ICT, Social Media, and the Arab Transition to Democracy: From Venting to Acting

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Abstract

There is widespread use of information and communications technology (ICT) in the Middle East and North African countries. Blogging and social media have played an important role in the recent calls for reform and change. Using these new communication systems and devices, citizens have been venting their anger and frustration with their autocratic governments and rulers. Most recently, the venting has turned into action, as shown by the eradication of the old regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, as well as the ongoing struggle in Syria. The most notable issues include lack of individual freedoms, deteriorating economic conditions, high unemployment, increased corruption, and violent treatment of citizens at the hands of security forces. The Arab Spring, or Awakening, and the events that have since followed have, in part, been promoted by ICT and other means of modern communications. Along with the popular Arab traditions of oral communication as well as Friday and Sunday sermons at mosques and churches, social media were used by organizers of the Arab Spring to call for and coordinate demonstrations against the regimes. Access to this newer media has circumvented the established and government-controlled media such as printed press, radio, and television—outlets bent on appeasing the rulers and misinforming the masses. Arab authoritarian systems have discovered that they cannot simply flip a big red switch to stop the flow of information that they would rather keep hidden from the masses. Further discussed are digital democracies that are currently emerging because of the growing population of netizens, bloggers, and social media political activists throughout the Arab world and the many attempts to silence them.

Look at what’s happening right now in Tahrir Square in Egypt. One of the most spectacular demonstrations of popular activism of courage and determination that I can remember. They are not following leaders. In fact, what’s striking, dramatically striking is how self organized it is. People are forming defense communities to protect themselves against Government thugs, they are forming groups to develop policies, to reach out to others. That’s the way things happen. (Chomsky, 2011)
Since the early part of the twentieth century when electronic mass communication media was introduced, it has been managed by Arab governments who realize the importance of controlling and manipulating public opinion. The physical facilities and contents of their broadcasts are strictly controlled; staff have always been employees of the government. Evidence of the vital importance of radio and television (TV) can be observed in the physical presence of army and security forces and military tanks guarding the buildings of radio, TV, and even major newspaper buildings (CPJ [Committee to Protect Journalists], 2012). Armed forces and strict access to these buildings without prior authorization and body search of the general public is the norm. There are reasons for this, as most of the previous military coups against Arab governments have targeted these institutions in the same way that they targeted royal or presidential palaces, telecommunication facilities, and other important ministerial buildings and military establishments. Cognizant of the ubiquity, importance, and dangers of the Internet infosphere, Arab regimes are trying to catch up with new communication technologies—that is, how to control and censor them.

On January 24, 2010, the Arab ministers of information met in Cairo and approved a joint proposal by the Egyptian and Saudi governments for the creation of a regional office to supervise Arab satellite TV channels (El-Amrani, 2010). The targeted TV satellites for closing by Arab governments included Al-Jazeera, Hamas’s Al-Aqsa TV, and Hezbollah’s Al-Manar. Qatar and Lebanon opposed the plan, while Egypt and Saudi Arabia supported it. One of the most recent examples of a similar type of enforcement is the Arab government’s insistence on installing spyware on smart phones, even before the Arab Spring uprisings (Barrett, 2012).

In order to examine the link between Middle East and North African (MENA’s) citizens’ demands for democracy and the role of the new media technology, it is helpful to look at the Internet penetration in these countries, which have a combined total population of 367 million, which is 5.2% of the world’s population (Emirates24/7, 2011).

The MENA region currently has 65 million Internet users (Sajbl, 2012). Statistics published in 2013 predict that Internet penetration in MENA countries will be at 150 million users, with 25 million handheld devices expected across the region by 2016 (ArabianGazette, 2013). This increase comes “in response to plummeting charges, improved services, and expanding competition among service providers” (Janardhan, 2011, p. 231). Social networks like Facebook and Twitter enjoy a dominant presence among Arab users. Facebook has more than 34 million Arab-speaking users compared with world subscribers of 800 million (Internet World Stats, 2011).

This rapid penetration of the Internet and blogosphere among Arab netizens in recent years has helped the push for political, social, and economic reform in their respective countries by elucidating the unjust prosecution of bloggers and microbloggers (i.e., Twitter users) by Arab security forces. However, it has also resulted in the government’s shutdown of Web sites and Internet cafés. A 2004
study by the Arabic Network of Human Rights Information reported that some 400,000 Web pages had been banned and filtered in Saudi Arabia alone to protect “Islamic values and culture”... The Saudi government also blocked several Shi‘ite and other Islamic Web sites that offer interpretations different from the official Wahhabi line” (Fisher, 2004).

Although some of the Arab demonstrations demanding change in the status quo have been peaceful, their governments have decided to unleash deadly force in their attempts to crush any uprisings, rather than responding to calls for dialogue and reforms. In the case of Egypt, how new technology played an effective role in the January 2011 revolution and the regime change is well documented (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Mari, & Mazaid, 2011; Lotan et al., 2011; Maynard, 2013; Neon Tommy, 2011).

Egypt joined Tunisia, which ousted its strongman Zein Abedeen Bin Ali in a similar peaceful revolt. In both Egypt and Tunisia, the new media technologies—in contrast to old ones—played a pivotal role in the revolutions. Egyptian and Tunisian netizens constructed e-communities that helped to expose the corrupt political and economic systems in their own and other Arab countries. These e-communities helped to mobilize the demonstrations, disseminate news from inside those events, and attracted global media attention to what was taking place in the countries. A 2003 RAND Foundation Report (discussed in more detail later) had predicted what could and would happen in the Arab world as a result of the impact of media technology on citizens’ calls for democratic systems of government in MENA countries.

The infosphere tends to draw young Arabs into the outside world and opens their eyes to a wider global picture different from the one brought to them by their local censored media. Their access to the new media allows them to compare their poor situations and living conditions with those fortunate others among their own compatriots who are members of a privileged ethnic, sectarian, political, or regime-connected group. Such comparisons magnify their unfortunate lot and give impetus to rising demands for a piece of the pie and for the end of oppression, discrimination, government corruption, and misinformation. According to some young Shi‘a demonstrators in Bahrain, their anger and resentment grew stronger when they surfed Google Earth and discovered how their fellow Sunni Bahrainis lived in better homes and neighborhoods compared with the cramped and poorer standard of living dwellings in their Shi‘a neighborhoods—within the same country (Lubin, 2011). Access to social media like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and others has enabled young Arabs to share and vent their dissatisfaction with like-minded political and social activists. However, this expression often comes at a high cost.

As the short-lived Arab Spring turns into the present Arab nightmare—case in point Egypt, Libya, and Syria—the development of new media is growing in importance and accessibility to Arabs who continue to be unhappy with the unfortunate
turn of events post-Arab Spring. Other Arab rulers watch with apprehension the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the monarchies that are attempting to fend off potential revolts in their own countries by promising reforms, increasing citizens’ salaries, subsidizing food stuffs, forgiving mortgage loans, and attempting to persuade their subjects that change should be brought about slowly and without violence. On the other hand, there are internal and external forces that are also bent on pushing their own extreme agendas and hijacking the Arab revolutions that terminated old regimes in the hopes of replacing them with freely elected democratic regimes. Muslim fundamentalists, Salafis, political Islamists, internal anarchists, and sectarianists are equally responsible for political unrest and economic paralysis in the region.

