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The Impact of Media on Religious Conflict in Egypt

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Abstract

New media outlets, enabled by modern technology, are having far-reaching and profound impact on society unlike any previous time in history. While the media's reach is not new, the way in which individuals are interacting with media has changed dramatically. Seemingly, overnight, unidirectional and highly censored transmission of information to the masses has transformed into an interactive environment marked by decreased censorship, rising freedom and a belief that news is no longer only the journalist's domain: news can come from anyone, anywhere, at any time. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of media expansion enabled by technological innovation on religious views in the Arab society. This paper aims to examine a growing and significant trend in the Arab world namely religious intolerance, division and conflict. We believe recent media expansion has contributed significantly to this intolerance and division by providing and making accessible various media outlets to various parties who use media to spread their religious ideology.

A man told his grandson: "A terrible fight is going on inside me -- a fight between two wolves. One is evil, and represents hate, anger, arrogance, intolerance, and superiority. The other is good, and represents joy, peace, love, tolerance, understanding, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, and compassion. This same fight is going on inside you, inside every other person too." The grandson then asked: "Which wolf will win?". The old man replied simply: "The one you feed." - Anon.

Keywords: Religious conflict; Impact of media; Censorship

Introduction

New media outlets, enabled by modern technology, are having far-reaching and profound impact on society unlike any previous time in history. Technological advances have fueled

globalization by connecting international cultures and transcending national borders. While the media's reach is not new, the way in which individuals are interacting with media has changed dramatically. Seemingly overnight, unidirectional and highly-censored transmission of information to the masses has transformed into an interactive environment marked by decreased censorship, rising freedom and a belief that news is no longer only the journalist's domain: news can come from anyone, anywhere, at any time.

Evans [1] argues that media can either act as a bridge between different views, exposing both sides to the other's views and forging a common culture or stressing differences resulting in the highlight of differences leading to conflict. Evans [1] goes on to argue that, "media with a particular orientation (secular or religious) may intensify differences by insulating the group it represents, reporting primarily views in line with that group's worldview and negatively portraying the opposing side". Evans [1] classified religious divisions into two different types that separate citizens into different camps. The first being the inter-religious differences between members of different religions and denominations where tensions may exist between different religious groups such as Christians and Muslims. The second being the religious divide based on intra-religious differences between members of the same religion such as Catholics and Protestants or Sunni and Shaiit Muslims.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of media expansion enabled by technological innovation on religious views in the Arab society. This paper aims to examine a growing and significant trend in the Arab world namely religious intolerance, division and conflict. We believe recent media expansion has contributed significantly to this intolerance and division by providing and making accessible various media outlets to various parties who use media to spread their religious ideology. We believe media expansion has moved religious debates and intolerance from behind closed doors onto the front pages of media such as newspapers, internet and social media outlets enabling the re-emergence of religion as a dividing force within the Arab society.

To fulfill this purpose we provide several examples that illustrate this phenomenon and discuss its impact. We

investigate how media outlets used in religious conflicts. In addition, we link what is happening in the region to various theories that can aid in explaining what is happening in the region. To achieve this objective, we look at the various media outlets in the region and examine the link between these media availability and expansion and its use to communicate to the public various religious ideologies that may create intolerance and conflict within the Arab society.

Throughout our world, religious values remain an important influence on individual decision-making and behavior. The legacies of Judaism, Christianity and Islam continue to impact the lives of billions; not only in the Middle East where they started, but around the globe, having significant impact on peoples' daily lives and decisions from how to dress, what not to eat, to how and where to worship. Ancient Mesopotamia was the ideological origin for all three of these traditions. This shared history among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has provided them a shared theological base, yet they have been in constant struggle with one another for hundreds of years.

Recently, scholars have turned their attention to studying how technology affects religious beliefs and values [2-4]. Caiazza [5] claimed that technology has the power to shape the lives of human beings. An argument could be made that advances in technology such as Satellite Networks, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have not only provided new channels of media distribution, but have additionally changed how people obtain information [6]. With regard to the mix of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity in the Middle East, this paper looks at the role new media outlets play in shaping religious views in the Arab region. Marsden and Savigny [7] stated that, "The genie of religion has been let out of the bottle and many liberals and academics want to engage with it while others want to put it firmly back in the bottle." This is an attempt to explore the relationship between media outlets expansion and the increased religious conflict in the Arab society.

