GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION
Focus on freedom of expression and association online

This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.

Global Information Society Watch 2011

Sida

JORDAN

NEW MEDIA AND SOCIAL RESISTANCE: MOVING TOWARDS A DIRECT DEMOCRACY
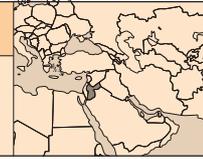
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Introduction

The entire world saw the first draft of Egypt's contemporary history being written in Tahrir Square in Cairo. The model for citizen uprising has been appreciated elsewhere, and deserves to be copied, especially in neighbouring Arab countries like Jordan. Hundreds of "cyber tribes" tried on 24 March 2011 to do just that.

Jordanian students had started a protest camp in response to a call on the social networking site Facebook. They chanted pro-reform slogans and called for corrupt officials to be put on trial. They were camped out next to the Interior Circle, or Gamal Abdel Nasser Square – named after the late Egyptian president – in Amman. Many young people met there for the first time. I saw one of them shaking hands with another introducing himself as the "Black Iris", the Jordanian national flower.

But at night, police attempted to disperse the youths, cutting off electricity to the square. Several Jordanian protesters were wounded after "loyalists" of the government attacked their camp as police stood by.

Revolution in Tunisia and Egypt raised hopes for political change in the region, including Jordan; but here the government succeeded in avoiding the results seen in Tunisia and Egypt by managing the transition to democracy.

Policy and political background

During the demonstrations in Jordan, activists used social networks to organise protests and mobilise large numbers of people.

Jordan has a history of persecuting activists and journalists. Fewer press freedoms mean networks such as Twitter or Facebook are viewed not solely as tools for social networking or self-promotion, but as a largely free arena in which to connect, debate and articulate different viewpoints.

The internet gives citizens a huge opportunity to access the other side of stories, and to participate in a counter-public sphere. It also gives people the opportunity to become "citizen journalists" and "newsmakers".

In response to the new media influence, Jordan's government tried to pass new laws to control the new "technology for freedom". In all press freedom indices, Jordan is not free, with one report stating that "[t]he Jordanian media have traditionally been under tight state control."[1]

On 23 June 2011 Jordan's Information Minister Taher Adwan resigned in protest over proposed laws which he said restricted freedom of expression and were a setback to the government's reform plans. "We were working on democratic laws and I was surprised at the drafting of new laws that restrict freedom of expression and lower the ceiling of press freedoms," Odwan told Reuters.[2] Adwan is a well-known novelist and journalist, and after he resigned he was appointed the CEO of the daily newspaper *Alarab Alyawm*.

The role of new technologies in the "Arab Spring"

During the "Arab Spring" all governments in the region were obliged to take note and implement changes to manage the new situation. Some used the old-fashioned model to counter the mass demonstrations, as in Egypt, Syria and Yemen, but for many of these regimes the game was over.

In Jordan the government took a smarter approach compared to neighbouring countries. The decision makers absorbed the anger of the masses in different ways; for instance, by amending the constitution, which was one of the main demands of the demonstrators. The new amendments included the establishment of a constitutional court, and more guarantees of civil rights and liberties.

Young people have succeeded in shaping societal reforms and ensuring that their interests are taken into consideration. The constitutional amendments included the reduction of the minimum age of political candidates to 25 years old. The law of public meetings was also changed to allow people to gather without permission.

One of the main powers of the demonstrators was the use of online social networks. In Jordan, as in many other countries, new media is multiplying,

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1   news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/828763.stm

2   www.guardian.co.uk/world/middle-east-live/2011/jun/21/syria-libya-middle-east-unrest-live

as are the number of satellite TV stations, resulting in a flood of broadcast and web news. Everyone is trying to get a share of the cake.

Blogging is flourishing in Jordan. Many bloggers serve different functions, such as advocating on particular issues or documenting events. Bloggers are potential competitors to traditional media, especially in closed societies.

Jordanian blogger Osama Romoh[3] won first prize in a Bern blogging competition 15 April 2010. Mohammad Omar, one of the early bloggers in Jordan, commented: "It seems that the [role of the] majority of blogs and social networks has turned completely since the 'Arab Spring'. (...) Now it's more about following up on public affairs and politics." [4]

Bater Wardam, one of the early internet activists, said in an article entitled "Electronic Democracy in Jordan"[5] that "maybe the main feature of the websites is that they allow for reader comments," adding that social media "facilitates the dissemination of opinion contrary to the government's."

