



The National Association for Media Literacy Education's
Journal of Media Literacy Education 6(3), 14 - 29

Guiding Digital and Media Literacy Development in Arab Curricula through Understanding Media Uses of Arab Youth

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Abstract

The role of new media in the Arab uprisings and the news of widespread surveillance of digital and mobile media have triggered a renewed interest in Arab audiences research, particularly as it pertains to these audiences' critical abilities and digital media literacy competencies. Taken for granted have been Arab youth's widespread use of social media for activism and political expression and their suspicion of government monitoring and privacy threats. This study questions these assumptions and attempts to provide a more accurate picture Arab youth's media uses, with the goal of informing the development of digital and media literacy curricula for the region. The study surveyed 2,554 youth and compared their media uses across countries, genders, incomes, ages, and education levels. The findings suggest low media literacy levels and media uses apathetic to political activism and focused more on entertainment with little fear of government surveillance and privacy risks

Keywords: *digital and media literacy, Arab media, media uses*

The nascent field of media literacy in Lebanon and the Arab world continues to be hindered by several obstacles, the most daunting of which is the lack of local research and case studies on which to base curricular material (Melki 2014). One relevant area of research that specially remains lacking is the media uses of youth in the Arab region. It is difficult to build relevant curricula in the absence of periodic media uses studies, such as those produced regularly in the US by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2010), the Center for Digital Future (2009), and the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2009). Data from such institutions can help academics refocus and reorient media literacy curricula, emphasizing the media, methods, content, and issues that are more relevant to the media consumption and production habits of students and youth, in general. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by studying Arab youth's mainstream and digital media uses and examining claims and assumptions of media habits that tend to exaggerate the use of digital media for political activism.

The Arab world's media landscapes experienced fundamental shifts since the mid 1990s due to developments in satellite TV, mobile telephony, and the Internet (Kraidy 2002; Rinnawi 2011), a new approach to news, such as that pioneered by al-Jazeera (Ayish 2011), and a restive young generation—known as the Arab youth bulge—yearning for economic and political empowerment (Chaaban 2009). More recently, social and mobile media offered formerly disenfranchised individuals profound resources that added bolder voices to the ever more complex and growing Arab public spheres (Etling et al. 2010; Hofheinz 2005). These same new media have been credited with advancing and intensify the Arab uprisings (Ghannam 2011).

However, the role social and digital media played in the Arab uprisings remains a controversial and understudied topic (Cottle 2011). One extreme argues social media was inconsequential (Morozov 2011), while another goes as far as calling it a Facebook revolution (Huang 2011). Both extremes

and most arguments in between offer little empirical evidence to support their claims, despite intense interest in the democratizing role of new media (Pintak 2011), the multifaceted and “ongoing battle over... the “hearts and minds” of Arabs” (Kraidy 2002, 91), and the dire predictions of ruptures in the Arab youth bulge (Chaaban 2009). Overall, the study of Arab media audiences continues to suffer from a dearth of reliable empirical research (Amin 2008), especially research on social media uses that preceded the uprisings (Ghannam 2011). Amin (2008) related this problem to a long history of state obstruction and “resistance presented by government bureaucrats and officials who maintain a proprietary, even paranoid, attitude toward information,” particularly public opinion surveys for audience research, which face “barriers and constraints, from inconvenience to imprisonment” (87).

This study attempts to partially fill this gap by analyzing social media uses of youth in Jordan, Lebanon, and the UAE at the very dawn of the Arab uprisings (2011). It examines social media consumption and production habits and compares them across countries, genders, age groups, educational levels, and income levels. In addition, the study evaluates the levels of trust and social and political values Arab youth associate with these media.

Studying media audiences is rooted in the uses and gratifications tradition (Blumler & Katz 1974; McQuail 1994; Rubin 1994). However, the ubiquity, mobility, and multiplicity of media tools and content today and their potential to empower individuals and communities—as well as subject them to efficient government surveillance—have altered the purpose and scope of studying audiences to now encompass new media and to cover “uses and gratifications” hardly imagined before, such as political empowerment, civic activism, simultaneous use of multimedia, and trust in online media sources and content. Kraidy (2008) critiqued traditional audience research that mainly stemmed from the UG paradigm, focused on television, and assumed an “audience to be bound up in the nation–state” (92). Moreover, the approach has largely ignored the expansion of regional Arab media and the Internet. Even the term “uses and gratifications” no longer seems suitable to describe the complex incessant

interactive relationship between individuals and ubiquitous media messages and tools where various overlapping uses of media defy neat categorizations. Most individuals today use media constantly throughout their waking hours and often use multiple media simultaneously for various purposes that often overlap. Since non–use of media has become the exception for many, it is pertinent to think of this human–media relationship as a habit, especially that the border between media use and non–use continues to blur. In addition, the interaction of various media, such as Web 2.0, mobile telephony, and satellite services, has extended the purposes of media uses to include organizational instruments for local and global activism, methods for archiving evidence, devices for emergency, and tools for calling for action and for work and school work.