Arab Media Outlet Development and Expansion

By the end of the 1980's, Arab media was limited to a handful of state-owned outlets across the Middle East, mainly comprised of state-controlled newspapers, radio stations and TV channels. Mass media in this part of the world played a significant role in forming, shaping, and influencing Arabs and regarded by many Arab governments as having great political importance. Across all forms of media (print, radio, internet, satellite television, etc.) the politics of marketing and advertising have brought a long awaited democratization of the Arab media. Arab states started their own radio programs in the first half of the 20th century, and television began to make advances shortly thereafter, beginning in Iraq and Lebanon [8,9].

From the very onset, the Arab press had close ties with politics as shown by newsprint communication of government messages as occupied states began their struggle national independence from European colonialism. The media became a sword to battle foreign rule and serve indigenous political

ends. Subsequently, the Arab press became a powerful propaganda platform at the service of nationalist movements promoting anti-imperialist and nationalist themes that remain popular to this day. In the second half of the 20th century, censorship began to take root as the influence of Arab governments on media institutions increased to protect, as they claimed, national unity (while concurrently eliminating dissent from public debate). In the name of preserving national interests, and consequently supporting government policies, Arab governments exerted a politically motivated policy of censorship on their media. Eventually, the once diverse Arab press was reduced to a handful of state-owned properties; creating a shift from free expression to censored, politically influenced content. Government confiscation of the basic freedom of expression impacted not only Arab journalists' rights, but also others as well (e.g. individual freedom of religion and religious debate). The journalists censored by the state faced threats such as torture, assault, restraint on travel, and arrest [10].

The Evolution of Arab Media

The Arab media has evolved into a multi-channel, diverse industry. This section will focus on the development of satellite networks, then transition to Internet and other media modes. A significant moment in Arab media history occurred when Qatari Emir, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa, granted \$150 million (US) to establish the Al-Jazeera satellite television network that began broadcast in late 1996. Al-Jazeera promoted objective and independent reporting, charting new territory in a region where such freedom of press was a new novelty. For the first time, an Arab channel would cater to Arab audiences on issues that mattered to it most; having a definite impact on the local and regional political landscape.

The birth of Al-Jazeera marked a milestone in the media history of the Arab World. Unlike other media outlets in the region, the Qatari channel challenged Arab audiences by confronting them with the harsh reality of their daily lives (poverty, repression, culture, etc.), addressing these through unusual point of view and controversial political debates. Previously, governments had carefully ensured television content to consist of mind-numbing entertainment and harmless news and talk shows. Al-Jazeera was also the first Arab network to feature Israeli leaders, which angered many Arab leaders accustomed to exerting tight political control over the state media.

In 2008, the Arab states attempted to reestablish control over many media outlets. The Ministries of Information of all, but two, of the 22-member Arab League approved the Satellite Broadcasting Charter reinstating government control over broadcasts and curtailing political expression (<http://blogs.rnw.nl/medianetwork/arab-information-ministers-adopt-satellite-broadcast-charter>). Analysts claimed the charter was a response by Arab governments to the relative freedom enjoyed by regional satellite broadcasters, many of which were privately financed and openly encouraged political discussion of sensitive matters.

It is no surprise that Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the two nations that own the satellites responsible for all Arab broadcasting (Egypt with NileSat, and Saudi Arabia with ArabSat) initiated the charter. Interestingly, Lebanon was the only country with a nay vote while Qatar, home base for Al-Jazeera, abstained. The charter's provisions allow political giants to deny television stations access to one of the mentioned satellites and prevent their citizens from watching any channel they so desire. As such, the charter poses a real threat to the Arab media and the rising standards for professionalism in the field.

Evoking, once again, the credo of preserving stability and security in the region, the charter bans broadcasting material seen as undermining "social peace, national unity, public order and general propriety" (familiar buzz-words Arab governments often throw at their opponents). However, despite this charter, the Pan-Arab free-to-air satellite television remains a much more liberal sphere, allowing for the development of numerous media outlets and greater transparency to discuss openly contentious and sensitive points.

The charter discussed above bans material based on criteria subjective to the political powers enforcing it. Material seen as undermining social peace, national unity, public order and general propriety is left to the judgment of the governments. Thus, it can be argued that governments could rule that material which promotes opposing political views, other religions, and alternate worldviews may disrupt social peace, national unity, and public order.

Proliferation of Religious Mass Media

To understand the impact of mass media on the Arab society, we look at where its growth occurred and how it was used. While religious division in the Arab region have always existed by the mere fact that there are various different religious groups in the region, there is little doubt that this division and conflict has been on the rise in recent years. Commenting on the "Arab Spring" the United States Institute of Peace (2011) stated that, "While it is too early to predict the outcome in any one of these cases, one vital challenge facing the region's youthful protestors is to confront-and where possible, transcend-the escalating ideological, social, and religious or sectarian tensions that have been exacerbated by democratic change itself". Amongst these democratic changes is the expansion of media outlets allowed by many regions in the region.

