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# Social Media and the Internet in the Arab Region

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## What remains ten years after the Arab Uprisings?

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This article gives an overview on the role of the Internet in the Arab region beyond the fixation on political uses of the Internet. It contextualizes how media convergence shape the hybrid media ecologies beyond offline-online binaries.



## Introduction

Writing on the role of Internet in the Arab region ten years after the Arab Uprisings seems to be haunted by the legacy of 2010 and 2011. The so-called Arab Spring, or better Uprisings, fixed the attention on expressing dissent and mobilizing protests in new online spaces. The breakthrough in forging revolutionary identities using digital tools despite the repressive frameworks was remarkable. While the Arab Uprisings shifted the attention from stagnation to the dynamism (Harders 2018), this moment of discovering the online possibilities of communication sparked an intensive debate on the role of the Internet in politics that pushed the promises of democratization. Often coined as “Facebook Revolution” and “YouTube Uprisings” at first, the Internet got central attention in the academic and public discourses. Early debates that followed on the role of the Internet as “liberation technology” (Diamond 2010) was often techno-deterministic and optimistic. Later developments in the region and worldwide led to the findings that online communication does not always have a positive effect: research on “dark participation” (Quandt 2018) and “dissonant public spheres” (Pfetsch et al, 2018) shows the dystopian potential of user-generated content. The rise of hate speech, polarization and disinformation cause worrying signs all over the world.

This article gives an overview on the role of the Internet in the Arab region beyond the fixation on political uses of the Internet. It contextualizes how media convergence shape the hybrid media ecologies beyond offline-online binaries. Media convergence refers to “both the changes of media technologies themselves and the implications for how we create, consume and distribute media within these converging technologies. It raises questions on how, when, and why new technologies have been included in a media system, and with what effect, are thus important factors in the analysis of media systems” (Richter and Kozman, 2021).

Looking at how technology drives the hybridity of the media systems, this concept “draws attention to change and flux, the passing of an older set of cultural and institutional norms, and the gradual emergence of new norms” (Chadwick 2017).

Based on this, the article covers three areas:

- a) the post-2011 learning processes from governments and activists,
- b) divergent media landscapes and questions of digital in/equality beyond access to technology and the infrastructure and finally
- c) hybridity of media systems and its effects on the media practices and landscapes.

## Post-2011 Learning processes from governments and activist

Discussions on the Internet in the Arab world is still overshadowed by the massive political rupture ten years ago: The Arab Uprisings continue to haunt the governments and to inspire the masses: power incumbents learned their lessons to prevent any potential renewed disruption by controlling, countering, and surveying emerging dissent in the digital public sphere. Authoritarian learning means that governments have learned not to underestimate the online public sphere. Therefore, they aim at limiting political dissent through legal authoritarian ways to invoke the image of a rule of law (Hamzawy 2017). The Internet in the Arab region today is less politicized, more watched, and more regulated than it was a decade ago (Mamdouh 2021). Regimes are claiming the digital territory through harsher and more sophisticated surveillance methods (Raouf 2017) and content moderation techniques which rediscovered the online potentials for self-promotion. Authoritarian learning enabled the governments to shape the Internet through controlling the infrastructure, media laws or political economy of the media landscape. Boundaries between the digital and offline worlds are protected as, for example, in Egypt where laws do not protect digital journalists while performing their profession (Badr 2020a).

However, it is not a black and white picture: independent actors also had their learning processes. Despite the growing limitations, activists also underwent learning processes to keep expressing their concerns, even if within limited circles. In Arab countries with constrained political frameworks tightening their grip on freedom of expression, oppositional actors and journalists learned to enhance their cybersecurity practices and work within “trapped endurance” (Badr 2020b). Using alternative safe technology tools for communication beyond the commercialized and co-opted social platforms corporates is part of innovative training programs in the Arab region, like those offered by the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism or regional UNESCO programs. New inputs come from the post-2011 Arab diaspora, which opens possibilities for working and networking from exile on issues that relate to the country of origin (Badran 2020). Therefore, politicized online communities still can form, yet amid much closer networks of trust and exclusive entry conditions to accommodate the increasing regulations and unpredictable consequences for online political dissent. So, temporary and short-lived moments of solidarity campaigns in times of blatant injustice can still happen, even under restrictive conditions, just like the second wave of the Arab Uprisings in 2018 and 2019, in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan showed us.

Whenever a new technology or trend appears, it renews the techno-deterministic interpretations of the role of Internet’s in political life. The recent launch of Clubhouse, the audio-based forum application, is a perfect example to illustrate this. Its growing popularity and intense use in a region with a predominantly oral culture shows a thirst for unregulated spaces of articulation. But the current euphoria should take contexts into account: how inclusive is an app that is only available for iPhone users and upon invitation only. Too soon, power holders will find ways to regulate, monitor and infiltrate the discourses, so it should not be mistaken for a breeze of fresh air.

