

## **The Middle East: Social Media Revolution in Public and Private Communication**

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### **Abstract**

Intercultural, social media's impact has been twofold. Social media have provided unprecedented opportunities for members of different cultures to get to know each other directly and hence they have helped people to demystify their intercultural beliefs. At the same time social media have made poisonous hate speech and xenophobic comments communicated to other cultures which is followed by backfire from hated people. This causes a chain of increasing hate speech which eventually finds its way into practice.

The changes in the media landscape as they are related to intercultural communication are what Shutter (2014: p. 478) calls a new field of inquiry, labelled as "intercultural new media studies," which consists of two fields: (1) new media and intercultural communication theory and (2) culture and new media. The study of social communities is extremely multidisciplinary, requiring expertise from communication, computer science, sociology, behavioral sciences, mathematics, and statistics

Those who have a relevant position in a social media platform organization have access to the most personal information one can conceive. They know what an individual looks like, how he or she lives, whom he or she loves or hates, where he or she goes, what he or she thinks. Doing research on social media gives us better accuracy, particularly in the case of sensitive issues of intercultural communication in the Middle East. In this article, we evaluate different aspects of social media in the Middle East, though with a critical view, the concept of "Middle East" is itself problematic. Middle East is middle east to another construct which is the West. Fruitful study of social media in the Middle East necessarily includes considerations there of ethnicity and race, religion, identity and language, the economy, and history and wars in the region and elsewhere.

**Key words:** Fundamentalism; Hate Speech; Historicity; Intercultural New Media Studies; Middle East; Social Media

## **Introduction**

The so-called Web2 technologies have brought about a revolution in public and private communication. These technological changes could be predicted as the Internet was developing fast during the 1990s. There were many preliminary social networking tools like Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) which could be traced back to the early 1970s, but, it was the cultural, sociological, economic and even political impact of these new technologies which proved to be incredible for politicians, businesses, academics, and others. Social media are powerful, but their power is not manifested in the conventional ways one could have predicted 20 years ago. Estimations show that by the year 2014, the number of people who were members of at least one social networking service had passed 2 billion and this number was increasing (Kemp, 2015).

Social media have left a profound political impact. Things that now happen – particularly in the previously non-democratic societies- could hardly been imagined only two decades ago. As social media give individuals the power of online participation based on –with some reservations- equal opportunities, marginalized and isolated groups are no longer oppressed in silence and they can reach out to the wider society and even bring their plight before the global community. Many of such instances worldwide include the massacre of Rohingya people in Myanmar, relocating, harassing and killing of Sampang Shia people in Indonesia and enslaving Izadi women and children in Iraq that raised global awareness and distaste and pushed the governments to simply “do something.” Social media also have provided a platform for election campaigns and polling surveys which can give the authorities better feedforward and help them make better plans. Another benefit of social media for political participation is the direct contact between rulers and lay people. Pioneers are Barack Obama (43.9 million likes), Narendra Modi (29.1 million likes), Mitt Romney (11.3 million likes), and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (6.9 million likes). This huge number of followers and their comments and ‘likes’ give the politicians’ strategic team a marvelous opportunity to analyze what is really going on among their supporters and how they can design their future policies in order to get optimum results. They can simply launch campaigns and organize public actions in a matter of two hours, which could hardly be attained some decades ago.

This phenomenon has provided a great opportunity internationally to businesses and individuals to seek ways that eventually culminate into higher efficiency and bigger revenues. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Google Plus, Tumblr, and Instagram, have changed the landscape of marketing forever. Social media can facilitate consumer conversion, brand equity, and customer loyalty. They will provide possibilities to increase business performance. Different studies have shown:

- 74% of consumers have a more positive brand impression after interacting with a company through social media.
- Purchase likelihood increases 51% after a customer presses the “like” button.

- When social media users receive good customer service, they tell three times as many people about it as do nonusers of social media.
- 83% of those who complained about a given company on Twitter “liked or loved” a response by the company.
- 90% of consumers trust product reviews from people they know; 70% trust reviews from people they don’t know.
- 40% of social media users “like” businesses in order to receive special discounts and promotions.
- Facebook fans of a brand spend twice as much as those who are not Facebook fans (Funk, 2013: 2).

Interculturally, social media’s impact has been twofold. Social media have provided unprecedented opportunity for members of different cultures to get to know each other directly and hence they have helped people to demystify their intercultural beliefs.