Satellite networks

Free-to-air networks have changed the media landscape in the Arab world forever. Two types of networks currently reach the region. Some networks are hosted on Arab satellites, specifically NileSat (Egypt) or ArabSat (Saudi Arabia), while others are hosted on satellites owned by nations outside the region. Arab states are able to exert control over the networks they host, while they can exert but little control over those hosted by other nations.

This is where things get complicated. In 2012 it was estimated that there were more than 565 Arab television channels [11] targeting the region. The number of free-to-air satellite TV channels grew by 438 percent between January 2004 and April 2011 (<http://www.ameinfo.com/134225.html>), with a growth rate of 19% just in 2011 [11]. Out of this number, 67% have established online sites to reach their target [12].

Currently the number of Arab corporations broadcasting or re-broadcasting satellite channels stands at 758, including 29 publicly owned ones and 729 owned by the private sector. They all broadcast or re-broadcast 1294 television channels (165 public and 1129 private channels) in multiple languages and a variety of specialties.

As a move toward democracy, many Arab states legalized ownership of satellite dishes and access to satellite networks resulting in the introduction of hundreds of independent and privately owned TV channels covering a wide range of issues from national and international news to topics considered taboo in the region such as homosexuality and premarital sex. This move has also significantly contributed to the spread of cable and satellite penetration in the Arab world starting in the early 1990's.

The Arab culture known for its collectivistic nature (12): a societal understanding that the advancement of the group is far more important than that of the individual. It is also traditionally been known for its focus on group harmony and getting along with other people. However, the new spread of mass media is influencing the Arab culture in significant ways [13]. There are now many free-to-air satellite networks dedicating most of their time to religious issues, debates and even discussions of other religions. While Muslims in the Middle East have always had more freedom to discuss religious issues and criticize other religions, minorities did not have the same privilege. However, with introduction of satellite networks broadcasting from abroad, the situation has changed dramatically and is creating a profound impact on Arab society, discussed later in this paper.

The impact of such changes would not be so great if it were not for the amount of TV viewing taking place in the Arab world. The Arab Advisor Group published a report at the end of 2011 where it stated that nearly 95% of the Arab population watches TV and this figure has not changed much since then (<http://www.mideastmedia.org/survey/2016/chapter/television/>). In a 2008 survey that investigated the volume of TV viewing in the region, Harmon reported that nearly 47 percent of young people surveyed were in the highest-viewing category, with 880 reporting more than three hours of TV watched per day. Less than three percent polled reported not watching or not having access to a TV. About one fifth watched one to two hours daily. More than one in four indicated two to three hours of daily TV watching. In a prior study Karam, 2007 reported that more than half of the 200 respondents viewed television up to three hours a day on a typical school or workday. Seventeen percent watched four to six hours a day and seven percent watched more than six hours a day. These numbers exceed the average of 2.8 hours for the U.S.

population reported by Bureau of Labor Statistics. This may explain Amin's claim that watching TV in the Arab world is no longer a luxury but a way to pass time and be entertained [14]. The U.S. invasion of Iraq is believed to have played a role in this trend. The event lured families across the Arab world to spend hours watching the news and television rooms became the focal point in the house: where food was prepared, clothes washed, children bathed and guests received. This has built a culture of TV watching that has only grown in magnitude and number in recent years.

Internet

The Internet represents the fastest diffusion of global technology in history. From the time the internet was initially commercialized, it took only four years to reach a critical mass of 50 million users. From 1969-1979, the Internet was host to only a small community of 188 computers.

The Internet's participation exploded to 600 million users and more than 171 million host computers in the 25 years subsequent [15]. According to the Internet World Stats [16], there are close to 2.5 billion Internet users in the world with a penetration rate of 34.3 percent in 2012.

The penetration rate in the Middle East was at 42.9% in 2012 and rising compared to the world average of 34.5%. The Internet World Stats report in 2011 puts the number of Arabic speaking Internet users at more than 86 million people.

By 2018, the numbers have increased significantly where there are 4,208,571,287 Internet users as of June 2018 (<https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>). There is a penetration rate of 64.5% in the Middle East in 2018 compared to 55.1% as the world total. As of March 2017, the number of Arabic speaking Internet users is almost 176 million people (<https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats19.htm>).

Tunisia was the first Arab country to connect in 1991 and Kuwait established services in 1992. They were followed by Egypt and the UAE, establishing links in 1993. Jordan soon followed suit in 1994, while Syria and Saudi Arabia were the slowest states in the region to allow regular access; not becoming available until late 1990's. Once Saudi Arabia made Internet access officially available in the kingdom, the country witnessed the largest and fastest growth in user population in the Arab world [15].