There is no doubt that there is the need for political social change, but there are concerns about how fast and in which direction. The Saudi Shi'a are the agents of political change and liberalization of the Saudi political system. The Shi'a minority have been treated as second class citizens. Their books, Web sites, and electronic communications are subject to monitoring and censorship (U.S. Department of State, 2004). Religious conservative voices are becoming louder than those calling for political and social reforms, and are thus exerting more pressure on respective Arab governments. Hence, Arab rulers become torn between the push for reform and liberalization, and the pull from conservatives and religious extremists. The latter enjoy more appeal among the masses, the poor, and the illiterate technophobic, which unfortunately remain the majority in all Arab countries. In Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah has called for reforms and for giving women limited rights in response to their repeated demands, but there has been a clash with the powerful and extremely organized religious extremists (Tétreault, Okruhlik, & Kapiszewski, 2011).

The conflict between the push for reform and the pull for traditional and extreme Islamic values is expressed by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia who issued a *fatwa* declaring that Saudi liberals are just as dangerous as militant religious extremists (Boustany, 2004). In September 2008, the Islamists called on Saudi leaders to act against “dangerous liberal ideology” and demanded a halt to media campaigns that “promote vice and evil” (Al-Hakeem, 2008). Unfortunately, the postrevolution developments in the MENA region are showing clear signs of less tolerance for freedom of expression, free press/media, respect for citizens’ dignity, and the rule of law. Arab regimes may have changed, but unfortunately the culture of oppression and suppression of expression remains unaltered; and expectations are that Arabs are taking to the infosphere to force a change.

**The Rise of Digital Democracy**

In order to place the Arab Awakening in the context of the digital age, one has to examine the extent of the Internet and social network penetration in the Arab
countries. Published sources and statistics such as Internet World Stats Usage and Population Statistics, BuddeCom, and others reveal a growing trend among the young generation of Arabs to use the Internet, social media, wireless communications, and other blogging tools more readily than their parents.

Janardhan (2011) in his chapter entitled “New media: In search of equilibrium” focuses on developments related to the new media in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in the context of media coverage of events in the Gulf, particularly in Iraq. These developments vary by country. Some, like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, are actively engaged, while others, like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have shown more caution in media experiments. There is a correlation between the economic conditions of an Arab country and the level of Internet penetration (Burkhart & Older, 2003, pp. 48–49). The poorer the country, the less Internet penetration, as the following 2011 figures affirm: Lebanon, 33%; Jordan, 30.5%; Egypt, 26.4%; Syria, 19.8%; Algeria, 13.4%; Yemen, 10.8%; Sudan, 11.4%; Libya, 5.9%; and Iraq, 4.3% (Internet World Stats, 2011).

While the Internet and social media connectivity played a major role in the Arab Spring, wireless communications played an even larger role as mobile and smart phones, texting, and recording are more popular among young Arabs. Of the 30 million Egyptians with Internet access, 70% only use mobile devices and do not access the Web via desktop systems (Internet World Stats, 2012a); in fact, the country has the highest level of mobile-only Internet usage in the world (MobiThinking, 2010). This mobile technology was a valuable and effective communicative tool when the dictatorial regimes blocked Internet access from personal computers.

The combination of communication technology and social media have expanded the already widely used word of mouth in the Arab culture of oral communication in addition to the popular rumor and gossip mills among the uneducated masses. Gatherings after prayers at local mosques and churches and major squares—such as Tahrir Square in Cairo and El-Kornich in Alexandria, among others—also played a major role in communicating across the then leaderless revolution. Sympathizers around the demonstrations’ gathering places collaborated to “re-create” the barred networks using the still-available technologies that consisted of land lines, dial-up modems, and ham radios in order to facilitate communication among demonstrators. Residents around Tahrir Square removed passwords from their wireless networks so protesters could connect and reach the outside world monitoring the events.

New communication technology triumphed over the old-fashioned regime propaganda thanks to satellite TV and a variety of Internet news sources and blogs (Deen, 2004). Such ICTs were also helpful to the protesters. The new electronic media helped liberalize Arab political culture and boost fledgling reform movements. They are also credited with breaking the monopoly of state-owned, government-controlled broadcast systems that have dominated the region. Arab
Internet opposition has been transformed into social and democratic reform movements. Conventional media in Arab countries have been engaged in deflecting and ignoring local and regional social and economic problems and by railing against the old-fashioned slogans of American imperialism and the unsolved Israeli–Palestinian dispute. The state-sponsored media was, by design, blind to domestic news: for example, there is no coverage of intellectual developments or human interest stories (Alterman, 1998). Government-sponsored Arab media has continuously downplayed any opposition and ignored opposition leaders or demonized them as foreign agents, enemies of the state, Muslim extremists, terrorists, Al-Qa’ida sympathizers, and drug addicts, among other labels used by government broadcasters from Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli, and Yemen before their dictators were removed from power.

Prior to the Arab Awakening, ICT provided channels of expression that acted as safety valve, allowing pent-up frustrations with the regimes and economic, political, and social problems to be vented without adverse political consequences for authoritarian Arab regimes, while opening a space for political participation among the citizens. But when some of the Arab Spring governments showed their bloody hands, the venting turned into action as we have seen in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen.

**Blocking and Blogging**

It is no secret that, with very few exceptions, most Arab countries have no working democratic systems of government, and the ruling regimes are usually described as the most repressive and dictatorial regimes in our modern times. Tunisian and Egyptian regimes in particular have long been classified as the top providers among Internet users and bloggers of political activists critical of their respective regimes.

However, they are also known for blocking access to the Web and blogs. This procedure is an organized, government-sanctioned process that goes beyond religious and moral claims, but is extended to and includes what these governments view as political and social activism, criticism of the internal affairs of the country, its leadership, and any content that government officials and censors consider objectionable on any grounds they choose.

In 2003, the RAND Corporation produced a report on information technology (IT) in the MENA countries. The report’s authors analyzed the core results of research and conference papers about the state of IT in the area and forecast what would happen in MENA countries with regards to catching up with the IT revolution. The main conclusion was that countries of the area—with the exception of Turkey and Israel—“will miss the information revolution” because of the “irregular pattern of ICT diffusion and use” (Burkhart & Older, 2003, pp. ix, x). Because the governing regimes of these countries have such strict regulations on the dissemination of information and because creating a reliable IT infrastructure is not a priority
(except in the UAE), as new media communication tools become ubiquitous, the authorities’ priority becomes aimed at controlling information resources and all means of information circulation. Thus, as communication satellites and wireless communications spread throughout the region, they move quickly to control the infosphere for fear of rising demands for democracy and the rule of law.

Arab governments, with support from their local Internet service providers, are known to send fake pages that can attract political activists to log in while government officials monitor users. Political bloggers and Internet activists criticizing their governments are subjected to imprisonment, torture, and death. In 2003, “a Tunisian teacher and journalist called ‘Umm Ziyad’ was imprisoned for a month because she criticized in a blog the education policy in Tunisia” (Khalifa, 2012). Under Mubarak’s regime, the “Muslim Brotherhood” and “al-‘Amal Party” sites were blocked for many years. During the January 2011 demonstrations, several sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and The Original Doctor newspaper were blocked because of their active role in promoting and organizing the demonstrations.

