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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Snapchat, Twitter and Instagram have seen an unprecedented level of adoption and usage among the mobile phone users across the globe. The ease and simplicity of these apps have helped in connecting the users by either posting the pictures of what is happening around them or a status that captures their thoughts in lesser than 140 letters. In addition, with the events across the world being sent in the form of pictures, along with an appropriate title, there is now the rise of uncensored coverage among Internet users, which will eventually play a major role in the decision making of the future. This in a way means that the average person has now turned into a journalist of sorts, albeit without any training.

Consequently, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and social media have created a platform for people across the world to voice their opinions and respond to issues that they feel deeply about, thus bringing a new dimension to mass protests and popular social movements. The most recent example of this would be of the controversial 'Tel Aviv Live Story' in Snapchat.

Snapchat's 'Live Story' features a compilation of videos and photos of a select city that will run for 24 hours, available for all its users to view. Usual for a Live Story, the 7th of July showcased Tel Aviv through images of the Mediterranean, youths dancing to a concert, the bride and groom walking down and many more. The decision to air Tel Aviv coincided with the first anniversary of Operation Protective Edge on the 8th of July, 2014 by Israel on Gaza that left around 70 Israelis and more than 2100 Palestinians dead. This sparked off outrage with the hashtags #TelAviv and #StopTelAvivLive trending on Twitter during the day. The inconsiderate timing was severely criticised in the online world[i]. The supporters of Palestine responded with photos of the violence that took place during the

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conflict in 2014. Memes posed questions of how would the US, Canada and Australia feel if their land was taken over by Israel. Snapchat, in the form of an apology, responded by the airing of West Bank, two days after the Tel Aviv fiasco.

It is important to note that the influence and impact of social media has been extensive, as access to such mode of expression has toppled governments, as seen during the Arab Spring protests. The self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in late 2010 as a protest against the inequality struck a chord with the majority of the people, which saw the departure of President Ben Ali on account of the mass protests held. The protests spread to Egypt, which resulted in President Hosseni Mubarak vacating the seat after a period of 30 years. The online world during that period in the region saw an increase in the number of political discussions that took place virtually that involved people not just affected by the events but also in the neighbouring countries[ii]. The attempt to limit the access of the citizens to Internet showed the ineffectiveness of the authorities to control the virtual sphere and ultimately showcased the power of the Internet and social media. The fall of dictatorial governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, and the rise of the collective voice of the citizens have resulted in them being given more rights than they were in the past. WikiLeaks now serves as a powerful reminder that governments which resort to distortion of facts and withholding of information will find it hard to inculcate trust among its citizens once the secrets are out.

While social media has brought down governments, it has also been effectively utilised by leaders to connect with the masses, thus lending it a more personal touch. The official Twitter account of the Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates, his Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum @HHShkMohd has more than 4 million followers, thereby giving him the distinction of being one of the most followed leaders on a global scale[iii]. Asking the public to suggest a name for the Mars probe to be launched from the UAE in 2021, #Mars_Probe trended almost immediately on Twitter after 14,000 tweets in a span of three hours on 14 April 2015 after the announcement by Prime Minister's official account[iv].

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It is important to note that the Arab World with its young demography and growing access to the Internet holds a lot of potential in terms of refining governments by allowing uncensored discussions to take place without restrictions. The ease of connectivity and the awareness of issues taking place across reported as it occurs has helped in a large extent to break down barriers such as gender assigned roles and the class system. A case in point to bolster the argument is that while women in Iran are expected to have their heads covered as a sign of modesty, a small but growing number have started to post pictures of them minus the headscarf; a small but definite sign of liberation from the rules imposed on them by the society they live in[v]. #Women2Drive is a movement in Saudi Arabia to enable the women to drive[vi]. Though the law does not specifically restrict women from being in the driver's seat, the country's patriarchal mindset coupled with the religious laws prevent this from taking place. With the issue discussed more frequently by the Saudi press and the international media taking it up, it is now a matter of time to see the actual effects of social media on the lives of a normal citizen. Social lobbying on Twitter in the form of #Mecca_live saw the airing of Mecca during the holiest night of Ramadan, Laylat Al Qadr, on 14 of July 2015[vii]. The move resulted in a lot of positive coverage of the city that translated into Snapchat getting over the Tel Aviv incident.

With the growing access, affordability and the ever-growing online content available on various topics, people now have a place to voice their opinions and encourage debate and discussion. Discussions such as these enable the development of clearer ideas and ways to go about implementing them. The civil society's right to deliberation has now come of age in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region through the Internet and its various applications.

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[i] "Snapchat takes Tel Aviv, sparks anti-Israel outrage", The Jerusalem Post, 8 July 2015.

[ii] Catherine O'Donnell, *New study quantifies use of social media in Arab Spring* (University of Washington: Washington, 2011)

[iii] "Shaikh Mohammad's Twitter followers top 4m", Gulf News, 14 May 2015.

[iv] "Shaikh Mohammad asks UAE residents to name Mars probe", Gulf News, 14 April 2015.

[v] "Thousands of Iranian Women Defy Hijab Law on Social Media", Time, 14 May 2014.

[vi] "Saudi Arabia's Women2Drive campaign is up against society", The Guardian, 3 June 2011.

[vii] "Snapchat streams Mecca live as thousands share incredible images of Islam's holiest city", 14 July 2015.