Shakuntala Banaji and Cristina Moreno-Almeida
Digital use and mistrust in the aftermath of the Arab Spring: beyond narratives of liberation and disillusionment

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Abstract

Via the prism of the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East in 2010-2011, new media has been presented as diametrically opposed to the top down and mistrusted. Asking the question: In what ways do trust, privacy and surveillance concerns intersect and inflect the individual and collective practices of young people in networks of participation, and their sense of civic connection through old and new media?, this paper presents a nuanced understanding of the relationship between digital media and mistrust. Through the study of original case studies in Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and the UAE, we examine attitudes towards and usage of digital media in creating and maintaining political, civic, cultural and artistic networks amongst communities. We analyse our abundant qualitative interviews, observations and ethnographic data collected to reveal the continuity of media mistrust as people move into the digital arena. As new tools continue to be launched many young people in the region remain alert to the ways in which these tools can serve or hinder individual and group aims. Beyond narratives of liberation, disillusionment or democratisation, 'new' media poses both mundane and surprising challenges in encouraging and engaging networks of participation in the MENA region.

Keywords

Digital ghettos; participation; youth; media mistrust; MENA; Social Media

The presence of social media and digital platforms, particularly during the 2010-2011 uprisings known as the 'Arab Spring', have encouraged narratives about new media's influence on democratisation. Our scepticism about overly enthusiastic narratives of new media's role (which in turn diminished the agency and history of social actors and dissident movements), led us to delve into the ways in which young people use digital platforms in their existing networks, or use them to create and establish new networks of participation. First, our main concern has been the steep differences in penetration rates and internet use within the region and, in particular, in our four countries of study. While reports like to claim a steady increase in internet penetration in all countries in the region,[1] the contrasts between Jordan (53.4 %), Morocco (57.1 %), Tunisia (48.5 %), and the UAE (91.2 %)[2] remain stark. Second, television continues to be more popular than the internet across the region with 93% of the population being viewers (despite a reported fall from 98% since 2013).[3] Amongst social media users, while Facebook's popularity in the region has been unquestionable until now, its usage has declined in recent years, -20% since 2013. Recent reports claim that messaging apps like WhatsApp are at the top of the list of social media used (Radcliffe and Lam, 2018). Third, such

statistics do not account for nuances in the use of platforms, and their role in bolstering or dismantling longstanding pre-digital networks.

The recent history of media and ICTs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is marked by what has been categorised as the liberalisation of broadcasting, particularly in our four countries of research, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and the UAE.[4] States like Morocco and Tunisia appear to have given up partial control in favour of private ownership of TV and radio channels; however, these are now owned by businessmen and families close to the regimes in question or even directly by regimes through private holdings (Gana, 2013: 166; Hidass, 2010). So, this ownership diversification is mostly a cosmetic move. Further, rules and regulations controlling entry to the broadcasting field remain confusing, unclear, and tied to political interests. And, despite its impressive 420 million Arabic speaking population,[5] the economic takings of the media sector remain undisclosed, although sources suggest that few satellite channels are financially sustainable (Kraidy, 2008: 98). All this contributes to many young people's mistrust of information gleaned from radio, television and newspapers in the region.

According to a report on media use in the region from the Northwestern University in Qatar (2017), concerns about privacy have also affected the way social media is used in the region; yet only one in five citizens say they are concerned about privacy.[6] In this regard, according to the same study, it is interesting to note that only 18% of UAE nationals are worried about state control of online use in comparison to 48% of Tunisians or 30% of Jordanians.

Our paper draws on sixteen original case studies consisting of interviews, observations and textual analysis carried out for a collaborative project Personalised Media and Participatory Culture in the MENA[7] to provide an in-depth examination of how young people from Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and the UAE navigate issues of trust and surveillance in everyday media use. As we will argue based on our cases studies, our four countries evidence ever-decreasing trust in commercial and state provision. We examine the fact that despite the multiple optimistic accounts of digital media during and after the 'Arab Spring' which cast them as advocates of civic participation and liberation, many young people across the region use this 'new' mode of communication with similar caution and scepticism to that prompted by broadcast media.

