

Dossier: Social Movements, Digital Transformations and Changes in the Mediterranean Region

# A Mediterranean Brave New World: The Tools that Lead to Social Movement, and Protecting the Online Civic Spaces They Inhabit

**Wafa Ben-Hassine**

MENA Policy Council  
Global Policy Council  
[accessnow.org](http://accessnow.org)

The use of digital tools has played an integral role in social movements in the Mediterranean region, from the pro-democracy uprisings of the Arab Spring to the anti-austerity actions of the *Gilets Jaunes*. Even in cases where the movements have not achieved the goals their members were aiming for, the ongoing use of technology to create online civic spaces has culminated in a tectonic shift. Today, more than ever, policymakers need to defend online civic spaces against their closure. It is crucial to protect internet freedoms for free expression, association, assembly and privacy online, and essential to ensure that people have the same freedoms online as those they are guaranteed offline.

Young people in the Mediterranean region have been leading calls for social and political change, which culminated during the Arab Spring. Digital media changed the mobilization tactics of democratization movements, and new communication and information technologies played a central role in the popular uprisings. Dubbed the “Arab Digital Generation,” (Booz & Co., 2012) youth in the Arab world have been harnessing digital tools to organize, educate and campaign. Among their top priorities are: transparency in government, digital education, employment opportunities and better healthcare technology (Pecquet, 2014). As countless studies now show, Facebook and Twitter were two of the main communication tools that assisted in the overthrow of four major dictators: Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. One of the main reasons why new

digital tools played a major role in the revolutions is that, at the time, internet content was significantly less controlled by the State than other traditional media outlets, such as television or radio.

Here, it is important to mention that the reason these social movements agitated the geopolitical order in the region is that they did not solely reflect what was happening “on the internet.” Protesters’ demands centred around very real, grounded issues. For that reason, and to fully understand how technology shapes social movements globally, we should draw the distinction between tools to launch social movements offline and fully online campaigns (Hussain & Howard, 2012). There are three stages of digital activism: the first is *preparation*, where activists use digital media in creative ways to find each other, build solidarity around shared grievances and identify collective political goals. Second is the *ignition phase*, involving an incident that state-run media typically ignore, but which is brought to people’s attention online and engages the public. The third phase involves the period of *street protests* that are made possible, in part, by online networking and coordination (Hussain & Howard, 2012).

Youth throughout North Africa and southern Europe – or the Mediterranean Basin more generally – provide a unique vantage point for digital transformations and popular mobilizations, because they have grown up in what is seen as a geopolitical hotspot in the digital age. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, up to 70% of the population is under 35. The internet penetration rate is an enormous 40% in the Middle East, and social media use in the region is increasing at a rapid pace. In 2012 alone, Facebook subscriptions from the Middle Eastern region increased by 29% to a total of 44 million users, 77% of whom are in the 16 to 34 age group, with women accounting for 35% of them. Users of social

media develop a “Web 2.0 sensibility”: they learn that they have the choice to question the information and messages they receive. Through social media navigation and practice, they develop ways of becoming producers, aggregators and scrutineers of content (Herrera, 2014).

**One of the main reasons why new digital tools played a major role in the revolutions is that, at the time, internet content was significantly less controlled by the State than other traditional media**

People under the age of 25 in Mediterranean countries accounted for almost half of the region’s population in 2010. The United Nations predicts that the overall population of Mediterranean countries will grow by a quarter by 2030, when there will be an estimated 70 million under 25-year-olds – compared to 55 million when the research was first conducted in 2012 (Kocoglu & Flayols, 2012). Young people in the region are able to stay connected despite shortcomings in wired internet through the use of smartphones and data services (Radcliffe, 2018). They use digital spaces to challenge the system, learn, socialize, work, play, network, do politics and exercise citizenship (Herrera, 2014). Indeed, the main source of information for the younger generation is social media, making the digital revolution one of the most important in the last 10 years. But not everything is positive: while there are high rates of connectivity, the unemployment, underemployment and youth poverty rates continue to climb.

