

# Social Media in the Arab World: the Impact on Youth, Women and Social Change

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The societal and political transformations that swept the Arab region throughout 2011 have empowered large segments of the population. Many stereotypes have been shattered, with Arab youth, “netizens” and women becoming the main drivers of regional change. Arab women and youth in particular have become more engaged in political and civic actions, playing a leading role in the rapid and historic changes sweeping the region. Meanwhile, the debate about the role of social media in these transformations has reached policymaking circles at the regional and global levels.

Throughout 2011, social media usage continued to grow significantly across the Arab world, coupled with major shifts in usage trends. Once used merely as a tool for social networking and entertainment, social media now infiltrates almost every aspect of the daily lives of millions of Arabs, affecting the way they interact socially, do business, engage with government, and take part in civil society movements. By the end of 2011, Arab users’ utilisation of social media had evolved to encompass civic engagement, political participation, entrepreneurial efforts, and social change. With a critical mass of Arab users in many countries, governments have also begun to recognise social media’s potential to develop more transparent, participatory and inclusive governance models. However, while creative and socially benefi-

cial uses of social media abound, they are accompanied by newfound concerns surrounding issues of security, privacy, freedom of expression, and the disruptive uses of social media on foreign policymaking and diplomacy.

## **The Shift to Activism**

The first three months of 2011 saw what can only be termed a substantial shift by social media users in the Arab region towards online civic and political mobilisation, whether by citizens – to disseminate information within their networks, organise demonstrations (both pro- and anti-government) and raise awareness of ongoing events locally and globally – or by governments, in some cases to engage with citizens and encourage their participation in government processes and in others to block access to websites and monitor and control the information on them. The growth of social media in the region and this shift in usage trends have both played a vital role in mobilising and empowering people, shaping opinions, and influencing change. A critical mass of young and active social media users exists in the Arab world today that is using Facebook and Twitter, among other social media sites, to effect this change.

A large percentage of young men and women primarily used social media during the “Arab Spring” to raise awareness within their own countries about societal grievances and the ongoing uprisings – according to several regional surveys conducted by the Governance and Innovation Program at the Dubai School of Government throughout 2011. While many users said they used social media tools to mobilise popular movements, a significant percentage of respondents (25%) also voiced concerns that they could be held accountable by au-

thorities for expressing their social and political views online. In Egypt and Tunisia, specifically, the ramifications of political activism – which included the authorities blocking the Internet – did little to deter people; in fact, the surveys indicate that for almost 60% of respondents, it motivated them further and even pushed the undecided to get involved in the civil and political movements on the ground.

According to the *Arab Social Media Report* series,<sup>1</sup> Facebook and Twitter usage grew substantially throughout 2011 in the Arab world. For example:

- The total number of Facebook users in the Arab world stood at 37,865,442 as of December 2011, having almost doubled since the same time the year before (21,368,605 in December 2010).
- At the beginning of December 2011, the country average for Facebook user penetration in the Arab region was just over 10%, up from just under 6% at the end of 2010.
- The number of Facebook users in the Arab world increased by 77% between January and December 2011. Youth (between the ages of 15 and 29) make up around 70% of Facebook users in the Arab region, a number that has held steady since April 2011.
- The percentage of female users has been at a standstill since April 2011, at 33.5%. This is still significantly lower than the global trend, where women constitute roughly half of Facebook users.
- The estimated number of active Twitter users (users who tweet once a month) in the Arab region at the end of September 2011 was 652,333.
- The estimated number of tweets generated in the Arab region in September 2011 by these “active users” was 36,889,500 tweets, with an estimated 1,229,650 daily tweets.
- The most popular trending hashtags across the Arab region in September were #bahrain (with 510,000 mentions in the tweets generated during this period), #egypt (with 310,000 mentions), #syria (with 220,000 mentions), #feb14 and #14feb (with a combined 153,000 mentions), and #kuwait (with 140,000 mentions).

