



REPORT ARAB POLITICS BEYOND THE UPRISINGS

Mobilizing through Online Media

Why the Internet Still Matters for Change in the Middle East

MAY 9, 2017 — MARC LYNCH

Social media had a starring role in the Arab uprisings of 2011. But since then, authoritarians have cracked down on online activists, and even on casual dissent on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Meanwhile, numerous reactionaries have shown they can use the web just as effectively as the liberals who were its first adopters in the region. Together, these events have unraveled the once-popular narrative that the Internet has an inherent bent toward democracy. Still, state control of communications has been forever disrupted, and online platforms continue to provide the region's most resilient sites for political and social engagement. Usually, they do not directly lead to mass action. However, such a metric underestimates social media's significance. The Internet's churn often occurs beneath the surface: ideas ferment, identities evolve, and coordination happens across geographical and social divides. Authorities may infiltrate and imprison, but online media will certainly be central to the next wave of change, whatever form it takes.

As autocratic regimes have regained their grip on power following the extraordinary moments of early 2011, many politically engaged Arabs have retreated into online spaces to rethink, reshape, and recreate forms of contentious political action. The severe increase in state surveillance and repression of the Internet over the last five years has shaped the way online media is used in Arab countries. But such repressive measures cannot erase the generational impact of the massive increase in the availability and use of social media. Understanding how social media affects politics in this post-uprisings environment requires moving away from narrower questions of political protest. Opportunities for regime-threatening protest may be scarce over the next few years, but political engagement continues to evolve within a rapidly changing information and communications environment.

This is not to deny the role social media played in protest mobilization in the Arab world and beyond.¹ But the shocking surge of protesters into the streets in early 2011 was only one form of political action, and as is often the case, the outcome of a long process of change. It is social media's role in that pre-uprising period of political engagement, experimentation, and mobilization that is most relevant to understanding the current situation.² Then, as now, the power of repressive states posed a daunting obstacle to political mobilization. But during those seemingly stagnant years, activists developed new ways to communicate, to challenge state domination over the flow of information, and to organize. They are still doing so today—and in far greater numbers, across a far wider cross section of society, than in the previous decade.

Social media is only one part of the array of political, economic, social, and institutional factors shaping regional politics. Their unique causal role should not be exaggerated. But nor should it be minimized. Few other areas of social or political life have witnessed such dramatic and rapid change over the last decade. The Internet and social media have created an ever-evolving but quite resilient new informational ecosystem that shapes every aspect of the political environment.

Online media takes many forms, each of which can have different social and political implications. However, there seem to be some political and social effects that all social media platforms share in common.³ Self-selection into communication networks seems to accelerate and intensify the flow of information, but also to direct it through communities of the like-minded. Individual Facebook pages may become centers for deliberation. Individual or group blogs may serve as a primary source of news and opinion within a particular community. Larger, more formal online newspapers and websites may become authoritative sources of alternative news and opinion. Twitter may allow a small group of local activists to transmit their message to a large international audience by connecting with influential journalists or public figures.

The effects of social media may have once been limited to a small group of young urban activists, given the relatively low levels of Internet penetration and the predominance of the English language online just after the turn of the century. Today, that is no longer the case. Consider the penetration of just one social media platform, Facebook. As of June 2016, Bahrain had eight hundred thousand registered Facebook accounts, an effective penetration rate of 58 percent. Iraq had 14 million accounts (37 percent); Jordan, 5 million (62 percent); Kuwait, 2.3 million (57 percent); Lebanon, 3.1 million (52 percent); Qatar, 2.2 million (97 percent); Saudi Arabia, 14 million (44 percent); and the United Arab Emirates, 7.7 million (83 percent).⁴ Survey research suggests that most of those users engage in some forms of political communication or news consumption on social media. In one recent survey, roughly half of Algerians, Jordanians, and Tunisians regularly received news through Facebook, as did 30 percent of Egyptians, 44 percent of Moroccans, and nearly 60 percent of Palestinians.

This does not mean that traditional media has lost its significance. On the contrary, traditional media and social media have evolved together into a complex, interdependent ecosystem. Today, with much greater levels of social media use and significant social media presence by broadcast media platforms, there is even tighter integration with the reporting and discussions on broadcast media.⁵ For most of the decade leading up to the Arab uprisings, the Qatar-based television station Al Jazeera served as a sort of common public sphere for Arabs across the region. Virtually everyone watched, or at least was aware, of its news coverage and major talk show programs, creating a sort of common ground even as most Arabs also consumed media from many other sources.⁶ Today, by contrast, the Arab media has become highly polarized and fragmented, with audiences distributed along sectarian, political, and ideological lines, sharing few common sources of information or ideas. Social media reinforces this fragmentation.