Former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak’s National Party employed many young people to perform government-sanctioned and financed operations, such as promoting his plan of—upon his death—bestowing to his elder son Gamal the next presidency of the country. The government was engaged in improving the picture of Mubarak and the governing National Party by establishing thousands of fake accounts, groups, and pages for the purpose of supporting Gamal Mubarak and his political party, and also for attacking leaders of the opposition like Mohamed El-Baradei and Ayman Nour. The counter group “6th April Youth Movement” uncovered the fake accounts and published the list to warn Facebook members.

Egyptian authorities have also been engaged in blocking and disrupting telecommunication services, aided by national Internet providers such as TE Data, the largest Internet service provider in the country, which has been charged with blocking Web sites. The company offers programs that block sex sites, but it also blocks political blogs. The providers of cell phones and Internet services revealed that their signed contracts with the government require them to cut off services upon receiving official requests/orders from the Egyptian government authorities (Khalifa, 2012).

In Tunisia, many non-Tunisian sites were blocked; among them the Egyptian news site al-Misryun and the Arabic News Network. For Tunisian sites, there are many examples such as: al-Kalimah, Al Barwabab, Al-Nahdah Net, and Tunis News. The most famous case involved blocking Facebook and YouTube. The deposed Ben Ali’s government has had a long history of attacking political opponents and regularly monitoring and hacking opponents’ e-mail and their Facebook and Twitter accounts.

These are just a few examples among many reported by various organizations monitoring government corruption and abuses. Next is a survey of specific cases,
plus evidence of the governments’ extreme measures to prevent the free flow of
information and the people’s utilization of ICT in order to promote it.

The Revolution Was Blogged and Tweeted

Tunisia and Egypt were listed on the 2006 Reporters Without Borders “roll of
shame” as two of the top 13 Internet enemies for repression of intellectual freedom
on the Internet (Reporters Without Borders, 2006). Opposition to the respective
regimes used the Internet and then later, the increasingly popular Facebook applica-
tion beginning in 2008, with Twitter coming shortly thereafter. These were used as
the tools of choice for mobilizing and managing demonstrations. Young people
especially were able to broadcast the January 25th revolution live on the Web,
Twitter, Facebook, and various blogs.

Tunisia

The Tunisian young population is growing with a median age of 30.5 years old, and
approximately 23% of the nearly 11 million Tunisians are under the age of 14
(Central Intelligence Agency, 2013a). They rely on the Internet and mobile phones
for credible sources of news, information, and social connectivity, with 93 mobile
phone subscribers for every 100 Tunisians. Approximately 25% of Tunisians use the
Internet, and some 60% of the Tunisian population stays connected to the Internet
throughout the day. Tunisian females are equally active, with more than 30% of
Tunisian females reported as active users and contributors to Twitter. Forty-two
percent of Tunisian females are regular users of Facebook, and 48% use LinkedIn
(Maynard, 2013). Females were among the most active political bloggers, Internet
users, and critical opponents of the old regime; they posted in French and Arabic
lamenting economic corruption, lack of freedom, and demanding a democratically
elected government. They exposed the Tunisian president and his family—such as
with the graphically simple video of the President’s plane arriving and leaving
Europe’s elite destinations with his wife as the only passenger. The uploading of
that video to YouTube prompted the Tunisian bureaucrats to crack down, not only
on YouTube, but Facebook and others (Howard et al., 2011), and unintentionally
accelerated the revolt against their corrupt president.

Mohammed Bouazizi, a street peddler and protester who had enough with
police brutality and humiliation, decided to immolate himself in public. Sami Ben
Gharbia (globalvoicesonline.org/author/sami-ben-gharbia; https://twitter.com/
ifikra), a leading Tunisian exile and online activist and founder of Nawaat (http://
nawaat.org/portail), hosts a Tunisian collective blog that was an aggregator of these
events. Together, these acts and activists gave strength to a movement that culmi-
nated with the end of Ben Ali’s reign on January 14, 2011 (Radsch, 2012). These
occurrences in Tunisia were eerily similar to what was to come for Egypt.
Egypt

Egypt ranks first among Arab countries for Internet use (Wikipedia, 2013a). Where the median age is 24.8, nearly 33% of Egypt's 84 million Egyptians are under the age of 14 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013b). The use of IT among that age group is prevalent. Egyptians under the age of 34 (70% of the population) are Internet savvy. Nearly 10% of Egyptians use the Internet, with females comprising 36% of Egypt’s Facebook population. Egyptian women made up 33% of the Egyptians actively tweeting inside Egypt during the revolution. Women like Esraa Abdel Fattah of the Egyptian Democratic Academy became vocal opponents to the regime, and Leila-Zahra Mortada documented women’s involvement in the revolution with a popular Facebook album.

The earliest user of the infosphere and blogosphere among the opposition movements was the Kefaya (or Kifaya) “Enough” movement, a Web site created in 2004 about Egyptian elections. It preluded the youth revolt of the Arab Spring of January 2011 and “was the first political initiative in Egypt to truly explore and capitalize on new social media and digital technology as its main means of communication and mobilization” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010). Egypt’s opposition has since relied on blogging and social media to call for reform and subsequently to mobilize the masses and coordinate the revolution.

Active young bloggers have covered the government’s abuses of human rights, corruption, and fabricated elections—issues not covered by the obedient, government-controlled, and bankrolled media. The blogosphere and mobile phones became the popular means of physically rallying opposition to Hosni Mubarak’s regimes in public squares across Egypt (Sakr, 2007), and many of these bloggers have suffered for their actions at the hands of Mubarak’s secret police. In 2007, Egyptian blogger Abdul Kereem Suleiman was sentenced to four years in prison for writing about sectarian clashes in Alexandria online—“The case represents the first time that an Egyptian blogger has stood trial and been sentenced for his work” (CPJ, 2007). “Free Kareem” rallies were held in April 2007 in cities as diverse as Athens, Berlin, Bucharest, London, Oslo, Ottawa, Prague, Rome, and Washington, DC.

In the 2007 article “Egypt’s bloggers do it better,” the online European magazine CaféBabel cited Reporters Without Borders stating that Egyptian bloggers were “not only commentators, but they also engage in investigative journalism” (Sankowska, 2007). The article goes on to mention that in November 2006, Egyptians posted a video on YouTube displaying the torture of Emad al-Kabir under the watchful eyes of police colonel Islam Nabih. According to the article, “The video is one of the first pieces of evidence used to express the government’s malfeasances.”

Hidden mobile phones were used to uncover and post on YouTube voting frauds and ballot-stuffing during a referendum proposing amendments to Egypt’s constitution, further undermining the Mubarak regime. Thus, Egyptian authorities
blocked YouTube and DailyMotion for extended periods of time. In 2008, the government blocked Facebook for a month when they realized electronic communication among Egyptian citizens was something to be feared. The state security forces responded in the only way they know how to react to dissent—imprisonment, torture, and death.

Mubarak’s security forces in Alexandria tortured and killed Khaled Sa’id, a young Egyptian blogger and businessman. Subsequently, a Facebook page was created by Wael Ghonim, a regional executive for Google who wanted to memorialize the young Egyptian blogger. The Web page showing his tortured body generated interest, just as Bouazizi’s self-immolation generated so much interest . . . because of the way they lived and died. Reports revealed that the “We Are All Khaled Sa’id” page on Facebook was visited by more than 1.3 million supporters on the Arabic page and more than 100,000 visitors on its English-language page. As in Tunisia, a Facebook page became a logistical tool to help organize democracy activists in the country. This and other blogs helped to widely disseminate information on the revolts throughout the Middle East.