But, they have at the same time made poisonous hate speech and xenophobic comments communicated to other cultures which will followed by backfire from hated people. This will cause a chain of increasing hate speech which eventually finds its way into practice.

The changes in the media landscape as they are related to intercultural communication are what Shutter (2014: p. 478) calls a new field of inquiry labelled as “intercultural new media studies,” which consists of two fields: (1) new media and intercultural communication theory and (2) culture and new media. Studying the intersection of new media and intercultural communication theory has the potential to revise and further develop twentieth-century theories of intercultural communication which were mainly based on traditional means of communication. In light of current intercultural new media studies, Shutter remarks that major intercultural communication theories need to be revised and reconfigured to yield new or modified intercultural communication theories that are more compatible with a digital era. The second field, culture and new media, focuses on the interdependent relationship between culture and new media, a topic of research which concentrates on the influence of socio cultural forces on the social uses of new media within and across cultures. We can use Shutter’s framework to examine intercultural communication in the context of social media, but as we have already said, one should not underestimate the negative effects that social media might have on perceptions members of cultural groups of each other.

New media can generate communication gaps between different cultural and ethnic groups. The complicated nature of new media has made changes to traditional cultural grammar, cultural themes, or cultural maps and yielded a new pattern, resulting in the loss of traditional cultural logic (Chen, 2012). Also, we should not forget that negative information, that hate comments and defamation efforts could be communicated more easily on social media and hence, can easily become a source for diffusing hatred and xenophobia. The horrible images –sometimes produced incredibly professionally- that DAESH in Iraq and Syria

communicate to the world through social media is one such example. If one has a survey under posts like these, it could be easily understood how social media might foster hatred, instead of friendship.

### **Doing Research on and via Social Media**

Social media have provided an unprecedented opportunity for researchers to study online social behaviors and their consequences. The fundamental issues in social network research were brought to close attention in the 1930s within the field of sociology. The early studies focused on human social communities and interactions. During the 1970s when researchers broadened the study of social networks from a sociological perspective of a study of communities of humans to other animals and to more general communities, rapid progress was made. For the symbiosis with biology, the term “sociobiology” was introduced in E. O. Wilson’s “Sociobiology: The New Synthesis” (Alhajj & Rokne, 2014). But the advent of social media gave social network analysis a new surge and at the same time, made huge progress in social media research and analysis.

Social networks have also had an impact on the way that researchers communicate and network with each other. On Facebook, Twitter, and especially LinkedIn, researchers are forming networks and sharing ideas and information in ways that promise to restructure how power and influence are exercised in the research industry (Poynter, 2010). The interactive nature of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram give users the possibility to communicate and describe their daily life experience in a unique way. For example, on Facebook, users can publish a variety of data on their timeline including written posts, photos, videos, and check-ins. The tagging scheme interconnects the relationship between object and users’ friends. The ‘like’ function can help users to express their attention on certain content such as pages, link sharing, or topics. This condition makes it easy to figure out the users’ preference by their activities on Facebook (Yao & Ting, 2014).

The study of social communities is extremely multidisciplinary, requiring expertise from computer science, sociology, behavioral science, mathematics, and statistics data mining techniques and analyses have been carried out to gain valuable discoveries with pervasive social and economic consequences in many areas of applied social network research. From the social analysis perspective, application areas include counter-terrorism strategies, crime data analysis, disease biomarkers, common hobbies, family relationships, social functions, occupations, and friendships. From the economic perspective, the analyses may culminate into certain target customer groups such as the development of drugs (Alhajj & Rokne, 2014).

Doing surveys on social media has multiple dividends and this is exactly why more and more institutes are turning to these studies. Doing online surveys has proved to be very cost effective. In 2008, about 55% of all market research revenue related to quantitative research conducted via surveys. In addition, about 17% of market research revenues related to automated/electronic data collection and 14% to qualitative research. In 2008, ESOMAR estimated that the global spending on market research was US \$ 32 billion, which would make

quantitative survey research worth nearly US \$18 billion (Poynter, 2010). SurveyMonkey which is an institute and platform which conducts online surveys raised an investment round in 2013 with a reported valuation of \$1.3 billion followed by Qualtrics which raised more than \$1 billion in 2014 (Brustein, 2014).