World Bank data indicates that youth unemployment is a critical issue in many countries across the Mediterranean region, where 25.4 million people are unemployed, of whom 7-8 million are aged 15-24. Reflecting the economic crisis, unemployment rates in the Mediterranean have risen more sharply for EU Member States than for non-EU Mediterranean countries over the past 10 years (World Bank, 2014; UN Population Division, 2015). In December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a young fruit and vegetable street vendor in Tunisia, set himself on fire in protest

after being harassed by officials. He became a catalyst for pro-democracy change, and his actions inspired youth in the MENA region to raise their voices and take to the streets in the long months that followed, in what we now call the Arab Spring. Youth unemployment, underemployment and youth poverty is widespread, and Bouazizi’s situation and protest resonated with the masses and helped inspire social movements (Mulderig, 2013). The fact that young people in Mediterranean countries today are well educated and connected has created high levels of frustration among youth in the region struggling with social and economic exclusion.

### **Use of Digital Tools to Challenge Power**

Recent social movements in Tunisia, Morocco and France present compelling case studies for the use of digital tools to challenge power.

#### *Tunisia*

With the rise of the Arab Spring came a proliferation of social media and networks used to mobilize people online and on the streets. Many people took to social media because other forms of political communication were regulated by the State and were inaccessible (Hussain, & Howard, 2012). According to technologist Ramy Raouf, members of social movements acquire skills as a response to the pressures they face. It is for this reason, Raouf explains, that the average internet user in Egypt, Iran and China has slightly more advanced skills than those living in countries with less internet restrictions – the more closed the internet ecosystem becomes, the more people have to adapt. For instance, before 2011, Tunisian internet services underwent widespread state censorship and surveillance, and internet communication technologies were tightly controlled. Despite the crackdown by the regime on YouTube, Facebook and other applications, bloggers and activists resisted and created alternative online newscasts and virtual spaces for anonymous political discussions outside of state control (Shirazi, 2013).

Protests in Tunisia were facilitated by the use of fast, scalable and real-time internet-based information and communication tools and social media networks. “Looking at the web, exploding with Tunisia’s

news and sights, reading the endless posts of Tunisian bloggers and Egyptian Facebookers,” Dr. Svetlova highlights, “it’s plain that Mark Zuckerberg’s creation and others like it are playing a high-profile role in the unfolding unprecedented people’s revolution in Tunisia” (Svetlova, 2011). Other tools to challenge state power during the protests included text-messaging systems, used both within and outside of the country to share information about the location of actions, the location of the abuses and organizing next steps. Access to technologies allowed people to build extensive networks, create social capital and quickly organize themselves on a scale never seen before (Hussain, & Howard, 2012). This type of organizing continues to this day, especially given that the lack of communication between the government and civil society has become a major driver of discouragement among the population (Ben Ameer & Neale, 2018). Social media uses, and the employment of communication technologies more generally, breaks that norm by ensuring the direct and instant expression of grievances and demands.

## While there are high rates of connectivity, the unemployment, underemployment and youth poverty rates continue to climb

### *Al-Hirak Movement*

Similarly, in Morocco, new technologies have allowed for quick and easy distribution of data that highlight abuses of power and build networks of both national and international solidarity. The “Al-Hirak” movement began on the northern edge of the Rif Mountains in Morocco, a region in the country that is largely neglected and marginalized. The demands of Rif residents include better access to schools, universities, libraries and hospitals. The residents of the northern city of Al-Hoceima, organized a rare series of protests after a fish vendor was killed in 2016, crushed to death by a trash compactor while trying to retrieve a catch that had been confiscated by police. The outrage spread and thousands of people protested against the incident. Mobiliza-

tion on social media helped build support and the unrest grew into *Al-Hirak al-Shaabi* (The Popular Movement). Police responded to the protests with brutal force and arrests (Lamin, 2017).