In line with Kraidy’s (2008) concept of interactivity, media uses today extend beyond mere media consumption and comprise a fair amount of production. This complicates the neat division between producer and consumer in the UG tradition. Consumers are simultaneously producers influenced by perceptions of how other consumers/producers may use their media productions.

This has implications on media literacy education and curricula. In fact, Kraidy notes, “Arab media institutions have in recent years adopted what can perhaps be best described as a modified encoding–decoding model through which viewers are given a sense of agency and where various staged ‘oppositional’ readings of the media text stand at the heart of the new trend in programming” (97). This further develops the conception of active audiences with choices into empowered interactive audiences (Kraidy 2008) who simultaneously contest and compose multiple discourses embedded within specific complex cultural arrangements and dominant ideologies, where these same “audiences ‘reproduce’ the social–economic system through their own participation in it” (99). In relevance to media literacy curricula, this means critical writing and reflexivity should occupy the same level of importance as critical reading of media texts.

Moreover, the omnipresence of media messages and technologies and their increased association with numerous social, physical, and mental disorders compel the consideration of the

addictive power of this converged media system (Lange 2008) and the importance of “more successful designs for media literacy interventions that can avoid boomerang effects and achieve more positive goals that will not only help people avoid the negative effects of media exposures but also enhance the positive effects” (Potter 2010, 690). Without regressing into an old conception of a passive audience, a new media uses/habits conception reframes the UG construct to acknowledge that gratifications media audiences seek generate both intention and habits, both of which consequently drive future media uses/habits (LaRose 2010). In that vein, habits are initially goal-directed and actively pursued, but over time become automatic forms of behavior. Strong habits further weaken individuals’ reasoned process and push them further towards the passive side of the spectrum. However, audiences can regain control over their media uses by exerting cognitive effort, particularly through the use of critical media literacy competencies.

Hence, the media uses/habits concept sets a dialectic relationship between the agency of an (inter)active audience and the dominant structures that reproduce themselves through this interactivity and by these audiences’ media habits. So, this study goes beyond the commonly used conceptions of gratifications to include political activism and empowerment, and beyond the notion of a nation-based consuming audience to include production activities and multiple Arab countries. Consistent with Kraidy’s (2008) recommendations, media uses cover both news and entertainment, integrate multiple media, and compare multiple Arab countries and various socio-economic factors in one design. Furthermore, in addition to the personal utilitarian values individuals associate with media uses, this study adds a set of political values to assess their relevance to audiences’ perceptions of digital media, particularly the social media and blogs credited with influencing the Arab uprisings.

Social Media Use in the Arab World, Pre- and Post-Uprisings. Studies on Arab media uses, particularly social media uses, remain rare and suffer numerous methodological problems. Amin (2008) offers a general review of studies mainly focusing on TV audiences. This section reviews other studies,

primarily those focusing on the Internet and relevant to informing media literacy curricula.

Continuing a long tradition in studying the diffusion of Arab media technology, a number of recent audience studies dealt with the impediments to the adoption and diffusion of the Internet in the Arab world. Warf and Vincent (2007) blamed low Internet penetration rates, high cost of Internet access and computer ownership, low literacy rates, and the lack of Arabic content online as impediments to Internet diffusion. The study found cultural factors impeded virtual community development, including the patriarchal system, restrictive gender roles, and the fact that group rights often surpass individual ones, which has contributed to conservative circles contesting Internet diffusion and the state using such contestation for coercive control. The study also found government censorship and monitoring to be serious barriers to the development of the Internet. Consistently, the 2009 Arab Knowledge Report confirmed that Internet penetration and the number of computers per person in most Arab countries stood below the global average. Yet the report noted that the growth rate in Arabic content is the highest among the top ten Internet languages. It stressed the importance of integrating digital and media literacy into the education system, as Arab governments have put little efforts towards this endeavor.

In contrast, Rinnawi (2011) emphasized the paradox Arab governments face in dealing with the Internet, explaining that Arab governments attempt to develop and simultaneously restrain the Internet. “At the same time that they are aware of its importance to their economic development and its vitality in attracting foreign investments, they perceive it as a factor that affects the political and social stability of their countries” (123).

Hroub (2009) challenged the perspective that the only source of control of the Internet in the Arab world comes from government and proposed that religious authorities offer a second primary form of control. Hroub claimed that the Internet’s impact on Arab society is over blown and warned against overestimation of its potential, as it is largely elitist and confined to narrow circles. “With the continuity of socio-political authoritarian systems coupled with illiteracy rates and technological poverty, the

Internet stays on the margin both as a public sphere of freedom and as a venue for political action” (271).

While the preceding tackled the numerous obstacles to Internet adoption, a number of studies emphasized the Internet’s potential as a platform for democratic reform and political change.

