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Analytical Study about the Repercussions of the Communication Crises Management in the Middle East: Navigation in Uncharted Water

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Abstract

This research critically analyzes the impact of crisis communication on the democratization process in MENA, while considering the caveats and the levels of accessibility and different motivations affecting the use of digital democracy and the relevant implications on the publics. In the current lack of contextualization and insight of MENA, it is crucial to make sense of the intervening variables and revisit the levels of freedom of expression, social egalitarianism, secularism and internationalism. The capstone argument is the correlation between the online engagement and the offline participation, especially in relation to the rapid growth of social movements and media effects in the region. The political fluidity, social chaos and economic disparity in MENA since 2010 is not only an illustrative case for understanding the synergy between ICT and change, but also showcases the complexity of using and implementing crisis management within the evolving new politics in the region. Such perplexity requires nouvelle-way of thinking about communication for development, in the light of the peculiarities of different localities. As such, the research aims to evaluation the current PR and crisis management in MENA, by unpacking the mechanisms behind the perception and ideological understanding of the contemporary role of technology in this rapidly evolving digital media landscape.

Introduction:

In the last six years, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been going true case of crisis management as a result of volatile political and cultural crisis. The intensity of the situation is magnified by the failing to make progress in attaining freedom and obvious delinquency in taking any steps towards solutions of such crisis dilemma that is marked by an alarming phenomenon of fragmented social fabric that escaped violence and instigated acute political national identity and alienated culture of enclaved ghettoes.

For example, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) viewed the rise of political Islam, and especially the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Salafi groups all over the region in very skeptical sense of fear and suspicion. In the suppressive regimes, activists are usually looked at through the lens of anarchism that attempt to escalate the destabilization of the region.

All of these aspects have influenced the potential practice of problem solving scenarios and put the culture in reverse, leading to a situation where they are fighting battles in inquisition courts. In this confusing and fluid state of affairs, many of the issues relating to an "authentic" Arab identity are being questioned, particularly the view that a critical mass of civil society that may be legitimately sacrificed in the name of national unity and security.

The Middle East region is certainly one of the troubled regions that are full of many unresolved matters and issues. The term is by itself, a source of endless disagreements about its parameters, cultures and geopolitics that might have resulted from its geographic definition. For example, most of the western literature prior to the World War I used three different labels for the same geographic area that was located south and east of Europe and Russia: First, the "Near East" to describe the geographical area occupied by the Ottoman Empire; second, the "Far East" to refer to the geographical area of China and third is the "Middle East" to indicate the geographical area that is located between Near and Far East (al-Dgama, 1996).

The specific section of the Middle East and Africa (MENA) has experienced an unprecedented situation of uncharted waters between agency and structure. But it is rarely the case to find anyone requisitioning the narrative of digital democracy as a 'natural' domain for anti-hegemonic politics. On the other hand, the unproblematic framing of politics fails to account for the ways that hegemonic institutions and oppressive regimes marshal new media for their own ends.

The MENA region suffers from unfairly distribution of wealth; sudden escalation of inter-group tension and the collapse of central authority (Costy & Gilbert 1998: 12). In addition, it suffers from many caveats;namely, excessive dire economic conditions, political anarchism and religious conflict have become

entrenched in the daily lives of such dysfunctional society that infuriated contestations of identity crisis and the reiteration of political Islam.

In this setting, minorities have been subject to a new kind of holocaust that often served as the official representatives of the 'enemy' that resonated through daily discrimination, scrutiny and punishment against them. Unsurprisingly, the communication space is often hampered with the prevalence of utilizing 'oppositional metaphors' ('us' vs. 'them') linked to internal and external issues or 'threats' facing the nation (Jager & Link 1993; Van Dijk 1997). Political PR-ization has labelled any opposition as the ungrateful criminals that are considered as serious threats to national security and social well-being of realizing the 'Ummah' (The religious State).

Since 2011, the misery of this troubled region has been worsened with the increase of poverty, illiteracy and illnesses. Yet robust digital communication has contradicted with the dim reality that spans over the impoverished and the affluent neighborhoods. Besides, internet penetration rates across the region continue to grow exponentially, while governments in panic acknowledge this growth with hasty policies and regulations.

Crisis management has been redefined with the increasing new digital platforms that encroached into the lives in ways unimaginable just ten years abided the desperate publics that by far exceeded governments' direct control and broke the iceberg of power and hegemony, by opening up new politics dimensions, and scope enlarge spaces for dissent, activism and emancipation.