The new century started with the revolution in new world media. The invention of social networks, starting with Facebook, YouTube and then Twitter, took access to information to a different level. According to the statistics, there are more than 15 million users of Facebook in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and this is increasing rapidly. Today, 27.2 % of Jordanians have access to the internet.[6] In August, the number of Facebook users had grown in the previous five months by 113%, which pushed the number of Facebook users in the country to over one million – over half the number of internet users.[7]

A 2010 survey[8] by Harris Interactive showed that 64% of internet users in Jordan are men and only 33% are women. The number of mobile subscribers[9] in the country stands at 112% of the country's population of six million. In Jordan the mobile plays a more important role than the internet in mobilisation.

These changes in technology have shocked the traditional control exerted by regimes. The "big brother" system has failed to keep up with the rapid changes.

Social networks were intended to be a new form of entertainment and a way of connecting with people. But they were still governed by the idea of design that "people will use your design for something you didn't intend."

A few years of open use of the internet in Jordan resulted in a surge in public conversations and debates. One of the main reasons was the immunity that the internet provided. Government policing forces did not have the technological expertise to be able to identify and thereby censor speakers.

The new revolutions in the region have introduced new leaders such as Wael Ghonim in Egypt, who was working in Google's United Arab Emirates office in Internet City in Dubai. Ghonim became an international figure and energised pro-democracy demonstrations in Egypt. *TIME* magazine[10] added him to its "TIME 100" list of the most influential people of 2011.

The fight for freedom is sweeping across the face of Arab nations as survival in the 21st century makes the old ways impossible. Technology and social networking are giving people an understanding that the world can unite on a global front to support the mass mobilisation efforts of people. Everyone should rise up now in this time of great energy and be free![11]

The protests have used different forms of civil resistance in their sustained campaigns, including strikes and demonstrations. Protesters in Tunisia and Egypt relied on social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and TwitPic in their early stages to accelerate the pace of social protest. In Jordan there is evidence that social media played a strong role in social resistance.

A member of Youth of March 24,[12] the group that organised the demonstration in the capital Amman using Facebook, told the author that the organisers always take into consideration the worst that the police could do. Because of this they assign some participants the task of documenting everything in the events, especially if police attack demonstrators. This technique was effective on 25 March 2011 when the pro-government gangs attacked the anti-government group, while the police stood by. Youth of March 24 promptly uploaded their visuals on the internet. The images of scores injured during the protests is archived virtually for the future.

There have also been cases of political opportunism. The banned Hizb ut-Tahrir[13] political party took the opportunity of the online space to

3   osamaa.com
4   ammannet.net/blogs/MohammadOmar
5   www.factjo.com/pages/AticleViewPage.aspx?id=1948
6   www.internetworldstats.com/me/jo.htm
7   www.jordanoholic.com/blog/tech/jordan-facebook-statistics-aug2010
8   www.nytimes.com/2011/05/19/world/middleeast/19iht-M19-JORDAN-REFORM.html?_r=1
9   www.jordanews.com/jordan/5103.html

10 www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2066367_2066369,00.html
11 www.crystalinks.com/2011freedomprotests.html
12 www.facebook.com/shbab.march.24?sk=wall
13 www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org

communicate with people and to promote its ideas on advocating for the Islamic Khilafah state. In the tsunami of demonstrations felt in Jordan, Hizb ut-Tahrir dared to organise public demonstrations. The government was forced not to take action as the demonstrations were peaceful.

Legislative context

Contrary to best practices, in August 2010 Jordan passed the so-called "cyber crimes" law that aims to control internet content. The law primarily regulates security and morality in an electronic communication context. Articles 8 through 10 of the legislation prohibit the use of the internet to download "immoral" materials, including pornography, and using the internet for prostitution or terrorism.

Articles 11 and 12 have been viewed as directly targeting online news media, although the government insists that was not the purpose of the law. Article 11 stipulates a penalty for accessing websites and information systems without a licence – though it does not specify where such licences would be acquired or what such a licensing process would entail. Article 12 provides for the search for and seizure of equipment if they are relevant to cyber crime investigations.

Members of Jordan's online community immediately became concerned that they would have to comply with the registration requirements and rules of liability for journalists and news outlets.