Emphasizing blogs, Etling et al. (2010) mapped the Arab blogosphere and found the Arabic networked public sphere clustered nationally and focused on local issues. Only few regional topics united the network, primarily Palestine. Despite predominantly covering personal issues, Arab blogs nevertheless contained rich political discussions. In addition, more blogging activities occurred in certain geographic areas, particularly the Arab East and Egypt, in addition to an English bridge group that interpreted local events to audiences in the West. It found the Arab blogosphere is a “political discourse space apparently free of government control” exhibiting a mix of top–down and bottom–up agenda setting dynamics (1240). This suggests that media literacy case studies should focus on local rather than regional (Arab) experiences.

Consistently, Hofheinz (2005) maintained that Internet technology has not been able to curtail expanding freedoms despite rampant censorship, while Lynch (2007) argued that the blogosphere represented a new medium for Arab political mobilization that could potentially break state controlled media by providing the foundations of a new Arab public sphere.

In contrast, Haugbolle (2007) critically analyzed the Lebanese blogosphere between 2005 and 2006, questioning the assumption that the introduction of free media automatically contributes to the development of democratic societies. Haugbolle noted that by facilitating informal modes of communication, blogs do open space for those blocked from official and mainstream news channels. The study rejected generalizations about Lebanese public opinion derived from studying the blogosphere, as it remained dominated by the educated and economically privileged. Consequently, it would be important to understand how Arab youth perceive blogs as trustworthy news sources.

More recently, a handful of studies centered on online and social media uses. A 2009 survey that

explored the knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of Iraqi youth and adolescents aged 10–30 found that one–third of Iraqi youth know how to use computers, but only 13 % described their knowledge level as “good,” and only 13 % said they had used the Internet, with twice as many males as females saying so (Iraq National Youth 2009). Among Internet users, three-quarters used it for surfing websites, while half used it for chatting, an indication that the web is mainly a source for entertainment rather than news and political activism.

Focusing on the UAE, Al–Jenaibi (2011) used survey and focus group methods to study social media uses. The initial findings revealed that Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn were among the most popular social media. Emiratis felt adept at using social media, perceived them in a positive light, and used them frequently. In addition, participants felt confident about social media’s abilities to credibly and accurately relay information, compared to traditional media.

In a more comprehensive study of social media uses in the Arab world, Mourtada & Salem (2010) provided evidence for a rapidly increasing number of Facebook users across the region, with the highest penetration rates in the Gulf region and Lebanon. Despite lower penetration rates in Egypt, the almost five million Facebook users in that country made up over one–fifth of the region’s users. The study found Facebook to be dominated by male and young users. When it came to gender, Lebanon and Jordan were among the top four gender–balanced countries. The UAE came in 10th place. Additionally, the study found some Arab countries have more Facebook users than Internet users, an indication that users access Facebook through mobile phones. With few exceptions, Facebook usage positively correlated with a host of economic and development indexes, including GDP per capita, Internet penetration rate, Human Development Index, and Digital Access Index. The exceptions, such as Saudi Arabia, the study contends, may be related to social and cultural norms and sensitivities. Finally, Internet freedom in each Arab country did not correlate with Facebook usage.

In an ambitious study to map media uses in the Arab region, Dennis, Martin, and Wood (2013) surveyed audiences in eight Arab countries. They

found that Television remains the top medium for news and entertainment across the region, while the Internet continues to occupy a larger space, especially in the Gulf countries that are better wired. Similarly, the use of the Internet, social media, and mobile technologies, while widely spread across the region, tended to be higher in countries with better IT infrastructures. The study also found a wide generation gap but a smaller gender gap for Internet use, and it concluded that Arabic is the main language used to access media, followed closely by English, but the latter lead in some countries when it came to accessing the web. In addition, most participants supported freedom of expression online, but paradoxically also supported more regulations for the Internet. Moreover, the majority had positive views about the Internet as a source for information, but only about half the participants saw that the Internet helped strengthen their political influence and gave them a stronger say in government policies.

In sum, the majority of these studies tended to focus on impediments to the adoption and diffusion of the Internet while others examined the potential of the Internet, especially the blogosphere, as potential for political reform. Even studies that tackled media uses directly tended to focus on limited media, examined general levels of internet use in different Arab countries as compared to their development indexes, and studied basic attitudes towards internet regulations and benefits. Therefore, this is frames media uses of Arab youth within media literacy with the aim of better informing digital and media literacy curricula and teaching. It surveys various digital and social media uses of Arab youth by answering the following questions and comparing them across countries, genders, age groups, education levels, and income levels:

RQ1. What characterizes uses of social media and blogs?

RQ2. How are online and social media perceived as news sources?

RQ3. How are online and social media perceived as entertainment tools?

RQ4. What characterizes attitudes toward Internet restrictions and the trustworthiness of online content?

