

DIGITIZATION IN JORDAN'S POST ARAB SPRING REFORM STRUGGLE

The Jordanian government has made pledges in the past to implement political, economic, and media reforms. Although some of these reforms have taken a step backwards, digitization and enhanced access to information and news has contributed to political and social activism in society. Jordanians have created communities and contributed to “digital and social activism,” making an impact through active public participation. Due to Jordan’s geographical location and weak economy, however, the country will remain vulnerable to external shocks and regional unrest.

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Two years into the Arab Spring, a large crowd huddled together on a hillside under a starry winter sky and wrote a little page of history. The young stood side by side with the elderly, so did the once-powerful and the nameless. A garbage collector took his place next to a former government minister. The event, named *Diwanieh*, which took place in Jordan's northern governorate of Ajloun, only three weeks before parliamentary elections in Jordan.

In a country hemmed in by authoritarian media legislation and self-censorship among journalists themselves, the participants of the event pushed the boundaries of free speech beyond anything seen so far in Jordanian public. Arguments bounced back and forth on political topics and human rights issues that were unmentionable in public before the Arab Spring.

Although social media and art forms –rap, photography, drawings– have played a role in free and artistic expression since the Arab Spring, it may well be that public debates will become an integral part of the changing landscape of the Middle East.

Decades of repression and disintegration in Arab countries took a tradition of lively debates from “*diwans*” to private discussions behind closed doors, while in some countries debates disappeared all together.¹

“There is a tradition of oral narration and discussion in the Arab world. Historically people gathered in the *diwan* and debated issues that concerned them,” said Fayez Feisal, a young coordinator of *Diwanieh*. “With these public debates, we want to revive that tradition.”

Over 500 people gathered in frigid temperatures to discuss politics, an unusual scene in Jordan. Although elections last month produced an unexpected high turnout rate of 56 percent, the population remains angry at recent fuel price increases and more hardship in the new year.²

Compared to the violent, noisy protests in Egypt and other Arab countries, all this may sound modest. Nevertheless, as citizens of a key buffer state bordered by Israel and Syria, Jordanians have been facing their own challenges. Recent arrests of some protestors, and the increasing fear of chaos and violence spreading from Syria has, for the most part, left even the ardent and the furious off the streets.³

1 *Diwans* are historically known as guesthouses of tribal chiefs in Arab society where people gathered to debate issues that concerned them and their community.

2 *Diwanieh*, a debate-exchange program of Leaders of Tomorrow, a non-governmental organization in Jordan where local *Diwaniehs* host informal, public debates in their local community.

3 “Jordan end protester trials state security courts,” *Human Rights Watch*, 30 November 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/>

The powers of Jordan's legislative bodies have been debated since the Arab Spring swept across the region. Under the new elections law, citizens are now able to vote for individual candidates in their own district and also for a political party or national coalition. The number of seats reserved for women was raised from 12 to 15, and the total number of seats in the Parliament was increased from 120 to 150.⁴

With a population of just over six million, Jordan is a relatively poor country with almost 14 percent living below the poverty line.⁵ As with other countries in the region, unemployment is high, especially among women and youth. According to Jordan's official Department of Statistics, the overall unemployment rate is 12.5 percent but the rate among young people under 30, which comprise nearly 70 percent of the population, is more than double the national rate.⁶

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With such a young population and high literacy rates –92 percent, according to World Bank figures– the Internet penetration rate in Jordan reached 55.9 percent by mid-2012.⁷ There are also about 2.2 million Facebook users and 59,726 active Twitter users.⁸ Jordanians are now increasingly utilizing social networking sites as venues to have debates on social issues, and to influence public opinion. Since the surge of the Arab Spring across the Middle East, Jordanians have created a hashtag on Twitter, “#reformJO”, dedicated to discussing and debating developments in the country's reform process. More concretely, environmental activists launched a campaign in September 2011 through a Facebook page, which started off as a cry to save thousands of trees in a forest in northern Jordan from being uprooted for the construction of a military academy.⁹ The page garnered over 5,000 supporters and succeeded in blocking the government's plans, thereby becoming a symbol of social media's power to call people to action and engage in street protests.

