



The Role of Social Media in an Evolving Middle East

By Zaid Tabaza

In a region with a legacy of government-regulated speech, social media has emerged as a user-driven force and means for self-expression. Through widespread growth and use, social media has become a key player in revolutions, journalism, and misinformation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

During the Arab Spring, social media played an instrumental role in facilitating communication amongst protesters and centralizing important issues. Screens became a sphere to voice opinions and organize demonstrations. *Guardian* journalist Peter Beaumont, who covered the uprisings, argued that social media served as a channel of solidarity between nations, allowing people to see their struggles paralleled in neighboring countries. He suggests that the medium of any revolution is intrinsically woven into its progression; the Arab Spring's quick rise echoed social media's rapid diffusion and ubiquity.¹

Rim Nour was among the protesters in Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution, an uprising of civil resistance that started in 2010 and culminated in regime change.² Nour's account as a

protester reveals how social media inspired participation in civil resistance movements across the Middle East. Nour credits her involvement in the revolution to a video she encountered online that ignited a deep emotional response.³

Social media also played a crucial role in the recent Lebanese revolution by allowing the country's youth to articulate their views on corrupt government practices. By voicing their dissent, the younger generation inspired action on the ground, manifesting in the organization of widespread protests calling for change.⁴

Meanwhile, limited press freedom has forced journalists to adopt pro-government biases by restricting the media's ability to report on injustice, corruption, and human rights violations. Social media, however, fills this gap by acting as an avenue for expression that is not exclusive to reporters—providing marginalized populations with a platform to voice their dissent and facilitate necessary conversation.¹

Social media has helped liberate journalists from constrained press freedom, specifically through the creation of digital journalism. While this has not eliminated censorship

and threats journalists face, it has provided more opportunities to challenge MENA status quo internet-based initiatives that are not subject to government licenses. This has contributed to paradigm shifts in the perception of journalism in the region, with steady growth in the use of digital media outlets.⁵

Prominent examples of such initiatives are *Mada Masr* and *Raseef22*. *Mada Masr* is an independent liberal news outlet that produces engaging, free, and critical journalism in Egypt.⁶ *Raseef22* is a Pan-Arab media platform based in Beirut, Lebanon, that supports a variety of progressive social justice causes. Founded in the wake of the Arab Spring, *Raseef22* has cultivated a significant readership and has a team of staff located in ten different countries.⁷

Despite social media's prominent role in Middle East uprisings, users are not treading a trouble-free path. Authorities use social media as a surveillance method to track and prosecute activists. The same regimes infiltrate media channels and impose harsh restrictions and regulations on content, silencing the critical voices of those fighting for change. Both *Raseef22* and *Mada Masr* have faced censorship in recent years, joining nearly 500 other blocked websites in Egypt.⁸

Even in the face of these obstacles, activists continue to resist oppression and address social issues. Media sources are battling blockages by filing lawsuits, issuing complaints, and finding other avenues to reach their audiences. *Mada Masr* has found a way to overcome censorship by creating a mirror website through the Tor network, which allows for anonymous and secure delivery. Users across the region also use VPNs to bypass government censorship.^{8,9}

Yet the digitization of social discourse has produced another challenge: misinformation. Social media allows misinformation and news hoaxes to spread rapidly worldwide through many platforms. In the Middle East, reliance on Wi-Fi messaging apps such as WhatsApp enables users to easily share and forward posts con-

taining false information. The dissemination of fake news through social media has been exceptionally high in the past few months due to the exchange of misinformation about COVID-19.¹⁰

The rise of digital journalism also raises concerns about misinformed news articles, and numerous initiatives have emerged to counteract this phenomenon. In December 2018, with support from the Facebook Journalism Project, the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) launched a program focused on addressing news misinformation that involved workshops administered across multiple MENA countries. The program emphasizes individual training to help users determine the legitimacy of their news and avoid spreading misconceptions.¹¹

Social media has created new realities for users in the MENA region. Individuals are challenging oppressive regimes and violations of their fundamental rights, but they also face obstacles such as misinformation and government censorship. Social media is both a tool for change and cause for caution.