The Overlooked Lessons of Social Media before 2011

In the decade before the uprisings, online media offered distinctly new public-sphere sites for organization, identity construction, formation of new solidarities, and internal argumentation—which however did not seem capable of producing mass mobilization or meaningful political change.

The experience of Egypt's Kefaya, which rose out of the anti-war protests of 2003, represents a critical example of this sort of movement. If judged by its ability to mobilize mass protest or to force meaningful political change, its political experience was one of repeated failure. But Kefaya succeeded in transforming its own members, changing the terms of Egyptian political discourse, introducing new political ideas and solidarities into the public sphere, and inspiring new movements and tactics that would in later years prove central to the revolution. The relationships forged between leftist and liberal activists with young Muslim Brotherhood members during those seemingly useless protests proved vital in the decisive early days of the January 25 uprising. Those young Islamists were themselves manifestly changed by their own participation in these social media and protest networks. As they grew dissatisfied with the Brotherhood's rigid hierarchies and cautious politics, and built friendships outside the group, many ultimately left the Brotherhood. Some did so in response to an internal crackdown toward the end of this century's first decade, and others in response to their experience of the revolution itself.⁷

We should assess the current slate of social media activities and opportunities by those longer-term standards, not by the unrealistic standard of the exceptional revolutionary moment of early 2011. There are now many small, resilient Kefaya-style networks and movements operating on the margins of politics across the Middle East. While they seem weak today, their latent potential should not be underplayed. Today's online activity resembles that in the years before the uprisings, but within a political environment profoundly changed by the aftermath of those uprisings and the reconsolidation of autocratic rule.

The social media of 2016 has a much greater potential reach than did the social media of 2006. It includes far more and far more diverse users across a much wider range of platforms. It tends to be far more organically integrated with print and broadcast media outlets, almost all of which now have robust websites and social media presences of their own. A wide variety of activists and identity groups have developed resilient communities and networks united by shared identities and interests. The extent of social media usage and the experience Arab citizens now have with its potential mean that these experiments will involve a much wider range of engagement and thus a great latent potential for sudden mobilization when a crisis hits or opportunity arises.

A decade ago, blogs and Internet discussion forums were still a novelty, used primarily by a small elite of urban, educated youth. This was both a strength and a weakness. Being early adopters gave young activists the opportunity to innovate and explore the potential of the new technologies without a great deal of competition or official pushback. The

effects of social media were thus felt primarily, and disproportionately, within a distinctive slice of political society. Many studies of social media in the Arab world tended to concentrate on that small group of activists who adopted the Internet early, used it for political and social mobilization, and internalized blogging into their identity.⁸ Such research offered keen insights into their role in political mobilization, but risked neglecting how the Internet was being adopted and used by the much larger nonactivist sector of ordinary citizens.

The situation today is quite different. For one, blogs have been largely overtaken by social media and by larger websites featuring collections of opinion and journalistic voices. More broadly, social media has become ubiquitous rather than exceptional. The high profile of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter during the revolutions of early 2011 brought many more users to those platforms. Social media has now become part of the regular texture of daily life rather than an exotic novelty. As such, this ubiquity makes it less of an independent causal variable and more of an environmental or structural factor for social and political outcomes. Citizens access information, talk politics, and organize for political action in an environment thoroughly structured by social media. The Internet now is less a new ingredient added to a recipe than it is the oxygen in the atmosphere.

The effects of this new media environment are felt widely across a range of political environments in and beyond the Middle East.⁹ Digital media played a key role in Iranian protests against the fraudulent 2009 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and served as a vital virtual infrastructure for the organization of an alternative civil society in the years that followed.¹⁰ In Saudi Arabia, Twitter emerged after 2011 as perhaps the single most important site for political discourse and activity.¹¹ Youth activists across the Gulf found creative ways to use social media to overcome state obstacles and repression, breaking taboos and connecting across social and sectarian divides in new ways.¹²

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube played a critical role during the early days of the Arab uprisings.¹³ There is no need to exaggerate their causal role, given the plethora of motivations and structural forces which went into those mass explosions of popular anger. But social media clearly mattered at the margins. It helped to accelerate and intensify protest movements, through the rapid sharing of information that galvanized protesters and helped them organize. It also helped to link together disparate local and national protests into a unified narrative, and brought that narrative out to a broad global media audience. The global phenomenon of sudden, unexpected mobilizations around focal-point issues seems difficult to disentangle from the worldwide transformation of information.¹⁴

But mobilization to protest was only one dimension of the transformative impact of the new media. Radical change in the structure of political communications has both observable and unobservable effects across a wide range of dimensions.¹⁵ Political communication theorists have argued that social media changes the nature, speed, and content of

information to which different individuals are exposed.¹⁶ People suddenly experiencing a surge of photos, videos, and outraged commentary from within a trusted social movement might be more likely to take action in response. People accustomed to the free access of information experienced in social media might bridle under new censorship provisions. Social media networks might allow individuals who share interests or identities to connect with each other across physical and social distance.