One day after the collapse of the Tunisian regime, invitations to a huge Egyptian demonstration were posted on Facebook. January 25th was chosen because it was the “Egyptian Police Day,” which is an official holiday in Egypt. The relationship between the police and Egyptians is extremely poor because of the commonly known practices of maltreatment, torture, and killing of citizens by the hated security forces. According to Khalifa (2012), the invitations were posted on the following three popular Facebook pages:

1. *We are all Khaled Said.* Named after Khaled Sa’id, a young Egyptian blogger and professional who was arrested, tortured, and killed by the Egyptian police in Alexandria. This was the most visited Egyptian page on Facebook. By February 14, 2011, the page had 804,000 members.

2. *6th April Youth Movement.* The page had 53,000 members, and the group had 93,000 members. The group was very popular in 2008 and therefore more recognizable on Facebook among Egyptian netizens.

3. *ElBaradei President of Egypt 2011.* The page was created by Dr. Mohamed El-Baradei, Egyptian diplomat and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for his work as director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency from 1997 to 2009 when he returned to Egypt after retiring from his post in Vienna and began his call for political reform. This page had 244,000 members.

The *Rassd News* was also one of the main sources of news and information about Egyptian demonstrations on Facebook. The page had about 250,000 members before being hacked and replaced by a new one. It claimed approximately 150,000 members. The *Original Dostour* newspaper page was another page that
covered news of the demonstrations through its journalist bloggers. This page had approximately 110,000 members (Khalifa, 2012).

In addition to Facebook, Twitter played a major role as a tool in managing and disseminating news from and to demonstrations (Maynard, 2013). Twitter was used in 2008 by organizers of the “6th April Youth Movement,” which called for a nationwide strike in all of Egypt on April 6, 2008. The strike was very successful, and Twitter became more popular among Egyptian organizers during the January 2011 events. Rassd News, The Original Doctor Newspaper, and “We are all Khaled Sa‘îd” accounts were the most active on Twitter, which carried blogs by famous politicians and challengers to Mubarak, like Dr. Ayman Nour and Dr. Mohammed El-Baradei. Both bloggers and tweeters served as reporters publishing news, information, photos, and videos about the demonstrations and the violent clashes they encountered from the security forces on the streets of Egypt.

Although Egypt had been boiling for a long time as a result of the economic mismanagement and Egyptians’ unhappiness with the autocratic and corrupt Mubarak regime (researchers at think tanks, policy analysts, political commentators, and scholars were monitoring the fragile and unstable situation), no one could have predicted how quickly events would unfold.

On Tuesday, January 25, 2011, more than half a million Egyptians filled the streets in eight major Egyptian cities; numbers soon rose to millions, and calls for more demonstrations were renewed on a daily basis. Both Facebook and Twitter were used to announce news and calls for gathering on the “Friday of Anger” January 28, 2011—another day of organized protests where hundreds of thousands of citizens gathered in areas throughout Egypt. According to activist and technologist Ahmad Gharbeia, the role of the Internet was critical on January 25 as the movements of the protesting groups were arranged in real time through Twitter. Everyone knew where everyone else was walking, and the organizers could advise on the locations of blockades and skirmishes with police (Elkin, 2011).

Reacting to the massive demonstrations against the regime, the government security forces cut off access to Facebook and Twitter. The shutdown began on Friday, January 28th at midnight, resulting in total shutdown of Internet connections in and out of Egypt. At 1:00 a.m., all cell phone networks ceased to operate. At 2:00 a.m., BlackBerry service was also cut off (Neon Tommy, 2011). Egypt was temporarily disconnected from the rest of the world by Mubarak’s security forces in their last-ditch effort to suppress the Egyptians and crush their demands for freedom and dignity. But by doing this, the government gave the revolution a stronger voice and more support from among the various social and economic strata in Egypt, thereby aiding in adding millions more to the demonstrations that culminated in a total of 10 Egyptian cities participating at the height of the revolution (Al Jazeera, 2011).

In the first three days of the demonstrations, January 25–27, 2011, Egyptians were particularly active on Facebook and Twitter managing directions, helping with
organizing the demonstrations, and broadcasting audio/visual materials from inside. Some published statistics on the flow of information on social media from January 25 to February 10, 2011 reveal the following: using mobile devices, Egyptian tweeters were active in and finding each other within an average spatial distance of between 65.2 m on February 4, 26.7 m on February 5, and 11.02 m on February 11 (Walters, 2012). The distance between tweeters was reduced from day to day and helped with mobilization of crowds, allowing them to find each other and coordinate their activities (Table 1).

Rassd News posted 57 video clips, 400 photos, 367 Web links, and 10,584 tweets; “We are all Khaled Sa’id” showed 61 video clips, more than 200 photos, and 100 Web links; and The Original Dostor wrote more than 500 tweets (Khalifa, 2012). On the “Friday of Anger,” which was so labeled by the “We Are All Khaled Sa’id” Facebook page, the average increase in membership was about 20 per minute. The page had 400,000 members before January 25, 2011 and grew to 600,000 by February 9, 2011. Five days later, the number of members increased to 804,000. This equates to approximately 20,200 members joining the page daily within a span of 20 days (Khalifa, 2012).

Another very popular example of a promotional piece for the revolution was a viral video that served as the rallying cry for the 2011 revolution uploaded on January 27. It has had millions of hits http://www.viralvideoaward.com/jan-25th-take-whats-yours/

Table 1: Use of Mobile Devices by Egyptian Tweeters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date in 2011</th>
<th>Total Number of Tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 4</td>
<td>2,268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 5</td>
<td>2,176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 11</td>
<td>5,272</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Walters (2012)

Iraq

In 2003, Burkhart and Older assessed: “In Iraq, the prospects for any development, let alone an information revolution are bleak.” Today, a decade later, after trillions of U.S. dollars spent, and over a hundred thousand civilian lives lost as a result of the unjustified invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Iraq Body Count, 2013)—although exact calculations of deaths have been noted to be extremely difficult to estimate and lower than actual numbers—the newly elected government of Nouri al-Maliki has been edging away from democracy. He has taken advantage of the Iraqi constitution’s ambiguities to establish personal control over key security institutions, including the Counter Terrorism Command. His critics have accused him of using these institutions to silence his political opponents (Ross, 2011).
Al-Maliki’s government has also been subsidizing journalists and political opponents with cash and land to gain favors with them and the media. Following popular demonstrations in February 2011, Iraqi security forces have reportedly beaten and arrested hundreds of journalists, political activists, and intellectuals (Ross, 2011). As stated earlier, Iraq has one of the lowest Internet penetration rates in the Arab World. According to Facebook statistics, out of a population of 32 million, only about 2.5 million are Internet users (or 8.2% penetration; Internet World Stats, 2012b). However, as of July 2013, “a major comprehensive survey” revealed increased use of social media in Iraq, with 77.9% of Internet users having an account with a social media service—with Facebook being the most popular (Khaleej Times, 2013). Ironically, the most recent concern for Iraq is that with the rising tension in the country, the social media realm has largely been used as a “place for sectarian hatred” (McEvers, 2013).

