**SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Social media use in the Middle East;

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**Abstract**

Social media is a taking over traditional media in a hurry. Pretty soon media like newspapers, magazines, and television new shows will be obsolete. Newspapers and magazines are already on the internet and video-sharing is soon to take over the nightly news on the television. The Middle East is slowly adopting the new social media trend that will soon be too powerful to try and block it out.

**Social Media**

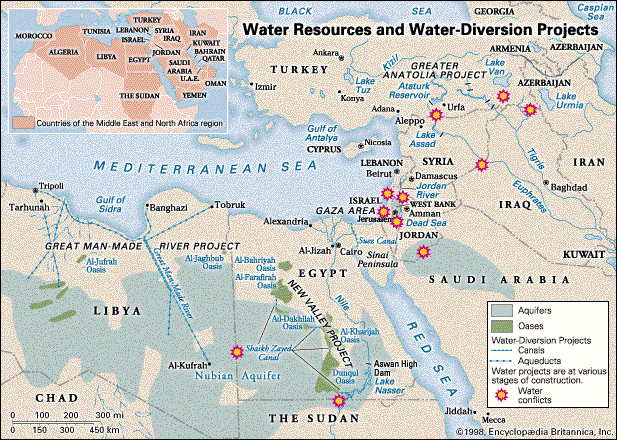
Social media has changed how people are spreading and receiving information on a global level. Social media brings people together city to city, state to state, country to country, ruler to ruler, organization to organization. It is not a form of traditional media such as newspapers; radio or television, but primarily an Internet and mobile-based form that is for sharing and discussing information. Social media happens to be a two-way communication that has the ability to be changed instantly and frequently as well as the ability to mix different forms of medium together. A social media post can have text, audio, video and photos all together where as traditional media would be kept to text in a magazine, or video on the television. Within the social media community, there are many different forms of medium. Social media is being used to companies and organizations for cheaper advertising and the ability for instant consumer interaction. There is also no restriction to geography with social media. It can reach anyone from any place.

**Examples:**

* **Photo sharing**: A service where one can upload and manage their digital pictures and share them with the world.
  + Flickr, Zooomr, Picasa
* **Blogging**: A service where one can write a “blog” or a post and informally have a “voice” on the web for anyone to see and interact with.
  + Blogger, TypePad, WordPress
* **Micro-blogging**: A service where people can connect with other people via a internet connection and send out a brief text to mobile phones, instant messages, or the web, containing links to other websites, text, photos, etc.
  + Twitter, Jaiku,Plurk
* **Social networking**: A service where people are brought together virtually where they can send out messages, make profiles about themselves, join interest communities, and chat with other users.
  + Facebook, MySpace, Bebo
* **Video sharing:** A service where people can upload videos or video clips for anyone to view and comment on.
  + YouTube
* **Social News:** A service where users can upload news stories as well as other links from all over the internet. The other users vote on the uploads and the higher the votes, the higher the uploads appear on the Web page.
  + Digg, Reddit

**The Middle East**

The Middle East consists of parts of North Africa, the Western Sahara, and the Middle East. According to Columbia University, “The Geographic area covered consists of North Africa; including Mauritania, Morocco, and the Western Sahara, Algeria, Tunisia, Malta, Libya, Egypt, Sudan; and the Middle East; including Turkey, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Armenia” (Libraries, 2009). The Middle East has vast differences amongst the countries as well as different traditional standards. The languages also vary from English in the business communities, Arabic, and Hebrew (Mussler, 2009). Even through the area is not very large, “The countries that make up the Middle East and Africa have a combined population of more than 320 million” (Mussler, 2009). The Middle East is a major contributor to the impact on the population, pollution, and the economic state of the world. There is a lot of tension throughout the Middle East internally as well as internationally. There is a lot of dispute over oil and gas, shared borders, and religion.



Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.

**Social media being used in Middle East countries**

Social media in the Middle East is different throughout the area. There are some countries/territories that have rules and regulations on their media with fines and punishments if offensive material is said about royalty and their families, armies, or judges and there are some that have little to no censorship regulations. The major countries in the Middle East has internet which helps them have access to the social media sites and blogs. It is obvious to say that countries/territories without the internet have little to no use with social media. Some countries that are having civil disputes or elections are using social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to help them in their campaigns. They are also using social media to organize protests and strikes against their governments. Social media is being used for the good as well. Some Middle Eastern countries are spreading advertising to get product awareness.

**Iranians** have recently used blogging, Twitter and Facebook to organize protests in their recent election process. Iran’s government has a lot of censorship with what gets leaked out into the media, but with social media it is a lot harder to censor. The Iranian government is having trouble with censoring Twitter “They can’t provide the outside world with information through the media, but technology allows Iranians to communicate with each other and to organize dissent” (Bee, 2009). With the use of Twitter and the direct connect to text messaging, social media is too immediate to censor.

