer the consequences of their actions.

"This is an issue which has haunted me for years, as I've seen a succession of friends and acquaintances assaulted, arrested, harassed, even tortured for their political activism," Lynch

wrote. He went on to speak of a blogger from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt who was likely arrested and faced legal problems, in part, because of the prominence that Lynch gave him in a newspaper article which raised his profile enough to make him a target in his home country. Lynch wrote that the blogger, Abd al-Monem Mahmoud, “never complained—indeed, he told me that he knew the risks and appreciated the help and the publicity—and neither have any of the other dozens of such activists I’ve talked to over the years. But that does not alleviate the ethical problem in my view. Neither the United States as a government nor civil society-based supporters of the activists have been able to do much to help them when they run afoul of the authorities. And the more that they are encouraged to develop political strategies, the more likely they are to run into such problems. We often have a habit of issuing bad checks to these people, egging them on and encouraging them to take risky actions but then failing to effectively protect them... What were their fans in the West prepared to do when the police started beating them up and getting them fired from their jobs or expelled from school? Not much. If citizen journalists expose corruption in a local government office, who is going to protect them when they are sued for libel or beaten up for their efforts ... keeping in mind that they enjoy no legal protections whatsoever as ‘citizen journalists.’”<sup>82</sup>

In response to questions posed by the author on the extent of U.S. support for social media and activists who are arrested, Tamara Wittes, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, said that the State Department routinely speaks out when bloggers are arrested for peacefully expressing their views. She said the State Department sees a disturbing trend to stifle freedom of expression in the region, from technical censorship to selective prosecutions against citizens:

Certainly, there are governments in the region that seek to control and monitor what their citizens do online, to stifle the potential of these technologies and unfairly target their users. Around the world, our Foreign Service officers follow the cases of these individuals and report on them in our annual Human Rights Reports. In the 2009 reports alone, we cited over 20 cases of bloggers and other Internet activists being harassed or unfairly detained by governments across the Middle East and North Africa. The Department also speaks out on behalf of these individuals in official diplomatic dialogues and in the media. Our officials condemned the imprisonment of Egyptian blogger Kareem Amer and called for his release on multiple occasions.

Secretary Clinton has made Internet freedom a global policy priority for the United States. We view this issue as one of how to apply existing rights to new

***“If citizen journalists expose corruption in a local government office, who is going to protect them ... keeping in mind that they enjoy no legal protections whatsoever as ‘citizen journalists.’”***

*— Marc Lynch, professor at George Washington University*

technologies. We are working hard to ensure that citizens' longstanding rights to freedom of expression and the free flow of information are protected regardless of medium—that the same rights that those citizens and journalists are accorded in the offline world are respected in the online world as well. Having said that, we understand that “Internet activists” are not analogous to “traditional journalists.” The Internet is a new medium for expression, reporting, and journalism, but also for citizen activism and civil society. All of these activities involve the exercise of basic rights (i.e. free expression and free association), online and offline, and we support both types. As the Internet and other technologies evolve, we are committed to ensuring that people everywhere can communicate with each other, express opinions and ideas, and access information, free from fear that their governments or other malicious actors will harass, arrest, or perpetrate violence against them.<sup>83</sup>

# Tweeting Royals and Digital Ministers

Across the region, heads of state; political, religious, and opposition figures; as well as royalty, who at one time may have been skeptical of social media, have begun to recognize its potential to promote their own agendas. Ehab Shanti, a media and communications professional who works in Jordan and the United Arab Emirates and previously served with the UNDP in Jerusalem, sees a need to generate original information and communications technology innovations, instead of creating Arab versions of Facebook or YouTube.<sup>84</sup>

Government leaders have become active on social networks—posting their profiles on Facebook, sending tweets, and engaging with citizens through Web chats. So far, the interactions are limited to questions and answers with a minister on a social media platform, 140-character tweets, or politicians whose online presence is limited to static Facebook profiles, which may have been posted by fans. Facebook groups in support of political leaders, as well as some online media outlets in the region that appear to be independent, have come under scrutiny as being co-opted by their own government’s influence or “soft sponsorship,” observers say.<sup>85</sup>

“Governments are using social media to their benefit,” Ben Gharbia said, adding that supporters had created tens of groups backing Algerian President Bouteflika, or Egyptian President Mubarak’s son Gamal in the run-up to presidential elections in September 2011, producing video and mobilizing small groups before the uprisings of 2011.<sup>86</sup> The Facebook campaign in support of then-presidential contender Gamal Mubarak had been competing with the outpouring of Facebook fan support for Nobel Prize laureate Mohamed ElBaradei, former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, who is expected to run for the presidency of Egypt in elections that were planned for 2011.