In 2012 Egypt made it to the top 20 countries with highest number of Internet users in the world [16]. Population Reference Bureau [17] stated that a large number of these Internet users in the region are accessing the net using a mobile device.

The Bureau stated that mobile communication access has expanded rapidly in the region in recent years where the number of mobile cellular subscriptions is about 350 million users with a penetration rate of 97 per 100 people at the end of 2011. This number has increased to 367 million at the end of March 2012 [18].

A recent report by the Arab Advisors Group [19] found that smartphones constitute 8.4% of total cellular handsets in Egypt. The number of smartphone users in Egypt grew from 12.6 million in 2013 to 27.9 million in 2019 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/467747/forecast-of-smartphone-users-in-egypt/>).

An Arab Advisors online survey of Internet users in Egypt found Internet to be the most common source for respondents to access daily and global news, as well as look for job vacancies.

The survey also revealed that the peak time for browsing the Internet for entertainment and personal issues amongst respondents is at night (after 9 PM), which also the peak time for TV is viewing. Knowing this trend, religious groups of all sorts have capitalized on the Internet by sharing their views with the Arab population and the entire world.

This has been done via blogs, video clips, religious websites and articles all placed on the Internet for viewing. Al-Kandari [20] commenting on the expansion of religious media argued that religion and religious figures enjoy positive exposure in the media. Religious figures could use religious media content in arguments with others to defend a religious viewpoint against liberal and secular stances.

According to Al-Kandari [20], the situation in the Arab world was much different before the 1990s where government media dictated the tone of the content of religious broadcasting which consisted of recitations of Quranic scripts and interviews performed on a one-to-one basis with Muslim clerics.

The situation; however, has changed significantly with the expansion of media outlets where many privately owned Islamic television networks endeavor to differentiate themselves by offering talk shows, enticing people to attend the studio and converse interactively with religious clerics [20].

Shahba and Hammam [21] have gone as far as arguing that many religious networks have even been able to attract advertisers because they introduced moderate and eloquent clerics, or retired actors, who transformed religious programming.

Ayatollahy [22] stated that the impact of religious media may be either constructive or destructive. For example, hate messages based on questionable information have been shared urging sides to stand up and act contributing significantly to religious divisions and conflicts. Because the framing of issues by the media influences the perceptions of people in a society [23-26].

The way in which Muslim and other religious media frame the religious debate may contribute to religious intolerance and conflict. Affirming this, Mahan [27] argued that there is a great deal of religion or something that looks like religion found online and in modern media.

The following table includes examples of how the web is being utilized in this religious debate and conflict (**Table 1**):

Table 1: Examples of how the web is being utilized in this religious debate and conflict.

| Headline | Summary | Website |
|---|--|---|
| Egypt's Pope 'Sorry' for Bishop's Koran Comments | The leader of Egypt's Coptic Christians has apologized for "inappropriate" comments by a bishop that cast doubt on the authenticity of some Koran verses. | http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11417460 |
| Coptic Pope 'Very Sorry' for Bishop's Quran Remarks | The leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt has apologized for the "inappropriate" comments made by the church body's second highest-ranking cleric regarding the authenticity of some Quran verses. | http://www.christianpost.com/article/20100927/coptic-pope-very-sorry-for-bishops-quran-remarks/ |
| Egypt's Pope Shenouda Apologizes to Muslims for Comments by a Senior Bishop | The head of the Egyptian Coptic Christians, Pope Shenouda III has expressed, on Sunday, his regret for comments of a senior bishop who cast doubt on some verses in the Quran that have hurt the feelings of the Muslims, saying the love between Copts and Muslims do not allow division between them, especially in the religious aspects. | http://www.afriqueavenir.org/en/2010/09/27/egypt%E2%80%99s-pope-shenouda-apologizes-to-muslims-for-comments-by-a-senior-bishop/ |
| Copts Slam Azhar Over Remark Egypt is Islamic | Egypt's Coptic Christian leader Pope Shenouda III apologized in a television interview Sunday to any Muslims who were offended after his top bishop reportedly disputed the authenticity of some verses of the Quran. | http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/09/26/120414.html |
| Egypt: Pope "Sorry" Over Bishop's Qur'an Comments | Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Christian Pope Shenouda III has apologized over comments made by a Bishop who questioned the authenticity of some Qur'an verses. | http://bikyamasr.com/wordpress/?p=17550 |
| Pope Shenouda III, Egypt Pope, Apologizes Over Top Bishop's Remarks About Islam | Egypt's Coptic Christian leader Pope Shenouda III apologized in a television interview Sunday to any Muslims who were offended after his top bishop reportedly disputed the authenticity of some verses of the Quran. | http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/09/27/pope-shenouda-iii-egypt-p_n_740119.html |
| Pope Shenouda Says He Did Not Apologize for Bishop Comments | In an interview yesterday on al-Nehwar satellite channel, Pope Sehnoda III said he has not "apologized" for comments made by Father Bishoy, secretary of the Holy synod, which questioned the authenticity of certain Quranic verses. | http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/pope-shenouda-says-he-did-not-apologize-bishoy-comments |