Along with Iran, **Egyptians** have used Facebook to create nationwide strikes to protest price increases. According to an article titled, “Egyptian Political Dissent Unites Through Facebook” Marian Fam points out that, “The activism on Facebook is part of larger efforts by youths across the Arab world to use technology- from blogs to cell phone text messages to YouTube- to challenge their government and push the envelope on dissent in ways older generations didn’t know” (2008). The new generations keep adding new technologies that enable the two-way communication instantly.

**Egypt** has touched base in the social media field. According to BBC News there are six million Egyptians that were online by 2007(Country Profile: Egypt, 2009). Bloggers have started to make their way into Egypt.

In **The United Arab Eremite** especially in the state of Dubai, social media is much of that in The United States. Social media such as blogging, Facebook, and Twitter is helping businesses promote their company or organization as well as product branding. BBC News reports, “Dubai aspires to be a regional and international centre for television and media” (Country Profile: United Arab Emirates, 2009). Much like The United States, advertising and public relations firms are using social media cause awareness of their products. According to the “Middle East & North Africa Twitter Demographics & User Habits Survey, over 90% of users in the region say they have found about a new product or service through Twitter and over 60% have had their perceptions of a brand change by Twitter” (McNabb, 2009). Egypt and Saudi Arabia like UAE that accept the new technology of social media and use it for social networking and brand awareness.

**Demographics of Social Media in the Middle East**

Social media is still very new to the Middle East and is growing at different rates depending on where the country stands with their government and media. Spot On Public Relations published a study on September 8, 2009 that studied the different countries in the Middle East and their status with social media, with an emphasis on Twitter. The company sent more than 750 Twitter users from the Middle East and Africa to participate in the survey. 241 users were from the Middle East and Northern African region and of that 216 Twitter users completed the survey. Twitter is growing at a rate of 17% per month.

The main countries that use social media and Twitter were found to be the United Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Lebanon, Syria and Jordan are on the rise to becoming countries using social media.

**Age:** 15-19 year old <10% of Twitter users in the Middle East  
 25-39 year old = 69% of Twitter users in the Middle East  
 over 40 year old = 8%

**Language:** 54% spoke Arabic

18% spoke French

3% spoke English

25% spoke something other than mentioned

**Gender**: 68% Male users

32% Female users

**Occupation**: 78% Employed

13% Students

3% Unemployed, retired, or housewives

**Profession:** 29% Information technology and services and Internet professions

23% Advertising, marketing and public relations

17% Media, media production and publishing

(Malin, 2009)

**Governments, Private Companies and Organizations Using Social Media in Middle East**

Governments, private companies, and organizations are using social media is different ways. In **Iran** after the Iranians were organizing protests the government started to block Web sites including Twitter and they also were blocking cell phone services (Bee, 2009). Also with the Egyptian crisis, the **Egyptian** government is having a hard time controlling the social media craze so they are resulting in “jamming cell phones if there is civil unrest, to prevent it from spreading” (Fam, 2008). There are also turning to social media to find who is starting the Facebook groups or the Tweets and arresting them. Esraa Abdel Fattah formed a Facebook group to promote the Egyptian strike on inflation and she was arrested for two weeks. Facebook then formed groups on releasing her. It is a battle between the governments for those using social media as a governmental tool. Ahmed Maher, another online activist involved with Facebook campaigns said, “Facebook is an interactive platform. It’s like we’re in a meeting 24 hours a day. We see how other people are living and we reject many government policies” (Fam, 2008).

**Controlled Social Media in Middle East**

All the countries that make up the Middle East have different rules with their media censorship and if the media is controlled (state owned) or uncontrolled (private).

**Egypt’s** media is one of the most influential and widely-read in the region and not very censored except there are punishments and prison sentences for criticizing the president, state intuitions and foreign heads of state. There are some privately owned media as well as state owned.

**Iran** has both state owned and private media. Iran has a lot of internet users. BBC News reported Iran to having 23 million users in early 2008 (Country Profile: Iran, 2009). Broadcasters are more restricted than the press and with such a high internet usage throughout the country, social media is easier to use without being controlled to what the users can say. Even though there was the incident with the Iranians’ protest social media in Iran tends to be uncontrolled.

**Saudi Arabia** has one of the most tightly-controlled media enviornments in the Middle East. All fo their traditional media is state run including television, radio and the press. There are not any private radio and TV stations allowed on Saudi Arabia soil (Country Profile: Saudi Arabia, 2009). There are 6.2 million interent users but the internet censorship is very high. The difference with traditional media and social media is the difficulty of censorship that social media is.

**Kuwait** has a very uncontolled with their newspapers. According to BBC News “Kuwait has some of the more outspoken newspapers in the Arab world, often aggressive in their coverage of politics and the government” (Country Profile: Kuwait, 2009). There is a mix of state owned and private television and radio stations. Kuwait has the ability to use social media.