Libya

As with Tunisia and Egypt, Libyan bloggers and social media activists can also be credited with igniting a revolution and uprising against their former President Muammar al-Qaddafi’s 60-year-old regime. For 42 years (1969–2011), Qaddafi established a zero-tolerance policy of criticism toward him or his government. Media was strictly censored and controlled. Anyone who defied the president or tainted the nation’s reputation could be sentenced to life in prison or receive the death penalty (Wikipedia, 2013c).

Like most MENA countries, Libya’s media is owned and operated by the government, which as early as 2007 has allowed nongovernment-owned newspapers and satellite TV services to be owned and operated by Qaddafi’s sons. According to the 2009 data of the International Telecommunication Union, there were approximately 82,500 Internet subscribers and 354,000 users. A single government-owned service provider offered access to an estimated 5.5% of the population (U.S. Department of State, 2011). The government reportedly monitored Internet communications. According to a 2009 report by the OpenNet Initiative, a partnership among several universities to analyze Internet filtering and surveillance, authorities selectively blocked some opposition Web sites and occasionally blocked others (U.S. Department of State, 2010). ICT penetration in Libya remains modest, with 1.1 million fixed-line and 5.0 million mobile cellular telephone subscribers for a combined fixed-mobile density approaching 100 telephones per 100 persons (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011).

In January 2011, the government began filtering some Web sites, including YouTube, after the posting of videos of demonstrations by the families of the Abu Salim prison massacre victims and of videos of Qaddafi’s family members attending parties (Reporters Without Borders, 2011). Other independent and opposition Web sites were also blocked that month, including opposition sites such as Libya
al-Youm, al-Manar, Jeel Libya, Akhbar Libya, and Libya al-Mostakbal, according to Human Rights Watch; access was later restored to some of the sites. Libyan political activists used e-media such as Al-Manar and Libya Alyoum, based in London, to carry statements and reports from inside Libya and were widely credited with spurring support for the protests among Libyans abroad, especially in the United States and Europe (U.S. Department of State, 2010).

Like their fellow revolutionaries in Tunisia and Egypt, Libyans used social media networks as organizing tools and as broadcasting platforms. Libyan bloggers disseminated news and information internally and to the outside world through YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. But unlike the situations in Tunisia and Egypt, the Libyan regime had to be removed with help from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) airpower and military aid.

NATO allied forces used Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and help from Libyan resistance at home and abroad as part of a wide range of sources of information, ranging from unmanned aerial drones to TV news, to help determine potential targets for air strikes in Libya and to assess their success (Bradshaw & Blitz, 2011). Many remote Internet users contributed to the fight from outside the region of Libya during this struggle. NATO enlisted nonmilitary personnel to help them uncover enemy plans. These “personnel” monitored social media feeds from their home countries. They spent time aggregating messages, synthesizing the data, and then passing it on to officials. At times, the information provided resulted in very precise and accurate accounts about a planned plot or attack; some successfully foiled. “NATO officials have acknowledged that social media reports contribute to their targeting process—but only after checking them against other, more reliable, sources of information” (Smith, 2012).

Since Qaddafi’s ousting, the first free elections in decades have been held, the freedom of press laws have also been upheld with many newsworthy Arabic TV stations and newspapers covering the ongoing transitional events more objectively, the number of Libyan Facebook users has reached 800,000 (U.S. Department of State, 2012, p. 13), and two of the most popular Libyan youth movement Twitter accounts (@Feb17Libya and @Shabab Libya) together now have 150,000 followers (BostInno, 2011).

Syria

Even though Bashar al-Assad is credited with opening up his country to Internet access soon after inheriting the presidency from his father, his country is going through an internal political struggle that has developed into a civil war. Severe measures to curtail personal and political freedoms have been taken by the Syrian regime, including a ban on social networks. Human Rights Watch reports that the Syrian government tampers with the very fabric of the Internet, blocking access to wireless communication, Internet, and social media, and restricting the use of the
basic electronic protocols that allow people to send e-mail and construct Web sites. Security forces have held online writers incommunicado and tortured them simply for reporting stories the government did not wish to see told (Human Rights Watch, 2005, p. 72). There are about 580,000 Facebook users in Syria, a 105% increase since the government lifted its four-year ban on February 9, 2013 according to Fadi Salem, director of the Governance and Innovation Program at the Dubai School of Government (Bulos, 2013). With foreign journalists barred from the country, dissidents have been working with exiles and using Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to draw global attention to the brutal military crackdown on protesters that has killed thousands of people and has led to mass arrests in the last nine weeks. The Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page, which now has more than 180,000 members, has been a vital source of information for dissidents (Preston, 2011). Syria is known as one of the most dangerous places for foreign journalists to visit. “A pro-Assad Syrian businessman based in Kuwait . . . announced on Kuwaiti TV that he would pay $140,000 to anyone who seized foreign reporters and handed them over to government security forces” (Dettmer, 2013). To quote the Syrian blogger Khaled al-Ekhetyar, “Web tastes freedom inside Syria, and it’s bitter,” and that for personal safety reasons, “many online journalists used pseudonyms” (Worth, 2010).

Despite these restrictions, Syrians continue to find new ways to circumvent online censorship and surveillance and have rapidly taken to the Internet as a means of getting news into and out of the country. As one prominent Syrian human rights activist explained, “the Internet is the only way for intellectuals to meet and share ideas in Syria today” (Human Rights Watch, 2005, p. 66). However, the Syrian government is becoming more clever and advanced in its use of the Internet and social media—it is able to disperse information while blocking local hosts (Chozick, 2012). A recent example of this behavior was in July 2013, when President al-Assad used his Instagram and Facebook accounts to disperse photos of himself acting as a civil leader concerned about the well-being of the Syrian people and showing affection and compassion to the injured. The act has been criticized by activists and others as “propaganda” and “a despicable PR stunt” (Karam, 2013). Both social media applications plus YouTube videos were used to disperse dozens of images that the report claims is “completely removed from the reality on the ground” as more than 100,000 people have been killed since the uprising in 2011 in opposition to the Assad regime (Karam, 2013).

Yemen

While Yemen’s Internet usage has more than doubled from 6.89% in 2008 to 14.9% in 2011 (Internet World Stats, 2012c), Yemen has historically and consistently had one of the lowest Internet penetration rates in the Arab world largely because of the lack of expertise in using technology products as well as the lack of funds to
purchase them (Opennet.net, 2007). The country’s ICT infrastructure and many (but not all) media outlets have been strictly controlled by the Ministry of Information. Freedom of speech is not freely permitted, and journalists are prosecuted for reporting on “sensitive topics” (Opennet.net, 2007, p. 2).

Yemen’s Arab Spring piggybacked the Arab Spring movements in Tunisia and occurred almost simultaneously with Egypt’s revolution, partly as a demonstration of solidarity with Egypt, but also in protest of their own repressive conditions. The demonstrations eventually resulted in the end of President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s long reign of corruption and economic despair. The Internet was key in getting people to gather in the capital of Sana’a in January 2011 for the initial protests. Twitter was an essential source for real-time information from citizens as many journalists could not obtain visas to report on the up-to-the-minute happenings, even though the use of such tools by Yemeni citizens involved the risk of having their device tracked by government.

Even under the post-Arab Spring government, Yemen is still considered a country with “pervasive censorship”—meaning it has been classified by the OpenNet Initiative as an entity that censors or filters “political, social, conflict/security, and Internet tools,” and invokes imprisonment and other harsh punishments for defying government regulations (Wikipedia, 2013b).