'New' media: narratives of liberation and disillusionment

Changes in the MENA media landscape have often been read in an optimistic manner as initiating discourses of democratization and liberation (Hafez, 2008: 1). Technological development has been connected to narratives of democratisation, and linked with modernity, progress and what are seen as the social values of the 'liberal' West (Armbrust, 2012; Guaaybess, 2013). Early studies of radio and television in the global south already positioned 'modernisation' at their core. Walter Armbrust argues that, 'for many, the relatively low rate of new media usage in the Arab world was taken as a sign of cultural backwardness' (2012: 157). Indeed,

[t]his faith in media is not reconsidered or questioned even by UNESCO, for instance, which continues its crusade for modernization via media and, today, via the Internet. UNESCO defends the idea that it is necessary to reduce "the digital divide between rich and developing countries", even though the role of media in development has never been clearly established' (Guaaybess, 2013: 2–3)

The internet and social media serve as the bearers of a narrative that continues to be the measuring tool to draw a line between first and third worlds, as well as to champion feelings of Eurocentric superiority in an effort to present nations as 'progressive', 'modern' and 'liberal' in line with their citizens' embrace of new and emerging media. In the context of declining trust in old media, and increased attention to fake news, the question of civic trust towards new media tools and social media platforms is paramount.

Tunisia and Egypt, in particular, have been cases which prompted idealised stories of 'success': in the imaginary of commentators, web 2.0 becomes the saviour and most trusted information source of those living under oppressive or authoritarian regimes, and young people are thought to have a unique affinity for new media tools. Well-known cyber-utopian voices regarding MENA media include Benmamoun et al. (2012), Howard and Hussain (2013; 2013), Khamis (2013), and Breuer (2015; 2014). This view can be summed up by the following statement in Lynch (2014, p. 95): '[t]he new generation of young people communicates differently, interacts differently, and has different expectations of the public sphere than previous generations did … a strong correlation and environmental case can be made that this *new* information environment has empowered political and social activism' (emphasis added).

Of course, scholars such as Gunter et al. (2016), Mehdi Mabrouk (2011), Mohamed Zayani (2015) and Nouri Gana (2013) offer a more nuanced analysis of the role of digital media in the 2010-11 uprisings. Zayani's (2015) work suggests that while the internet may have been useful for activists living far from the region – for instance, in the Tunisian diaspora in France – it was a limited and less accessible tool when considered alongside the strategies of well-established face-to-face social movements in the region. In an attempt to rebalance attention to aspects of Tunisia's history, Mabrouk (2011) and Zayani (2015), in their respective studies, point to numerous events of social unrest in Tunisia prior to the 2010-2011 protests, including a significant trade union movement. While studies have shed light on the historical narrative that connects social movements with the 'Arab Spring' and hence offer more comprehensive narratives of the 2010-2011 events, mistrust towards both traditional broadcast and 'new' and emerging media is addressed only incidentally.

Alongside other factors, let us consider the issue of access with regard to the argument that increased social media use is responsible for increased knowledge about and public participation in anti-authoritarian protest. In the face of an almost uniformly digital optimist media narrative, George Joffé (2011) suggested that it had not been proved that either 'mobile telephone technology nor the internet – whether as Twitter or Facebook– were essential to the success of the demonstrations in Tunisia or Egypt' (2011: 525). Indeed, mobile networks and internet providers were shut by the authorities in both countries at some point during the protests, and the protests continued. Old

technologies, Joffé went on to claim, 'may have been more important, especially satellite television which is universally accessible and much more difficult to shut down, as regimes have discovered to their cost' (2011, p. 525). Data from the Arab Media Outlook 2011-2015 (2012) suggests that in 2010 Tunisia had almost one TV set per household. In 2010, however, internet penetration was only 36.8%. If access to mediated information is a key component in civic consciousness, then it is difficult to dismiss the role of television, and in particular of Al-Jazeera's critical coverage of unfolding events, as well as of ubiquitous graffiti and other media forms, in favour of digital media as a tool for creating a sense of common identity, circulating news, and airing grievances.

In line with a more sceptical take on the attribution of social change to new media, Belghazi and Moudden (2016) in Morocco, and Gana (2013) in Tunisia, engage with the idea of a disenchantment experienced once the uprisings had cooled down. While Gana initially explores the important role that social media had in circulating news (2013: 6), he then emphasises the mistrust which developed in the aftermath: 'many Tunisians eventually felt dismayed and disenchanted with Facebook and social media….' (2013: 7). In contrast to the 'presentist' (Postill, 2012) writings on new media revolutions, Gana (2013: 18) and Zayani (2015: 62–68) emphasise Tunisia's history of cultural dissent and of spontaneous workers' movements in keeping alive a spirit of rebellion.

