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# The Impact of Information Technology and Social Networks in changing Political and Social Reality of the Arab Countries

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**Abstract.** The impact of online social networks on social capital can be achieved in myriad ways. For instance, common interest groups can help users coordinate for collective action. At the same time, regular exchanges between users can foster trust and norms of reciprocity that are key antecedents of community life. Likewise, news feeds allow users to keep in touch with what is going on “out there.” This paper looks at the positive and negative impacts of the internet and the social media in the Arab world; Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Yemen, Jordan, Syria, Bahrain and Palestine. It also focuses on the factors that, have led to the increased use of the social media in these states as well as the measures and controls the authorities are taking to monitor the use of the social media.

**Keywords:** The Internet, Social networks, filtering systems, Arab world, uprisings, citizen participation.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The internet has in the last two decades played a major role in how the society and the government operate in terms of communication, social interaction and execution of duties. Today, all government, business enterprises, the media and the community in general relies almost entirely on ICT for effective operations. Emergence of the social network has also had a great impact on the government operations especially in the western world. President Obama’s campaigns greatly relied on social media especially to reach out to the modern mostly younger generation who are computer savvy. The social media has brought more citizen participation in governance especially in the western world and with it, there has been a more transparent approach to governance (Gilbert, 2004). With a computer and internet connection one can easily communicate to the world. This has been made much easier and quicker by the social networks, such as Facebook, twitter, MySpace and even Google. According to Abdalla (2009) there is need for governments especially in the Arab world to embrace the shift in paradigm from the traditional way of governance to the more proactive and creative approach by the social networks (Khalil, July 13-14 2009,). Social networking applications have changed the way we learn, socialize and the governments should therefore promote the use of “e-government” websites, which would encourage citizen participation in government as well as community initiatives. In this paper, much focus will be on the effectiveness and implications of the internet and social networks to governance especially in the Arab and Muslim world. The paper also looks at the increase in the use of social networks especially by the youths in the Arab world, advantages and disadvantages of the social networks as well as new models in the use of social networks.

Interest in the use of ICT has mounted over the last decade and today a large percentage of the population in the world either has an ICT device or is well familiar with the use of these devices and their applications (Egypt’s Changing Civil Society: The Muslim Brotherhood and New Media, 2011). The internet and the social networks have therefore transformed the social and political cultures from the traditional authoritative to the current participatory and creative

culture in the Arab world. The internet has in many ways shifted power from the government to the citizens and through this, there has been hope and voice of people, in the Arab world (The Internet in the Middle East and North Africa: Free Expression and Censorship.). Human rights groups have been more active and the internet has greatly helped their course in democratization, participation and awareness to citizens in these nations (Tadros, 2005). It has removed isolation of the human rights activists through increased connectivity to the world and removal of boundaries. Internet and the Social media have played a major role in regime change currently ongoing in the Middle East.

## **2 THE DIRECT IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS:**

Most of the countries in the Middle East were grappled with authoritarian rule for so many years. The leaders who held on power for so many years failed to address the issues of the citizens some of which are; high unemployment rates, rising cost of living, corruption and lack of participation in governance issues. Egypt and Tunisia for instance have high unemployment rates with many graduates remaining unemployed. The internet and social networks therefore played a major role in enlightening people of the governance issues and they therefore played a major role in promoting the revolutions. The internet and the social networks have been the quickest and most affordable ways of communication especially by the youths in these countries. They also serve the purpose of giving current information about events in the world. One can easily get information about an event occurring in a different part of the world on a social media like Facebook in real time. For instance in the wake of the uprising in Tunisia, A fruit vendor – Mohamed Bouazizi set fire to protest the government. Bouazizi's action sparked protest in the world and the protests were fuelled by a Facebook page created by Wael Ghonim. Students in Egypt and Tunisia used Facebook, Twitter and blogs to rally supporters to engage in the protests. It is however true that the internet and the social networks did not give to the protests but it is a fact that they played a major role in fuelling the protests (Williams, June 11, 2011).

The internet and the social networks have been so important in our lives over the past decade that we can barely do without them. Effective communication is the key important of these media. The power of communication drives all other important aspects of the economy. The tourism sector, businesses, education, medicine and transport all greatly rely on the internet for their operations. However, the dangers brought by the internet and social behaviors should not be overlooked. The Arab world has had a tradition of strict laws that prohibit some behaviors and conducts. Unmonitored many young people find access to much information in the social networks and the internet that would easily lead them to acts prohibited by the sharia law.

Internet and social media has played an active role in helping activists overcoming government's suppression of free speech (Amnesty says internet freedom key to Middle East revolts, May 12, 2011) (Schonfeld, 2011.). The Middle East and North Africa's uprising that has driven several leaders from power can be well attributed to the power of the social media. Governments have therefore put much effort in trying to control the social networks to try to avert other problems that can arise in their regimes due to social networks. Their efforts have involved linking with the companies that provide internet access, social, networking silts and mobile phone communications to try to filter information they feel will incite the masses and lead to revolutions. (Reifeld, 2003).