Doing research on social media can –in some cases- give us better accuracy, particularly in the case of sensitive issues. In doing research, we have public and private accounts. Researchers should know that respondents may modify their biographical accounts of themselves so as to produce a more acceptable or enhanced self- account. This is known as a “public account” and may differ from the “private account” in terms of reports of behavior and beliefs and the language which is expressed in the account (Bloor & Wood, 2006: p. 139). On social media, people often tend to be themselves. Of course, they are aware that others are looking, but they express themselves and their feelings more authentically than what they do in the real life. We are aware that this is highly context-oriented and there are many instances in which people are less likely to speak on social media in comparison to personal and oral interactions. Moreover, people are more likely to express authentic opinions on public pages like for example under posts of political figures or celebrities. At the same time, social media often allow individuals to take false identities, which may be misleading for researchers. According to a 2012 study, Facebook announced that 8.7 percent of its 955 million monthly active users worldwide are actually duplicate or false accounts (Kelly, 2012). This percentage is higher than the regular 5 percent of the margin of error for statistical analysis which shows how studies on social networks might yield erroneous results.

The second benefit of doing research on social media is the cost reduction issue. Doing social surveys is highly costly and it is very hard for independent researchers and students to do a broad survey of several hundred respondents. Alternatively, social media have provided a huge amount of data which, if taken correctly with a precise sampling strategy, could be used to write and publish marvelous pieces of research. Some social media platforms like Facebook have provided a possibility to design and run polls in which users directly vote for candidates or ideas. Millions of people join these Facebook polling and give their opinions for free.

Another very important issue which encourages researchers to do social network studies is the issue of access. Researchers are humans and humans are bound to places. Traditionally, if a researcher wanted to do a study in a remote corner of the world, the only way was to travel there. This was and is the most authentic way to study people. However, currently it is much faster and easier to do research online. The researcher could do surveys on societies without even the subjects noticing his or her presence; researchers should never fail to apply ethical principles of doing social studies, however. Availability of the content generated on social media also gives the researchers an opportunity to study even those who are not members of social media. In fact, firsthand accounts people tell about others on social media can help researchers to study these non-users.

Nevertheless, what independent researchers could learn from social media, could not be compared in any way to what people within the industry can know. In a 2011 interview with



Russia Today, the Wikileaks founder Julian Assange said “Facebook in particular is the most appalling spying machine that has ever been invented. Here we have the world’s most comprehensive database about people, their relationships, their names, their addresses, their locations and the communications with each other, their relatives, all sitting within the United States, all accessible to US intelligence. Facebook, Google, Yahoo – all these major US organizations have built-in interfaces for US intelligence. It’s not a matter of serving a subpoena. They have an interface that they have developed for US intelligence to use” (Lee, 2014: p. 12). This view might be very dark, but just a short consideration will show that this is not far from the reality.

The fact is that, those who have a relevant position or access within a social media platform organization have access to the most personal information one can conceive. They know what an individual looks like, how he or she lives, whom he or she loves or hates, where he or she goes, what he or she thinks and even they can simply ask what Woody Allen in a 1972 film tried to answer: “What’s My Perversion?” And, with the advanced automatic data analysis tools and technique, it is very easy to learn how a nation is living and what they will be going to do next year. The following example shows how people in the social media industry can know more about the wider society.

Das and Kramer (2013) report results from an exploratory analysis examining “last-minute” self-censorship, or content that is filtered after being written, on Facebook. Kramer at the time of this study was a staff member in Facebook Company. They collected data from 3.9 million users over 17 days and associate self-censorship behaviour with features describing users, their social graph, and the interactions between them. Their results indicated that 71% of users exhibited some level of last-minute self-censorship in the time period, and they provided specific evidence supporting the theory that a user’s “perceived audience” lies at the heart of the issue: posts are censored more frequently than comments, with status updates and posts directed at groups censored most frequently of all sharing use cases investigated. Furthermore, they found that: people with more boundaries to regulate censor more; males censor more posts than females and censor even more posts with mostly male friends than do females, but they censor no more comments than females; people who exercise more control over their audience censor more content; and, users with more politically and age diverse friends censor less, in general. This study has many things to say and it has other things to show us beyond its findings. First, we see to what extent social media platforms might watch the society and what they do; and second, to our surprise, we find that even when a user decides not to publish what he or she wrote as a draft, Facebook takes a copy for herself!