Likewise, with regard to Morocco, Belghazi and Moudden frame the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings as a time of *ihbat*, Arabic for deception or *disillusionment*. Social media, they claim, actually only 'served to amplify the movement and abetted the optimism of the demonstrators' (2016: 39). Such narratives of initial optimism and eventual disillusionment contextualise the fact that when movements do not lead to significant political change, theories that make a causal argument about social media and liberation collapse and commentators lose interest in researching these cases further. Detailed, multi-perspectival and historicised accounts are needed to ensure that we do not oversimplify the role of old or new media in people's everyday lives before, during and after uprisings and protest movements.

Civic mistrust

Several key scholars in communications and political science connect the notion of trust in institutions such as the media with the idea of strong, democratic civil society (Barber, 2003; Dahlgren, 2009; Luhmann, 1979; Miszal, 1996). Hauser and Benoit-Barner approach trust as 'a paramount problem when the conditions of civil society make us mutually dependent on partners whose diversity so increases in scope and complexity as to exceed our capacity to understand the basis for their actions or their level of commitment to common goals' (2002: 270–271). Summarising the literature on trust (and mistrust), Hauser and Benoit-Barner discuss several propositions, including the following: 1. Trust surfaces in conditions of uncertainty. If one knows for sure, one does not need to trust; 2. Trust emerges in situations in which a choice between alternatives is required; 3. To trust, one must rely on beliefs about others to form expectations about their behavior and use these expectations to make choices; 4. To trust one must rely on the familiar to anticipate the unfamiliar in the sense that one uses the available repertoire

of experiences to form expectations and 5. Relationships of trust are self-stabilized by establishing an obligation to honor trust. As outlined in the introduction, all of these relationships of trust and conditions for trust between citizens and print or broadcast media, can be seen as repeatedly threatened in the MENA region by authoritarian media ownership, non-transparent regulation, curtailed liberalization, surveillance, censorship, and the reality of inaccurate, fake or delayed reportage. Rhetorical attempts to bolster the image of the mainstream broadcast media as trustworthy appear to work primarily with citizens who are in ideological alignment with the media outlets' views. Likewise, mistrust of fellow citizens and of the state has deep roots in everyday experience. Beliefs in the mutual reliance of citizens, and of the fairness of governance, have been undermined by a plethora of mediated or directly deployed authoritarian practices that surveille, punish or constrain citizens.

A culture of fear often protects the power of authoritarian regimes. This is well known to the populace across the MENA region – as well as in Latin American studies (Corradi et al., 1992; Rotker and Goldman, 2002) and in Western states (Giroux, 2003). In North Africa, the internalised 'respectful' fear towards power is articulated as '*hiba*' or '*hibat addawla*' (meaning to look imposing, and to inspire fear and respect), which has historically characterised the relationship between the state and civil society (Leveau, 1997: 96). Acknowledgement of this fear in the literature on new media is very recent (El-Issawi, 2016; Lynch et al., 2016; Zaid, 2016). Many in the region experience the feeling that in their everyday lives they are being listened to and observed by the deep state, which fuels a culture of mistrust among citizens (Shaery-Eisenlohr, 2011: 128; Smith and Loudiy, 2005: 1099). This culture of mistrust is widespread and enacted through wariness in everyday situations, from sharing a taxi to talking in a public café. Examples of mistrust, fear and wariness are present throughout our data, and particularly in Tunisia, Morocco and UAE. Suggesting the dialectical nature of trust, mistrust and civic interaction, these topics were discussed with us, sometimes openly but also often in covert ways, where mistrust was extended to the nature of our own investigation on media practices and networks of participation, especially in the case of the UAE.

Methods and research design

We deliberately chose four contrasting countries with different colonial histories, distinct governance structures, socioeconomic patterns, levels of internet penetration and media cultures – Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and UAE – to exemplify the need to discuss youth participation, new media and the MENA region in a differentiated manner.

Our research was initially textual and encompassed the collection and analysis of cultural, social and political materials produced by groups on and off-line in the MENA region and the textual 'mapping' of hundreds of overlapping civic and political networks frequented by young people between the ages of 17 and 30 in the four countries. We undertook this mapping in order to provide a context for the choice of our future case studies: namely, to examine the most frequent sorts of civic networks – were they students? Workers? Urban or rural or both? Overtly political or deliberately apolitical? We also examined the extent to which forms of art and creativity such as film, music and art featured in these groups' as a central issue or a tool of communication; and we

examined whether there were connections between networks fighting for social justice and those fulfilling cultural functions for particular communities. In fact, we discovered that there were intergenerational and cross-media connections between many of the existing civic networks within each country, but that some were quite isolated, and sometimes deliberately so. We also found a large number of local and regional civic networks that chose to keep a low profile, chose not to connect themselves to others with similar names or interests nationally or internationally, and that were based on face-to-face or traditional media ties. In interviews we discovered that they shunned a wider membership quite deliberately in an effort to ensure trust.