**Digital Venting in the Gulf States**

Arab Gulf citizens are the most cyber-connected in the Arab world. This has recently become a double-edged sword for the rulers of this area because of the fear of following in the footsteps of their counterparts in the Arab Spring countries. Gulf Arab netizens are also calling for political, social, and economic reform in their Gulf kingdoms and sheikhdoms. Twitter’s platform for public opinion is emboldening citizens in the Arab Gulf States to exchange views on delicate issues in this deeply conservative region despite the strict censorship that controls old media and extends to new digital media. Unfortunately, these Gulf netizens discovered that they were not immune from the same mistreatment that befell their fellow netizens and bloggers in the rest of the MENA countries.

**Bahrain**

With Internet penetration rate of 77%, a history of strong government censorship, and full control over the media, Bahrain has a history of intimidating bloggers and netizens whose views are not shared by the government. The kingdom of Bahrain witnessed its own Arab Spring in 2011 as clashes between the majority Shi’a population (which is about 70% of the Bahrainis) took to the streets demanding social and political rights comparable with those enjoyed by their fellow minority Sunni countrymen. Here again, the Internet and social media were used to call for and
organize demonstrations, and also to emphasize the economic, social, and political disparities between the privileged Sunni minority and the Shi’a majority. In order to crack down on the demonstrators, the kingdom had to rely on the GCC security forces “Peninsula Shield” led by the Saudi forces to quell the mostly Shi’a uprising. King Hamad has recently announced that he is directing his government to establish some form public representation to give his subjects a voice in the otherwise autocratic rule of the kingdom.

BahrainOnline is a popular blog among members of the Shi’a opposition as well as Sunnis loyal to the ruling family. In 2002, Bahrain’s Information Ministry censored Internet sites on the grounds of “inciting sectarian or propaganda lies, sparking activist protests” (TheAge.com, 2007). Several other sites were also censored for discussing an alleged plot to maintain Sunni domination. In 2002, the opposition Shi’ite group successfully used the Internet to boycott the national election (Janardhan, 2011, p. 228).

The Web site “Mahmood’s Den” is one of the thousands of blogs that have sprung up across the Arab world and provides a venue for dissent. According to its creator, Mahmood Al-Yousif (a.k.a. “the Blogfather”), the frustration with leadership is at a boiling point, and these harassing techniques are symptomatic of the leadership’s realization of this fact. Al-Yousif pointed to 13 cases that were brought against Bahraini journalists that showed how the government turned its attention to the Internet. In 2007, he was taken to court for criticizing the Minister of Municipal and Agricultural Affairs, Mansur bin Rajab. Al-Yousif criticized bin Rajab for saying that his ministry did not shirk its responsibilities following the December floods that killed many Bahrainis.

In 2005, the Bahraini moderator of an online discussion forum and two Web technicians were detained for two weeks on charges of defaming King Hamad (Middle East Online, 2005). Most recently, bloggers and political activists like Maikel Nabil Sanad post on events that precede and follow the revolution and the persistent conflict among the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, President Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the rest of country. According to Sanad (2011), an important factor in preventing the Egyptian army from shooting at its people was that it was using American-made weapons against a large peaceful protest by an army that had very special ties to its American counterparts. This would not only have serious repercussions on Egyptian–American army relations, but might further damage the American image in Egypt, the region, and perhaps the world. That argument still holds true, even though protestors found that canisters of tear gas used by the Egyptian police were American made (Wali & Sami, 2011).

In 2011, a Royal decree was issued to rectify previous harsh sentences handed down for some 20 protest-linked suspects, including a 20-year-old woman sentenced to a year in prison for reciting poetry critical of the government’s effort to crush a Shi’i-led uprising against the Sunni monarchy (Rebhy, 2012).
Kuwait

Kuwait ranks among those countries with the highest Internet penetration at 74.2% of the population having access to the Internet and social media (Internet World Stats, 2012d). In spite of its relatively democratic system, it has its own political upheavals with constant conflict and clashes between the Emir and his Council of Ministers on one hand, and members of the National Assembly—in particular the ultraconservative Islamists—on the other. Kuwaitis have used various forms of communication for sound political and electoral objectives, including calls for women’s civil and voting rights and inclusion in the legislative and executive branches of government.

Fears of the spread of the Arab Spring movement to the Gulf States have prompted GCC countries, including liberal Kuwait, to clamp down on antiestablishment bloggers and online political commentators. Kuwait has jailed several opposition tweeters and former MPs (Members of Parliament) on such charges, and many others have been tried for a variety of offenses that range from conspiring to overthrow the government to insulting the emir (News24.com, 2013). The proposed “Combined Media Law” approved by the Kuwait’s Cabinet of Ministers stipulates a jail term of up to 10 years for insulting God, the Prophet Mohammed, his companions and wives, and other prophets. The same penalty applies to those instigating the overthrow of the regime, and stipulates a fine of between $175,000 and $1.05 million for criticizing the emir or the crown prince (Al Arabiya, 2013).

This law is in contrast to earlier efforts such as when in October 2007, a group of Kuwaiti civil society organizations, including the Kuwait Transparency Society, published the “Vision of Kuwait for Reform.” The vision called for the endorsement of a bill on the Right to Information in order to achieve transparency in the public sector and the review of press law to guarantee freedom of media (Almadhoun, 2010). Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders strongly lashed out at the new media law describing it a “draconian” and urged parliament to reject it (News24.com, 2013).

Additional efforts to regulate the telecommunication industry prompted some members of Kuwait’s National Assembly to pass the first reading of a law to establish a government authority to regulate the telecommunication industry in the country. The proposed new organization, modeled after the Saudi Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC), would be given the authority to control the mobile and landline phone sectors, as well as Internet providers, including restricting or banning certain services and applications such as the recent blocking of Viber applications—a protocol for smart handheld devices used for texting, sending images, audio files, etc. (Reuters, 2013b).

Yet fears of a Gulf Arab Spring have resulted in abandoning the spirit of moderation after 2007, and increasing the number of arrests and imprisonments of bloggers and political activists (including a former member of the National Assembly on
charges of insulting the emir). The verdicts of these trials produced protests from international organizations like Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders. Most recently, a young blogger by the name of Hamid Al-Khalidi who is part of a growing list of young activists in Kuwait and across the Arab Gulf was targeted for “electronic crimes”—that is, voicing the very same longing for freedom, justice, and opportunity. Just days before Al-Khalidi’s sentencing, the Kuwaiti appeals court extended the jail term of another Twitter user, Bader al-Rashidi, who tweeted criticism of the Kuwaiti government. He, too, was sentenced from two to five years on charges that he attempted to instigate a coup and insulted the country’s emir. In the past year, Kuwait sentenced some 10 online activists (among them a woman, Huda al-Ajmi) to various prison terms on charges that ranged from Twitter and blog posts insulting MPs or the emir, to inciting protests (Associated Press, 2013).

According to Mohammed Al Humaidi, a lawyer and director of the Kuwait Society for Human Rights, “The government of Kuwait and other Gulf governments have begun to feel the danger of Twitter that toppled presidents and governments in the Arab countries and it is clear from the way they are abusing many Twitter users with these false charges” (Salama, 2013b).

On July 30, 2013, in a surprising move, Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah pardoned every political activist who had ever been sent to prison (some up to 11 years) for insulting him “especially online,” and added, “By the will of God, we are heading towards a new phase of this legislative term, where the country will witness a promising launch towards progress . . . and development” (Westall & Lyon, 2013).