For the Al-Hirak movement, Facebook Live, a service that allows users to broadcast video live directly through the platform, was a crucial tool for raising awareness and garnering support. On an almost daily basis, the protesters of Al-Hoceima broadcasted their marches and public meetings live on the social network. Facebook Live was also used as an essential instrument to document and share incidents of police repression – some video views numbering in the thousands. But according to information provided by the activists to Access Now, an organization that fights to protect human rights in the digital world, when Moroccan authorities realized protests were being broadcast live on the Internet, they issued orders to telecommunication companies to block both internet and phone network connections while the protests were in progress. The efforts by authorities to restrict access to internet platforms significantly undermined protesters’ ability to share their movement with the rest of the world. Previously, shutdowns and network disruptions lasted four to five hours during protests, after which authorities restored connectivity. However, during the Al-Hirak protests, shutdowns continued for two to three days, leaving the residents of Al-Hoceima in complete isolation. Shutdowns increase isolation in times of unrest by preventing people from communicating with loved ones, accessing emergency services and holding authorities accountable for human rights violations (Tackett & Sayadi, 2017). Morocco is not alone here: the trend of using shutdowns as a tool to repress social movement is, unfortunately, increasing globally.

### *Gilets Jaunes*

Moving to the northern shore of the Mediterranean, the *Gilets Jaunes*, or Yellow Vests movement, is an example of social organizing that began online and continued to spread massively to eventually facilitate organizing offline. The Yellow Vests in France is described as “a grassroots, social media-based citizens’ movement with no formal structure, recognized leader or party, or union backing, named after the high-visibility jackets that French drivers are required by

law to carry in their vehicles” (Quinn & Henley, 2019). The movement began online as a protest over French President Macron’s government imposing tax hikes on fuel. The taxes highlighted a rift between the city “elite” and France’s rural poor. Fuel taxes especially affect those who are living outside of major cities and are more reliant on cars, disproportionately impacting lower-income, working-class people in areas of the country that are struggling economically. The tax increases were followed by austerity measures to benefit the wealthy and undercut worker protections. The protestors called for greater corporate regulation, education reform and expanded social safety-net programmes to provide new protection mechanisms for children, the elderly and workers (Williamson, 2018).

**When Moroccan authorities realized protests were being broadcast live on the Internet, they issued orders to telecommunication companies to block both internet and phone network connections while the protests were in progress**

Protests have included blocking highways, creating barricades and deploying convoys of slow-moving trucks. French journalist Frederic Filloux described some of the groups organizing tactics, saying that, following a call to action and an online petition launched against tax increases, Yellow Vests-related Facebook events mushroomed, leading to locally organized marches and protests sometimes garnering a quarter of a city’s population. Protestors share their perspectives via selfies, videos and live blogging. Self-appointed thinkers have become national figures due to the popularity of their Facebook pages and streaming events through Facebook Live. “Right now in France, traditional TV is trailing a social sphere seen as uncorrupted by the elites, unfiltered and more authentic” (Filloux, 2018). Filloux writes that Facebook substitutes the traditional media in a context where journalists have been attacked and the subject of public hatred. Facebook groups have

emerged as a trusted voice representing the masses. The network’s semblance of transparency and the unparalleled immediate live platform it provides have supported the movement’s growth. Eventually, and as a response to the Yellow Vests’ widespread and ongoing protests, President Macron moved to suspend the tax increase and raise the minimum wage (Williamson, 2018).

## **Use of Digital Tools to Build Societies**

### *E-Government, E-Citizenship & E-Democracy*

After Tunisia’s uprising in 2011, the new government attempted to tap into the sensibilities of its young wired citizens by developing “e-government” and “e-citizenship” programmes, opening up an online portal where citizens could report incidents of government corruption, and setting up Facebook pages to allow citizens to convey their ideas for administrative reforms. Similar programmes had already been initiated in Morocco, Turkey and Egypt, largely funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). These programmes take a view of digital citizens as “those who use technology frequently, who use technology for political information to fulfil their civic duty, and who use technology at work for economic gain” (Mossberger & McNeil, 2008). However, the programmes are not very popular, as people in the MENA region have organically developed their own model of e-democracy, going online to express their voices as citizens in criticizing the government, occupying virtual spaces, performing e-strikes and e-demonstrations (Herrara & Sakr, 2014).

### *Civil Society Work*

Digital tools have also been used by civic organizations to monitor and hold the government accountable. *Al Bawsala*, a non-profit NGO in Tunisia that is independent from political influence, serves as a resource for citizens who seek political information, Members of Parliament (MPs) looking to embrace democratic and consultative practices, and associations that seek to ensure the rights of citizens through monitoring, advocating and empowering.