As stated above, there is some governmental control over networks hosted by Arab state-owned satellites, where officials can influence content or even stop broadcast of an entire channel.

For example, Egypt has terminated the broadcast of several television channels (<http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2010/10/20/egypt-stops-tv-channels-islamic-trend-seen-a-target/>). A call in Denmark was put out to ban the most influential two Arab based satellite TV stations, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabyia (<http://www.ahram.org.eg/338/2010/11/02/9/46423.aspx>).

Social media

Social media networks have been used in many ways, from connecting with friends and family to advertising products and services. Social media has also been used to bring social issues to the public and call for support: whether for earthquake relief in Haiti or animal rights in the United States. The number of users of social media has reached more than one billion users in 2012 [27].

As of April 2010, two-thirds of Americans used social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace, showing an increase of penetration of about 230 percent; up from a baseline of 20 percent in 2007 [28].

In a study on social network usage per person across 10 countries, the Nielsen Company [29] reported that the average time people spend around the world on social media is approximately five and a half hours a month.

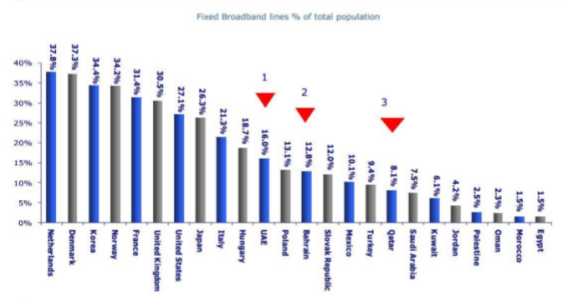
In 2018, approximately 2 billion internet users are using social networks (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>). In the most recently measured period, 77 percent of U.S. Americans had a social media profile (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/273476/percentage-of-us-population-with-a-social-network-profile/>).

The average person will spend more than five years of their lives on social media (<https://www.adweek.com/digital/mediakix-time-spent-social-media-infographic/>). The Arab world has also engaged this social media movement and it is expected that about 100 million regional users will be participating by 2015 [30].

We personally believe the Arab world will surpass this number as the 'Arab Spring' of 2011 has made social media sites, such as Facebook, a meeting place for information and mobilization regarding social and political change (both peaceful and rebellious).

The following section will look at the various social media, assess how they are being used and the impact they have on religious debate and conflict in the Arab world (**Figure 1**).

Fixed broadband Internet: UAE, Bahrain and Qatar lead the broadband adoption in the Arab World



As of June 2010
Source: Arab Advisor Group

Figure 1: Broadband Internet in the Arab World by end of 2008: UAE, Bahrain and Qatar lead the broadband adoption.

Facebook

According to The Nielsen Company [29], Facebook is the number one social- networking website in the world, making its impact significant and far reaching. More than 1 billion of the 1.7 billion people who use Facebook speak a language other than English (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2016/09/29/facebook-translation-new-languages-corsican-fulah-malta/91268284/>). In all, Facebook is now available in 101 languages. More than (<http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>) are outside the US and Canada the number has grown from 75% in the previous year which goes on to show the increased growth in the rest of the world (<https://www.omnicoreagency.com/facebook-statistics/>) [30].

In the Arab region, more than 45 million people use Facebook [31] and the number increased by one million each month from June to December 2011, [16] and has been increasing significantly since the Arab Spring. Egypt alone added more than 600,000 users [30,32].

