GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

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

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

Global Information Society Watch 2011

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THE INTERNET REVOLUTION IN THE ARAB REGION PAVES THE WAY TO DEMOCRACY

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Introduction

2011 marks a significant turning point in the history of the Arab region following the uprising of people against their government leaders. Many reasons triggered this unprecedented wave of rage that toppled established regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, and resulted in the 20 February protests in Morocco.

Corruption, oppression, mediocre standards of living, poverty, inequality and abuse of power constituted the perfect formula for the Arab world revolt. The internet was one of the main channels that mobilised people to unite and fight for their civil rights. Not only did the internet help the masses join forces to air their concerns and legitimate demands, it also proved to be an effective tool to change government policies in the Arab region, and helped in paving the way towards more transparent and democratic processes in the Arab world.

The role of the internet and social networks in the uprising in Morocco

Morocco is one of the countries in the Arab region where the uprising took place in various forms. Street demonstrations throughout major cities of the country called for a change in the decision-making circles and condemned the practices of some public figures who, according to demonstrators, managed to accumulate wealth at the expense of the ordinary citizen and abused their power while serving the country. The internet in general – and social media and networks specifically – helped activists to generate consensus across the various segments of society to express their concerns and opinions about the pressing issues Morocco is facing.

Due to the sharp increase of internet penetration in Morocco,[1] the internet has become an effective tool to harness social solidarity. Online platforms such as blogs, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are now widely used amongst the youngest generation in Morocco and also played a significant role as a

communication channel in the uprising. Protesters used these platforms to achieve widespread consensus for their demands; they also used social media channels to keep both the general public and official authorities updated with what was happening on the ground. Multimedia material was strongly present in reporting on street demonstrations and it can be described as vital to ensuring the credibility of information disseminated. Amongst the many challenges protesters were facing to get their voices heard was the scepticism of the public about their real intentions, especially since the mainstream media depicted them as a threat to the kingdom's stability.

Citizen media gave another dimension to social resistance events in Morocco. Websites like hibapress.com and hespress.com were instantly updated with news video feeds and pictures of the demonstrations. The material gained the respect and credit of readers who were out of the loop, but also generated criticism from people against the uprising. Some articles posted triggered scepticism about the sources of information circulated, especially if they meant to criticise the 20 February Movement or one of its figures. Some commentators on the articles posted even referred to the Moroccan secret services, alleging that they were spoon-feeding the websites, reinforcing the notion of information manipulation.

Another example of citizen media that emerged following the recent uprising events in Morocco is mamfakinch.com. The name "mamfakinch" was coined from the raw Moroccan Arabic dialect to mean: "We're not going to give up." It was established by a group of blogger activists. Its mission consists of pushing for more social and economic reforms. It also defends the right to access information and freedom of expression as inherent human rights of the common citizen.

The internet definitely transformed the perception of information during the protests in Morocco. No significant credit was given to the public or state media due to its legacy of being fully supportive of the government's agenda. Social and citizen media bridged the gap and reached out to the common citizen, allowing more space for freedom of expression.

But, to restate a central complaint, to what extent can the information it provided be judged credible?

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1   www.internetworldstats.com/af/ma.htm

The impact of social media on freedom of expression

Social networks and citizen media contributed to the idea of freedom of expression in Morocco during the uprising. Facebook groups and YouTube channels were created to gather opinions of people sharing the same concerns or the same political affiliation. The accessibility and ease of use of internet social tools such as Facebook encouraged some police officers and soldiers to create their own online groups to reveal their working conditions and treatment by their superiors. It was the first time that police and soldiers in Morocco opened up about the kinds of conditions they faced, knowing that the military and public service code prohibit them from protesting against the regime or disclosing details of any sort to the media.

It is not clear whether they were aware that using social media breached their code of conduct, or what impact they were hoping to have. Reports on some social media websites appeared at a later stage claiming that the people who organised the Facebook groups or posted videos on YouTube were tracked down and arrested. However, despite these sorts of negative outcomes, it has to be said that in general social media tools have no doubt helped in improving the status of freedom of expression in different segments of society.

A brief reading of the Moroccan Constitution: The legal context for freedom of expression

Freedom of speech and expression is one of the pillars of a democratic society. The internet and the media in Morocco are relatively free, and people are also entitled to demonstrate and express their views freely. In fact, street demonstrations are not alien as a form of protest in Morocco. The parliament square in the capital city Rabat has witnessed protests by unemployed qualified graduates, including doctors and bachelor's degree holders, for decades.

The current Moroccan Constitution[2] deals broadly with the notion of different freedoms. One of them is freedom of expression. Article 9, which was amended in 1996, states that the constitution shall guarantee all citizens the following:

- Freedom of movement through, and of settlement in, all parts of the kingdom

- Freedom of opinion, and of expression in all its forms

- Freedom of association and the freedom to belong to any union or political group.

However, Article 41 of the amended 2003 Press Code[3] stipulates that journalists and publishers can face financial penalties and risk imprisonment if they violate restrictions on defamation, or publish critical content related to three sensitive topics: the monarchy, territorial integrity (i.e. the calls for independence in the Western Sahara), and Islam. The Press Code emphasises that threats to public order can be considered one of the criteria for censorship. Given these limits, newspapers are reluctant to be openly critical of government policies, and journalists are still not free to express an objective point of view, particularly on the sensitive topics.

