Hungry for content: How the COVID-19 pandemic changed media usage in the Middle East and North Africa
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While the uprisings during the Arab Spring had a significant influence on the adoption of technology and its insertion into peoples' daily lives, the COVID-19 pandemic has been paramount to the new disruptions in the media landscape, provoking accelerated changes as well as novel relations between social actors on mediatised platforms. Whereas the first paradigm shift with media usage can be found in the adoption of the internet and user-generated content on media platforms, the second paradigm shift observed at the time of the pandemic is an acceleration of media consumption, as well as interwoven relations between work and play on mediatised platforms, creating both solidarity and distance between the users of digital content. The pandemic marks a new technological milestone in audiences' media usage and habits, one that has thus far been both positive – through the interconnectedness and agency – and negative – because of a lack of access for some – for cultural diversity and intercultural relations. The adoption of mobile internet skyrocketed in the region, and some countries, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have ranked among the countries with the highest penetration rates globally for platforms such as Facebook and YouTube.

An opening of discourse? Politics, religion, LGBT rights, and women´s empowerment

The upsurge in the usage of digital content occurred when the COVID-19 crisis was declared a pandemic, cities went under lockdown, and people were instructed to stay at home. The quotidian became digitally dominant and tangled into a composite of blended professional and personal domains. The excessive usage of digital technologies marks a momentum that pertains to prolonged time spent on media platforms, as well as new usage patterns that have blended educational and work-related platforms with other platforms, including media and those presumably for personal use. The complexity emerging from the new normality of blending the personal and professional, as a consequence of bringing the office home, renders the boundaries between platforms where users spend their time quite thin and volatile.

The prolonged usage of digital content is driven by the younger generation across the region, with the adoption of new applications, be it podcasting or social networking platforms such as TikTok or ClubHouse, which became popular at the time of the pandemic (New Media Academy, 2021). For instance, between February and August 2020, influencers on TikTok witnessed a 65% average growth of their followers, with Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia witnessing the highest engagement rates. Conversations on TikTok increased by 148 percent between March 15 and April 15, 2020 (Talkwalker, 2020). They are typically light-hearted and revolved around family values, traditions, and stereotypes associated

with Middle Eastern cultures, while being creative and entertaining. The youth, often open about their identities, have engaged in exchanges about the cultural habits and mindsets of their families as well as common mores. In addition, parodies, pranks, dances, and activism have all gone on TikTok. ClubHouse, on the other hand, hosts conversations that deal with sensitive topics, some of which are considered taboos in the region. The emerging popularity of this new platform lies in the ephemeral characteristic of its audio conversations, which are typically more difficult to control by authorities. ClubHouse's rooms have been hosting enriching conversations, conventional and unconventional, pertaining to racism, politics, religion, LGBT rights, and women's empowerment, as well as artistic and cultural conversations covering cinema oldies, music, production, poetry, and literature.

The meaning of cultural differences in the habits of internet usage

Simultaneously, TikTok and other platforms have been used by governments, NGOs, and health institutions to share information. It is no surprise that social media has become the preferred platform to get news; about eight out of ten people in MENA get their news from social media (New Media Academy, 2021). This raises concerns about the quality of information users are receiving and relying on. With the pandemic, misinformation and fake news have increased significantly across the globe, and the MENA region is no exception. Enabled by the development of technology, misinformation has increased not only in politics and propaganda agendas, but also in health and nearly all kinds of content.

Today, about five out of ten people are connected to the internet in MENA, the majority of whom are young men looking for new experiences. The MENA web sphere is little homogeneous; users interact in Arabic, English, French, different dialects, as well as other languages. Although this speaks to high diversity, it also points out that countries across the region, and the people within them, are culturally different and one has to be wary of data-driven profiles that may overlook local specifics that make regions, countries, or people unique. For instance, internet usage habits in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – differ greatly from those in North African countries. From a macro perspective, the former have a better and faster technological infrastructure that makes users' experiences more enjoyable and affordable. In such countries, YouTube content has soared, facilitated by high streaming quality. In the latter, internet users spend more time on Facebook and are active on blogs. While they may have a lower streaming quality for their usage experience, some users, mainly in Tunisia, enjoy a web sphere that is freer, more diverse, and less subject to control and censorship compared to the former.

The potential of multilingual internet usage for intercultural relations

Early on, Arabic digital content was slow to develop for reasons that include its multilingual users, the lack of time and material resources to commit to Arabic content creation, the lack of institutional support to provide and promote Arabic digital content, and few technological tools that could recognise the Arabic alphabet characters. It took some private and public initiatives (such as Arabic reCAPTCHA, educational content Madrasa, etc.), as well as commitments from user communities such as the Arab Wiki community to boost Arabic content. After it stagnated at

about 1–3% through the previous decade, according to Statista 2020, it reached 5.2% by January 2020, making Arabic the fourth most common language used online. Previous research on the Arabic web sphere showed that the multilingual environment in MENA hindered the development of the Arabic web. It is not that users do not use or produce digital content, but that the variety of languages they use does not account for the Arabic digital content. For instance, in 2019, 58% of internet users in Tunisia stated that they use the internet in Arabic, while 57% said they use it in French, and 24% said they use the internet in English (Mideastmedia.org, 2019). The same data shows that half of those who said they use the internet in Arabic in Lebanon, Qatar, and the UAE also use the internet in English, and less than a quarter of those who said they use the internet in Arabic in Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia said they also use the internet in English. Using the internet in multiple languages is beneficial for cultural diversity and intercultural relations, as language is and has been a conductor of intercultural dialogue and exchange. Users who interact in more than one language have access to different opportunities that may lead to new exchanges and multiple discoveries and experiences—cultural, economic, socio-political, or technological—in addition to virtual and physical mobility that may extend ones' networks to new communities and places.