## Facebook: Mobilising Movements and Calls to Protest

As the statistics above indicate, the number of Facebook users has risen significantly in most Arab countries, most notably during the first three months of 2011 – at the height of the “Arab Spring” – and in the countries where protests have taken place. The role of social media in the revolutions that have swept the region has been debated, with some camps labelling them the main instigators and others relegating them to mere tools. Regardless, it can be stated that many of the calls to protest in the Arab region were initially made on Facebook (save for the first protest in Tunisia), and all did indeed manifest in the streets (with the exception of the first call to protest in Syria on 4 February 2011). This is not to say that there was a causal relationship or that the Facebook pages were the defining or only factor in people organising themselves on those dates, but as the initial platform for these calls, they were undeniably a factor in mobilising the movements.

Conversely, the protests themselves seem to have led to a rise in the number of Facebook users in the region. The countries where protests occurred have all shown a positive growth rate, except for Libya, which could be explained by the number of expatriate workers leaving or switching Facebook locations. A comparison of the growth rate for each country during and following the protests to a similar period the year before shows that the growth rates doubled and even tripled in some countries (see Chart 41). The numbers themselves do not illustrate the type of usage, of course. Some usage may be political, while other usage may be purely social and not entirely related to the civic movements at the time. But the exponential growth in the number of Facebook users coinciding with the protests in each country does indicate the need for further research to explore the possible correlation.

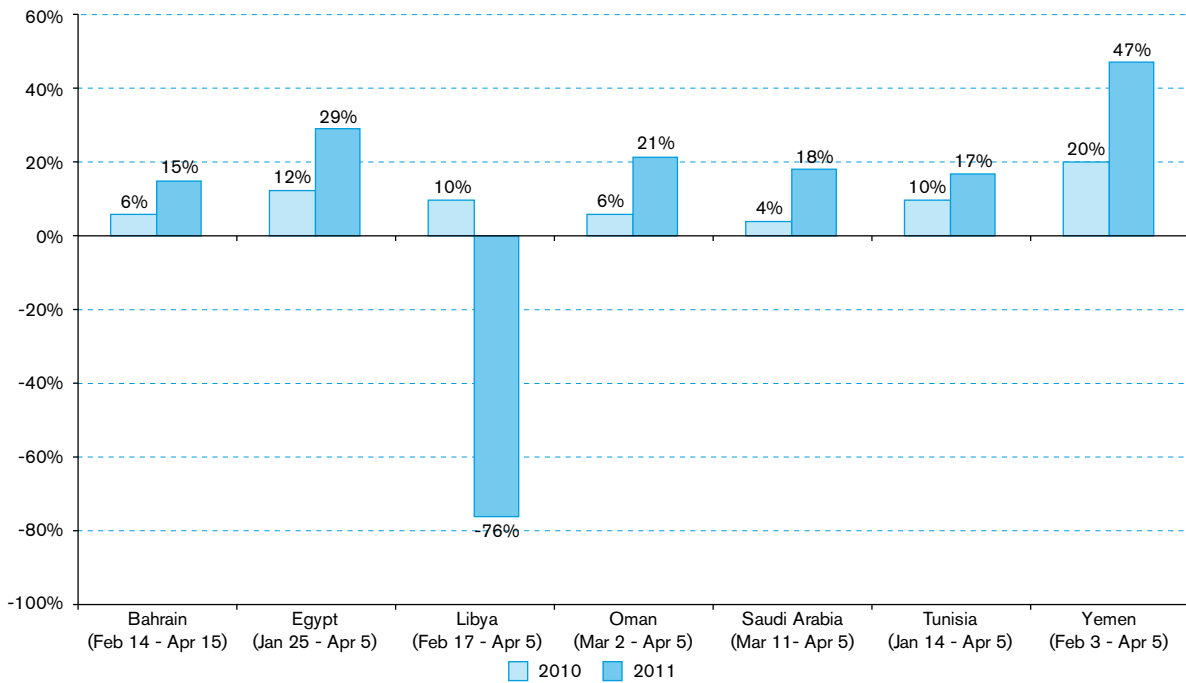
## Twitter: Informing the Online Political Conversation

Twitter usage in the Arab world grew throughout 2011 as well, both in terms of the number of users and the volume of tweets they generated. As with

<sup>1</sup> Source: *The Arab Social Media Report* series, available at: [www.ArabSocialMediaReport.com](http://www.ArabSocialMediaReport.com).