Yes, it is impossible for independent researchers to run such an extended survey. But, the science has shown us that we can do a much more limited survey on our own, and generalize its findings to the wider society.

### **Context: Middle East**

All chapters in this volume concern one or more aspects of social media in the Middle East. A geographical area historically consisting of Persia, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and Egypt is now comprised of 17 countries of Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Yemen is known to be the Middle East. However, there are other definitions and there is no wide agreement among researchers as how many countries are in the Middle East. For example, Seddon (2004: 1) describes the Middle East as “six countries and one disputed territory in North Africa (Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Western Sahara), eight countries in Western Asia (Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran), seven in Arabia (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and Yemen), five newly independent states in southern Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) and Afghanistan. It also, somewhat controversially, includes the ‘Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’.”

With a critical view, the concept of “Middle East” is itself problematic. Middle East is middle east to what? The answer is simple: it is middle east to another construct: The West. In this view, one can say that even the term “Middle East” itself is an ethnocentric construct. And this very fundamental view has shaped much of what Westerners think about this region and people inhabiting in it.

Middle East is a strange place in the eye of the Western beholder. As early as 1820 American missionaries started travelling to Middle East to evangelize people. Their accounts of people in the Middle East is really interesting and we recommend our readers to read them.

What media communicate about Middle East to the outside world gives the international audience the perception that the craziest things are being carried out in this region. An old fable of the frog and the scorpion who were trying to cross a river best represents what people in the world conceive of the Middle East. The scorpion couldn't swim. So he asked the frog, “You can swim, I cannot; please give me a ride on your back.” The frog replied “No, you will sting me, it is in your nature.” The scorpion replied “Are you out of your mind? If I sting you, you will drown and I will drown too.” The frog saw this argument as rational and agreed. The trip went fine but when they got to the middle of the river, the scorpion suddenly stung the frog. As they were sinking, the frog asked “Why did you do that? Now you die too” The scorpion answered, “Because this is the Middle East.” People in the West cannot sort out what people do in the Middle East and that's why they think Middle Easterners are mainly irrational. In 2001, one of the greatest experts on Islam named professor Bernard Lewis wrote in an article:

Too much of the Muslim world is again seized by an intense - and violent - resentment of the West... Why? [ . . . ] It should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations - the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an

ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, or secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.

Recently, this negative view has been invigorated by the horrible pictures people of the world see of what is going on in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, mostly carried out by DAESH but also shared by some other factions. These actions were also replicated in other countries like France, Britain and even United States which made widespread panic among people whose life has been so peaceful that they cannot stand seeing these atrocities near where they live.

But, the fact is that those people who live in the Middle East do not see things as so much irrational. Things are only complicated in the Middle East and as Western people live in a low-context culture, actions and lifestyle in the Middle East are not conceivable for them. If one wants to know what is going on in the Middle East, a massive reading program, travel to some parts of the region, a mind reset, and a sophisticated mind is needed. This last feature is urgently needed because a good commentator on the Middle East should be capable to find and analyse different and very complicated factors. Otherwise, he or she will very likely make a wrong comment. A prominent example is former Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz's predictions of war with Iraq which not only turned out to be wrong on many accounts, but also culminated in a full-scaled chaos in the region.

### **Ethnicity and Race**

Issues of ethnicity which have long been partially solved in the West are still in place in the Middle East and to our surprise, new media have somehow served to strengthen ethnic ties and prejudice. Issues of race which are now to a high degree solved in the West (after all, the son of a Kenyan former student is now the American president, though he has recently spoken forcefully about the problems that ethnicity and race present in the US) is still preserved in the Middle East. The irony is that, the race of people in the Middle East is simply classified under a single category of Middle Eastern; but, in reality, people still attribute themselves to different races and are proud of that.

History still matters in the Middle East and people do not seem to be willing to forget the past. In Iran for example, a majority of people are still proud of some thousands years of civilization and may think that other people in the world are "rootless." Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi calls himself the Caliph of Muslims, and Jihadist groups call foreign soldiers Christian Crusaders.