This qualitative 'mapping' phase was followed by ethically alert participant observation, in-depth qualitative interviews, and focus groups, to generate a series of contrasting case studies. In all countries participants either chose to have pseudonyms or to use their own names because this would benefit them and we respected these choices. Interviews and focus groups were recorded, translated and written up and analysed thematically in conjunction with observational field notes and photographs. These in-depth case studies – several of which are the focus of this paper – were systematically chosen to illustrate examples of the different types of civic networks that exist in the region, including newer (ones that have sprung up in the wake of new media) and older ones (that might be adapting in various ways to the new media network culture), ones that had an overt focus on gender and protected characteristics and ones that were embedded in patriarchal cultures, ones that were self-reflexive about their political potential and ones that either ignored or deliberately shunned the arena of the political.

We trained our four research assistants in the region– Asma Alabed in UAE, Rita Adel in Jordan, Chadi Chahdi in Morocco and Sara Attafi in Tunisia, and Monica Ibrahim in London– extensively in qualitative methods, and provided them with theoretical literature and fieldwork instruments such as interview schedules and fieldwork templates. In collaboration with them we chose to focus on networks of participation which illustrated the peculiarities of a set or group of young people between the age of 15 and 35 involved in a broadly civic cause – artistic production, popular social movement or other social enterprise – that had used, or utilises new and emerging media for communication and connection. We were exceptionally sensitive to issues of social class, gender and exclusion, deliberately seeking out, and taking time to get to know and win the trust of, networks to which contained working class and lower middle class participants, since it was always much easier to contact networks of predominantly well to do and well connected citizens. Table 1 lists the variety of networks included in our research.

Morocco	Jordan	Tunisia	UAE	London
Football Ultras	'Books on the Road'	LGBTQ & Feminist	Motorbikers	Al-Arabiya
Film-makers network	Jadal – Cultural Cafe	Gamers	Musical/artistic venues	

Sufi musicians	Heavy Metal	Manich_Msamah	Counselling and self-disclosure	
Trainee teachers union		Les Volontaires	Digital podcasting	

Table 1. Groups and networks examined in the MENA and diaspora

In focus groups or interviews, and during observations and in our analysis, we asked questions that would allow us to elaborate on the depth and types of individual and group participation in civil, religious, political, artistic and other networks offline, the connections between social class and creative production, the extent to which emerging digital platforms can be or already are being transformed into networked communities of participation, the connections between creativity and political transformation, and whether there is evidence that these networks are beginning to include otherwise disconnected communities in the MENA region in non-digital situations. We analysed the data from observations and interviews thematically, critically contrasting our findings to existing narratives about media and new media in the MENA region. Issues that jumped to the fore were digital mistrust, new media avoidance, civic-branding and online self-promotion. Therefore, this paper asks the following question: In what ways do issue of trust, privacy and surveillance intersect in the MENA region and inflect the individual and collective practices of young people in participatory networks and their sense of civic connection through old and new media?

Media mistrust and surveillance

Distrust of traditional media was palpable even in the UAE where our interviews engaged much less explicitly with criticisms of the state. Harris, a member of a motorbike network in Dubai told us sarcastically 'Well, look at the newspapers in the UAE, *everybody is happy*! – Adding – And look at the news here, *everything is perfect*!' A conversation about road safety and traffic accidents thus prompted a comment on the lack of freedom of information across UAE media. The same idea was reiterated by Sami, member of Les Volontaires, a Tunisian association interested in empowering young people through an engagement with everyday environmental and cultural issues: '… most of the time *you can't find real and important information on the TV news*.'

In spite of the discussions above which might suggest that distrust of TV and newspapers is to be expected, while new media is now seen as the go-place for youth who want 'trustworthy' news, we received similar responses of mistrust when asking about online news sites. Maha, a young Moroccan screenwriter and director, explained: '*I don't trust news websites*, except if it's the same news everywhere. Now e-newspapers only care about having as many views as they can. If they think disseminating *fake news* would help them reach that, they will do it, just as … tabloids [exist offline], [that genre of news source] also exists on the internet.' Likewise, Mohamed, a Moroccan sound engineer and member of a young people's cinema network, expressed scepticism about

online media. While some reports argue that more youth in the MENA region are accessing news through social media (*Inside the hearts and minds of Arab youth*, 2016) it is clear that the feeling towards online news retains the healthy scepticism that is applied to news from television, radio and the press.