This research aims to offer critical reassessment of the many complex challenges, foreign lens used in dealing with its potentials. This is particularly important in the absence of indigenous knowledge and contextualization that led to many problems of misunderstanding, superficiality of reading data and social distance.

Conceptual Framework and Crisis Management Research in MENA

In this section, the contextual analysis emphasizes the in-crisis situations, rather than incidents, emergencies or disasters. The aim here is to provide a fresh local perspective and discussion regarding how communication could have been utilized during the ongoing in-crisis situation. Scholars argue that [t]he critical component in crisis management is communication (Coombs, 2012, p.17). However, the vague concept of communication is by itself a major problem that limits effective functioning in the in-crisis situation (International Wildland Fire Summit, 2003; Reid & Van Niekerk, 2008, p. 246).

In these crossing lines that MENA nations are subject to, it is imperative to consider broader societal perspective through the lens of transgression, by explaining the cause and effect of the crises (Fediuk et al., 2010). Applying insights of

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) on a macro level of crisis, by proposed to refer to the concept of performance history of this region, which links the crisis history and prior reputation to the reputational threat of a crisis that is known as "the velcro effect" in SCCT (Coombs & Holladay, 2009).

It is thus crucial to examine the crisis in MENA on three levels: micro, meso and macro. All three levels are dependent upon each other in order to deliver effective and efficient media use for crisis communications (Thiessen & Ingenhoff, 2010). It is thus relevant to introduce the KAD model (Dowthwaite, 2011), which offers an understanding of the big picture when dealing with media, especially social media, for crisis communications. By that, I aim to contribute to crisis communication theory, by examining crisis response strategies from a communication-centered perspective (Kamp, 2014). In my view, the crises in MENA attest how the unmatched government response strategies in these countries have stipulated and harden the implications of the ongoing crisis. This assessment of organization-centric models may be useful in handling crises within the MENA region.

One could argue that the crisis communication in MENA has resulted from the mismanagement of the resources, capacity building and public spheres that failed to maintain the minimum levels of having social contracts between the governments and the publics. This suggests that the popular uprisings are not coincidental and that they have unleashed hidden issues that have existed for decades. The unresolved problems, discrepancies and challenges in MENA have reinforced the effects of the so-called modifiers and eventually lead to a Velcro effect further affecting the reputation of those governments that only favored and supported a culture of fear (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). But liability for the present crisis is the responsibility of citizens who have been normalized and tamed into silence on one hand, and the governments' focus on sustaining power and authority, while practicing all sorts of corruption, mismanagement of the states and serving the hegemonic powers of elite or military.

Such conceptual framework explains how the volatile situation and hostility in MENA has given way to political Islam, increasing violence and loss of identity. Public anger has been on the rise, hazards and uncertainty cause a new escalation with every new incident that further tarnished the image, and enhances a likely domino effect of the crisis.

There is continuous failure to connect ideas and concepts developed about any scholarly work about the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Reasons might be the result of the strong western influences and also low indigenous theoretical features (Ayish, 1998). Besides, "managerial bias" and the lack of context and understanding of the region (Waymer & Heath, 2007), are two main hurdles in this

understanding. However, such absence of local knowledge only serves to escalate some of the external crises and internal conflicts in the region (Musallam, 2004).

Research on crisis in Egypt run the gamut—from studies that opine that political figures like Gamal Abd El-Nasser have always exploited the average citizens for their own political gains, that Egyptians no longer trust the military or political Islam, to others that reframe the intersection of the romantic idealism of Arab nationalism and the sense of discontent and betrayal from the colonizer and the patron state (Bahgat & Henry, 2014). Yet, others focus on "crisis informatics" or emergency information management during the political demonstrations and protests in Iran, Tunisia and Egypt in June 2009, December 2010, and January 2011 respectively. Findings indicated that twitter filled a unique technology and communication gap at least partially. However, it recommends that social media and crisis research must be placed in the larger context of social media use in conditions of crisis (Kavanaugh et al,2011).

Another study that attempted to understand the crisis communication of Egyptian workers movements (The Solidarity Center, 2010), revealed that the Egyptian government maintained an iron grip on power, harshly punished dissent, and played a central role in a system that keeps workers powerless and poor.