### **Religion**

A majority of people who live in the Middle East are Muslims. Here, there is another misunderstanding of the Middle East in the West. Westerners mainly believe that Muslims are homogenized followers of one religion. Yet, Islam is mainly divided into two sects: Sunni and Shia. And within each sect, there are different schools. The Legitimist Shi'a or Shi'ites pay allegiance to Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, regarding him as the only legitimate successor of the prophet. The largest Shi'a school is that of the Twelvers who

acknowledge a succession of 12 imams. From the early 16th century Shi'ism became the established school of Islam in Iran under the Safavid ruler Sultan Shah Ismail. Another group of Shi'a, the Ismailis, or Seveners, do not recognize Musa al-Kazim, son of Ja'far as-Sadiq, as the seventh imam, taking that the last imam visible on earth was Ismail, the other son of Ja'far as-Sadiq, the sixth Imam. The Seveners are divided into several groups on the basis of their beliefs as to the succession from Ismail; one of these groups is that of the Nizari Ismailis, of whom the Aga Khan is the spiritual head (Seddon, 2004: p. 615). In Iran, Iraq and Bahrain the Shia people consist of a majority of the population and in countries like Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Saudi Arabia there is a considerable minority Shia population.

The great majority (probably more than 85%) of Muslims are followers of the Sunna (the way, course, rule or manner of conduct) of the Prophet Muhammad. The remainder are mainly followers of the Shi'a tradition. The Sunnis recognize the first four caliphs including Ali as rashidun (following the right way). They base their Sunna on the Quran and six books of Traditions, and are organized into four orthodox schools or rites—Hanafi, Hanbali, Shafi'i and Maliki—each with their specific religious/ legal code. Thirty years after the death of the Prophet, the Islamic community was forced into a civil war that gave rise to three sects. One main cause of this first civil war was that the Muslims of Iraq and Egypt resented the power of the third caliph and his governors; another cause was trade rivalries between groups of the mercantile aristocracy. After the caliph was assassinated, war broke out in full force between different factions. The war ended with a new dynasty of caliphs coming from the lineage of Abu-Sofyan, which ruled from Damascus. The Sunnis recognized the authority of the fourth and the succeeding caliphs. Two smaller groups formed as a result of this schism. The Shi'ites argued that the only legitimate leadership must be in line with the lineage of Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali. A third group maintained that leadership should be based on Islamic scholarship and the will of the people, and not on inherited power or blood. This group was labelled by other Muslims as Kharijites or the Khawarij (seceders) (Seddon, 2004: 626). In the modern day there are other sects in Sunnism.

The range of religions practiced by Middle Eastern people is not limited to Islam. In fact, most of the religions in the world have been originated from the Middle East. Christianity and Judaism are also practiced in this region. Other religions include Yazdânism, Zoroastrianism, Mandeism, Druze, Yarsan, Yazidism, Shabakism Manism, Bahatism and Sufism.

### **Identity and Language**

Much of Middle Eastern identity is wrapped around the Arabic language. Poetry and storytelling have historically been observed as elevated art forms. Another shared bond in the Middle East is Arab ethnic identity. From Iraq in the north down to the Arabian Peninsula and west all the way to Egypt, ethnic Arabs predominate. There are, of course, significant clusters of other ethnic groups. A majority of Iranians are Persians, and Turks are predominant in Turkey. Apart from the so-called "Arab-Israelis" — Palestinians who found themselves in

Israel's borders when the country was born in 1948 — Jews are the dominant group in Israel (Kamrava, 2005: pp. 1-2).

The history of Arab and Middle Eastern nationalism shows how the history of this region preserved a cultural continuity. The Middle East has a history of opposition and fighting against foreign occupiers and colonialists. There were, and are, many rivalries among social and cultural forces in the region which have roots deep down in history, sometimes for several hundreds of years. For example, Arab nationalism against the Israeli tried to put itself into the sacred opposition of the holy Prophet with local Jews of the Arabian Peninsula. When attacking Iran in 1980, Saddam Hussein tried to associate himself with Arab conquerors who took over Iran 14 centuries before and hence encouraged some Arab countries to back it against hated “Persians.”

DAESH kills Shi'ite people because they are “Safavid” but Jabhat Al-Nusrah which is a rival group accused DAESH of being agent of Iran! Islam has always provided the language of opposition to dictatorships and of calls for justice. This is also the case today and helps explain the appeal of Islamist ideas and their influence. Uneven distribution of wealth and resources, combined with oppression is ubiquitous, and young people naturally look for explanations, analyses, and programs from the same sources as previous generations—religious ideas, concepts, and language. Islamism is a refusal to injustice, tyranny, and national humiliation. Delivering neither material goods nor a sense of dignity, the old ideologies, forms of secular nationalism, are understandably widely perceived as failures. Nationalism has not vanished— far from it. Instead, it has been assimilated into the Islamists' discourse. The combination of a deep, multidimensional crisis of moving towards modernity and the specific cultural idiom of political protest has produced a very heady mixture, indeed (Russell, 2006: 16).