It is interesting to note that not only young people register for social networking websites in the Middle East. For instance, people over 25 years old comprise approximately 70 percent of Facebook users in the region [32,33]. Facebook has been used aggressively to deal with sensitive issues such as political and religious views. Both Muslims and Christians have defended their religious positions via Facebook, and at times, mobilized attacks on other religions adding wood to the fire of the religious tensions, intolerance and conflict in the region. These social media outlets has made possible more than ever for anyone who has the resources, knowledge and interest to engage in this debate and conflict increasing the number of participants in this conflict. Therefore, social media enabled many who may have felt helpless before to actively participate in this debate and conflict on a much bigger and far reaching scale. For example, recently, a Christian group in Egypt launched a group on Facebook called, "Stop the Islamic Terrorism against Christians in EGYPT & ALL OVER" ([http://](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=237753542895)

www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=237753542895). The group is using Facebook to bring awareness and rally others to their religious cause. A group of Muslims created a group on Facebook in Arabic calling for trial of Pope Shenouda III, the highest religious authority of the Coptic Orthodox Church worldwide (http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=105944159463830&v=app_2392950137\"!/group.php?gid=105944159463830&v=info). To summarize, Facebook has been used to organize demonstrations and mobilize groups of individuals to act on various causes on a much bigger scale that was unthinkable or obtainable in the past. Evans argued that the increasing variety of news sources has reversed the role of the media, contributing to growing cultural fragmentation rather than the unification of nations. This same argument can be made here where the fragmentation of nations has become a major issue. For example, the fragmentation of religious groups in Egypt (where conflicts between Christians and Muslims has significantly increased) and Iraq, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen (where the religious tensions and conflict between the Sunni and the Shaiits Muslims) has increased significantly in the recent years.

YouTube

Another social network being used to communicate to the world is YouTube. It has allowed people to share ideas via words, images, music and any other medium that can be seen or heard. YouTube exceeds 2 billion views per day, and has 72 hours of video uploaded every minute. People now watch 1 billion hours of YouTube per day (<https://techcrunch.com/2017/02/28/people-now-watch-1-billion-hours-of-youtube-per-day/>). YouTube is localized in 43 countries and across 60 languages; YouTube had more than 1 trillion views or around 140 views for every person on the Earth (<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1144149.pdf>) More than two hours of YouTube videos are uploaded in Mena region every minute (<https://www.go-gulf.ae/blog/online-video-consumption-middle-east/>).

Muslims and Christians use this medium for religious gain, whether to explain/ defend their religious views or attack opposing ones. One needs only to spend a few minutes searching YouTube with specific religious key terms to realize the pervasiveness of this medium in religious debates. Some people have gone as far as calling for the killing of those who oppose their religious views arguing that this is what God dictates. YouTube has made it possible for those who may not be able to appear on religious networks by creating a similar platform for them where they can share their message with millions across the world.

Twitter

Twitter has also been used to inform rebellion groups on meeting places for protests or to keep them updated on issues. As of the second quarter of 2018, the micro-blogging service averaged 335 million monthly active users (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/>). Every second, on average, around 6,000 tweets are tweeted on Twitter corresponding to over 350,000

tweets sent per minute, 500 million tweets per day and around 200 billion tweets per year (<http://www.internetlivestats.com/twitter-statistics/>). Today, 70% of Twitter accounts are outside the U.S., and Twitter is now available in 33 languages. (https://blog.twitter.com/marketing/en_us/a/2013/connecting-advertisers-to-twitter-users-around-the-world.html). According to the Washington Post [34], Twitter was probably the most effective social media used to get information from Iran to the outside world regarding the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/discussion/2009/06/17/DI2009061702232.html>). In Egypt, people can report irregularities of their government and women can anonymously report mistreatment via Twitter. Twitter has also been used in these religious conflicts as people twitted of actions there were taking place during some protests in Egypt. For example, when the Christians organized a large protest in Cairo, clashes with the Egyptian military took place where close to 30 were killed. Twitter was used to share information about the event to rally people to either support the military or support the Christians.

Blogs

Another area that has grown significantly in the Arab world is blogging. Of the 37 million blogs on the Internet, it is estimated that almost 40,000 are in Arabic language (<http://www.openarab.net/en/node/366>). Blogging has given the Arab population a tremendous amount of freedom to express opinions, share ideas and reach the outside world with ideas traditionally confined to their close-knit communities. Blogging has also allowed the Arab population to challenge the establishment, including political and religious groups. For example, bloggers in Lebanon played an important role in blocking legislation that would have limited online freedom of expression, and are also serving as watchdogs on the official Arab press or government press. This activity has not come without cost to bloggers, as some of them have been jailed (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6385849.stm>) insulting Islam and government leaders. Blogging has also opened a door for females to express their opinions, which is usually not encouraged in Arab culture. Below are a few of the numerous examples of how women are using blogs (**Table 2**):

Table 2: Examples of how women are using blogs.