The opportunities created by social media can be seized or squandered by any group. Indeed, social media likely favors populist movements, which can mobilize nationalist or other in-group identities and biases.

Youth activists are not the only users able to exploit the opportunities of new media, of course. By far the most popular social media users in the Gulf are religious figures such as Mohamad al-Arefe, Salman al-Awdah, Nabil al-Awadhy, and Aid al-Qarni, who use their online platforms to spread religious messages, raise money for charitable causes, and to promote their political views. This diversity highlights a critical point: there is no reason to believe that this new information environment necessarily favors one ideological trend over another. The opportunities created by social media can be seized or squandered by any group. Islamists and secularists have each demonstrated the ability to use social media effectively to engage in semipublic internal discussions, to organize protests, to challenge state narratives and to influence mass media coverage. Indeed, social media likely favors populist movements, which can mobilize nationalist or other in-group identities and biases.

The State Strikes Back

Resurgent authoritarian regimes are not blind to these new developments, of course. They have taken increasingly stringent efforts to surveil, repress and censor Internet content and to intimidate or imprison influential users.¹⁷ These efforts, while deeply damaging to the public sphere and to the individuals affected, are somewhat quixotic. Their efforts to deal with particular symptoms will do little to reverse a deep structural change in the nature of political communication. To the extent that they calculate that online activities that do not directly lead to offline mobilization are not immediately threatening—and thus can be tolerated—they may allow these new spaces to survive.

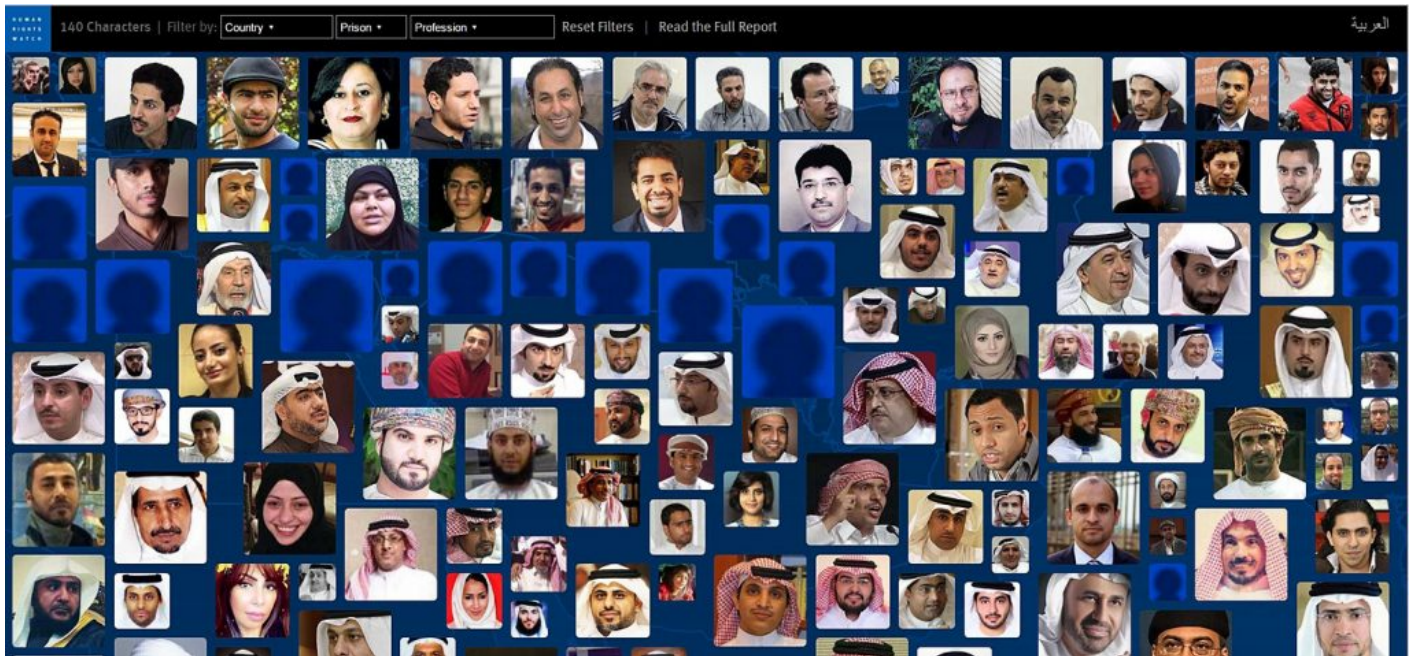
States retain considerable ability to broadcast their political messages and to mobilize their supporters, and have proven remarkably effective at adapting to the new information environment. But states have not been able to reproduce the