Raised a lot of controversy about the role played by the Internet and social networking sites in the Arab revolutions, while seen by many observers of the situation in the Arab region from the inside and outside the key, and the Internet that brought down Ben Ali and Mubarak. Others argue that social networking sites, and with the evolution of the situation in

the Arab region, especially the recent events in Syria, has become a weapon in the hands of the government than in the hands of the people. With conflicting views and different control tools like the Internet has become the scene of the game of cat and mouse; Once the government holds the reins and the other chased by the people. Perhaps the Arab governments did not pay attention to the value of a weapon dangerous only at a late stage, in spite of the ban, which the government of Ben Ali in Tunisia play on all the sites that pose a threat to their existence, they cannot control the social sites and «Facebook», found that young people wave their hopes, and sailed in it without fear that they reached the desired shore. The same scenario was repeated in Egypt, the Mubarak government has tried during the days of the revolution cut off all connection types from the Internet and phones, but nevertheless continue to challenge young people who took advantage of every loophole to continue to communicate that ended the Revolution. In his talk to the «Middle East journal» interpreted strategic analyst who specializes in the Middle East, Jonathan Paris, governments have become more dominant and control in the area of the Internet to use it as a means to enable them to promote themselves on the one hand, and to determine the identity of its opponents, and is currently in Syria, which benefit from experiences of Iran, which was able to suppress the revolution Green two years ago, and the identification of opponents who are spreading their views on the «Facebook» and «twitter» and stop them, then tortured, has been adopted at the Russian experts and then pass their experience and strategy in this area of the Syrian government, as revealed byRecent reports on this issue. Paris also explained that without social networking sites was not possible to "Bouazizi" story to come out to light, and coordination of a population of 'Tahrir Square' is the story of "Khaled Said" of Alexandria, who was killed six months before the revolution.

The role of social networking sites in the Syrian Revolution, he said it was important, but played a secondary role after the role of satellite TV, and this is because most of the possession of the Syrian satellite dishes that were able to penetrate the ring media of the Syrian regime, which encouraged the masses to take to the street. The scenes of brutal repression in the "DER'A" that prompted the rest of the Syrian provinces to demonstrate. The social networking sites on the Internet, their role was secondary, because the majority of Syrians either do not have the ability to communicate on the Internet or because the Syrian authorities block opposition websites, which monitors the Internet around the clock, and this may lead the majority to refrain from using the Internet as the was used by the demonstrators in Egypt and Tunisia. Provided with this service «YouTube» space for activists to provide video clips to satellite TV, and this is calculated for the positive role of social networking sites. The Syrian regime fought social networking sites, because the system did not favor that the Syrian citizen to communicate freely with other citizens and away from the eyes of the security authorities, as he feared the spread of ideas, which calls for freedom and democracy. There is therefore a whole army of security men and the job monitor Internet users to detect and track, and there are strict controls on the Internet, most news sites, the Syrian opposition blocked,. And the fear of the Internet, but in the long run these attempts will be unsuccessful, because the Internet is difficult to control, and because young Arabs and Syrians in particular already way ahead of the system in electronic technology. That the Arab communities living throes of difficult, and needs for a period of time to mature media, and within the so-called Electronic media, and this needs to be a democratic climate and the situation of political stability. And people have a sixth sense, and has the ability to know the correct news professionally edited news grind. During the past years, especially since the launch of the satellite channels, the Arab media landscape has been reduced to inform the party for the benefit of the media professional, this is something positive

Censorship is normal in many countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Bahrain, Syria, Libya and Yemen governments have put more effort to try and block the social and political contents of information in the internet and social networks. Most of these countries use some of the latest technologies to assist them in filtering the information. The preferred filtering technology in most of these countries is McAfee's Smart Filter. Yemen has for a long time used the Websense but is currently using Netsweeper which is Canadian – built. Other countries using this technology are UAE and Qatar. Most of the social networks will undoubtedly be targeted for filtering by many of the countries governments. This is because as we discussed, the social networks and the internet in general greatly sparked the revolutions currently experienced in the Middle East. The governments would either block most of the modern social sites like Facebook, twitter and MySpace or block some URL information they feel would be inciting. In as much as media freedom is being violated in such moves, the filtering companies most of which are U.S. made will certainly help block such information. For the governments to help control the use of certain words in the internet and social media, some strings of requested URL key words would be blocked. Other methods would include packet filtering which helps detect the controversial keywords, DNS filtering and IP blocking or full block which completely cuts off internet would be applied.

The filtering methods named above are the most common and their application would include a number of methods. One technique is technical blocking which basically block access and the methods mentioned above are commonly used, URL, IP, and DNS filtering. URLs block is the easiest way and is the most preferred method by many countries. This is because the method involves blocking blacklisted words and it is very easy for the government to identify several words to be blacklisted that can for instance lead to insecurity. A search result removal is a technique that can also be used in the implementation of filtering. This involves the government approaching some of the companies that provide internet search services to help omit some unwanted websites from search results. The other method is to order removal some web content hosts. Filtration can occur at various points of control that include; Internet backbone, internet service providers, institutions and individual user computers, this can be achieved through installation of filtering software. Modern protocols like the IPv4 and more recent IPv6 will play a major role in helping these governments effectively filter internet content. ICAP which is a cache-extension protocol is the commonly used protocol and can be applied in institutions and homes in restricting unwanted sites.

### 3 CONCLUSION

From the article, we realize the great impact the internet and the social network has on social and political life of countries in the world (Africa, Internet Filtering in the Middle East and North). The Arab world that has for a long time been considered to stick on traditional culture of authoritative governance has surprisingly seen a paradigm shift in power from the leaders to the people. We have also realized the impact the internet and the social networks have on transforming the patterns of political and social life in the world. Internet is a double edged sword and is important in economic, political and social growth but when not properly monitored can have adverse effects due to accessibility and ease of transfer of information.

The awareness of Arab youth that surprised everyone, including Arab governments that have not bet on this awareness, which could move the street in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria, saying this is good evidence that the Arab youth to take initiative, and now makes the event rather than to follow the events in dull receiver. And the generation of the eighties (ie, those born in the eighties of the last century) are the ones who agitate for the street now, they are not recipients as they are makers of the event, phenomenon of «citizen journalist» or «Press the street» a new phenomenon, and the younger

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generation are the pioneers.

The Middle East governments will for sure tighten the noose on internet security and filtering to ensure that use of some key words in the internet and social media that would be a threat to peaceful coexistence is impossible.

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