The regulatory framework for news media has been at the centre of a very intense debate over the past ten years, with various regulatory bodies being formed and empowered, merged and restructured, dissolved and then resuscitated.

Jordan is not the only country to regulate access to the internet in this way. Saudi Arabia, Iran and China (which has the so-called "Great Firewall of China") are amongst countries which have introduced laws to restrict access to the internet. "Iran is believed to be worried about the influence of the internet and especially social networking websites, as pro-democracy activists across the Middle East use them to promote and publicise their movements," the *Guardian* reported.[14] However, in passing such a law, Jordan is violating its obligations under international human rights law.

The right to freedom of expression is well established in international law. The two main United Nations human rights instruments – the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) and the

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)[15] – provide in Article 19 of both documents: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Jordan is also party to the 2004 Arab Charter on Human Rights, which establishes in Article 32 the same guarantees as the abovementioned Article 19. International law also requires states to take positive measures to create a climate in which human rights are genuinely protected and freedom of expression can thrive, including the dissemination of different points of view. The United States Supreme Court has stated that the internet is "the most participatory form of mass speech yet developed."[16]

Revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and the "managed democracy" in Jordan, raised hopes for political change north of Jordan. Syrians are organising campaigns in the capital Damascus and other cities, taking inspiration from Egypt, Tunisia and Jordan in using social networking sites to rally their followers and to push for political reforms.

It seems that the new media and information technology have played a vital role in changing the balance of power between government and social resistance movements in the Arab world. Social networking tools such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube as well as mobile phones have clearly changed the way we communicate with each other across the world. At the same time, repressive regimes are increasingly censoring and monitoring information flows and passing new laws to control the content published by new media.

But governments are losing the battle because cyber-wise young people are more capable of adopting and adapting to the potential of the new weapons compared to the old, ruling elites.

Conclusions

There is an increasing acknowledgment of the link between democracy, human rights, fighting corruption and development, and an awareness that press freedom is not a luxury, but rather a critical factor in social and economic development.

Five centuries ago the invention of printing played a vital role in curbing the church's authority,

14 www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jul/13/iran-tightens-online-censorship

15 The ICCPR was incorporated into Jordanian law and published in the Official Gazette twice: in issue No. 4658 on 16 May 2004 and in issue No. 4675 on 16 September 2004 due to errors in wording.

16 www.firstamendmentcenter.org/cyberspeech

and new technologies such as the internet and satellite TV may have the same impact. These new "freedom technologies" will weaken any unfit ideology.

Authoritarian regimes believe they have the right to control the public mind and the content of any media. But new media give a loudspeaker and a platform to the voiceless. They also give the public another account of a story rather than the official governmental tale. In politics new media give political movements, especially in the opposition, an extra-parliamentary opportunity to address the people in a direct democracy.

The radical change in the Arab world is a triumph of new media.

Action steps

In emerging democracies, introducing good laws is the first step to promote an independent, pluralistic and professional media as a fundamental infrastructure of good governance.

It is time to take into consideration the following steps in Jordan:

- New media are part of the information society and offer a huge opportunity to consolidate democracy and to promote development. Governments must not always look at the "half-empty glass" and consider new media a challenge rather than an opportunity.

- Amend existing legislation and develop new laws to ensure that the right to know is secured. This includes passing laws to ensure the right of access to online information.

- Abolish the cyber crimes law and drop any ideas of adopting separate legislation on internet content.

- Improve infrastructure to facilitate internet access.

- Work to reduce the cost of subscribing to the internet. ▪

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

Everyone is familiar with the stories of Egypt and Tunisia. **GISWATCH** authors tell these and other lesser-known stories from more than 60 countries. Stories about:

PRISON CONDITIONS IN ARGENTINA Prisoners are using the internet to protest living conditions and demand respect for their rights.

TORTURE IN INDONESIA The torture of two West Papuan farmers was recorded on a mobile phone and leaked to the internet. The video spread to well-known human rights sites sparking public outrage and a formal investigation by the authorities.

THE TSUNAMI IN JAPAN Citizens used social media to share actionable information during the devastating tsunami, and in the aftermath online discussions contradicted misleading reports coming from state authorities.

GISWATCH also includes thematic reports and an introduction from Frank La Rue, UN special rapporteur.

GISWATCH 2011 is the fifth in a series of yearly reports that critically cover the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GISWATCH is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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