sort of total dominance over information that characterized Arab autocracy before the new millennium. Repression now entails observing, managing, and shaping massive online flows of opinion and information rather than suppressing it.

The power of social media to affect politics was in many ways an artifact of its seeming unimportance. The regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, like many autocratic regimes, allowed Facebook to operate in part because it seemed a nonpolitical platform for families and friends to connect. As the potency of online activism became clear, Arab regimes began to view social media as a threat, and took more seriously the need to surveil, control, and curb its use. Bahrain pioneered the deployment of online trolls to swamp opposition Twitter hashtags and pollute political discourse. Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have repeatedly arrested Twitter and Facebook users for postings deemed offensive to the ruling family, imposing harsh sentences to deter others from engaging in even minor forms of subversive speech.¹⁸ Many regimes have used social media profiles to track down and imprison activists, and have regularly infiltrated online groups to manipulate their political and organizational discussions.

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State scrutiny and repression is the most obvious challenge. There has always been something of a self-limiting quality to the political power of online media. In the first decade of this century, activists could mobilize the potential of online media in large part because states did not yet recognize it as a threat. The more that their protests threatened regimes, the more that states would turn their considerable resources toward either shutting down online activism or exploiting its potential on their own terms. During that decade, some regimes cracked down at the first sign of mobilization while others viewed online activism as a useful way to allow small groups of malcontent elites to vent while surveilling their activities. After the attention devoted to social media during the 2011 uprisings, no Arab state will again overlook their potential for activism.



HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH CREATED AN INTERACTIVE WEBSITE TO HIGHLIGHT THE CASES OF 140 SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS AND DISSIDENTS FROM BAHRAIN, KUWAIT, OMAN, QATAR, SAUDI ARABIA, AND THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, MANY OF WHOM HAVE BEEN ARRESTED, TRIED AND SENTENCED TO FINES OR PRISON FOR THEIR ONLINE ACTIVISM. SOURCE: HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH.

As social media grew in power, states cracked down by jailing prominent users for critical tweets, and expanded their surveillance over online communications. The discussion forum Bahrain Online has been blocked in the country since its founding, and its administrator, Ali Abdulemam, was repeatedly jailed and threatened as the forum became more influential.¹⁹ The Saudi writer Raif Badawi was also arrested over his postings on a liberal forum. The Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states have arrested citizens for tweeting jokes or insults directed at ruling families. The repression can extend across borders: in Jordan, a prominent journalist was even arrested for tweeting criticism of the Emirates. Meanwhile, prominent Saudi leaders have also joined Twitter and engaged with other social media platforms in order to shape influential sites of discourse.

This overt state repression of social media both attests to its political significance and changes the nature of its use. Few Facebook or Twitter users now expect social media to provide a safe, unobserved space for organization or semiprivate conversation. Social media must now be understood as, in part, public performance, and as a riskier form of talk than it seemed a decade ago. Indeed, some Arab activists suspect that online groups and platforms that are allowed to remain open are partly tolerated to allow repressive regimes to observe the participants and their possible activities. The effects of such regime interference have been to reduce the operational contributions of social media to political protest and to force online discourse into new directions.

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In response to state repression and surveillance, some communities go “dark,” cultivating private discussion forums open only to members, while others retreat from the most explicitly political topics to refocus on cultural or local issues.

Resilient Sites of Social Media Engagement

The most obvious site of ongoing online engagement is social media itself. There is no single site or platform today that encapsulates Arab social media. WhatsApp is increasingly central to youth communication and social interaction. YouTube has been an indispensable tool for the circulation of videos, often through embedding in other social media sites. Instagram, Snapchat, PalTalk, and many other platforms either have or will take their turn as sites for youth to creatively explore opportunities for collective action, information sharing and online connections.