RQ5. What characterizes attitudes toward the Internet in general?

Methodology

This study used a cross-sectional survey methodology. It used a self-administered survey approach for efficiency and to avoid interviewer bias and maximize respondent privacy.

The study surveyed 2,744 high school and university students in Jordan,¹ Lebanon,² and the UAE,³ using a cluster sampling technique. In cluster sampling, researchers draw groups rather than individuals, which improves the response rate and allows for efficient surveying. A cluster was defined as a high school or university classroom. Researchers categorized the schools and universities in the three countries according to tuition level (lower-, middle-, upper-income), location (urban, rural), gender, (male-only, female-only, mixed), orientation (religious/missionary, secular), language (Arabic/English, Arabic/French, Other), and ownership (public/private). At least two schools from each category in each country were contacted. Most attempts to get access to public, lower-income, and rural schools failed. This skewed the sample in favor of urban middle-to-upper-income private schools and universities. From the final list of 43 schools and universities, researchers selected purposively two to four classes, taking into consideration gender, age, and language diversity.

Jordan, Lebanon and the UAE were selected mainly for pragmatic reasons—given the easy access to schools and universities without the need of official government permission—and because they offer relatively high literacy rates (90% and higher, according to the World Factbook), as well as a large number of schools and universities.

Although 2,744 filled the paper questionnaires, only 2,477 were deemed valid for use. The (un-weighted) demographics of the final sample ended up as follows: Most participants came

¹ Sample size: 874 (459 from universities and 415 from schools).

² Sample size: 1109 (352 from universities and 757 from schools).

³ Sample size: 761 (135 from universities and 626 from schools).

from Lebanon (48 %), followed by the UAE (28 %) and Jordan (24 %). Most participants were female (56 %). All participants were aged 13 to 28, with 79 % of them between 16 and 21. Most (63 %) were still in school. Most came from high schools that taught Arabic and English (62 %), followed those that taught Arabic, English, and French (19 %). Similarly, the vast majority said they fluently spoke Arabic (88 %), followed by English (70 %) and French (15 %). The vast (84 %) were not employed, and most (63 %) claimed an income or allowance of \$250 or less per month.

Although the sample was skewed in favor of urban middle-to-upper-income private schools and universities, it nevertheless represented much of the youth demographics of the three countries. The vast majority of inhabitants in Jordan (78 %), Lebanon (87 %), and the UAE (78 %) live in cities. The three countries have relatively high literacy rates (96, 90, and 90 %, respectively) and high school-life expectancy (13, 13, and 11 years, respectively) (World Factbook n.d.).

The questionnaire comprised 59 close-ended questions and one open-ended question and required 15 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was grounded in published academic and commercial studies (e.g., Pew Internet 2009; Kaiser Family Foundation 2007), and took into consideration local cultures. The questionnaire was pretested and translated into Arabic, and reverse-translated into English to ensure translation reliability.

All uses and attitudinal questions used a four-point ordered response scale measured at the ordinal level, while some frequency-of-use questions for specific periods used a seven-point ordered response scale, measured at the ordinal level.

Because of the sample skew, the researchers implemented a data weighting procedure, using SPSS, giving a 1.5 weight coefficient to “lower to middle income” participants, and a 0.5 weight coefficient to middle to upper income participants. The weighted dataset was analyzed using frequency tables, cross-tabulations, and correlation tests. A chi-squared significance level of $p \leq 0.05$ and a 5% difference between compared variables was considered significant.

The independent variables used for comparison were: country of residence, gender, age

group, education level, and income level. For simplicity, age groups, education levels and income levels each included only two groups: 18–28 years old versus 17 or younger, those with a high school degree or higher versus those with some high school education or less, those of middle-to-upper income versus those of lower-to-mid income, respectively. Surveying in the Arab world comes with its own difficulties, and using cluster sampling has some significant limitations. First, the researchers faced difficulties in securing permission from the selected universities and students. These difficulties varied from non-responsiveness and rejection to participate, to refusal to allow certain questions, especially those relating to religion, in the survey questionnaire. Some of these difficulties contributed to skewing the study sample. In addition, the sampling used did not allow for statistical generalization. However, the researchers made sure to include a diverse and mostly representative sample of the population under study. Finally, survey methodology does not allow for the rich information that can be gathered through qualitative methods, such as depth interviews or focus groups.

Results

Organized by research question, this section starts with general results for each research question then compares the variables across the countries, genders, age groups, education levels, and income levels.

Uses of Social Media and Blogs. Participants were asked how often and for what purposes they use social media and blogs, and what languages they use to write blogs.

The vast majority (87%) said they had used social media, with no significant differences appearing between the compared groups. Among those who had used social media, 84% used it mainly for fun, 84% to connect with existing friends, 58% to connect with family, 55% to make new friends, and 41% to express their opinions. Only 9% used social media to conduct business, and 5% used it for political activism.