Football ultras outspokenly denounced the state's online surveillance. Souhail and Zakariya suggested that the group are equally mistrustful of the police and of traditional media. Ahmed, another interviewee, explained 'the virtual world is no longer an open space to express yourself fully. If you want to start an initiative, [the state] can get people to destroy it and … [t]he *surveillance of cell phones and computers* from the satellites comes first and then comes the work of the police district chief'. A key point to note here, however, is that they are undeterred from their civic mission by surveillance and media bias. Ultras we interviewed came across as alert, mistrustful *and* active on social media, using it to their advantage. In order to protect themselves from state surveillance they avoid showing recognisable faces or names, as Souhail explained. On their YouTube channel proxidotcom, music is posted without authors being named. Singers are disguised. Other information that may lead to arrests is redacted. In this sense, while mistrust of state tactics that begins around traditional media extends to social media, even given the more limited access people have, social media does allow for users to resist mainstream narratives. This happens not just at the level of belief and consciousness, but also at the level of action and discursive production.

For members of other networks, online anonymity is far harder to maintain. For this reason, we were told, social media is not a preferred option in organising protests. It is used, however, to advance a group's political agenda by 'playing' with net surveillance, and planning misinformation about group activities to mislead the authorities. Bouazza, a member of the teacher trainees' union in Morocco, said in this regard, that the organisation of protests happens

> mostly through phone calls, and organisational matters mostly go through the phone, *we use the internet rarely*. Sometimes we say [online that] we're going to meet here, but we don't meet there, but we let the media know that we're meeting there… to deceive… It's not trickery, but we give the wrong spot to the Ministry of the Interior.

This group of activist trainee teachers uses apps selectively depending on their aim and need for privacy. Private WhatsApp groups are used by coordinators, as these can adapt to changes in the coordination of groups, such as altered telephone numbers and the ability to create new groups instantly. Public Facebook pages, YouTube channels and hashtags are part of their efforts to disseminate their struggle; but these reveal minimal private information as we discovered at the mapping stage, except through metadata, which are not so easily accessed. As Houda another trainee teacher union member admits, the use of the hashtag was picked up by Al Jazeera Arabic programme 'Hashtag', helping them to get the message about trainee teachers' pay and conditions out more widely. Despite Houda's praise of their social media presence and activity, she also insisted that committee decisions are only made during face-to-face offline meetings: 'we mostly rely on direct contact with the teacher trainees in the training centres; however, Facebook played a role in communicating our final decision of the meeting to the public'.

Mouhsin, another member of the union, agreed with Houda in contesting the notion of social media as irreplaceable platforms for democratic discussion outside the West.

Trust building strategies

Sali, one of the founders of The Green Room, a platform for young musicians in the UAE, suggested a different way of looking at the use of online and offline spaces to create networks of participation. Discussing people who approach her about becoming part of The Green Room's activities, she explained that she prefers to meet people online first rather than face-to-face as this allows her to find out more about the person 'because it enables ... more chances for me to find out who you are before [I meet you and] I'm able to kind of form a response'. The fact that using the internet and social media profiles to 'police' or check out the activities and legitimacy of fellow-citizens who wish to participate in civic initiatives was only mentioned explicitly in our UAE case study, suggesting a social and political context of anxiety over state control and surveillance which had an effect on our research in the UAE. However, all the networks we examined have ways of policing the boundaries for members and non-members, and several, such as CHOUF in Tunisia rely on either Skype interviews or face-to-face encounters before agreeing to membership, if membership is actually a desirable criterion.

Thus, mistrust of media and of other citizens can be seen as a building block for and an impediment to civic and political action and empowerment. In our case studies it takes a plethora of forms including refusal to watch or listen to media/political output, a tendency towards complaint and generic conspiracy theories, subversive and dissident engagement with mainstream media narratives, or a search for multiple alternative sources to corroborate news.