CHART 41

Growth Rate of Facebook Users During 2011 Protests As Compared to a Similar Time Period in 2010



Facebook, much of this growth can be attributed to the events of the “Arab Spring” and its influence on the Twittersphere. This influence was not only reflected in the growing numbers of users and tweets, but also in the fluctuations in the number of daily tweets and in the top trending topics and hashtags during the period of the “Arab Spring.”

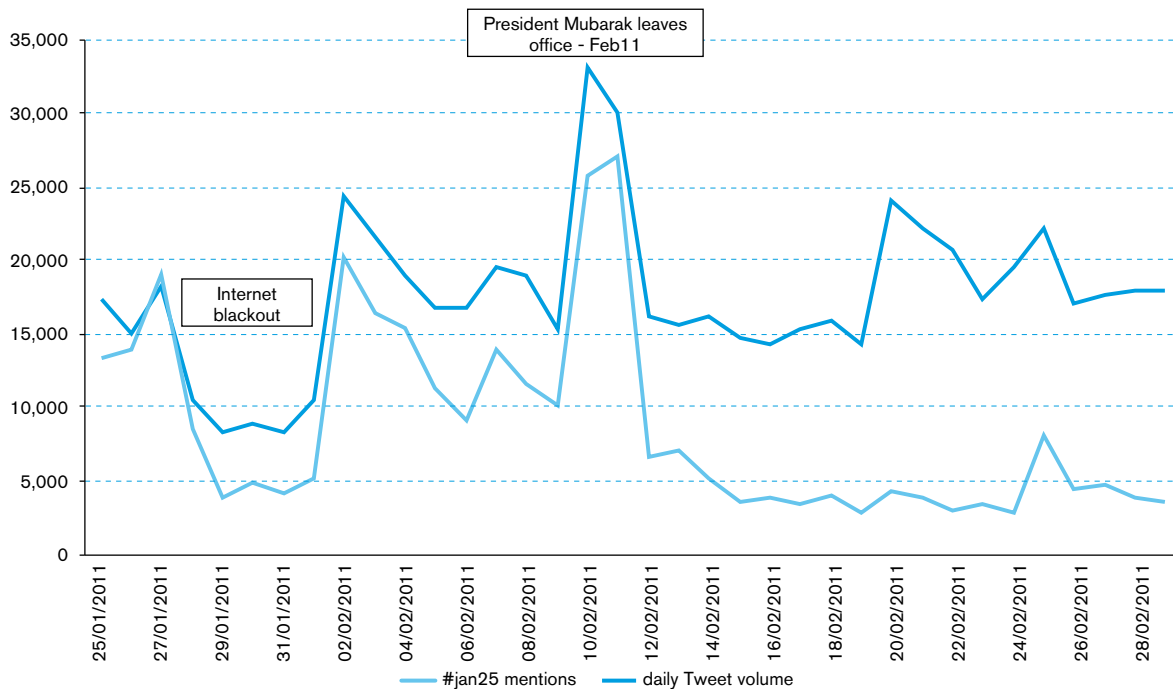
In looking at the fluctuations in the volume of daily tweets in certain countries, we noted that some of the fluctuations or “spikes” seemed to coincide with current events at the time. For example, Chart 42 shows a drop in the number of tweets in Egypt during the Internet blackout (28 January – 2 February 2011) and a spike when former President Mubarak left office on 11 February. This does not conclusively indicate that the events directly contributed to the fluctuations in tweet volume, but their concurrence provides a high degree of circumstantial evidence for linking current events to the surge in tweet volume. As with the daily volume of tweets, spikes and fluctuations within the daily volume of mentions of popular trending words and hashtags (in Chart 42, #Jan25, specifically) also coincided with these events and accounted for a

large number of the daily tweets. This gives a clearer idea of what the Twitter conversation in Egypt – in this case – was about and indicates that, to a large extent, ongoing social and political events at the time did indeed drive this conversation.