Across the region, users experience cultural exchange and freedom of information differently. Although the web is by definition a global space where geographic frontiers lose their properties, in several countries those frontiers remain as rigid as in the offline world, and enforcement of control practices on freedom of speech during the crises such as the Arab revolutions, the diplomatic and economic blockade against Qatar, and even the COVID-19 pandemic, remind Arabic users how little freedom they have to engage in conversations and exchanges spontaneously.

In the media and cultural realm, although some Arab internet users support control practices by their governments to ensure quality content that conforms to their traditions and religions, data from the Media Use in the Middle East survey (2018) show that the majority of users in the surveyed countries agree that they benefit from watching content from other parts of the world. The COVID-19 crisis accentuated the trend of being receptive to more entertainment choices, as evidenced by data showing the skyrocketing usage of both global and regional streaming services, like Netflix and Shahid of the MBC group, which reported 10-fold audience growth since the pandemic began (Khamis, 2020).

There is a new commitment to cultural digitisation projects

Suffering from a dearth of recreational opportunities, users in MENA turn to digital content in part to address this shortage. More than eight out of ten users in GCC countries say they watch films and other video content, check news, and listen to music online. It is no wonder, then, that with the pandemic, some cultural organisations turned swiftly to offering their programmes online, not only to reach audiences in their newly quotidian environment, but also to offer enrichment and refuge from a stressful crisis.

Today, the digital content from MENA deserves a more positive image. It offers ample opportunities for cultural diversity and intercultural relations that foster dialogue and enrichment on multiple levels and across various topics. Besides language exchange with all its dialect

varieties, debates between regional versus pan-Arabic supporters, conservatives versus moderate conservatives and liberals, cultural and artistic experiences are abundant. The misfortune and pain of the pandemic pushed content creators to turn to the web sphere and integrate, partly or exclusively, digital content into their programmes, and it is reported that the audience response has been overwhelming. In addition to offering exhibitions and virtual artistic events, we have witnessed a new commitment to initiate and develop cultural digitisation projects. For instance, the Royal Opera House Muscat launched its series of online concerts that are available to watch from one's home on the Royal Opera House Muscat website or through its YouTube and Facebook channels. What was once an exclusive, distinguished experience, reserved for the elite who can afford to attend the Royal Opera House Muscat event, became freely accessible to all audiences in Oman, the MENA, and beyond on YouTube. Also, Amman Jazz Festival 2020 played across five days from the rooftop of the MMAG Foundation for Art and Culture with its epic view, and 20 bands reached internet users across the region, for free. The Qatar Museums as well as the Louvre Abu Dhabi have offered virtual tours and other digital activities on social media platforms to engage fans from the safety of their homes. The Saudi Film Festival 2020 was held on YouTube, and theatre workshops and productions have also turned to online platforms. The Qatar National Library announced further digitisation of cultural content to make it available to users in MENA and across the world.

Social inequalities and the fighting for a better tomorrow

While these initiatives are to be celebrated as they increase opportunities for cultural education, intercultural relations, cultural dialogue, and exchange initiatives, one still needs to keep in mind that only five in ten people in MENA have access to the internet. The inequalities between those who have and do not have access to the internet are deepening, as the COVID-19 crisis has severely affected the economy and the conditions of low-income workers. Alarming inequalities have been reported regarding the education of pupils (The National, 2021). Private and elite schools enjoy infrastructure that enables access for the kids of those well-off, while the majority of public schools are deprived of internet connections and even of hardware, most of the time. This is the case in the cities and the situation is even worse in rural areas. Students are leaving schools because the overall ecosystem to support online education is not totally ready. Not only is there a lack of digital infrastructure at schools, but at home, the environment is often unsuitable for online learning, which makes it a challenging experience. There is still time for governments and international organisations to save these pupils from the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic by addressing internet connectivity across the region, especially in schools, and ensuring real, universal access for equal opportunities.

Such a lack of opportunities has provoked a flow of migration that has been hard to address properly. A significant proportion of youth in the region dream of migrating; many lose their lives attempting to cross the Mediterranean. Often, the youth use the relationships they develop online to facilitate the migration process. Youth exposed

to globalisation through digital and social platforms realise how much they are missing in their own countries and feel they could have a better life abroad. Migration, legal or illegal, becomes an option, and arrangements are typically processed online through social platforms.

Those who choose to remain home continue fighting for a better tomorrow through online activism that triggers "feelings of engagement" (van Dijk, 2013). These youth are increasingly active in civil society, both offline and on social media where they can facilitate action arrangements, donations, support, recruitment, and marches. While the Arabic digital web promises thriving growth and opportunities ahead, social platforms assist community members in developing personal initiatives that are turning into collective actions. Both men and women find that the internet makes it easy to get involved in civil society and get started (Latine & Myllyla, 2019), as starting somewhere remains what matters most and what shapes the future of the networked public.

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