Some differences emerged between countries, genders, and income levels. First, Lebanese and Jordanians were more likely than

Emiratis to use social media for political activism, while Jordanians were more likely than Emiratis and Lebanese to use it for expressing their opinions. Second, males were more likely than females to use social media for making new friends. Similarly, lower income participants were more likely than higher income participants to use social media to make new friends.

In contrast with their social media uses, few participants (23%) said they had ever written blogs, and only 10% blogged at least once a day. When comparing groups, males tended to blog more frequently than females, but no other differences registered.

Among those who blogged, 68 % wrote about music/entertainment news, followed by arts/culture (37%), sports (33%), travel (25%), science/technology (23%), international news (20%), health (18%), and religion (17%). Local politics garnered 15%, followed by Arab political news (14%) and economic/financial news (11%).

Lebanese subjects blogged most frequently about local politics and least frequently about religion. Jordanians blogged the most about music/entertainment and arts/culture, and the least about economic/financial news. Emiratis blogged the most about international news. Males blogged more than females about sports, science/technology, and local politics, while females blogged more about music/entertainment and arts/culture. As for education level, participants of lower education level were more likely than those of higher education level to blog about music and entertainment and less likely to blog about local political news. Older participants blogged more than their younger counterparts about

Online video services ranked second with 59% using them as news sources at least once a day. Here too, Lebanese and Jordanians used this news source less than Emiratis. Those of higher income also used them more than those of lower income. Social media followed with 52% using them as news sources at least once a day. The same trend emerged between countries with Lebanese using them less than Jordanians and Emiratis, and higher income

local politics and less about music/entertainment. Finally, higher income participants blogged more than lower income participants about international news.

Furthermore, the vast majority of bloggers primarily wrote in English (81%). Only 11% used Arabic, and 4% used French. In addition, 4% wrote in both Arabic and English. When comparing, those of higher income used English more often than those of lower income, while the latter used Arabic more than the former. Lebanese used French the most, while Emiratis used English the most.

Social Media and Blogs as News.

Participants chose how frequently they used various media sources for news. They also responded to whether certain values are associated with news accessed through blogs and social media.

The vast majority of surveyed participants received most of their news from television and word of mouth (friends/family), followed by professional websites, online video services, emails, SMS, social media, print media (newspapers/magazines), radio, and—at the bottom of the list—blogs (See Table 1). This section focuses on professional web sites, online video services, social media, and blogs.

Professional news websites ranked as the top online news source with 59% of participants using them at least once a day. Lebanese were slightly less likely than Jordanians and Emiratis to use professional news websites (at least once a day). In addition, older participants, those with higher education, and those of higher income used news websites more often than their counterparts.

participants using them more. Blogs ranked last with only 16% using them as news sources at least once a day. Jordanians were less likely to use them compared to Lebanese and Emiratis. In addition, older participants and those of higher education used them more often.

Table 2 reveals some values participants associated with news acquired from blogs, social media, online video services, and professional news

Table 1
Uses of Various Media as News Sources

How often do you use these media for news?	Never	About once a week	At least once a day
TV	6%	15%	79%
Friends/Family	12%	21%	67%
Professional News Websites	18%	23%	59%
Online Video Services	19%	22%	59%
Email	24%	22%	54%
SMS	28%	20%	52%
Social Media	29%	19%	52%
Print Media	20%	31%	49%
Radio	23%	31%	46%
Blogs	70%	14%	16%

websites. Participants were asked whether they describe these news sources as trustworthy, untrustworthy, independent, government controlled, objective, or biased. A simple index was then calculated by subtracting the percentage of

participants who agreed with each of the three opposing pairs. Only professional web sites received a positive index value (+11) for trustworthiness, suggesting they were perceived as the most trustworthy news source compared to the other three.

Table 2
Values Associated with News from Online Media Sources

How would you describe news from the following media?	Blogs	Social Media	Online Videos Services	Professional News Websites
Trustworthy	10%	20%	24%	33%
Untrustworthy	38%	37%	31%	22%
Trustworthiness Index	(-28)	(-17)	(-7)	(11)
Independent	15%	20%	22%	20%
Government Controlled	6%	8%	10%	16%
Independence Index	(9)	(12)	(12)	(4)
Objective	6%	9%	11%	13%
Biased	13%	12%	11%	10%
Objectivity Index	(-7)	(-3)	(0)	(3)

On, the other hand, blogs received the highest negative index (-28), suggesting they were perceived as the least trustworthy news source, followed by social media (-17), and online videos (-7).

Social media (+12) and online videos services (+12), followed closely by blogs (+9), offered a higher positive index for independence. This suggests they were perceived as more independent than professional websites (+4).

Finally, the objectivity index suggested that professional websites (+12) were perceived as more objective than online video services (0), while both were perceived as more objective than social media (-3) and blogs (-7).