### Social Media and Arab Women’s Empowerment – A Regional Perspective<sup>2</sup>

The societal and political transformations taking place across the region have also played an instrumental role in challenging stereotypes about Arab women as oppressed and subservient. In particular, the leading role that women have played in orchestrating and participating in social movements in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen has cemented their position as equal partners to men in transforming the political landscapes in their countries. The most obvious acknowledgement of this leadership role was the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to an Arab woman, Tawakkul Karman, a leading Yemeni political activist. Whether Arab women’s civic and

<sup>2</sup> The Gender and Social Media Regional Survey was conducted jointly by the Governance and Innovation Program and the Gender and Public Policy Program at the Dubai School of Government.



political engagement will be enhanced in the aftermath of the “Arab Spring” remains to be seen.

Although social media has been a powerful tool throughout these popular movements, both for mobilising activists and disseminating information, Arab women’s use of social media is low compared to men’s in the region, as well as in comparison to the global female usage average (for example, women make up about half of Facebook users globally, while they make up only a third of users in the Arab region).

#### *Explaining the Social Media Gender Gap in the Arab World*

In the Arab world, men remain twice as likely as women to be users of social media. The barriers to women’s utilisation of social media can be divided into two categories: environmental and personal. Environmental factors – which have more to do with the environment in which female social media users operate – constitute the largest barriers to Arab women’s use of social media, specifically “societal and cultural constraints,” in addition to “access to ICT” and “lack of relevant content for women.” On the other hand, the personal factors, which have more to do with the skills or abilities of female social media users themselves, such as “level of education,” “ICT literacy,” “confidence in social media” as a

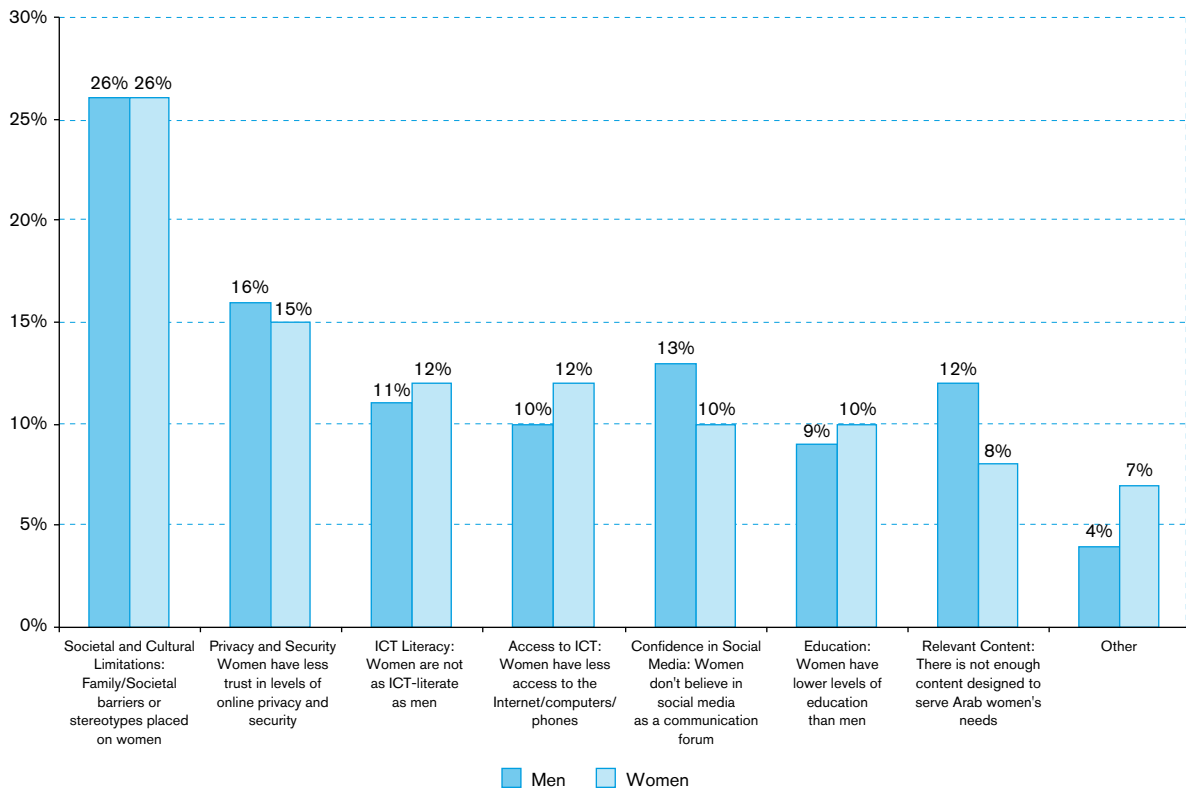
means for communication, and “level of trust in ICT’s security and privacy,” are also viewed as barriers, but with lesser impact (see Chart 43). This suggests that closing the “virtual” gender gap will require efforts to overcome the environmental barriers by addressing discriminatory attitudes and cultural constraints on women, rather than addressing the personal barriers by focusing on “fixing the women” solutions.