## Divergent media landscapes and questions of digital in/equality in the Arab region

The Arab region has diverse media landscapes. Despite sharing similar linguistic, cultural, and historic trajectories, the social reality is divergent across the geographically vast region, which has the highest inner-regional socio-economic inequality in the world. It includes countries with the highest GDP per capita in the world, like the Gulf countries Qatar and Kuwait, along the poorest countries in the world, for example Somalia, Sudan, and Mauritania (World Bank 2021). The socio-economic disparities do not only lead to different lived social realities but also shape media production and use patterns in those diverse political and social realities. Differences become instantly visible when comparing the role of Internet in two neighbouring countries like the war-torn Yemen and the technologically over-saturated United Arab Emirates.

While the online and social media users have risen, this does not mean that civic and political participation has increased. The average percentage of Internet users in the MENA region rose from 25% in 2010 to 63% in 2019 (World Bank 2019). It would be a mistake to assume that increased reliance on social media to obtain information and express political views online correlates with an actual increase in freedom of expression and the ability to criticize their governments (Khamis, 2021). Increasing Internet penetration is not a sole indicator for increased capabilities, because what matters more is what people do with the Internet instead of just being connected and owning the infrastructure (Trappel 2019). The digital divide shows in the level of knowledge, attitudes and how Internet users spend time on the Internet. A recent study shows that Facebook and WhatsApp remain popular in the region, with a rise in Instagram and Snapchat (UNESCO 2018). So, the assumption that more connectivity will lead to more political freedom is flawed.

## Hybridity of media systems and its effects on the media landscapes

Contextualizing the Internet within the media systems in their entirety acknowledges that online communication does not take place in a social vacuum. Building on the hybridity of media systems (Chadwick, 2017) investigates how the interplay between new online and old professional media interact together. Locating the social media within this broader hybrid media context shows that the rise of social and online media users takes in parallel with a decline of users of traditional journalism.

The popularity of social media in the Arab world shows three aspects. First, it corresponds to the global youth's turn away from mainstream media. In the Arab region that has a prominent young demographic the exposure to mainstream media, other than TV, is low and declining when compared to using the online media. Arab youth predominantly use online media, social media and TV (UNESCO 2018). In recent years successful formats even wandered from the alternative digital space from YouTube to commercial professional productions, like in the field of science journalism show El-Daheeh, that attracts a transnational Arab audience.

Second, turning away from the mainstream media is not only generational, but shows the low credibility and levels of trust in the weakened and dependent professional media. The Arab media landscapes are marked by high political parallelism and fragmentation, so favoring online media implicitly means turn the back to the old media constellations. Further new ways to engage audiences online include the growing importance of podcasts, formats that increase engagement and loyalty (Reuters 2020) and imitate online subscription communities. Further new formats include online communication for social change initiatives to engage in the immediate community, like several local anti-harassment campaigns and applications.

Finally, the third aspect for the hybrid media systems is the symbiotic relationships between online and offline media (Badr 2019) when occasionally, trending topics make their ways from the digital into the offline world, or vice versa. In Lebanon, for example, hybrid communicative figurations combined traditional graffiti for media critique into new media practices that had non-political participatory potential (Kraidy 2015). Even professional journalists use the hybrid symbiotic relationships to self-organize and initiate transnational professional networks on the Internet. Covid-19 pandemic intensified collaborative online formats of exchanging advice and sources in the Arab region.

## Conclusion and outlook

Inequality as a lens helps us understand the Internet in the Arab region. Not only does it reflect on the different lived social realities and media landscapes, it also discusses the digital in/equalities as well. If 2010/11 brought hope and a strong determination to transform Arab societies from malaise to empowerment, a decade later the region is marked by fragmentation instead. This does not dismiss the potentials for subtle transformation. Two arguments speak for micro-dynamics of cultural change. The first one, we should not underestimate the role of the subpolitical fields that still can bring cultural transformation without openly clashing with the political elites. Subpolitical spheres like environmental awareness, urban planning, gender equality, and the post-2011 collective memory exist. The second argument is the inherent instability in Arab societies that is fostered by the inequalities and the youth bulge. Current conditions are not sustainable in the long term! "Nothing is over" (Weipert-Fenner, 2021) as seeds of inherent instability and a possible renewed rupture still exist. In some countries socio-economic inequalities even intensified than a decade ago: deep inequalities, political exclusion and disenfranchised demographics still shape the Arab social and media realities. Temporary sparks of outrage and solidarity despite the constraints entails suppressed potentials for resistance and resilience, until structural opportunities arise.

Perceiving the Internet in the Arab region therefore should focus on interactions between diverse media formats in a dynamic and hybrid context to overcome the divide between online and offline media. This paper calls for more intra-regional and international comparisons. Digital public spheres show convergent dynamics globally and regionally, like the rise of disinformation – while maintaining diverse intra-regional prehistories and trajectories.

Recognizing the processuality of subversive tactics online, without the overemphasis of the political, opens ways to see subtle transformation. Despite the current patterns of authoritarian learning and a growing sense of despair for dissi-

dent voices, regional dynamics never fail to surprise experts. The MENA region is tied to international alliances. Despite the brain drain, self-exile and multipliers' shattered biographies research indicates that younger, better-educated people with higher rates of Internet usage tend to be more engaged in public events. Under the current restrictive frameworks in media and the Internet landscapes, many actors channeled their creative energy through the overlooked, less confrontational cultural and social fields. This hybrid subversive tactics do not only deconstruct the dichotomy between the liberation and non-liberation approaches, but open ways to see the nuances of the Internet in a region with inherent instability.

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