| Title | Description | Website |
|--|--|---|
| Bahai Faith in Egypt | Live news feeds. Up-to-date discussion of Baha'i in Egypt | |
| Baheyya: Egypt Analysis and Whimsy | Commentary on Egyptian politics and culture by an Egyptian citizen with a room of her own. | http://baheyya.blogspot.com/ |
| | | http://misrdigital.blogspot.com/ |
| Welcome to my rebellious kingdom | One woman's struggle with cultural and religious constraints | http://arablady.blogspot.com/ |
| Tunis Targets Pro-Freedom Arab Blogger | News Feed | http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1607838/posts |
| The Angry Arab News Service | A source on politics, war, the Middle East, Arabic poetry, and art. | http://angryarab.blogspot.com/2010/11/bahraini-blogger-ali-abdelemam.html |

The emergence of these new social media tools has obviously played a large role in evolution of the world's information flow. It is important to state that this not only affects the flow of information within specific areas, but also between areas. For example, it is now possible for Arabs in the Arab region to communicate and form online communities with Arabs outside of the traditional region. Governments could view this as a threat to issues such as religious opposition and revolutions.

The Forbidden Fruit Theory

The forbidden fruit theory posits that warning labels will increase interest in violent programs [35]. This theory applies to other areas where upon labeling something as forbidden, human tendency and desire to acquire it increases. We apply this theory, along with other theories that will be discussed below, to the current media situation in the Arab world. We

propose that because religious debate has been forbidden in this region, people's desire to engage in it is has enhanced.

A second theory that will be employed to understand this phenomenon is the availability heuristic theory. This theory contains the assumption that the more available some piece of information is to memory, the more frequently we must have encountered it in the past [36]. Therefore, the piece of information must be true and is used to solve problems and answer questions when needed. While this is partially accurate, where the frequency of experiences does affect its availability to memory, availability heuristics is not the only factor. Schwartz [36] argues that vividness also impacts memory in a significant way. For example, watching a TV interview is much more powerful than reading a transcript because it is a more vivid experience: likely making it more available for memory recall.

This paper builds on two theories to illustrate the impact of technology-enabled mass media on Arab society and particularly the religious aspect of the society. Before free-to-air networks were introduced to the region, religious views were often discussed in more private and controlled settings (i.e. the home). Therefore, participants in any specific religious conversation were limited in number. The cultural implication for Arab society, and particularly countries such as Egypt that host multiple religious groups, is that religious debates between different faiths could cultivate hard feelings and even violence due to sensitivity of topic and emotional and psychological baggage that accompanies it. It is probably safe to say that the most influential cultural value in this region is religion as Islam is considered a complete way of life and viewed to provide guidance to Muslims in all aspects [37,38]. The complexities of religious debate have made it a forbidden fruit that many desire but know they should not touch as these debates and conflicts were kept out of the media [20]. According to the forbidden fruit theory, the taboo nature of religious debates increases people's desire to engage in them.

Arab states were able to manage these religious debates (or conflicts) relatively well in the past through various techniques. The scale of such debates was limited by strict government restrictions on the time and topics discussed in national media outlets, as well as outside influences in various media forms. For example, Saudi Arabia did not allow non-Islamic books to enter the kingdom and Egypt provided very little mass media broadcast time for religious groups. The impact of this may be more easily understood using the availability heuristic theory. Arab individuals are now, more than ever, exposed to religious debates due to the number of free-to-air networks focused on issues of faith: as will be illustrated in the latter sections of this paper. Therefore, religious debates and ideas have moved front-and-center in the Arab world and this creates a significant implication that needs to be addressed.

Homophily and Social Presence Theory

Homophily and social presence theory may be useful theories to define the evolution of Arab communication in response to technological advances. Homophily refers to the sociological phenomenon that people tend to form stronger social ties with those more similar to themselves in characteristics such as gender, race, religion and values [39]. Shared values, in particular, can create very strong ties within a group of individuals.

Advances in video conferencing and multimedia delivered via the Internet have come a long way, making dynamic communication in on-line social networks not only possible, but commonplace. Social presence theory posits that the degree to which participants engage in communication, depends largely upon the degree of social presence or sense of "being there" the participants have. According to this theory, face-to-face interactions have very high levels of social presence, while written forms of communication, like email,

tend to engage the participants less in the communication process.

Social presence theory [40] posits that the degree of richness of a social interaction largely depends on the communication channel used, with face-to-face interaction as the richest form of interaction. When applied to computer-mediated communication, social presence theory asserts that more interactive forms of communication provide a greater sense of social presence, and a richer experience.

In the context of the Arab world, these two theories relate very closely to create a context for societal change. If people form stronger connections with those that share their values (homophily), then it stands to reason that the advent of rich interaction facilitated by the Internet (video sharing, multimedia, etc.) provides individuals in the Arab world opportunities to form strong connections with a globally dispersed group of people sharing their closely held beliefs.