Social Media and Blogs as Entertainment

Participants answered questions about the use of media for entertainment. They were also asked to allocate certain values to social media and blogs.

Participants spent many hours daily on entertainment-related media activities, substantially more than what they spent on news. In fact, 55 percent of participants spent over three hours per day using media for entertainment, while only 10 percent did the same for news. Watching television, using mobile phones, and listening to music ranked as the top entertainment-related media activities. Table 3 focuses on the use of online media tools for entertainment.

Table 3
Use of Media for Entertainment and Leisure

How often do you do the following for entertainment and leisure?	Never	About once a week	At least once a day
Watch TV programs	4%	14%	82%
Listen to music on a PC	7%	14%	79%
Talk on mobile	7%	14%	79%
SMS/Mobile text	8%	13%	79%
Listen to music on MP3/portable player	13%	16%	71%
Listen to music on radio or TV	13%	21%	66%
Use social media	20%	26%	54%
Watch videos on DVD/VHS	11%	42%	47%
Chat online	31%	22%	47%
Watch videos online	24%	32%	44%
Play games on a mobile phone	26%	31%	43%
Watch videos/movies on a PC	21%	40%	39%
Talk on Skype/VOIP	39%	25%	36%
Play video or computer games	26%	39%	35%
Play internet games	32%	35%	33%
Read books or magazines	24%	49%	27%
Read blogs	67%	18%	15%

Social media topped the list of entertainment-related online media activities with 54% using them at least once a day. Jordanians used social media for entertainment the most, and so did higher income participants. Chatting online came in second (47%). Lebanese chatted online the most, and so did higher

income participants. Next came watching videos online (44%). Emiratis, males, and higher income participants used videos online for entertainment more than their counterparts. Talking on Skype/VOIP followed (36%). Next came Internet games (33%). Emiratis, males, and lower income

Table 4
Values Associated with Social Media and Blogs

How would you describe the following media?		
Values Ranked	Social Media	Blogs
Exciting	1	6
Distracting	2	1
Addictive	3	10
Essential	4	4
Efficient	5	5
Beneficial	6	9
Liberating	7	7
Harmful	8	8
Boring	9	2
Educating	10	11
Difficult	11	3

participants played online games more than their counterparts. Finally, reading blogs was the least popular entertainment activity, with only 15% saying they read blogs for entertainment at least once a day. Emiratis and males used this medium for entertainment more than their counterparts.

Participants associated certain values with social media and blogs. Their responses were ranked for easier interpretation, as shown on Table 4. For social media, the top three values participants chose were exciting, distracting, and addictive, followed by essential, efficient, beneficial, liberating, and harmful. The three lowest ranked values were boring, educating, and difficult.

As for blogs, the top three values were distracting, boring, and difficult. Then came essential, efficient, exciting, liberating, and harmful. The lowest three ranking least popular values were beneficial, addictive, and educating.

Attitudes toward Internet Restrictions and the Trustworthiness of Online Content. Participants responded to attitudinal questions about online restrictions, about the trustworthiness of online content, and whether they used real names or fake profiles online. The purpose of these questions was to gauge participants' attitudes toward freedom of expression online, their critical awareness of the

veracity and accuracy of online content, and their alertness to online surveillance and privacy threats—three matters that tie into media literacy competencies.

When asked about their attitudes toward Internet restrictions, a slight majority (52%) advocated no or fewer restrictions on Internet content (21% chose no restrictions), and 48% supported more restriction or an Internet ban (8% chose ban). Emiratis, males, and lower income participants were more likely to choose no/fewer restrictions.

When asked about the trustworthiness of online information, 83% described it as somewhat or very trustworthy (71% chose somewhat trustworthy). Emiratis trusted online content more than Lebanese and Jordanians.

When asked whether they used their real name or a fake profile for various online activities, the majority said they used real names for all online media in question. More specifically, 86% used their real names on social media. Lebanese and Jordanians were more likely than Emiratis to do so. The same applied to those of higher income and higher education.

Similarly, 82% used their real names for email, with Jordanians and Lebanese more likely to

do so than Emiratis. Again, participants of higher income and those of higher education were more likely than their counterparts to do so.

Next, 69% used their real names for chatting online, with substantially more Lebanese doing so compared to Jordanians and Emiratis. The same applied to participants of higher income.

Finally, 61% used their real names for tweeting, and 53% did so for blogging, although only few participants blogged or tweeted, with differences between categories parallel to the preceding media.

Attitudes toward the Internet. Participants responded to attitudinal questions about their perceptions of online tools. These questions aim to better understand whether participants see the Internet as a positive or negative tool for personal and political empowerment and whether they are aware of online media’s negative aspects, such as distraction from work and school and its potential to offer surveillance opportunities for government institutions. It also aims to assess whether the Internet as a medium is perceived as a corruptive force—a sentiment that accompanied the introduction of almost all new media, especially TV—and whether participants appreciate it for its

potential as a political instrument or more as a mode of entertainment.