Artivism, entrepreneurial networks and branding

Online presence came across as an important means of building an artistic or activist brand. CHOUF describes itself on its website (in English followed by French and Arabic) as a 'feminist, separatist organization interested mainly in women's bodily and sexual rights in Tunisia.'[8] Chouf only accepts members who identify as female; issues of trust are paramount in their procedures for admission. New members are required to have two sponsors within the organisation, and need to go through a six-month test period. While Skype is sometimes the first point of contact, face-to-face soon follows. The purpose, as Dorah one of its founders told us, is to filter out members who identify themselves as men 'because simply our priority in CHOUF is to provide a "safe space" for women'. Despite the safety-related hurdles to becoming part of this organisation, CHOUF is adamant in its use of audio-visual material uploaded online to disseminate its message and pursue its political agenda. CHOUF has active Facebook and Twitter accounts. Thus, online presence is valuable not only in promoting their activities and creating awareness of gender issues within and beyond Tunisia, but also in inviting non-members to participate, and in vetting potential members or reacting to individual crises where geographical co-location is not possible.

In spite of the general lack of trust in media, new marketing and branding opportunities among young people have developed within social networking sites (Bennett and Robards, 2014). While most of the initiatives we researched had a civic participatory ethos, both traditional and new media emerged as key elements in most groups' aim to grow the sphere of influence of their organisation or network. The connection between civic participation, media and brand image featured especially in the case of the cultural and music scene in Dubai. Tala, a 24-year-old independent musician, mentioned the changes in the music scene, how it was male-dominated and instrumentalised indigenous culture. Ultimately, however, self-promotional hype via social media, and the elitism of the scene, proved to be generators of mistrust amongst more critical young people.

Field observations led our research assistant in the UAE to agree with Tala's critical comments on the way in which some cultural stakeholders in Dubai portray events as 'independent' and 'grass-roots' while organising them in five-star hotels, catering exclusively to the upper classes and with little interest in promoting local culture or cultural activities other than for profit. As Tala claimed, some of these initiatives 'make it sound like they really did something from nothing and … I don't know how to say this politely, they've been like media whores, throwing themselves at every possibility, every magazine feature, every Dubai tourism sponsored documentary they can be in'. Hend, the creator of Tea with Culture, a podcast that talks about culture in the UAE, agrees with Tala; describing the most popular art gallery Al Serkal having a 'shopping mall mentality… it's totally the mentality of a commercial space…' and adding that these artistic spaces search for bloggers, influencers and hype on social media to promote their commercial agenda with no significant contribution to the local art scene. 90% of the artists they exhibit, she told us, are foreigners – usually white Expats – and not migrant workers from Africa or South Asia.

Another of our cases exposed further this tension between civic participation and commercial profit in networks that bill themselves as social enterprises. Books on the Road, founded by Ghaith Dahboushe, aims at promoting reading among Jordanians. Ghaith uses the quaintly named 'Nancy', his aged Mercedes, as an 'alternative space' from which to exhibit and sell donated books at affordable prices in order to fund a library elsewhere. While Ghaith believes that his presence in the streets of Amman, and now in a store and cultural centre in Madaba, are key to getting Jordanian youth interested in reading, one of his colleagues, Ahmad, is adamant about the role media exposure plays in the success of the project: 'Everyone has a smart phone, everyone has his mobile with them all the time, people open all their applications on the phone, Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Linked In, all the websites are always open'. Despite a lower than 50% internet penetration rate in Jordan, for Ahmad, mobile phones are synonymous with permanent internet access. To him the internet serves not only as a communication medium, but can also be a mechanism to sell books online and gain online payment. Requests for books are channelled through WhatsApp or their Facebook page. As Ahmed said, the website contributes to creating a brand for Kawn, which is the name of the group under which Books on the Road works. Ahmad's use of social media is therefore at least partly directed to gain visibility for commercial profit. The absence of

any awareness around access and social class when he discussed online media and online payment was discernible.

What the scholarly emphasis on MENA political communication and new media that we drew attention to at the outset conceals, however, is the fact that groups of mainly middle class young people are capitalising on social media in entrepreneurial ways that have much to do with gentrification, and little to do with a desire for political liberation or social critique. Yet, culturalist narratives continue to emphasise social media use by young MENA citizens quite exclusively as a way to access news and participate in revolt (See the case of the Arab Youth Survey, 2016, The Middle East: A Region Divided, 2017).