The mayor of the Jordanian capital, Amman, Omar Maani, is known to gain popular buzz on Twitter and is among several top government officials, including former Prime Minister Samir Rifai, who engaged in social networking.<sup>87</sup> Rifai became the target of protests over high food and fuel prices and the slow pace of political reforms, inspired by upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt and was sacked in a government shakeup by King Abdullah II. In the days that followed only a few of the former ministers were active on Twitter. In a tweet, Jordan’s former minister of higher education and scientific research, Walid Maani, thanked his well wishers on February 1, 2011, saying, “To those who worked tirelessly, I say thank you. It was a privilege to work with you for the good cause of Jordan”. To followers, these ministers were fondly called the “digital ministers.” The ministers who have yet to adopt social networking, or don’t care to, are called the “analogue ministers,” said Daoud Kuttub, a journalist and media developer in Jordan and the Palestinian Territories.

*Across the region, heads of state as well as royalty, who at one time may have been skeptical of social media, have begun to recognize its potential to promote their own agendas.*



Jordan's royal family embraced online outreach during the reign of the late King Hussein, who died in 1999. King Hussein is said to have been a leading example of Internet outreach for his time.<sup>88</sup> Today, King Abdullah II and Queen Rania are online using Web 2.0 platforms. In the summer of 2010, the queen herself led a "Twisit" (a combination of Twitter and visit) campaign giving online video spiels to raise awareness of Jordan as a tourist attraction along with her Tweets from her travels and activities, in English and Arabic.<sup>89</sup>

Jordanian officials aren't alone in their use of social networking platforms, but they appear to be among the early adopters. In the Palestinian Territories, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad accepts e-mails from followers on his Facebook page, though three e-mail attempts by the author to reach him did not yield a reply. Meanwhile, many other Arab leaders have Facebook profiles in English but do not accept e-mail or friend requests, and it is hard to determine if any of the Arab leaders officially approved the profiles, whether they are official or uploaded by fans or in some cases, foes. They include: Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The Facebook page of Egyptian President Mubarak had content before the revolt, but after mass protests began, the content appeared to have been deleted when checked on January 29, 2011.<sup>90</sup> While Tunisian President Ben Ali was in power, his Facebook page was replete content and photos, but it was replaced shortly after he fled the country by a news report dated January 15, 2011 headlined: "Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali forced to flee Tunisia as protestors claim victory."<sup>91</sup> In Syria, where Facebook, YouTube, Blogspot, and many other sites are officially banned, Syrians subvert the government firewall to access the sites using proxy servers.

Facebook is tolerated even at the highest levels of government: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and First Lady Asma al-Assad have individual Facebook profiles among a robust selection of Facebook fan groups.<sup>92</sup> In the old city of Damascus, cyber cafes lure young people and foreigners by touting their ability to access banned sites.<sup>93</sup> Even with limited access for many in Syria, Facebook's viral nature has given whistle-blowers some measure of protection and has also led to some government accountability in a country where criticism of government or its employees may result in arrest.

Journalist Claire Duffett reported from Syria that when a video posted to Facebook in September 2010 showed two Syrian teachers beating students, the Ministry of Education removed them from their positions. A technology specialist employed at a Damascus-based magazine said he created the Facebook group featuring the video and calling for the teachers' firing after a local news site asked him to help them circulate the footage anonymously.<sup>94</sup> In Saudi Arabia, which announced in November 2010 that it would ban Facebook for moral reasons, and unblocked the site a few hours later, the Saudi elite and international business people are able to access the Internet unencumbered through virtual private networks.<sup>95</sup> And while it is unclear if the Facebook profiles are officially approved, Saudi King Abdullah and the House of Saud are featured on Facebook community pages with content drawn from Wikipedia.<sup>96</sup>



# Conclusion: Social Media's Long-Term Impact

It's still very early in the dawn of the digital age in the Arab world. Just as Arab satellite channels helped revolutionize broadcast news, social media is arguably changing the nature of news and community engagement, which continues to evolve with increased convergence of social media and satellite broadcasts, as seen in Tunisia, Egypt, and other countries of the region. To be sure, blogging and social networking alone cannot be expected to bring about immediate political change. It's the long-term impact, the development of new political and civil society engagement, and individual and institutional competencies on which analysts are focusing.