Through its project *Marsad* ("Monitor" in Arabic) it observes legislative and executive proceedings and promotes transparency. Al Bawsala uses technology to track government data in order to make the collected information freely accessible to citizens.<sup>1</sup> In Tunisia, many other organizations do the same on a local scale.

## While digital tools and technology have undoubtedly increased access to information and social movement mobilization in the Mediterranean region, challenges do remain

### *Start-up Ecosystem*

Digital tools in the Mediterranean region and across the Middle East are not only being used to mobilize, educate and organize action, they are also being used to support youth through online entrepreneurial projects. Across the Middle East, entrepreneurs and their start-ups are striving to offer an economic future to the region's overwhelmingly youthful population, while helping to foster social and political change (Pecquet, 2014). Even in typically closed spaces like Algeria, people are using digital tools in innovative ways in the start-up ecosystem. The Algerian Center of Social Entrepreneurs (ACSE) is one such start-up. Co-founder Yanis Bouda describes the organization's goals as "to inform, educate and train people about social entrepreneurship, in order to encourage them to get involved and to challenge the status quo through a viable economic activity that has a high social impact."<sup>2</sup> The organization uses digital tools to promote its campaigns. A lot of movements are launched using Twitter hashtags, such as #TRASHTAG, #CivicTech, etc., to encourage the participation and inclusion of all citizens (Casbah Tribune, 2019). The Algerian Social Entrepreneurship Space is another start-up organization in Algeria. Every year, they organize the event "Impact@work," where young Alge-

rians present projects that benefit the country both socially and economically. During the final competition, innovative projects on topics ranging from environmental issues to supporting youth education in the sciences, were presented (Agli, S., 2017).

### **Conclusion**

While digital tools and technology have undoubtedly increased access to information and social movement mobilization in the Mediterranean region, challenges do remain. In a region where youth unemployment is widespread, members of civil society have harnessed these tools to create economic opportunities through the start-up economy. Internet and communication technologies have broken through connection and communication barriers in isolated regions allowing for the immediate sharing of abuses, critical information and opinions in online civic spaces. Still, governments now resort to information control tactics such as internet shutdowns, network disruptions and repressive legislation to stop the flow of critical opinions. The shift in the use of digital tools in the popular uprisings in 2011 has reverberated around the Mediterranean region through online civic spaces. These instruments, now more than ever, need to be protected.

### **References**

- AGIL, S 2017. "L'entrepreneuriat social, le nouveau visage de l'économie Algérienne ?" [www.huffpostmaghreb.com 26/11/2017](http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/26/11/2017). Retrieved from [www.huffpostmaghreb.com/sami-agli-/lentrepreneuriat-social-l\\_b\\_18656420.html](http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/sami-agli-/lentrepreneuriat-social-l_b_18656420.html).
- ALHINDI, W. A., TALHA, M., & SULONG, G. B. "The role of modern technology in Arab Spring" *Archives Des Sciences*, 65(8), 2012, 101-112.
- BEN AMEUR, A. & NEALE, E. *Democracy in Tunisia: Façade or Reality?* The Atlantic Council, 23 March, 2018. Retrieved from: [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/democracy-in-tunisia-facade-or-reality](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/democracy-in-tunisia-facade-or-reality).

<sup>1</sup> Albawsala. Retrieved from [www.albawsala.com/en/presentation](http://www.albawsala.com/en/presentation).

<sup>2</sup> Adel, M. "Algerian Center for Social Entrepreneurship." *Impactjournalismday* Retrieved at <http://impactjournalismday.com/story/algerian-center-for-social-entrepreneurship/>.