Blogs and Internet forums were the critical platforms during the first iteration of social media activism in the first few years of the century. Egyptian activist blogs formed the critical infrastructure of the Kefaya movement, playing a key role in disseminating information about police brutality and organizing protests. Bahrain Online brought thousands of Bahrainis into unprecedented open, anonymous political debate, and broke the news of several damaging royal scandals.²⁰ These have become less central to the emergent Arab public sphere. While some famous first-generation blogs have been abandoned, as their authors moved on to other endeavors or suffered political repression, others have taken on fascinating new forms. Arabic language sites rapidly overtook the first generation of primarily English language blogs written by young, urban elites.

Facebook has been perhaps the most important single platform for Arab online engagement. In some countries, it has almost become synonymous with civil society and the public sphere, as the principle site for ongoing, focused dialogue. Facebook does not simply exist as an enclosed universe, of course. Articles on the mainstream media are posted, circulated and discussed on Facebook pages. As Jordanian social media activist Naseem Tarawnah puts it, “Facebook

manages to keep conversations alive long after they've died in mainstream media—widening the ripple effect, like throwing a stone into pond.”²¹ The course that those discussions take can be unpredictable, allowing for seemingly unconnected issues to suddenly resonate with each other and create new political configurations and points of agreement.

Facebook offers many opportunities for community building and the construction of networks of the likeminded. Public pages become sites for active, ongoing discussions of these issues, with far more opportunity for real engagement than in blog or YouTube comment sections or on Twitter. One of the most critical issues for Facebook is its real name policy, in sharp contrast to Twitter where anonymous accounts are common and, increasingly, bots roam freely. Egypt has been a central location for digital politics, both before and after the uprisings.²² Innovations such as the “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page set the standard for the political uses of social media.²³ This real name policy also creates vulnerabilities, of course, as state intelligence agencies can observe the membership and activities of public pages—and typically can gain access to private and personal pages as well.

Twitter typically has far lower penetration and usage rates than Facebook, especially in Egypt, North Africa, and the Levant. Twitter tends to be used by more politically engaged users, and especially by journalists. This gives it the ability to have a disproportionate impact by shaping mass media narratives, disseminating images and events well beyond relatively small networks. Twitter-based social networks themselves tend to be more episodic, transient and superficial than Facebook's. At the same time, it has remarkable power to spread images and ideas extremely quickly, providing a public focal point during moments of crisis.

The primacy of Facebook over Twitter depends on context. In Saudi Arabia, Twitter emerged as one of the most influential and critical public sphere sites in the Kingdom.²⁴ In 2014, a study found that it had the highest per capita Twitter penetration in the world, with more than four million regularly updated accounts.²⁵ Social media has helped to overcome the state's restrictions over public space, including gender segregation and the physical barriers to public assembly and protest. Manal Sharif's campaign to promote the right of women to drive is probably the best known of the social media hashtag campaigns. But beyond specific activist campaigns, Twitter simply became the location where Saudi public arguments took place and where young Saudis learned how to engage with public politics.²⁶

Citizen Journalism Brings Bold New Voices, and Some Rumor Mongering

Beyond these core social media platforms, dedicated citizen journalism portals have been an important node in the broader network of online engagement. Egypt's *Mada Masr* is an especially well-developed initiative allowing activists

and investigative journalists to challenge the state-dominated media.²⁷ Iraq's *Niqash* has provided outstanding reporting from the local level across that war-torn country. Investigative journalism remains difficult in the Arab world, but the civil society organization Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism has trained nearly two thousand journalists who have produced hundreds of local and national investigative reports over the last decade.²⁸

Few of these platforms have broken out to reach a mass audience. But this limited reach can also be a strength. Regimes may be more willing to tolerate platforms that have only a small elite constituency. What is more, building the capabilities and connections of a core constituency can have long-term payoffs for democratic politics and the consolidation of civil society.

Several experiments with citizen journalism portals are particularly instructive, both for their strengths and their failings. Tunisia has a long history of creative Internet activism.²⁹ Several online news aggregators and political platforms, such as TuneZine and Tunis News emerged in the first decade of the century, evolving not only into sources of information but also into sites of oppositional identity formation for a small set of Tunisians inside the country and abroad. Nawaat, one of the most iconic of the citizen journalism platforms, grew out of this ecosystem.³⁰ Nawaat began in 2004 as a platform connecting Tunisian youth and dissident voices in France and inside Tunisia. Its founders and editorial collective had a highly political mission, often clashing with the more apolitical blogging community, which preferred to avoid political issues and repression. Its best-known achievement prior to the revolution was publishing the Wikileaks State Department documents on the corruption of Ben Ali's family.