The forged nature of countries in the Middle East is the source of continuous clashes and conflicts. For example, Iraq and Jordan were products of 20th century British policies and their kings were brought from Saudi Arabia. Also, in these newly established countries there is not a single dominant ethnic group and hence central governments cannot do their routines easily. For example, Kurds are scattered in four countries and about half of the Jordanian people are Palestinians (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012: p. 3). The oil countries in the south of the Persian Gulf are so prosperous that they represent the highest rate of immigrants in the world. For example, as of the end of 2012 Emiratis made up around 11% of the population, while expatriates accounted for the remaining 89% (Oxford Business Group, 2014: 15).

## **Economy**

In the Middle East and elsewhere, state actors opted for statist policies for three main reasons. First, in the absence of a pre-existing industrial foundation and given the pervasiveness of economic and political underdevelopment, they saw the state as the primary agent capable of and responsible for effecting positive change, not only socially and politically but

economically and industrially as well. Second, most nationalist leaders, especially those who came to power in the 1950s and 1960s, viewed the private sector with suspicion and scepticism, seeing it either as an agent of foreign capital or as economically parasitic, or both. This conviction was invigorated by a painful recognition of the state's disadvantaged position in relation to many multinational corporations and thus the need for greater centralization and policy coordination in dealing with these powerful and sometimes exploiting companies. Related to this was a third and final factor, which was the widespread adoption of import substitution industrialization (ISI) policies, with the state retaining for itself the role of a central actor (Kamrava, 2005: p. 262). Notable examples of Middle Eastern countries which adopted ISI policies in the second half of the 20th century include Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Iran (Moghadam, 2003: 40).

Compared to that in the rest of the developing world, Middle Eastern statism has tended to be more extensive and deeper. For example, World Bank estimates that worldwide, state-owned manufacturing enterprises accounted for 25 to 50 percent of value added in manufacturing around the year 1980. The comparable share for Egypt was 60 percent and for Syria it was 55 percent. In Egypt in 1953, a year after Colonel Nasser's coup, the total output from the public sector was £E128.0 million and from the private sector was £E736.6 million. By 1973, the year before President Sadat officially announced the open door policy and the start of his liberalization program, public sector output had raised by eleven times, to £E1409.8 million, while private sector output had raised by only 2.5 times, to £E1807.1 million. By the 1980s, the Egyptian public sector included 391 companies, employed 1.2 million workers, and had assets with a market value of £E38 billion (Kamrava, 2005: 263). As a result, the development has had not the pace which was expected decades ago and the economies in the Middle East still suffer from many malfunctions. The region accounts for just over 4 percent of global imports, less than it did in 1983; Germany alone accounts for 6.4 percent. Its economic stagnation is vividly depicted by a comparison to Asian economies. According to the World Bank, in 1965, Egypt's per-capita gross domestic product was \$406, while China's was only \$110. Today, Egypt's G.D.P. has increased four-fold to \$1,566, while China's has increased thirty-fold to \$3,583. Also, Iran and South Korea had roughly the same per-capita G.D.P. in 1965; now South Korea's is \$24,000, while Iran's is only \$3,000 (Singh, 2014).

Another malfunction the economies in the Middle East are suffering from is what economists call "Dutch Disease." The term Dutch disease refers to the adverse effects of natural gas discoveries on the manufacturing sector in the Netherlands in the 1960s, essentially through the subsequent appreciation of the Dutch real exchange rate. This terminology has since been used to describe sectoral booms with adverse general equilibrium effects on other sectors of the economy (Apergis, El-Montasser, Sekyere, Ajmi, & Gupta, 2014: 485). The largest of oil reservoirs is unevenly distributed among the countries of the world, with most reserves lying beneath the countries of the Middle East and specifically not in the industrial countries that rely on them most seriously. Today, OPEC controls about 40 percent of the world's oil production and about 66 percent of its reserves (Bradford, 2006:), which means oil countries

in the Middle East will continue enjoying an “easy money” which will threaten them with many bad consequences including the Dutch Disease.