**Iraq** has changed tremendously since the overthrow of Saddam Hussien. Before when Hussien was in control he had only a few, controlled media outlets, but now Iraq is able to chose through hundreds of press and many radio and TV stations. BBC News reports that there are private media outlets that are linked to different groups and organizations that have a say in Iraq’s future (Country Profile: Iraq, 2009). Iraq still has issues with controlled media but with the access of internet, social media is slowly turing the problem around.

**Spreading Ideas in Middle Eastern Countries through Social Media**

Social media is a tool that has been able to get passed the controlled media of a Middle Easterner’s government and bring them together to fight and issue that has never been able to be done before. Facebook and Twitter, along with different blogs, allow civilians to stand up for what they believe in and make a stance on different issues.

**Iranians** used social networking to assist them with organizing and sharing the progress of their protests that they set up due to social media. The Heritage Foundation stated that, “ The use of e-mail, Facebook, MySpace, Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr, Digg, LinkedIN, Twitter, and other social networking tools to facilitate discussion, debate, and exchange ideas and information on a worldwide scale is a well-estabished phenomen” (Carafano, 2009). Their leader Mohmoud Ahmadinejad became president and the civilains of Iran disagreed with what he stood far. They immediately started rioting but their government was able to get contol after arrests and violence. After that occurred the Iranians started creating groups on Facebook, Tweeted on Twitter, and wrote blogs. The Iranian governemnt started to block the websites. The word got out to the outside world and with Twitter and Facebook, there are other ways to get onto the social websites and protests started to occure. As the protests began, documenation appreared on YouTube, Facebook, and Flickr, along with blogs and emails, which ended up getting to mainstream news services like CNN and Fox News (Carafano, 2009). In the end without the use of social media, the civials would never been able to be heard. Social media is ahead of most goverenments.

As mentioned earlier, **Egypt** was having problems with natiowide stirkes due to the inflation increase. Activates used Facebook and YouTube to bring people together who supported the strike. They boybotted purchases of all commodities on a Sunday May 4, 2009 and meat and poultry through Tuesday. They were able to reach out to 74,000. The activast Maher said, “You’re beginning to see the possibility of the end of apathy in political life using person media. What will [the government] do about it? Shut down Facebook?” (Fam, 2008).

**US State Department and Department of Defense Use Social Media in Middle East**

The US State Department and Department of Defense are trying to use different forms of social media to further US agendas and public diplimocy. The US Forces has aquired a **Twitter** account for Afghanistan. Their profile page has pictures from Afghanistan of children and civilians, mission statements to defeat terrorists and videos of soldiers doing different activities such as Peace Day Painting and solderiers builiding relationships with the Afghanistan communities (USFORA, 2009). This twitter page is very affective because it as 5,439 people following their page. That means that there are 5,439 people that are interested in trying to bring peace to Afghanistan and fight terrorism. Navy. Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said “For leaders,…it’s really important to be connect to that [Facebook and Twitter] and understand it. I think communicating that way and moving information around that way- whether it’s administrative information or information in warface- in absolutley critical” (Miles, 2009).

The Department of Defense also has a **Facebook** account. The U.S. Forces has an Afghanistan Facebook page. On July 23, 2009, the page received it’s 20,000 fan, which makes it that fastest-growing official military Facebook page the militiary offers. The page is the main way that the governement get’s its’ information about what is going on in Afghanistan out to the public (Service, 2009). It is a very effective Facebook page because it not only gives information in what is happening in Afghanistan, but it is able to be updates instantly, pictures are able to be uploaded, as well as videos, and it is the new media that everyone is starting to get into.

**Terrorist Groups and Social Media in the Middle East**

Terrorist groups are able to use social media as much as any other group is. Social networking allows terrorits groups to get bigger and stronger along with reaching an infindent number of locations. Al Qaeda has uploaded torcher videos and YouTube as well as traning videos for the members. Also governments in the Middle East are able to block some social media websites but leave Al Qaeda fields open for people to recruit to (Kimmage, 2008). YouTube has been aware about the terrorist posts and have put a ban on terro videos on their site. The Google chairman Eric Schmidt said that, “Google is banning terrorist traning videos from its popular video-sharing Web site in response to pressure from Sen. Joseph Lieberman” (YouTube Bans Terror Videos After Prompting By Lieberman, 2008).

**Future of Social Media in the Middle East**

Social media will soon be too hard to block out of the Middle Easterners lives. It has already started to show that it is too powerful of a communication to keep it from surfacing. Even though governenments in the Middle East are able to block out public information, the instant two-way communication between social networks is too powerful. Social media is nothing to fear except the spread of democracy. Social media is part of the new generation that will hopefully spread the idea of peace and democracy.

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