Social networking has changed expectations of freedom of expression and association to the degree that individual and collective capacities to communicate, mobilize, and gain technical knowledge are expected to lead to even greater voice, political influence, and participation over the next 10 to 20 years. These changes could be said to have accelerated in early 2011. Tunisian exile Ben Gharbia, who plans to return to his homeland from the Netherlands, had been keenly aware of the impact of social media and the yearning among Tunisians to speak freely. Before the revolution, he said: "You cannot take it away from them. They are addicted to free expression. This is what we are noticing, people won't give it up."<sup>97</sup>

According to George Washington University's Lynch: "The real impact of political blogging is still likely to lie in the longer term impact on the individuals themselves, as they develop new political competencies and expectations and relationships. The impact of the new media technologies will likely be best measured in terms of the emergence of such new kinds of citizens and networks over the next decades, not in terms of institutional political changes over months or years."<sup>98</sup>

Before the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, an example of the kind of spontaneous expression that Arabs shared with the world could be seen in the flurry of tweets sent in celebration over Doha, Qatar, being selected to host the 2022 World Cup.<sup>99</sup> It has long been apparent, and the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt only served to reinforce the reality, that social media has changed the nature of free expression to give unprecedented voice to Arabs of all classes across continents. Could social media continue to manifest itself on a scale and in ways that coalesce into a form of pan-Arab unity that has so far been elusive?

*Just as Arab satellite channels helped revolutionize broadcast news, social media is arguably changing the nature of news and community engagement.*

# Appendix 1: Arab Social Media, News, Activist, and Entertainment Sites

A small sampling of Arab Social Media, News, Activist, and Entertainment Sites, some in Arabic and Arabic and English:

- Animation site, Kharabeesh, [www.kharabeesh.com](http://www.kharabeesh.com)
- Arts and culture site, Alhoush Community Channel on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/user/AlhoushCommunity>
- News site, Ammannet, [www.en.ammannet.net](http://www.en.ammannet.net)
- News site, Ammon, <http://en.ammonnews.net>/Social networking site, Arab Friendz, site for singles, [www.Arabfriendz.com](http://www.Arabfriendz.com)
- Tunisian human rights, media and civil society site Nawaat, [www.nawaat.org](http://www.nawaat.org)
- Social networking site, Maktoub's Ashab, [www.as7ab.maktoob.com](http://www.as7ab.maktoob.com)
- Tech news site, ArabCrunch, [www.arabcrunch.com](http://www.arabcrunch.com)
- Video and news site, Aramram, [www.aramram.com](http://www.aramram.com)
- News site, 7iber.com, [www.7iber.com](http://www.7iber.com)
- Google Internet primer for school-age children, [www.google.com/ahlan](http://www.google.com/ahlan)
- Egyptian NGO-sponsored Internet radio and news website, [www.horytna.net](http://www.horytna.net)
- Photo sharing site, Ikbis, [www.ikbis.com](http://www.ikbis.com)
- Social networking site, Jeeran, [www.jeeran.com](http://www.jeeran.com)
- News site, Now Lebanon, [www.nowlebanon.com](http://www.nowlebanon.com)
- Online drama Shankaboot, [www.shankaboot.com](http://www.shankaboot.com)
- Saudiwoman's Weblog, [www.saudiwoman.wordpress.com](http://www.saudiwoman.wordpress.com)
- Saudi Jeans, [www.saudijeans.org](http://www.saudijeans.org)
- Women Living Under Muslim Laws, [www.wluml.org](http://www.wluml.org)

## Appendix 2: Country Profiles

**Sources:** Data on cases of threats to bloggers is from [www.Threatened.GlobalVoicesOnline.org](http://www.Threatened.GlobalVoicesOnline.org) as of December 2010. All other data is from the Arab Media Outlook, Dubai Press Club, 2009-2013 as of 2009.