news/2012/11/30/jordan-end-protester-trials-state-security-courts

4 “Jordanian Parliamentary Election 2013,” *Election Guide*, <http://electionguide.org/country.php?ID=110>

5 “Jordan Country Page,” *The World Bank*, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/jordan>

6 “Jordan Department of Statistics,” http://www.dos.gov.jo/dos_home_e/main/index.htm

7 “Telecommunications Indicators (2012)” *Jordan Telecommunications Regulatory Commission*, http://www.trc.gov.jo/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1941&Itemid=508&lang=english&lang=english

8 “Jordanians and Facebook,” *Jordan Business*, August 2012, <http://demos.mediaplusjordan.com/jb/cms/node/25>

9 Environmental activists lobbied against the construction of a military academy in the Bergish area of Ajloun Forest to preserve its rich, diverse ecosystem. “Halt Ajloun Deforestation Campaign,” <http://www.facebook.com/HaltAjlounDeforestation>

While some social media campaigns managed to galvanize enough support to be dubbed success stories, many trickled down to inactive pages of abandoned causes. The determining factor, social media experts say, in the success or failure of a campaign, is the balance between online and offline activity. “I advise all #JO [Jordanian] candidates to start [the] conversation online and take it offline for human interaction,” tweeted Jordanian social media expert Khaled ElAhmad, as candidates started gearing up for the parliamentary elections.

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Digitization has had an impact on journalism in Jordan, including faster dissemination of broadcast and print reports and increased participation by viewers and readers. At times, it affects politics in the country as well – broadcast stations like *Radio Balad* use social media networks to disseminate information and even garner tips and concerns from ordinary citizens.

As satellite channels in Jordan cover general and nationwide issues, social media and community radio stations have been forced to focus on local issues that were previously neglected. Blogs and online news websites have also become a platform where people look for more local, social, and taboo subjects that traditional media have long ignored. There is a debate however, on the role of bloggers and citizens in the creation of news. Some media observers believe that bloggers have become an actual part of the media, while others view comments and stories by bloggers and social media activists as outlets for professional journalists to pursue issues they previously ignored.

Despite online activism against Internet censorship, the Parliament, Senate and the King recently approved an updated Press and Publications Law compelling electronic publications to register with the Department of Press and Publications and pay a fee of more than 1,400 dollars. Furthermore, websites are obligated to appoint a chief editor who has been a member of the Jordanian Press Association for at least four years. This editor is to be held accountable for all content, including comments posted on their website. The law requires such publications to register with the Ministry of Commerce and to obtain a license to operate from the Ministry of Culture. The latter has the authority to block websites that are either unlicensed or deemed to be in violation of any law, and to close the website’s offices without providing a reason or obtaining a court order.¹⁰

¹⁰ “Jordan’s King Endorses Controversial Media Law,” *The Daily Star*, 19 September 2012, <http://www.thedailystar>.

Jordanian bloggers and journalists expressed their disapproval with these new legal provisions by blacking out many media websites on 29 August 2012.¹¹ Human Rights Watch (HRW) accused the government of making this legislation in order to “go after opponents and critics.”¹² HRW also described amendments to the Press and Publications Law as vague, particularly the definition of “electronic publications” as “an electronic website on the Internet with a fixed address that offers publication services.” Under this phrasing, content on the Internet, including blogs and multimedia material such as videos, is exposed to scrutiny by the government, limiting public expression online. Another example of legislation that restricts the media freedom is the Anti-Terrorism Penal Code, that “provides for imprisonment for writing or speeches that undermine national unity, incite others to commit crimes, sow the seeds of hatred and division.”¹³

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On the other hand, there were also positive developments, driven by the Arab Spring. According to a recent study conducted in 2011 on the status of press freedom by Al Quds Centre for Political Studies, an independent research center, self-censorship among journalists declined from 95 percent in 2010 to 86 percent in 2011. The percentage remains high perhaps due to fear of detention (or harassment) and personal repercussion from society when writing on taboo subjects such as the royal family, religion or sex.