New media refrainers, apolitical lurking and digital ghettos

The networks of young people that we studied, which we present because they share typical features with multiple other civic networks across the four countries, capitalise on the differences between certain apps that allow for privacy (i.e. WhatsApp groups) and others that are more exposed (i.e. Facebook and YouTube). The tension for them is between a mass dissemination of activities and news, and the susceptibility to surveillance. Contrary to much of the literature about the internet in the aftermath of the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings, our study found that many young interviewees perceive all social media as a space with *a limited capacity to create social and political engagemen*t. While most had Facebook profiles and therefore in principle at least agreed with reports claiming Facebook as the king in the region (87% of social media users according to the *Arab Social Media Report*, 2015) in spite of its fall since 2013 (Radcliffe and Lam, 2018), many admitted that they were 'not really active' in this social network. Tamer, a freelance journalist who has worked in Jadal social and cultural centre in Amman, voiced what many of our interviewees across the four countries told us, that while he does have a Facebook page, his online presence is limited, with virtually no civic or political engagement: 'I have Facebook, but I am not very active on it despite being a journalist'. Two other Jadal members, Yamen, a Syrian refugee of Palestinian decent, and Abdullah, a teacher at Jadal, had similar responses indicating deliberate social media disengagement.

We received similar responses in Morocco. Mohamed from the cinema network told us:

> Honestly, I'm not very active on Facebook. I mean, I follow activities, but don't leave comments or share content on my Facebook account. I'm a member of many groups on Facebook, but only related to cinema. I'm not involved or active on Facebook, I just follow posts shared by others. In my opinion, Facebook is not ideal or professional like YouTube is… I use YouTube a lot and email and I use LinkedIn to communicate with many people.

The references to YouTube in our Moroccan case studies support figures that place Morocco as the second in the MENA region in numbers of YouTube subscribers.[9]

The ghettoisation of the like-minded, facilitated by the ability of social media to create interest-based clusters or 'bubbles', came up in several of our case studies. Abdullah from Jadal was bothered by the desire for likes and shares, problems with privacy, and especially by the lack of acceptance of criticisms in comments that are deleted by page owners. He explained that he was concerned with the commercialisation and ghettoisation of culture, which he admitted were not exclusive to online practices in the Jordanian cultural field. The problem of 'digital ghettos' was mentioned during our interview with Khalil, a Tunisian graffiti artist and activist member of the Manich_Msamah (I will not forgive) initiative. This initiative started to campaign against the economic Reconciliation Act, which aims to protect politicians from Ben Ali's regime, who are suspected of misusing public funds, from being prosecuted. One of Khalil's roles within this network has been to tag physical walls and create public artwork for the group rather than to create a social media presence. According to him

> The common people who work by night for example, or who spend all day at work and could only go back home late… you cannot really make these people hear about you and your message through any other way…. The street walls are the best way to make them see and read the messages you want to them to see.

In contrast to tags on walls – which bring the public of all political and class hues up against their messages - social media does not reach the very poor, and allows for people with contending ideologies to disengage, as discussed by Khalil

> Usually we do Facebook and social media to express our thoughts, right? However, if someone is following me and sees something that is not really pleasing for them… they would automatically block me… I personally leave Facebook to share cultural events I'm involved in… Facebook and social media are useful in these things but not to express myself.

While messages on physical walls can be and are erased, Khalil believes this is a sign that the message has reached someone and annoyed them enough to make the effort of erasing it worthwhile.

In spite of the idea that social media provides a free space that could be seen to compensate for the absence of collective public space in the MENA region, as argued by Howard and Hussain (2013: 5), our analysis of focus group data supports the argument that online platforms encourage 'the clustering of like-minded people into polarized communities' (Lynch et al., 2016: 7). With such clustering an integral part of the digital landscape, as Hindman (2009: 13) argues, *being able to speak* and *being heard* are distinct processes, especially when it comes to political messages.

In this respect, Samah, another member of Manich_Msamah, told us that being active on Facebook and Twitter was useful because they already knew that 'many people in [the] network were active on Facebook and it was easier to share information there'. This is the case with the Ultras in Morocco, who use Facebook to communicate with their followers because most members of their network are already there. However, in order to pass their messages to a broader audience they create tifos, visual banners displayed

through a mixture of digital and physical choreography by fans in the stands of an arena or stadium, which are then broadcast by television networks and seen by a variety of publics. While Khalil and many of our interviewees across the four countries have online profiles, these play a limited role in encouraging civic and political initiatives beyond members who are already engaged with similar political interests. Paradoxically, perhaps, although there is a lower chance of dialogic response and greater possibility of erasure, walls and other physical spaces like football stadia reach wider audiences in an uncensored but collective way through graffiti, and thus become trusted if ephemeral means of political and civic dissemination: you know where you are with a physical wall.