Since there is no law in Morocco that limits or regulates freedom of expression on the internet in general, the constitutional articles related to freedom of expression apply. This explains why some bloggers were arrested in the past for criticising state policy or the king.

The 20 February Movement in Morocco

Morocco joined the wave of uprisings in the Arab region, inspired by the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the 25 January Revolution in Egypt. A group of young Moroccan activists called for a day of street demonstrations nationally on 20 February 2011 – the date giving the movement its name.

The movement managed to get support from cyber activists, traditional lefties, Islamists and twenty human rights organisations, including the Moroccan Association of Human Rights and Amnesty Morocco.[4] Their main demands focused on introducing a new democratic constitution; an effective parliamentary monarchy and the separation of government branches (legislative, executive and judicial); language rights for Berber speakers; and the release of all political prisoners.

The main channel used to mobilise the Moroccan population was the internet. 20 February activists created a Facebook group, a YouTube channel and a Twitter account to discuss the issues at stake, mainly related to political and social reform. These attracted thousands of participants and supporters all over the country, as well as worldwide. The Facebook group was the main point of reference for all the movement members coordinating their activities on the ground. It included the movement's official releases and supported group discussions. YouTube was used to broadcast videos from the street protests and to get feedback from members of the movement as events unfolded, and Twitter

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2 Chapter One of General Provisions and Basic Principles of the Constitution, adopted September 1996.

3 Article 41 of the Moroccan Press Code, 2003 edition.

4 www.thenation.com/blog/158670/arab-uprisings-what-february-20-protests-tell-us-about-morocco

helped with real-time updates on demonstrations across the country. Other internet channels and websites were also used to report on the events, in particular CrowdVoice[5] and Global Voices.[6]

Besides using these channels to synchronise the movement's branch activities and logistics across Morocco, they were critical in creating awareness amongst the public. YouTube hosted promotional videos[7] produced by the movement featuring citizens from diverse backgrounds explaining their motives for joining the protests. In response to this, YouTube was flooded with personal videos of people explaining their point of view about the situation in Morocco, including the current regime, and also expressing their support for – or refusal to support – the 20 February Movement's call for protests.

Even though the 20 February Movement in Morocco represents only a small minority of people calling for change, and has faced fierce criticism from supporters of the regime, who constitute the majority of the population, its achievements to date can be considered a phenomenal contribution to the democratic process in Morocco. A new amended constitution which takes into consideration some of the movement's demands has been approved. The government has also decided on a wage increase for public sector employees with immediate effect.

Conclusion and recommendations

The uprising in Morocco created a social media frenzy. The use of Facebook, for instance, increased sharply in the first semester of 2011, reaching more than three million subscribers with a population penetration rate of 11.23%.[8] Social media were a vital enabler of much-needed social discourse on taboo topics, and proved to be a successful tool to reach all sections of society.

Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, access to the internet in Morocco was not shut down by the government to silence the uprising, which can be considered a breakthrough for freedom of expression in the Arab region. The government opted for leaving the internet free and accessible for people to express their views – even while there are allegations that it tried to manipulate the content through its secret services.

However, the achievements of the protests so far ought to be attributed to the efforts of the people leading the protest movement, who believed that the time had come to initiate constitutional, social and economic reforms that will benefit the unprivileged. The role of the internet and social media in the Moroccan uprising was that of providing an interactive medium to host real-time debate and to discuss people's demands. This proves that the existing channels of discourse between the state and citizens, including governmental and non-governmental entities, political parties and associations, failed to fulfil the needs of the common citizen who took refuge in the social and citizen media channels to lead a radical change of the idea of the state-citizen relationship. This relationship was based on a top-down approach to decision making when it came to state policies – while the internet helped to make these decisions evolve around the citizens' needs.

Compared to other countries in the Arab region, Morocco enjoys a relatively stable political environment, but still needs to work vigorously towards having a true democratic regime. The internet can have a positive impact on a participatory process that works towards a democratic society where the rule of law, equal opportunities, and an improved standard of living are achieved.

Action steps

The decision-making process in Morocco can be inclusive if the government engages in the current dialogue with its citizens, of which the internet is the main driving force. The mechanisms of how policies are implemented should be altered to reflect the needs of citizens: adopting a bottom-up approach would be the ultimate way to secure a democratic society that recognises the role of people in shaping policies.

The Moroccan state could use the internet as a way to communicate with people by:

- Setting up official online open forums on government websites to host discussions where people can comment on state strategies and policies.

- Launching capacity-building programmes to raise awareness about the role of the internet in initiating a bottom-up approach to decision making.

- Endorsing the use of new technologies by citizens and providing the necessary financial support to deploy the necessary infrastructure.

- Introducing new policies to guarantee the right to access to information.

- Guaranteeing online freedom of expression as a right.

- Reinforcing the notion of open access to data and open government.

- Using ICTs to harness transparency and accountability. ▪

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5   crowdvoice.org/protesters-demand-reform-in-morocco
6   globalvoicesonline.org/-/world/middle-east-north-africa/morocco
7   www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sof6FSB7gxQ
8   www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/morocco#chart-intervals

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH
2011 Report
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