Within a few months of the revolution, Nawaat registered as an official nongovernmental organization (NGO), in part to allow it to legally take foundation grants. It expanded its staff and professionalized its operations, focusing more on investigative journalism and multimedia. Along with its own journalism, Nawaat also maintained an "open" page where contributors could directly publish. Hundreds of people have contributed to this section, from well-known politicians such as Moncef Marzouki (who later became president) to student activists and citizen journalists. Nawaat did not replace the mass media or reach a broad Tunisian audience, even if it managed to survive and even prosper as an online platform. It cultivates a small but influential elite audience of civil society activists and educated youth, which allows it to punch above its weight in terms of agenda setting.³¹



DEMONSTRATORS OUTSIDE THE SAUDI EMBASSY IN HELSINKI, FINLAND, PROTEST THE DETENTION OF SAUDI WRITER RAIF BADAWI, WHO WAS ARRESTED AND SENTENCED TO 10 YEARS IN PRISON AND 1000 LASHES OVER HIS POSTINGS ON A LIBERAL FORUM. CREDIT FLICKR/AMNESTY FINLAND.

The transition from oppositional collective to professionalized NGO has not been entirely smooth. In the fall of 2011, Nawaat's leadership infuriated many activists by censoring stories and then refusing to honor a journalists' strike, leading to an exodus of some of its founding staff.³² Nawaat's growing prominence also opened it up to exploitation by various political factions or by individuals seeking to discredit their rivals. Leaks to its investigative journalists or posts on its open page could be used to anonymously attack political rivals or spread malicious rumors. Once published on Nawaat, these rumors and leaks would become legitimate fodder for television and newspaper coverage. This became especially problematic as Tunisian politics polarized between Ennahda and anti-Islamist groups in 2013. For instance, a stream of inflammatory leaks alleging Ennahda's penetration of state institutions likely originated with intelligence agencies seeking to fuel popular hostility to the Islamist party.

Jordan, like Tunisia, has a long history of online activism and media that belies its seemingly static political system and suggests the importance of looking beyond formal politics when examining sources of dynamism within authoritarian regimes. In the first decade of the century, a remarkable number of Jordanians developed blogs, new media companies, and online platforms. The government, while concerned about the potential political implications, viewed the emergence of a tech sector and the cultivation of entrepreneurial youth as critically important to its economic future. The leading Arabic-language web portal, Maktoob, was created in Jordan before being sold to Yahoo in 2009. King Abdullah II famously reached out to leading bloggers, even posting comments on critical blog posts and inviting them to the royal palace— a savvy public relations move that also pointedly warned bloggers that the Palace was watching them.³³

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7iber, the citizen journalism hub launched in the spring of 2007 by a group of these young Jordanian bloggers, set out to be a platform for engaging a wide range of voices in a distributed framework that would enable political conversation, investigative journalism, and community building. It relied less on diaspora-based leaders than Nawaat, reflecting the different levels of political openness in the two countries. For the first few years, 7iber attempted to focus on local issues rather than national politics. In the heat of the Arab uprisings of 2011, however, 7iber made a significant advance into the political public sphere by hosting the “hashtag debates.” These monthly events combined physical salons with a robust online component. In one of the best known of these events, the former deputy prime minister, Marwan Muasher, engaged in a frank discussion about the limits of the Jordanian regime’s liberalism and the need for deeper political reforms. Other hashtag debates explored questions such as the forms of constitutional monarchy. Those hashtagged moments of collective discourse faded as the protest movement lost steam, but have been reproduced at the local level in a number of dynamic ways.³⁴ Like Nawaat, 7iber chose to make a transition from a freewheeling collective to a media startup company attracting international grants. This transition to a more formal structure caused problems among the founders and an evolution of the platform’s mission and content.

A number of other widely read online news platforms have become fixtures of the Jordanian media scene, largely filling the space once occupied by weekly print tabloids. Ammon News, for instance, speaks to a broad audience of primarily young Jordanian nationalists who are far less dependable regime supporters than their elders.³⁵ Khaberni speaks to young liberal Jordanians, connecting out to broader Arab issues in an effort to build robust transnational solidarities without sacrificing local specificity. AmmanNet, run by the journalist Daoud Kuttub, became one of the first successful Internet-only community radio stations.

the Jordanian government defended the introduction of a new online publications law in part by pointing to instances of blackmail, in which individuals were warned that failure to pay would mean the dissemination of defamatory information on these unregulated platforms.

As in Tunisia, these online platforms were often abused to spread rumors against political or personal enemies. Indeed, the Jordanian government defended the introduction of a new online publications law in part by pointing to instances of blackmail, in which individuals were warned that failure to pay would mean the dissemination of defamatory information on these unregulated platforms.³⁶ While this problem was real, the draconian new Internet publications laws ranged far more broadly in cracking down on independent online platforms. The new regulations—including a requirement to register with the government—and high profile prosecutions of platforms that crossed some political line forced more restrained coverage, or drove many online platforms offline.