Conclusion

Narratives of liberation and disillusionment around digital media and socio-political change are present in the MENA region, and evidenced in our research. They are, however, far more awkwardly intertwined – with each other and with less altruistic motives and feelings – than the literature suggests. Media branding for economic gain is common amongst those who promote their initiatives as educational or cultural (Sufi musicians who wish to be hired, cultural centres seeking members, cultural bookshops and the like). The literature on social media and the 2010-2011 MENA uprisings repeats an ahistorical narrative attached to the 'Arab Spring' where pre-protest youth are uncritically positive about the power of social media to bring political change while post-revolutionary attitudes are tainted by disappointment. Although some of our interviewees declared that they were active during the 'Arab Spring', despite both direct and indirect questions, those events were rarely mentioned as a key moment that had an unparalleled effect on attitudes towards old media or new media (moving them from trust to mistrust or otherwise). While mainstream print and broadcast media are still regarded with mistrust – often rightfully – our reading of more critical literature and our analysis of cases from Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia and UAE enables us to argue that caution and mistrust lead to more selective and critical uses – and avoidance – of new media tools, rather than to conspiratorial disengagement. Our systematic, contextually-specific analysis of attitudes of media trust and mistrust, and feelings about surveillance and 'over-exposure' on social media across our typical cases of youth civic networks, urges a more complicated view of the relationship between civic mistrust and democracy. If unquestioning trust in networked contacts met online or in news disseminated online might lead to young citizens unknowingly befriending a government agent, or to a belief in propaganda, then some mistrust is healthy, and justified.

However, digital surveillance and cross-platform data-gathering are not the exclusive preserve of the state; these are used by vulnerable networks or individuals to check up on erstwhile new members, and to vet sources of information. Youth in the region have grown up within social, cultural and political circumstances whereby distrust of state-controlled media, of political parties, of trade unions and associations as well as of sharing political views in public spaces is the logical outcome of their own or their parents' experiences. Although there may have been a flurry of joining and searching and liking and online experimentation, this lack of trust – and hence the premium on trusted networks – has not disappeared because of the existence of 'new' media platforms and tools; it has, rather, been tempered and transferred.

We are all too aware of the limitations of our study. Having identified dozens of MENA civic networks started by or involving young people, from the most traditionally politicised ones to the artistic and entrepreneurial ones, we were only able to concentrate in depth on four of these in each country. In order to maintain some breadth amongst these cases, we could not pay special attention only to alternative media producers or follow our networks during politically heightened moments falling outside the months of the ethnographic data collection. Moreover, the fact that most of the cases that agreed to work with us were urban or peri-urban left most rural youth networks underexplored. With these limitations in mind, in the case of young civic producers/networks, it was only on rare occasions that distrust of mainstream media narratives seemed to galvanise the creation of sustained alternative social media content. The ones who did engage online most regularly were interested less in producing alternative journalism than in addressing everyday concerns (fighting against unjust laws, the stigma of mental illness, the social exclusion of LGBTQ communities, and fighting for access to or maintenance of public spaces, music traditions and freedom of speech) which were of great importance and urgency within their communities and their everyday lives and through which their experience of democracy was embodied. With the use of Facebook decreasing and with the development of new popular platforms such as Snapchat which include facial identification, further comparative studies of situated civic and leisure practices with digital and entirely non-digital networks, at times of stasis and times of upheaval will provide us with invaluable information on whether mistrust, privacy and surveillance continue to be issues inflecting these young citizens' media practices. It will also be interesting to note whether mistrustful and cautious young MENA citizens' continued democratic engagement leads those who currently fetishize civic trust (as one of the highest democratic values) or who fetishize new media (as inherently bottom-up), to change their perspectives.

Funding

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Notes

1. See http://mideastmedia.org/survey/2017/overview/ [Accessed April 17, 2018].
2. 'Internet Users (per 100 people)', UNdata (2017) http://data.un.org/en/index.html [Accessed April 11, 2018].
3. See http://mideastmedia.org/survey/2017/overview/ [Accessed April 17, 2018].
4. For detailed accounts on liberalisation in the countries researched in this study see Joan Barata (2013) for Tunisia, Ahmed Hidass (2010) for Morocco, Muhammad I. Ayish (2013) for the UAE and Naomi Sakr (2013) for Jordan.
5. See http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/arabic-speaking-countries.html [Accessed April 11, 2018].
6. See http://mideastmedia.org/survey/2017/overview/ [Accessed April 17, 2018].
7. http://www.lse.ac.uk/Middle-East-Centre/Research/Collaboration-Programme/2015-16/Shakuntala-Banaji
8. See http://chouf-minorities.org/about-us/ [Accessed August 15, 2017].
9. 68% of social media users in Morocco are subscribers in YouTube (*Arab Social Media Report*, 2015).