



The Socialisation of Communication in the Middle East.

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Twitter is as much a buzz word in the Middle East as it has been in the rest of the world over the past year. It is not uncommon for news of fires, collapsed buildings and plane crashes to break first on the microblogging service and even the recent presidential elections in Iran came with the 'Powered by Twitter' tag. In a region where the mainstream media is still in a state of evolution, social media has finally caught the public's attention.

A year ago, 'digital communications' meant securing coverage on online news portals such as AME Info, ArabianBusiness.com, Maktoob Business and Zawya, all of which have grown massively in reach and influence. This changed towards the end of 2008 when Twitter was made accessible in the UAE via the internet after being blocked by the country's internet service providers, triggering a tipping point of sorts.

After the first Dubai Twestival, which was covered extensively by the United Arab Emirates' mainstream media, Twitter became *über-cool* and along with it, social media. Throughout the Middle East, hotels, restaurants, retailers, airlines, consumer technology companies, government entities and even some political candidates in Lebanon rushed to set up profiles on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Their ubiquitous logos now stand shoulder-to-shoulder with other social bookmarking options on most English online news portals.

It is important to note here that a significant percentage of the region's audiences, especially the youth, are no strangers to online media. The region's netizens have long had a choice of using international sites or home-grown channels like Shoof, Maktoob and Ikbis. A 2008 poll of Arab youth by regional research company Maktoob revealed that 65 per cent regard the internet as their primary source of information, while 84 per cent say they base their buying decisions on information they see online. In making the mainstream media sit up and take notice, social media has earned a spot in the Middle East's popular culture.

Unsurprisingly, media companies and entrepreneurs in the region have been quick to adapt and evolve in line with the fast-changing media environment. On a smaller scale, niche social networks catering for mothers, travellers, communications professionals, businesspeople and ethnic groups have sprouted up all over the Middle East's digital landscape.

The surest sign of the growing maturity of the Middle East's digital media space came from regional media conglomerates such as the Abu Dhabi Media Company (ADMC), which began to look at investing heavily in digital media. This year alone ADMC launched a joint venture with a leading Massive Multi-Player Online Game (MMOG) developer and a football portal and invested in VEVO, a new premium music video and entertainment service powered by YouTube.

Even Facebook launched its Arabic offering earlier this year in the hope of capitalizing on the market's potential. And why not? There are 3.1 million Facebook users in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) area, of which almost a third use the site in Arabic. Add the Levant and North Africa to the equation and you're looking at a market of 8.4 million users.

Invariably, marketing and communications consultancies have joined the scramble to carve out niches for themselves, while looking at ways to develop and monetise new services. Those that had already brought digital communications professionals onboard and developed a business plan early on were primed to capitalize on the latest trend. Others are still feeling their way along but are learning quickly.

Suddenly, words such as 'dialogue', 'conversation', 'advocacy' and 'community' have found their way into communications plans and new business presentations, a refreshing change for a market where a large amount of communicating revolves around news releases and press conferences.

Challenges still remain in terms of securing client buy-in, not just from a budgetary point of view but because many have concerns that arise from a perception of surrendering control to the online community. Measurement is the other big challenge in a region that relies quite heavily on advertising value equivalents. Accurately demonstrating return on investment is near impossible.

However, we can only be optimistic about the future as social media continues its move into the Middle East's mainstream and the communications industry rides the wave.