The Dutch Disease has two effects. The first effects relate to exchange rate. The Dutch Disease is known to be potentially adverse effects of a booming export sector on the performance of other exports and of industries competing against imports. These effects work through an empowering of the exporting country’s exchange rate. In the 1960s, the Netherlands experienced a vast escalation in its wealth after discovering large natural gas reservoirs in the North Sea. Unexpectedly, this seemingly positive gain had serious repercussions on important sectors of the country’s economy. Affluence is likely to reduce the profitability and competitiveness of traditional agricultural exports. It would also encourage imports of food and raw materials, which may compete with domestic production. It is likely to discourage the emergence of new industrial exports, essential for the successful diversification of the economy. The expansion of Iranian oil export earnings in the 1970s provides a good example of these effects (Russell, 2006: p. 43) which culminated in unsolvable problems that finally resulted in widespread protests and the fall of Shah (See for example, see Abrahamian, 1982).

The second effect of the so-called Dutch Disease is that during the modernization and expansion of the oil sector, the rest of the economy might be ruled out from access to important factor inputs. That is, the oil sector, with its financial resources, would allocate these resources to itself, undermining the ability of the private sector to invest and flourish. The Dutch Disease also tends to result in increased poverty. The price distortions created by the appreciating exchange rate can be seen as a tax on exports, and, if the country has a trade pattern based on comparative advantage, this would likely involve labor-intensive activities. Rates of economic growth in these sectors would decline, delimiting any tendency for benefits of oil-based expenditures to “trickle down.” Under these conditions, the economy would likely become more vulnerable to external pressures from which the poor cannot protect themselves. Finally, the inflation originating from expanded oil-financed expenditures would, again, likely harm the poor disproportionately (Russell, 2006: p 43). One of the solutions countries might find to this widespread problem in the Middle East, might be letting foreign migrants to come in and bear the hardships of inequality! It is what we are seeing in many oil countries of the Middle East. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, some 37.1 percent of the population are foreign workers constituting at least seventy- five percent of the workforce in Saudi Arabia, eighty-two percent in Kuwait, and almost ninety percent in Qatar and the UAE at the beginning of the 2000s (Thiollet, 2011: p. 2).

## **War**

Since the defeat and collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the Middle East has lacked cohesion. Despite many attempts to create a regional security arrangement that would ensure stability, the nations of the region have failed to have a credible collective security structure. Internal disputes, failed attempts at peace agreements, and disparate systems of governance have worked against regional security coherence. Security agreements and bilateral relationships with outside powers, such as the United States, have

been tenuous and, at times, severely strained or quickly broken (Tucker and Roberts, 2010: p. xxxiv). Most of the wars and clashes in the Middle East, then have racial, cultural, ethnic and religious pretexts.

The identity crisis which fosters these clashes partly is due to long standing “self and other” duality of cultures and their members, and partly is a result of a colonialist country making policies that created many countries with disputed identities. This complexity becomes even worse when foreign interventions destroy equilibrium or make a political void which will fast be occupied by extremism and violence. Unfortunately, the future of the Middle East does not seem to be something peaceful or even promising.

### **Studying Social Media in the Middle East**

Social media are not a new phenomenon. Criminal activities, diseases and trafficking are all examples of either social networks or their functions. In the Middle East in which there is a great sense of community and collective identity, social networks have always been very important. But, it is the advent of social media networks which has given the traditional social network a new boom. Some features in social media like openness to world and the possibility of one-to-many communication seemed more liberal in nature which is not something that many people in the Middle East like. Therefore, there has been resistances, both politically and socially, to social media use in the Middle East. Yet, the introduction of mobile social networks like WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber etc. which are highly group bond has been surprisingly appealing to Middle Easterners. High level of privacy, small scale groups closed to outsiders and impossible to search-and-find platforms to find, are all features which are highly similar to those of traditional social networks.