It is against this backdrop that, with the increased Internet penetration in the country, countless news websites have mushroomed in the digital sphere, delivering news rapidly to an ever-growing audience. In the past five years, over 30 Jordanian news websites have been established, both in Arabic and English, and the Jordanian blogosphere has seen an expansion matching this overall increase in Internet usage. Many argue that journalistic professionalism and accuracy of news were put at stake

net/newDesign/latest_news.php?nid=40951

11 “Hundreds of Websites Go Dark in Jordan in SOPA-Style #BlackoutJo Protest Over Internet Bill [Updated],” *TechCrunch*, 29 August 2012, <http://techcrunch.com/2012/08/29/150-websites-go-dark-in-jordan-in-sopa-style-blackoutjo-protest-over-internet-freedom/>

12 “Jordan: a Move to Censor Online Expression,” *Human Rights Watch*, 10 September 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/09/10/jordan-move-censor-online-expression>

13 Anti-Terrorism Penal Code: a vaguely written act that allows the government to hold suspected terrorists indefinitely, and would impose penalties on a person who would engage in activities inside or outside Jordan that has the potential to expose the lives and properties of citizens to danger.

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in the process, and that proper regulations were paramount to guard the integrity of the profession. “Jordan is joining the clubs of enemies of the Internet,” said Rana Sabbagh, a leading political columnist at *Al Ghad*, an independent daily, in an interview.¹⁴ “Eventually it will be unfair to hold owners of websites accountable for reader comments posted on their websites. There was a lot of blackmail, abuse and unprofessionalism with the news websites, but you cannot punish the good ones just because you do not know how to handle the situation.”

With the extended coverage of Jordan’s latest parliamentary elections, the Jordanian public had the capacity to consume, to contribute, and share their opinions. An online streaming website, *JordanDays.TV*, broadcasted local district meetings conducted by parliamentary candidates, where viewers had the opportunity to hear them speak and answer questions from the public.

In Jordan, media development, or the lack of it, continues to reflect the political struggle for reform. Inspired by the Middle East revolutions and the positive step of revoking a restrictive Public Assembly Law, journalists at the government-owned *Al Rai* newspaper protested for many weeks in February and March 2011, demanding more freedom, enhanced professionalism, increase in salaries, and an end to the interferences by state authorities over written and published material. This was the first ever protest in the history of the government-owned newspaper.¹⁵

With the Arab uprisings taking place, a layer of fear has been lifted in Jordan. More people are expressing their political views and their demands for reform – or lack thereof in some cases. Increased participatory politics in Jordan will surely require an amendment to the Press and Publication Law and the Anti-Terrorism Penal Code. If not, the reform process will continue to be inadequate.

Revolutions in the region, as well the introduction of satellite television and the Internet, will make journalists as well as viewers and readers in Jordan demand fast, up-to-date, and field reporting that we are beginning to see today. Through social media, readers will increasingly debate, share, and comment on reports published by media outlets. The role of bloggers, social media, and online websites will perhaps continue to proliferate, and the way news is shared and exchanged may even change as well.

¹⁴ Personal Interview with Rana Sabbagh, 13 September 2012.

¹⁵ “Jordanian Journalists Call for Press Freedom,” *The Washington Post*, 8 March 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/07/AR2011030704540.html>

Public debates like the one held in Ajloun, on topics chosen by the local community, is a powerful new model that may be difficult to stifle in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. However, the new restrictive amendment to the Press and Publications Law that includes censoring websites and stifling Internet freedom is indicative of the uncertainty and the negative direction of the reforms.