Almost all somewhat or strongly agreed that the Internet offers great entertainment opportunities and helps them with work/schoolwork. A substantial majority agreed the Internet helps them express their opinions, helps them advocate their causes/beliefs, and distracts them from work/schoolwork. A substantial minority agreed the Internet poses threats to their privacy, helps corrupt them, helps the government monitor them, and helps them influence government, while one-third agreed the Internet helps them gain political power. See Table 5. The latter highlights the low ranking of the Internet as a political tool in participants’ minds, particularly in comparison to the Internet as an entertainment tool. When comparing countries, Jordanians and Emiratis agreed more than Lebanese that the Internet helps them express their opinions, helps them advocate their causes, distracts them from work/schoolwork, and helps the government monitor them, while more Emiratis than Lebanese and Jordanians agreed the Internet helps them gain political power. In addition, more participants of higher education agreed the Internet helps them advocate their causes, poses threats to their privacy, helps the government monitor them, and helps them influence government.

Table 5
Attitudes Towards the Internet

Do you Agree/Disagree that the Internet:	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Offers me great entertainment	68%	26%	4%	2%
2. Helps me with work/school	70%	23%	4%	3%
3. Helps me express my opinion	31%	51%	11%	7%
4. Helps me advocate my causes/beliefs	22%	48%	20%	10%
5. Distracts me from work/school	18%	37%	25%	20%
6. Poses threats to my privacy	14%	32%	28%	26%
7. Helps corrupt me	13%	27%	29%	31%
8. Helps the government monitor me	13%	26%	31%	30%
9. Helps me influence the government	9%	26%	32%	33%
10. Helps me gain political power	9%	21%	30%	40%

More higher income participants agreed the Internet distracts them from work, poses threats to their privacy, and helps the government monitor them, while more lower income participants agreed the Internet helps them influence government and helps them gain political power. Finally, more males agreed the Internet helps corrupt them, helps the government monitor them, helps them influence government, and helps them gain political power. This may suggest a gendered rift in participants' perception of the Internet both as a political tool and a medium that offers vast opportunities for government surveillance, which are perceptions enhanced by more critical awareness of the Internet and may also be related to social structures that have historically pushed women out of the political sphere.

Discussion

This study explored the media uses of youth in three Arab countries and assessed the values these youth associate with various online media, focusing on the uses of social media and blogs within the context of media and digital literacy.

Avid Consumers, Nonprolific Producers, and Not so Media Literate Users. The study found participants digitally savvy and adept at using digital technologies but not necessarily media literate. They use social media extensively, but use it more for entertainment and networking with family and friends rather than for news or political activism, which is consistent with other studies (Iraq National Youth, 2009). Participants are avid consumers of social and digital media but not prolific producers. In contrast with extensive use of social media by the vast majority of participants, only few write blogs regularly, and their blogging activities mainly focus on entertainment and soft news. Hard news and local and regional news garner less attention. Moreover, participants overwhelmingly trust online content. Despite widespread fears of privacy threats online, most use their real names for all online media. However, political culture may taper this trust. Emirati participants are the least likely to use their real names on all online media, probably due to less freedoms and more restrictions in the UAE compared to Lebanon and Jordan. In addition, those of higher income, those of higher education, and

older participants are more likely to use their real names, an indication that awareness of online threats to privacy and other risks—a logical measure of digital and media literacy—are not related to education, wealth, or maturity that comes with age. In addition, the findings show participants prefer USA-originated web tools, and they reflect the dominance of English among bloggers, especially among affluent bloggers and those from the UAE, reflecting the country's sizable English-speaking expatriate population (Etling et al. 2010).

A Risk-Free World of Entertainment, Safe from Big Brother, Removed from Activism. Arab youth tend to be highly uncritical and unaware of social media risks, an indication of low levels of critical media literacy and poor knowledge of online media threats. Most participants associate the Internet with entertainment, personal utility, and expression, while they disassociate it from government surveillance, privacy threats, personal corruption, and political activism. A majority agrees that the Internet offers great entertainment opportunities, helps with work/schoolwork, helps express opinions and advocate causes and beliefs, and simultaneously distracts from work/schoolwork. On the other hand, a majority disagrees that the Internet poses threats to privacy, helps corrupt users, helps government monitor users, helps users influence government, and helps users gain political power. This may have strong implications for Arab political activism and the Arab uprisings in general, as it seems to support the notion that the new opportunities afforded by online media did not play a central role in these uprisings or in advancing political activism in the region—at least not in these three countries.