There are many incentives for wealthy and powerful institutes to study social media in the Middle East, but, there is a lack of comprehensive studies on this subject, both by scholars from the region or international researchers. For example, the Middle East is a big market for many products which means that thorough studies on social media use in this region should be of interest for many companies. Or, the political role that social media play in the Middle East must be taken seriously by international powers and hence, it is expected that they fund and publish many studies on different aspects of social media use. Yet, a quick search on academic websites will show us that there has not been a serious effort on studying social media in the Middle East. Amal Ibrahim in her chapter “Social Media in Egypt during the 2014 Presidential Campaign” concluded that both candidates’ campaigns for presidency in Egypt used social media mainly for a one-way communication campaign rather than engaging or interacting with the voters. Her chapter highlights numerous opportunities provided by social media in online electoral campaigning. She also questions the limits of using social media tools in political campaigning and discusses some of the concerns raised by this case. Or, Caitlin Miles in her chapter “Moving Beyond the Public Screen: Perspectives and Debates in Gendered Media during the Gezi Park Protests” shows in order to garner attention and exposure, activists in Gezi Park in Istanbul utilize violent imagery with the consequence of undermining the contemporary and historical activism of its women members. Moving away from the idea of

consensus and other theoretical underpinnings upon which the public screen relies, her contribution highlights how other media, i.e. social networking sites, are utilized to contest socio-cultural and historical assumptions of women as political actors in the Turkish context. Framing the dynamics of the public screen as lacking nuanced understandings of the socio-political and historical processes at play in the case of Gezi, Miles underlines the ways the Istanbul Feminist Collective utilized social media as a mode to challenge and combat overarching assumption of women’s activism during the Gezi Park protests.

For international scholars, social media have provided a very cheap and advantageous source of data from one of the most mysterious regions in the world. It is no longer necessary to travel to the Middle East in order to get first hand and authentic data. Particularly, as the Western world is place of routine and prosperous life, writing papers, chapters and even books based on the data from Middle East will get widespread attention.

Chengzhang Bao for example shows in his chapter “Social Media of the Islamic State” how DAESH glorifies “Jihad” and violence through its professionally produced videos and online magazines. The group attempts to subvert modern Western political and historical notions, challenging the current international system in the Middle East, and mainstream values of the Islamic world with its religious extremism ideology. By conceptualizing the notion of takfir, the group attempts to provide religious legitimacy for the establishment of “Islamic State” and a legal basis for its mass killings and gross abuses of Jihad. Its use of social media to spread religious extremism is highly contagious, and apt to set an example to other extremist groups.

Studying social media in this region also has the benefit of developing abilities to predict what comes next. Social media have been very effective in developing a strong revenge culture. Scenes of violence are captured and shared many times and their vivid contents will make “forgetting” harder. It is useful to study this aspect of social media use in the Middle East and explain how this dimension has worked against the expected outcome of globalization as a benevolent and peaceful phenomenon.

Middle Eastern people are very prudent not to reveal things about their sexuality. Social media have provided researchers with reliable tools to study systems of sexualities in this region. Particularly, if they assure participants about their anonymity, the researchers will gain marvelous data which will in turn help them to make authentic explanations about behaviors and thoughts of people who live there. For example, Elaine Hatfield, Shari Paige, and Paul Thornton in their chapter “The Business of Matchmaking in the Middle East” showed that The emerging global culture is based—for better or worse—on those Western values, and perhaps someday the Middle East will be more of a part of that global society.

Studying social media in the Middle East will have political lessons for activists in this region and other parts of the world. They will learn from experiences of other people who have adopted social media in favor of civil movements. They will know how to organize protests and how to force or convince political leaders to bend to the will of public. They will adopt ways in monitoring and disclosing corruption of any kind and they will learn how to reach out to human rights organizations when pressured by suppressive factions and governments. For

example, Issam Mousa in his chapter “Digitalism and Development of Arab Media in 21st Century” shows that how social media have created a dilemma to the authoritarian Arab governments, which came with counter measures, but recent revolutions that are sweeping Arab countries, testify to the importance of digital media in bringing about such drastic changes.

## **Conclusion**

All chapters in this volume set out to study one or more aspects of using social media in the Middle East, some relating to serious societal and cultural problems, and others, especially case studies, to interesting but more limited perspectives on a single case. We understood the importance of the subject and we tried to make a contribution in this respect. In fact, this is the first collection of this kind which is published worldwide. Contributors in this volume are experts in the field, and many of the participating scholars are native to the region they have studied. After a “call for chapters” announcement, we carefully chose them based on their proposals and their previous studies and expertise.

This volume is the second in an international social media trilogy: first, Cui Litang’s and Michael H. Prosser’s *Social Media in Asia* (2014) and the third, *Social Media in Africa* (forthcoming).

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