Ongoing Mobilization after the Uprisings

The difficulty of mobilizing large-scale protests in the wake of the uprisings does not mean that activists have stopped using social media to organize politically. Smaller-scale campaigns coordinated through social media continue to appear, offering some evidence of the ongoing discontent and latent potential for organization. Tunisia and Jordan again offer useful examples of such ongoing mobilization linked to social media.



THE JORDANIAN “MANICH MSAMAH” (WE DO NOT FORGIVE) CAMPAIGN, ORGANIZED THROUGH FACEBOOK PAGES AND INTERNET SITES, MANAGED TO LAUNCH MAJOR PROTESTS AND SUSTAINED SMALLER PROTESTS LIKE THIS ONE OVER THE COURSE OF MORE THAN A YEAR. CREDIT FACEBOOK/MANICHMSAMAH

The Tunisian campaign against the Economic Reconciliation Law offers a good example of how social media intersects with traditional civil society and political forces.³⁷ The Economic Reconciliation Law proposed in July 2015 by Nidaa Tounes, the ruling party, aimed to separate economic crimes such as corruption from the transitional justice process in a way that many Tunisians believed would grant impunity to the corrupt elite of the old regime. Resistance to the bill emerged quickly from a network of twenty-four different civil society organizations and a diverse group of activists.³⁸ The “Manich Msamah” (we do not forgive) campaign, organized through Facebook pages and Internet sites, managed to launch major protests and sustained smaller protests over the course of more than a year.³⁹ It used its own social media pages alongside platforms such as Nawaat, combining text and video to publicize the campaign, its protests, and its demands.⁴⁰ This campaign demonstrated how these social media platforms allowed demoralized and marginalized activists to break through and reach a broad public despite general political apathy and an indifferent mainstream media.⁴¹

Young Jordanians also continued to find ways to convert online possibility into political action. After the dissolution of the early 2011 protests in Amman, the Herak movement took root, connecting activists across the south of Jordan through Facebook and other social media. The movement proved able to sustain itself for years against significant odds.⁴² Protests were only the most visible dimension of Herak’s activism.⁴³ Its members argued that the dialogues and

connections promoted by Herak's online presence and real-world meetings were the critical contribution. Herak participants attested to how such participation had changed their understandings of the nature of politics and the possibilities of social change.



@ShaghafJo التحالف الشبابي-شغاف · 19 jun. 2016

غرفة عمليات ومنسقى المحافظات في #التحالف_الشبابي_الأردني_لانتخابات_خريف_لقاء_للتحضير_لخطة_العمل .

PROVINCE COORDINATORS FROM SHAGHAF, A GROUP OF YOUNG JORDANIAN ACTIVISTS, MEET TO PREPARE FOR JORDAN'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN SEPTEMBER 2016. CREDIT TWITTER.

In the summer of 2016, another interesting group of young Jordanian activists, primarily from outside Amman, came together under the name Shaghaf.⁴⁴ As Sean Yom and Wael al-Khatib observed, the Shaghaf activists adapted to draconian regime pressures not by abandoning political challenge but by moving it away from street protests into new domains. More than a dozen local chapters coordinate online through Facebook groups, Twitter, and WhatsApp on initiatives such as an accountability project for parliamentary candidates and local-level political debates. Like the Herak movement, Shaghaf brought new types of citizens into politics, experimented with new forms of online-offline interaction, and worked to advance particular ideas within a relatively closed political environment.

Such Jordanian and Tunisian political campaigns do not amount to an Arab uprising-style protest wave. They should be understood more as ongoing experiments in organization, network-building, and mobilization. They succeed by existing, developing new tactics, spreading ideas, and bringing in new members, not by overthrowing regimes.

How Social Media Really Matters for the Region's Future

Those expecting social media to produce another "Arab Spring"-style tsunami of protest are concentrating on the wrong

things. Instead, the focus should be on how the complex interplay between traditional media and social media is transforming the substance and texture of politics across the region. Online news and social media networks have become a fully normalized, core element of the political space, used by all social and political actors in a variety of ways.

Those activities do not have to be directly political in order to have important effects on social mobilization, the ability of regimes to control information, and the relationship between citizens and the state. As with Egypt's Kefaya movement or other phenomena in the middle of the century's first decade, such forms of political engagement will not lead to major change any time soon. But that is not the correct metric for evaluating their significance. Some of the most dynamic experiments with social media—including both the building of new communities and experimentation with new platforms and methods—take place when formal politics is blocked. Young Arabs, including not only self-conscious activists but a wider circle of engaged citizens, continue to experiment with new ways to communicate and to organize. Such activity may seem apolitical, but this needs to be understood as an adaptive strategy in order to remain under the radar of suspicious states. The political importance of the new relationships, competencies, and networks forged through online engagement will likely only be revealed when sudden new political openings appear.