#### *Social Media as a Gender Equaliser*

Arab men and women largely agree on issues related to social media and its implications for women and civic participation. They use social media in similar ways and have similar opinions on the role that social media can play in women’s empowerment. Whether this is a result of using social media or has more to do with the typical profile of a social media user warrants further research.

#### *Social Media and Changing Perceptions about Women and Civic Participation*

A key finding of this research is the shared view of social media as a tool for women’s empowerment. The majority of respondents felt that social media had the potential to be an empowering and engag-



ing tool for women, whether in social, economic, legal, political or civic arenas. These perceptions contrast with the reality of gender inequalities that persist in the Arab region when it comes to these domains. In that sense, social media can potentially be a change agent towards women's empowerment in Arab societies.

### *Social Media: A Panacea for Women's Empowerment?*

Gender inequality prevails in "real life" in the political, social and economic arenas in the Arab world. This is apparent in the Arab region's low rankings in terms of gender parity within the political empowerment and economic participation pillars of various women's empowerment indices, as well as in regional and international reports such as the *Arab Human Development Report*.

Even though social media is largely viewed as a tool for empowerment, giving women access to and enabling them to create entrepreneurial opportunities, social change, and civic and political action, 40% of respondents asserted that social media may also present new concerns for women's civic participa-

tion. Additionally, the overarching "real life" barriers for women's empowerment may not be surmountable using social media alone. While "virtual" participation might be a first step towards women's empowerment, it may not necessarily translate into real-life participation in mainstream political, civic and public arenas. The real-life barriers on the ground within these arenas should not be underestimated and need to be addressed in efforts to promote gender equality in the region.

### **Social Media in the Arab Region: from Perception to Reality**

Arab societies continue to have limited channels for interactions, with no real civil society, limited media freedoms and a lack of representative government institutions. Until a few years ago, the flow of information in Arab societies remained overwhelmingly hierarchical, mainly flowing top-down from governments to citizens and state media to society. Today, with a critical mass of social media users across the region and the convergence of these informational sources with other communication channels

such as satellite TV and mobile telephony, information flows have been almost fully rewired in Arab societies, giving rise to new opportunities for empowerment.

### **Coupled with the robust growth of social media usage among youth in the Arab region, there is a pervasive perception of social media as an enabler for youth and women's empowerment**

During the "Arab Spring," social media played a critical role in most of the popular movements in the region. According to our research findings, it was promising that, coupled with the robust growth of social media usage among youth in the Arab region, there is a pervasive perception of social media as an enabler for youth and women's empowerment. If lessons are to be drawn from youth utilisation of social media during the ongoing popular movements in the Arab world and young people's growing sense of empowerment today, these strong positive perceptions suggest that social

media will continue to play an important role in empowering large parts of Arab societies in the future. From a societal point of view, this will be realised as long as a critical mass of young Arabs continue to embrace social media with the primary objective of influencing change in their societies.

The growth of social media usage also changed the ways in which governments interact with societies in the region. Arab governments' reactions to this new phenomenon have been mixed. While some tried to resist change, a few governments were more responsive and started adapting. The few responsive governments tried to take advantage of this growth by putting policies in place to regulate social media usage. With the continued government restrictions on media, civil society and political representation in most Arab countries, and given the region's young population and increasing penetration rates, social media will continue to play a growing role in the political, societal and economic transformations in the Arab region. From a governance point of view, thanks to the new informational structure in Arab societies, these transformations will continue to take place at an increasingly faster pace and will continue to bypass existing governments' controls and restrictions.