<b>Bahrain</b>	
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	5
Population (2009)	0.8 million
GDP per capita (2009)	US \$27,260
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	9
Total dailies circulation (2009)	189,000
Total TV Penetration (2009)	98% (Satellite TV Penetration: 97%; Cable TV Penetration: 3%; Internet Protocol TV Penetration: 2%)
Broadband Penetration (2009)	68%
Mobile Penetration (2009)	209%
<b>Egypt</b>	
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	31
Population (2009)	76.7 million
GDP per capita (2009)	US \$2,160
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	19
Total dailies circulation (2009)	4.0 million
Total TV Penetration (2009)	93% (Satellite TV Penetration: 43%; Cable TV Penetration: 0.2%)
Broadband Penetration (2009)	7.4%
Mobile Penetration (2009)	72%

<b>Jordan</b>	
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	1
Population (2009)	5.9 million
GDP per capita (2009)	US \$3,630
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	8
Total dailies circulation (2009)	313,000
Total TV Penetration (2009)	95% (Satellite TV Penetration: 78%; Cable TV Penetration: 1%; Internet Protocol TV Penetration: 0.1%)
Broadband Penetration (2009)	15%
Mobile Penetration (2009)	95%

<b>Kuwait</b>	
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	2
Population (2009)	3.5 million
GDP per capita (2009)	US \$45,920
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	17
Total dailies circulation (2009)	961,000
Total TV Penetration (2009)	99% (Satellite TV Penetration: 91%; Cable TV Penetration: 9%; IPTV Penetration: 0.1%)
Broadband Penetration (2009)	25%
Mobile Penetration (2009)	109%

<b>Lebanon</b>	
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	5
Population (2009)	3.9 million
GDP per capita (2009)	US \$\$7,710
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	13
Total dailies circulation (2009)	396,000
Total TV Penetration (2009)	93.4% (Satellite TV Penetration: 88%; Cable TV Penetration: 1.4%; Internet Protocol TV Penetration: 0.1%)
Broadband Penetration (2009)	19%
Mobile Penetration (2009)	61%

<b>Morocco</b>	
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	6
Population (2009)	31.8 million
GDP per capita (2009)	US \$2,830
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	20
Total dailies circulation (2009)	710,000
Total TV Penetration (2009)	89% (Satellite TV Penetration: 68%; Internet Protocol TV Penetration: 0.3%)
Broadband Penetration (2009)	12%
Mobile Penetration (2009)	88%

<b>Oman</b>	
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	0
Population (2009)	2.8 million
GDP per capita (2009)	US \$21,650
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	8
Total dailies circulation (2009)	274,000
Total TV Penetration (2009)	86% (Satellite TV Penetration: 48%; Internet Protocol TV Penetration: 0.1%)
Broadband Penetration (2009)	9.7%
Mobile Penetration (2009)	130%

<b>Palestinian Territory</b>	
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	1
Population (2009)	4.0 million
GDP per capita (2009)	US \$\$1,680
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	4
Total dailies circulation (2009)	80,000
Total TV Penetration (2009)	93%
Broadband Penetration (2009)	15%
Mobile Penetration (2009)	25%

<b>Qatar</b>	
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	0
Population (2009)	1.2 million
GDP per capita (2009)	US \$93,170
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	7
Total dailies circulation (2009)	211,000
Total TV Penetration (2009)	93.5% (Satellite TV Penetration: 75.5%; Cable TV Penetration: 3.2%; Internet Protocol TV Penetration: 13.5%)
Broadband Penetration (2009)	84%
Mobile Penetration (2009)	169%

<b>Saudia Arabia</b>	
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	6
Population (2009)	25.5 million
GDP per capita (2009)	US \$18,850
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	15
Total dailies circulation (2009)	~1.9 million
Total TV Penetration (2009)	91% (Satellite TV Penetration: 95%; Internet Protocol TV Penetration. 0.2%)
Broadband Penetration (2009)	37%
Mobile Penetration (2009)	130%

<b>Syria</b>	
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	16
Population (2009)	20.3million
GDP per capita (2009)	US \$2,770
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	10
Total dailies circulation (2009)	379,000
Total TV Penetration (2009)	90% (Satellite TV Penetration: 74%)
Broadband Penetration (2009)	0.5%
Mobile Penetration (2009)	45%

<b>Tunisia</b>	
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	23
Population (2009)	10.4 million
GDP per capita (2009)	US \$3,950
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	10
Total dailies circulation (2009)	399,000
Total TV Penetration (2009)	92.5% (Satellite TV Penetration: 92.6%)
Broadband Penetration (2009)	24%
Mobile Penetration (2009)	87%



Yemen	
Bloggers threatened, arrested or released (Dec. 2010)	3
Population (2009)	23.7 million
GDP per capita (2009)	US \$1,170
Number of daily newspapers (2009)	6
Total dailies circulation (2009)	170,000
Total TV Penetration (2009)	61%
Broadband Penetration (2009)	1.6%
Mobile Penetration (2009)	34%

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