Before Internet and satellite technology evolved into its current state, an individual in the Arab world likely had a limited social circle of family and friends. In these collectivist societies, social acceptance was based on conformity with prevailing values in that social circle. Dissenting ideas and opinions were not given a strong reception and finding like-minded individuals was difficult, if not impossible. New media outlets have made it possible for religious groups to connect across cities, countries, and regions. For example, a Shaiit Muslim in Egypt who may only be one of only 1% of the Egyptian population has found renewed strength in numbers by being able to connect with Shaiit Muslims across the world. While in the past this individual may have been discouraged to engage in a religious debate or conflict, media expansion has changed this for him. This is true for many other religious groups.

Implications and Conclusion

There is little doubt that this new expansion in mass media in the Arab world is a step forward, bringing several benefits to the region and the world. In the past, mass media was typically controlled by the state: only content deemed appropriate by government was shared with the public and the world. The availability of social media has provided the Arab public with the tools necessary to share various kinds of content. These new media channels have altered how free speech is viewed and practiced in the region. The Arab population's freedom of speech is no longer limited to discussions with friends and close contacts in homes, as this new media has opened the entire world to them. However, Ayatollahy [22] argues that religious media expansion can be used either positively or negatively. This paper has attempted to shed light on how media expansion has been used negatively to contribute to religious intolerance, division and conflict.

The current media outlets have encouraged the Arab population to think about and engage in various issues and share their point-of-view with others worldwide. The new media outlets have made available a wealth of information not available in the past; thus, providing new tools to evaluate and

perceive ideas. Moreover, the world has benefited from social media through access to a wealth of information about the Arab world and the events shaping it. In the past, information about the region was limited to a few books written mainly by Westerners who made a great effort to learn about understand its culture and characteristics [41]. This new mass media offers the world a window to ideas, images, and videos shared by Arabs who desire for the world to know more about them and their lifestyle.

These new media outlets have fueled the movement for democracy in the Arab region. The recent fall of the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan governments are great example of what mass media can achieve. The movement was initiated by the story and images of a Tunisian man who burned himself to protest the actions of the government (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/dec/28/tunisia-ben-ali>). The story was shared over various social media outlets creating a national and global outcry for regime change. The Egyptian population mobilized a similar movement via Internet. According to BBC News (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12272836>), Egypt activists begin Tunisia-inspired 'day of revolt' to be held on January 25, 2011. Seeing the call online, thousands of people turned out to protest the current situation. The Egyptian protests eventually forced an end to the 30-year rule of President Hosni Mubarak.

These new mass media outlets, while providing a platform to display the intellect of the region, also provide a conduit for those who advocate (and propagate) damaging ideas with little societal value. Unfortunately, abusive social media practices by individuals on the fringe of society are commonplace. For example, consider the horrific images posted on YouTube capturing the beheading of people to promote ideologies and recruit others to join radical movements. This is not an attempt to blame media outlets, particularly the ones that are hard to control such as Facebook, YouTube, etc., but simply state the current landscape of our media's evolution.

Evans argued that most, if not all, of the countries in the Middle East face a growing divide between religious and secular segments of society. Religious tensions between Christians and Muslims still lead to violence in states in Africa, Asia and between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East.

Consider the use of social media to call for the release of two Christian women in Egypt believed to have converted to Islam. Reports indicated that the church was preventing this conversion by keeping them detained at a secure location. While the Egyptian government denied this claim, the supporters of the cause spread far beyond the borders of Egypt. Later, the Egyptian church received a warning from al Qaeda warning retribution if the women were not released. Six weeks later, an Egyptian church was bombed resulting in the killing of many people [42]. This illustrates how various religious groups have misused social media outlets for promotion of causes and the spread of religious intolerance, division and conflict.

Previously, the Christian population has not been able to freely express itself in the region regarding their religious beliefs due to local pressures. Today, they are able to reach the Arab region via satellite networks and other media outlets broadcasted from abroad. This new freedom has, at times, been misused as Christian networks have employed approaches considered offensive to Muslims: leading to contempt of the Christian population. The availability of media has made it possible for these groups within and outside Egypt to criticize Islam and Islamic teachings leading to increased religious conflicts and intolerance in the region. While healthy debates should be encouraged as it contributes to human development and knowledge and understanding, the religious debate in the Arab region has led mostly to an increased violence and conflict. Moreover, new media outlets in the Arab world have led to a significant division even within similar religious groups. This division is not limited to Christians and Muslims, but also between groups such as the Sunni and Shiite Muslim. This division has populated all kinds of media in recent months in the Arab world and particularly in Egypt. While religious debate is acceptable, the nature of the religious debate currently taking place via media outlets (and particularly satellite networks) is very damaging to Arab society.

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