Traditional Media Uses Migrate to Social Media. Cultural factors that influence offline media uses seem to mediate online media uses, which suggests that traditional media literacy lessons and theories continue to be relevant in the social media realm. Cultural factors that influence gender roles and gender-based values offline, such as the (in)appropriateness of meeting new people in certain settings, seem to be replayed in the social media realm with females less likely to use social media to meet new people. Moreover, similar gender trends that exist in traditional media again surface in blogging, with more males interested in blogging

about sports, technology, and politics, while more females interested in entertainment and arts and culture. Age, education, and income seem to also play a similar role to that in traditional media uses, with older participants and those of higher education more interested in local politics and less so in music and entertainment, and higher income participants more interested in international news.

Traditional Media Still Trump Online Media in News and Entertainment. Media literacy curricula should not ignore traditional (offline) media and non-social online media, as they continue to occupy a significant space among Arab youth and remain more credible than social media. Television and word of mouth remain the top sources of news, beating all online and social media in popularity, while radio and newspapers trail behind all online news sources except blogs. When exclusively comparing online news sources, professional news websites, and online videos beat social media and blogs, assumingly with the former's high quality news product and the latter's strong audio-visual appeal. Consistently with news sources, traditional media (TV and listening to music) and mobile phones dominate entertainment-related media uses. However, unlike online news sources, social media rank first for entertainment among online media. Reading blogs is the least popular entertainment activity and source of news. Validating these perceptions are the values participants associate with social media and blogs. Many regard social media as exciting, easy to use, and addictive, while a majority sees blogs as boring and difficult to use. In addition, many perceive both social media and blogs as distracting and not educating. Finally participants do not strongly perceive either as liberating, beneficial, or harmful, further supporting an apathetic view of social media and blogs when it comes to political activism. Moreover, the analysis of values specific to news reveals that participants view news from blogs and social media as untrustworthy and biased but simultaneously independent. In contrast, they regard professional news websites as more trustworthy and objective but also less independent. Online video services offer mixed results, as participants perceive them as somewhat untrustworthy and relatively independent, but the perception about their objectivity is mixed.

Traditional Obstacles to Internet Diffusion Still at Play with Social Media. Media literacy curricula should take into consideration IT infrastructure, access to Internet, and political culture in each Arab country. Technological development, interest in events abroad, and diversity and prolificacy of the traditional local press may account for differences in the social media uses of each country (Kraidy 2002). Emiratis, who enjoy the most developed Internet infrastructure, but the least diverse local press, are more likely than Jordanians and Lebanese to use all online and social media for news. Technological development seems to also play a role in online entertainment. Emiratis use online videos, online games, and blogs for entertainment more than their Lebanese and Jordanian counterparts. Tied to technological development is the affordability of Internet services both for news and entertainment (Rinnawi 2011). The findings show affluent participants more likely to use professional web sites, online videos, and social media for news and more likely to use social media, online forums, and online video services for entertainment. Furthermore, the cultural and political factors that inhibit Internet diffusion in the Arab world (Loch et al. 2003; Warf and Vincent 2007) extend to views surrounding Internet restrictions. The number of participants who advocate fewer restrictions on Internet content is virtually equal to that of those who prefer more restrictions. In addition, participants from countries that experience the most Internet restrictions (UAE then Jordan) tend to advocate fewer restrictions more than participants from countries that experience few or no restrictions (Lebanon).

Conclusion

The study found that surveyed Arab youth are avid and adept consumers of online and social media, particularly of Western media tools and for entertainment purposes, but are not prolific producers of online and social media, especially for the blogosphere. They tend of overly trust online content, which suggests low digital media literacy levels. Political activism was low on their priority list, as they tend to view social media and blogs as tools for entertainment that are largely perceived as

safe of government surveillance and privacy risks. The same obstacles that inhibit Internet diffusion and adoption remain at play with social media and blogging uses, especially technological development and cultural restrictions. Similarly, media uses that dominate traditional media are echoed in the social media and blogging spheres, including the differences between genders, incomes, ages, and education levels. Furthermore, popular traditional media, particularly TV, remain more popular than online media for both news and entertainment.

Therefore, the findings suggest a strong need for developing and advancing media literacy education in the Arab region, as the results indicate low critical media literacy rates and little awareness of online media threats among Arab youth, despite proficiency in using digital technologies but primarily for entertainment purposes. In addition, the findings indicate that media literacy curricula and theories that focus on traditional media remain relevant, especially that cultural factors that influence offline media uses also apply to online media uses, while traditional media continue to occupy a significant space among Arab youth and remain more credible than social media. Finally, media literacy curricula should differentiate between Arab countries when it comes to priorities, topics, and focuses, taking into consideration each country's IT infrastructure, access to Internet, and political culture. Furthermore, given the differences between the countries when it came to responses about the Internet's potential for political activism and government surveillance threats, it is important to emphasize the latter for Lebanese curricula and highlight the former for Emirati and Jordanian curricula.

More in-depth research is needed to assess the specific media literacy needs and to guide the development of curricula, as well as research that focuses on critical thinking and analytical skills of Arab youth when it comes to consuming and producing media messages.

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