**Oman**

In spite of calls for democratic reforms during the Arab Spring, the opposition did not gain momentum. The Omani’s *Internet Service Manual* details a long list of prohibitions, by which any public Internet service provider must abide, including: (1) defaming His Majesty, the Sultan, or members of the royal family; (2) inconsistency with current laws of the state; (3) undermining confidence in the fairness of the government; (4) containing false data or rumors; (5) anything tending to the hatred of or degradation of the government; or (6) promoting political or ideological ideas conflicting with the country’s current system.

Private companies operating in Oman are not allowed to use encoding devices without permission of a competent authority. Bodies governing the censorship process, even the rules governing the methods of censorship, are not readily available to the public. The Omani state-run media outlets do not feature debates or commentaries on political issues. In November 2005, a wave of arrests of protesters calling for political reform was followed in 2006 by government action against bloggers in general, and the online site “Sabla” in particular, on political grounds. In
2012, more than 50 activists were arrested for involvement in online and offline protests, and many received prison terms of up to 18 months.

Omanis are active users of the Internet, more than 68% of the Omani population used the Internet in 2011 (Freedom House, 2012). The country’s public prosecution issued statements threatening to take legal action against anyone publishing “offensive writing” or “inciting protests” via Facebook, Twitter, or personal blog pages. However, Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said, who has ruled for 43 years, issued a royal pardon for anyone convicted of “information technology crimes,” a move—albeit temporary in nature—that was hailed by human rights organizations. According to the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (n.d.):

Debate websites such as the Omani network website known as “Sabla” (http://www.omania.net) are the only outlet for discussing local affairs. Although the discussions are under pseudonyms, this does not prevent the Omani authorities from arresting and questioning the contributors to these websites, and subsequently sentencing them to imprisonment for one year with a stay of execution. (p. 160)

One such user of influence is the Omani activist Tiba Almauli, a member of the Omani Shura Council who later practiced political activism through the “Sabla” forum by writing a large number of posts using a pseudonym. Almauli was arrested and questioned by the Omani authorities in May 2005 about her writings and postings critical of the increase in the prices of gasoline, eventually leading to an 18-month prison sentence for criticizing senior state officials online. Later, the Court of Appeals reduced her prison sentence to six months, and in 2006 she was released from prison. On March 22, 2004, poet and human rights activist Abdullah Al-Riyami posted an online article demanding the elimination of censorship of the Internet (CPJ, 2004). Banned from appearing in the media, he continued to write online at http://www.kikah.com and was imprisoned from July 2005 until the beginning of 2006.

Qatar

In a recent meeting of the Arab Summit held in Doha, some Arab leaders including the then emir of Qatar urged their counterparts in the region to view the Arab Spring as a wake-up call for social and economic reform, and urged his fellow Arab rulers to use ICT to address some of these issues. In 1995, the same emir abolished the Information Ministry (known for being the formal government propaganda machine in the Arab world) and with it, press censorship. This positive move was followed in 1996 with the establishment of Al Jazeera, the first example of Western-style satellite TV in the Arab world. It should be noted that Al Jazeera came about as a result of ideological and political disputes between Qatar and Saudi Arabia.
Even with its Western-style debates of sensitive political and social issues, *Al Jazeera* has to walk a fine line and avoid upsetting its Qatari owners, hosts, and investors.

While these are positive Qatari steps forward, the step backward was the passing of a press law that allows the imprisonment of journalists for work the government finds offensive or politically unacceptable (*Agence France Presse*, 2006). As recently as December 2012, the government sentenced the Qatari poet Muhammad ibn al-Dheeb al-Ajami to life in prison for an Arab Spring-inspired verse that officials claimed insulted Qatar’s emir and encouraged the overthrow of the nation’s ruling system. The verdict was passed on this third-year college student of literature at Cairo University after spending almost one year in solitary confinement (*Associated Press in Doha*, 2012).

With the younger emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani replacing his aging father as head of the state, it is yet to be determined whether Qatar will follow a more democratic and open path to political reform, or continue on with the old and repressive system practiced by most countries in the region.

**Saudi Arabia**

According to the CITC figures for 2012, Saudi Arabia has a mobile penetration of 188% and 15.8 million Internet subscribers (Reuters, 2013b). It has been described as one of the world’s premiere blockers of Web sites. Saudi Arabia along with Tunisia, Egypt, Iran, and Syria are among the top 13 countries worldwide notorious for human rights violations and Internet suppression (*Associated Press*, 2007). It has a national authority responsible for blocking certain sites. Citizens requesting to have a site blocked can file a Web form, and all requests are accepted without any verification to the content of the sites.

The government handpicks *ulama*, who are given jobs and religious authority by the King and provide a cloak of legitimacy for the rulers under the pretense that under the Al-Saud, religion and state are partners. The Wahhabi clerics have exerted their power to silence the new media by filing law suits against bloggers and Internet activists, closing their bureaus, and jamming their transmissions. These religious extremists view the free digital media as a challenge and threat to their authority. The government took different but similar paths by launching sponsored and financed satellite channels of its own such as *Al-Arabiyya* (The Arab) and *Al-Fajr* (The Dawn), a religious and educational channel intended to combat religion and political extremism in the aftermath of Al-Qa’ida’s attack on Saudi Arabian installations on May 12, 2003, dubbed the “Kingdom’s 9/11” (Tétreault et al., 2011).

Incidentally, the freedom conferred by blogger anonymity has encouraged freedom-deprived Saudi they to embrace the Internet as they consider blogs a safe platform from which they can express themselves and call for change and empowerment. More than half of the Saudi blogs are authored by women, especially on female social issues. Popular Saudi women blogs such as “Farah’s Sowaleef,” “A
Thought in the Kingdom of Lunacy,” and “Saudi Eve” among others are usually critical of male domination in Saudi society and record the experiences of those who dare to challenge established norms. Female bloggers have also posted petitions to the government asking for Saudi women to be given permission to drive their own automobiles (Janardhan, 2011, pp. 228–229).

Fearing internal unrest fueled by cyber communication, the Saudi government has taken draconian measures to limit online activism in the name of national security, including banning Web-based communication applications like Skype, WhatsApp, and Viber if the providers do not comply with its requests for surveillance rights (Al-Mukhtar, 2013; Salama, 2013a). A report that ran prominently on the front page of Riyadh-based Arab News also stated that Saudi Arabia is seeking to end anonymity for Twitter users by requiring residents to register their national identification numbers to hold an account (Reuters, 2013a). Government officials in the Ministry of the Interior warned that social media Web sites including Twitter have been used by militant groups to incite social unrest, while the country’s top cleric described bloggers as “clowns” who waste time with harmful discussions (RT, 2013).

As recently as June 24, 2013, the Saudi Specialized Criminal Court has sentenced seven government critics to prison for terms ranging from 5 to 10 years for allegedly inciting protests and harming public order, largely by using Facebook (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

UAE

The UAE has the region’s second largest Weblog community. The emirate has one of the most networked and wired digital communities in the Arab Gulf States (Janardhan, 2011, p. 229). It has an Internet penetration of 70.9%, nearly 6 million Internet users, and approximately 3.5 million Facebook subscribers (Internet World Stats, 2012e). The emirate has introduced a high-quality and very modern communication system: the Abu Dhabi-based Al-Arabiya satellite TV has drawn large audiences throughout the Middle East, stimulating popular interest in and knowledge of politics and current affairs.