To be positioned to take advantage of such openings, however, such online platforms face steep challenges. Many online organizations and movements have already succumbed to the extreme polarization and sectarianism that has infected the broader Arab public.⁴⁵ Social media narrowcasting has both benefits and problems in this regard. The distancing of these groupings from the mainstream of society can cost them the ability to speak to a broader public and reduce their generalizable appeal. It can also drive polarization, as clusters of the like-minded value ideological purity and expressive action over moderation and pragmatism. The attractions of in-group insularity can be depoliticizing as well, as users move away from political issues of broad public concern toward issues with symbolic or material significance only to their own smaller groups.

These characteristics of social media are likely to particularly encourage populist and illiberal groupings. And the political change enabled by this online media could as easily be in populist, ethnonationalist, or hypernationalist directions. Every political trend now uses the same online platforms, minimizing any advantage that activists once gained from them. The near universality of online media virtually ensures that political and identity trends that dominate societies will also dominate online spaces.

It is a sobering reality that social media tends to promote the formation of clusters of like-minded users, where more extreme and intolerant views often flourish.⁴⁶

It is a sobering reality that social media tends to promote the formation of clusters of like-minded users, where more extreme and intolerant views often flourish.⁴⁷ The very properties that give social media its mobilizing power also make it especially well-adapted to sectarian and militant groups. Social media tends to reinforce in-group identities and to encourage extremist views within those like-minded communities. It facilitates the dehumanization of targeted groups, and ratchets up emotional and angry responses to their perceived outrages. Islamists across the region have developed online platforms as robust as anything produced by liberals. So too did supporters of Egypt's military coup, ethnic nationalists in Jordan, jihadists recruiting for the Islamic State, Shia militias, and hardline sectarians across the Gulf.

The broader media ecosystem has changed significantly as well. Independent sites must compete for attention within a far more crowded media ecosystem than existed in the period before the uprisings. Online media is increasingly difficult to disentangle from broadcast or print media. Virtually every Arab television station or newspaper has a web presence today, and their stories and content typically drive online discussions. That includes the vast array of media platforms supportive of, and generally funded by, resurgent authoritarian regimes. Nationalist, mobilizing websites use the same mix of online engagement techniques as do the independent platforms, but with the overt or covert support of the state, they typically have far greater resources to amplify their message.

Still, social media has enduring real benefits, as well. Platforms dedicated to a specific political or social constituency can afford to specialize, covering stories of interest to that sector in greater depth and bringing out otherwise neglected issues. Within such specific sectors, focused media platforms can become sites for the formation of stronger and more self-conscious collective identities. They can also become useful sites for the negotiation of political strategies and the articulation of shared interests. In short, new media sites today serve many of the functions once found in offline civil society—but do so across a greater distance and with greater immediacy.

New media spaces are one key reason why, despite surface appearances, there is no going back to the old days of resilient Arab autocracy. This does not mean that the Internet can, on its own, create democracy, or even that the balance of power inexorably tilts away from states toward society. The broader significance of these new online platforms is generational. Today's Arab youth are digital natives, and will continue to use social media to explore new identities, information, and ideas. The effects of this engagement will be nonlinear, introducing new sources of turbulence and

creativity into the political sphere. This will complicate the efforts of resurgent authoritarian regimes to dominate the flow of information, or to restore stability and a sense of normality. Politics will be more turbulent, as new social and political movements will come together suddenly and seize sudden opportunities to challenge authority.

This perspective offers both more and less hope about the transformative power of the Internet than has been common. Social media has degraded some aspects of state power but reinforced others. States and anti-liberal trends have learned to navigate the new informational environment, even if youth activists typically stay a step or two ahead. Social media has encouraged the emergence of new political movements, but not necessarily normatively attractive ones. Ultimately, the most important near-term effect is likely to be the evolution of new networks, identities, and strategies whose importance will only be revealed when the unexpected becomes reality.

About This Project

This policy report is part of “Arab Politics beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism,” a multi-year TCF project supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Studies in this series explore attempts to build institutions and ideologies during a period of resurgent authoritarianism, and at times amidst violent conflict and state collapse. The project documents some of the spaces where change is still emerging, as well as the dynamic forces arrayed against it. The collected essays will be published by TCF Press in June 2017.

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