- BOOZE & Co. *Understanding the Arab Digital Generation Report*. 20121. Retrieved from: [http://idal.com.lb/Content/uploads/Understanding\\_the\\_Arab\\_Digital\\_Generation.pdf](http://idal.com.lb/Content/uploads/Understanding_the_Arab_Digital_Generation.pdf).
- CASBAH TRIBUNE. "ACSE : Alger a désormais son incubateur d'entrepreneuriat social." *Casbah Tribune*, 16/01/2019 <http://casbah-tribune.com/acse-alger-a-desormais-son-incubateur-dentrepreneuriat-social/>.
- FILOUX, F. "How Facebook is Fueling The French Populist Rage." *Monday Note*. 2 December, 2018. Retrieved from <https://mondaynote.com/how-facebook-is-fueling-the-french-populist-rage-27a86acb9d85>.
- HERRERA, L. & SAKR., R. *Wired citizenship: Youth learning and activism in the Middle East*. Routledge, 2014.
- HUSSAIN, M. M., & HOWARD, P. N. "Democracy's fourth wave? Information technologies and the fuzzy causes of the Arab Spring." *Information Technologies and the Fuzzy Causes of the Arab Spring (March 27, 2012)*.
- KOCOGLU, Y., & FLAYOLS, A. "Les jeunes diplômés dans les pays MENA : un potentiel bloqué dans la file d'attente de l'emploi." *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook. Med. 2012* IEMed, 2012. Retrieved from: [www.iemed.org/observatori-fr/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2012/Kocoglu\\_fr.pdf](http://www.iemed.org/observatori-fr/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2012/Kocoglu_fr.pdf).
- LAMIN, M.H. "Protests grow over police actions in Morocco." *Al-Monitor, the pulse of the Middle East*. 4 July, 2017 Retrieved from: [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/protest-police-morocco-rif-hoceima-popular-movement.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/protest-police-morocco-rif-hoceima-popular-movement.html).
- MULDERIG, C. (2013). "An Uncertain Future: Youth Frustration and the Arab Spring." *The Paradee Papers* (16) 2013. Retrieved from: <https://open.bu.edu/ds2/stream/?#/documents/170838/page/2>.
- PECQUET, J. Technology a Middle East Bright Spot. *Al-Monitor, the pulse of the Middle East*. 20 May, 2014. Retrieved from: [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/tech-middle-east-changing-region.html#ixzz5nzbqk3hg](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/tech-middle-east-changing-region.html#ixzz5nzbqk3hg).
- QUINN, B. & HENLEY, J. (2019). Yellow vests: protesters fight for ideological ownership. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: [www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/13/yellow-vests-protesters-fight-for-ideological-ownership](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/13/yellow-vests-protesters-fight-for-ideological-ownership).
- RADCLIFFE, D. (2018). Middle East youth and tech: what's happened since the Arab Spring? 30 November, 2018. Retrieved from: [www.zdnet.com/article/middle-east-youth-and-tech-whats-happened-since-the-arab-spring/](http://www.zdnet.com/article/middle-east-youth-and-tech-whats-happened-since-the-arab-spring/).
- SCOTT-RAILTON, J., MARCZAK, B., RAOOF, R. & MAYNIER, E. (2017) "Nile Phish: Large-Scale Phishing Campaign Targeting Egyptian Civil Society," *Citizen Lab* (University of Toronto), 2 February 2017. Retrieved from: [citizenlab.ca/2017/02/nilephish-report/](http://citizenlab.ca/2017/02/nilephish-report/).
- SHIRAZI, F. (2013). Social media and the social movements in the Middle East and North Africa: A critical discourse analysis. *Information Technology & People*, 26(1), 28-49.
- STEPANOVA, E. (2011). The role of information communication technologies in the "Arab Spring." *Ponars Eurasia*, 15(1), 1-6.
- SVETLOVA; K. "Analysis: The limits of a Facebook revolution," *The Jerusalem Post* January, 18 2011. [www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Analysis-The-limits-of-a-Facebook-revolution](http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Analysis-The-limits-of-a-Facebook-revolution).
- TACKETT, E. & SAYADI, E. (2017). Morocco: A complete blackout during protests in Al-Hoceima. *Access Now*. Retrieved from: [www.accessnow.org/morocco-complete-blackout-protests-al-hoceima/](http://www.accessnow.org/morocco-complete-blackout-protests-al-hoceima/).
- UNITED NATIONS, DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, POPULATION DIVISION (2015). *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision, Methodology of the United Nations Population Estimates and Projections*. ESA/P/WP.242.
- WILLIAMSON, V. (2018). What France's Yellow Vest protests reveal about the future of climate action. *Brookings*. Retrieved from: [www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2018/12/20/what-frances-yellow-vest-protests-reveal-about-the-future-of-climate-action/](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2018/12/20/what-frances-yellow-vest-protests-reveal-about-the-future-of-climate-action/).