The UAE Constitution guarantees all citizens “freedom to hold opinions and expression of the same” as well as “freedom of communication.” In recent years, the government has relaxed its control on the media. The establishment of Dubai Media City drew numerous broadcast and print media to Dubai including the Middle East Broadcasting Center, and Western news services like CNN and Reuters, in addition to Al-Arabiya. The ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, is one of the few Arab rulers to have a Facebook page of his own (facebook.com/HHSheikhMohammed). He has used the application on several occasions to reach the public, including answering questions about the 2008 global economic crisis that affected Dubai (National, 2009).
The nation’s state telecommunication monopoly and sole Internet service provider also plays a major role in suppressing and censoring citizens’ blogs. Active bloggers whose views the government considers objectionable are subject to arrest and imprisonment. While the Etisalat (Emirates Telecommunications Corporation) has long blocked pornographic and gambling-related sites, it also blocks sites dedicated to the Bahá‘í faith and sites with addresses ending in .il—that is, based in Israel (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

Prior to the Arab Spring, the UAE was attempting to liberalize its nationally controlled media and was responding to calls for free expression. Yet, in spite of the positive measures described above, the UAE has also taken measures against netizens and bloggers. Since December 2008, cyber police in the UAE have been monitoring the Web and keeping an eye on its users. According to UAE Article 20 of the 2006 Computer Crime Act, “an Internet user may be imprisoned for ‘opposing Islam,’ ‘insulting any religion recognized by the state,’ or ‘violating family values and principles’ ” (Reporters Without Borders, 2010).

Since 2009, Colonel Dahi Khalfan, Chief of Police in Dubai, has campaigned by posting on various Web sites (e.g., http://www.emarati.katib.org/node/52, http://www.uaetorture.com, http://www.Hetta.com, and others). After the Arab Spring, he supported sweeping Internet regulations that allow arrests for a wide list of offenses, including insulting leaders or calling for demonstrations (Rebhy, 2012). He has also been active on Twitter in expressing his harsh criticism of the Arab Spring and demonstrators, and the Muslim Brotherhood (CNN, 2013).

Iran

For the past decade, Iranians have been turning to the Internet in large numbers. This is evidenced by the increasing number of Iranian Internet users at an average annual rate of 600% between 2001 and 2005, and also from reports revealing that “Iranians ‘blog’ to an extent unparalleled in the region” (Human Rights Watch, 2005). Still, dozens of Iranian reformist publications have had their licenses revoked. A women’s magazine was accused of “threatening the psychological security of society . . . having weakened military and revolutionary institutions” (Economist, 2008). Since 2004, the Iranian judiciary began targeting online journalists and bloggers: “The government has imprisoned online journalists, bloggers, and technical support staff and blocked thousands of Web sites, including sites that offer free publishing tools and hosting space for blogs” (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

In February 2007, The Guardian reported the Iranian regime had shut down a Web site “fiercely critical of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad” (Tait, 2007). Baztab, a Shi’a fundamentalist Web site that accused President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of betraying the Iranian revolution by attending a female dance show,
was closed for “acting against the constitution and undermining national unity. The order coincided with the confrontation of Gholamhossein Elham” as Iran’s new Justice Minister, who previously urged “prosecutors to pursue news outlets that printed ‘lies’ about Mr. Ahmadinejad’s government” (Tait, 2007). His appointment came as the government disclosed new measures to restrict unofficial news Web sites. The Iranian government has also censored the Farsi-language version of the Reporters Without Borders Web site http://RSF.org. The Internet surveillance under the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Orientation is designed to censor and ban Web sites that the government censors deem unfriendly or spreading false information (Refugee Review Tribunal, 2009).

An example of how issues of politics and participation have recently played out is in the case of the use of Twitter in Iran. In June 2009, in the aftermath of the Iranian election, there was a huge opposition to an election many people believed to be full of irregularities. There were riot police in the streets and a ban of any media reporting in the country ensued. Over the course of 18 days, the protestors turned to Twitter on an unprecedented scale. There were no less than two million tweets from Iran by 500,000 people. At the height of activity, there were 200,000 tweets an hour (BBC, 2010). One of the most symbolic historic tweets of Tehran in 2009 summed up the people’s protest against the Iranian election fraud. The tweeted picture worldwide of the young girl, Neda Agha-Soltan, shot in the head by Basjí forces became the iconic symbol of how corrupt and morally bankrupt the Iranian government has become. World condemnation ensued, and Twitter evolved as an effective organizational tool of protestors around the Middle East.

As recently as 2012, Iran’s cyber police committed the criminal act of killing labor activist, blogger, and Facebook user, Sattar Beheshti—who dared to criticize the former Ahmadinejad government. Beheshti died while undergoing interrogation in Iran’s notorious Evin Prison just one week after his arrest on national security charges on October 30. The cyber police also confiscated his computer and handwritten notes (Eurasia Review, 2012). This was not the first time the Iranian former regime has acted violently against netizens.

In the June 2013 presidential election, young people used their smart phones, tweeted, and blogged in support of the moderate candidate Hassan Rouhani who won the free fair election and provided hope for a new era for Iran and Iranians . . . one the world hopes will be different from his predecessor’s.

Conclusion

Most MENA governments have recently discovered that the might of the new ICT is much stronger and more threatening to them than any military force that they were prepared to fight. Internet, wireless, and mobile communication devices coupled with established oral traditions have contributed to the overthrow of a
number of authoritarian Arab regimes. The authoritarian regimes failed to quell citizens’ anger vented through the digital media available to them. Digital communications moved protestors and information around faster and more efficiently than their governments, with their respective controlled media, could, helping to organize the movements. Egyptian, Tunisian, Yemeni, and Libyan protestors were able to record and broadcast pictures and news messages with their mobile phones by uploading them for the world to see and hear. The mobile devices’ global positioning system data were particularly useful for tactical and operational support during the demonstrations. As a result, protestors were able to change directions to avoid police barricades and confrontations with security forces. Government efforts to censor, imprison, or murder bloggers have failed to halt the rising tides of protests and the now familiar call: “Ash-Sha‘b yurid isqat an-nizam” (The people want to bring down the regime) or “Irhal!” (Leave!).

There are lessons to be learned by the post-Arab Awakening in the affected countries and social phenomena to consider in countries with potential for the same unrest. Dr. Ekaterina Stepanova, head of the Peace and Conflict Studies Division at the Institute of the World Economy and International Relations noted:

If there is a positive pattern to discern in the impact of Internet-based tools and social media networks on recent developments in the Middle East, it may have less to do with fostering Western-style democracy than in encouraging relatively less violent forms of mass protest. (Stepanova, 2011, p. 6)

People’s demands for reform are ongoing. They are here to stay. While Arab satellite TV coverage and political debates like those of Al Jazeera network inspire Arab activists to call for political and social change, blogs and social networks have become the Arab activists’ media tools of choice. Young Arabs in particular now use the blogosphere, not mainstream media, to reengage and express their own political views that the established Arab media do not allow or provide. Their demands become empowered by these tools and technologies. Netcitizens, bloggers, and organizers of all ages should be prepared to use their sharpened and tested skills to combat and counter their authoritarian governments, and force them to adapt to a democratic system—a system that strives toward social justice, peaceful resolution, and clear responsiveness to the massive cries for political and economic reform.

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