A study of tourists' perspectives before and after visiting Egypt following the Egyptian Revolution revealed that their perception of risk was affected by media and marketing communication messages (Amara, El Samadicy, & Ragheb,2012). Another study shows that young Egyptians, frustrated with the status quo are engaged in online activism through social media, to get their message across (Awad & Zayed, 2011).

These varied studies confirm that little is known about the cultural challenges to the core values of many Egyptians (Enander, Lajksjo, & Tedfeldt, 2010). Clearly, cultural experience is related to social time and space on an individual level, but one can also distinguish certain collective cultural experiences related to certain crisis and risk discourses (Harro-Loit, Vihalemm, & Ugur, 2012).

The research identified recurrent narratives of suspicion and disbelief that hinder any objective analysis, by calling digital evidence into question. But such narratives of suspicion are highly mobile, and are employed by varying cyber communities with multiple political aims and effects without shaping or influencing the mainstream media. Even within the elite circles, many activists proposed that new media only reaffirmed and strengthened the Patron states' power, militancy and violent patriotism in MENA; while in other situations it challenged and destabilized the states' hegemonic truth claims and boosted horizontal powers and voices through social movements. However, the arguments remain elitist, fragmented, unrepresentative and contradictory in many issues.

Against this backdrop, the research urges the academy to move away from typical western literature, stereotypes and profiling because we cannot suspect the political pitfalls not withstanding without rethinking given facts as a productive interpretive stance within the evolving regional landscape of new media and new politics. However, the indigenous works presented bids from the region remain inadequate in identifying and explaining the forces, groups, ideas, institutions and dynamics. Such gap is further driven by both the pervasive nationalist revolutions, political upheavals in MENA, which makes its sources and ramifications broader and run deeper than nationalism and its discontent.

Most of the studies lack a holistic approach of MENA that considers cultural diversity, political immaturity, dire economic conditions, and technological failures. Such blind spots of MENA, the lack of understanding of the cultural norms and ways of thinking, and the peculiarities of its communication circles, as well as political logic acerbated the cultural and political crisis and among different actors involved.

This consistency in overlooking the public's ability (or lack thereof) to access political information from an array of media sources over time (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003), has disregarded reluctance of many of the political regimes in MENA to allow media platforms to pursue informational plurality that such a condition actually manifests (Barber, 2003).

Normalizing crisis is another challenge in this regard, as many of the regional publics have become accustomed to losing their privacy under police states that continuous make them subject to surveillance. For example, the extensive phone-tapping programs of the regional Ministries of Communications taught people to code their language, practice self-censorship, and evade phone conversations altogether to circumvent surveillance. But surveillance in the digital age has entered entirely new horizons (Herrea, 2015).

As such, this research can be considered as an experiential research in making sense of the impact studies of the Middle East should be based on local knowledge, and should refrain from being bipolar in viewing facts between "optimistic" versus "pessimistic" hypotheses in deductive forms of investigation. As such, the research calls for more profound inductive approaches that use comparative case studies to thoroughly chart the long-term processes of politics, media and culture, while mapping the media, power and society intricate in any given time and space.

But the change of mind-set requires similar shift in the narrow focus on discussions of the uses and pitfalls of communication technologies during critical moments, uncertainties and hazards of risk societies. The approach considers the transnational political economy of media and political infrastructure, which has

had long-term and far-reaching consequences on the media effects in the region (Hussain & Jawaid, 2015).

The core discussion of this research is to look at the roles and impacts of technology, and media effects on one hand, political dynamics and cultural struggle on the other hand, especially in times of crisis by comparing the expectations and performance, as well as the dynamics involved. To serve this goal, the research aims to delve under skin and provide in-depth lens to the collateral roles played by military operations, politics, foreign policy, economics, society, and culture.

Understanding New Politics in MENA

In this section, the research aims to make sense of the current political calamity that have been escalated after the 2011 political upheavals, usually referred to in the western media as the 'Arab Spring' The region remains in continuous dilemma to balance the challenges of "western" and "otherness" culture and modernization with traditional and religious values that are deep rooted and cause stagnation. Most of previous attempts in drawing an overview of MENA followed two routes: First, it analyzed pressing theoretical dilemmas across historical time and regional space, while focusing on the thematic substance of issues such as development and democracy (Ibrahim & Hopkins, 1997). Second, it focused on parsing out details of every country on a case-by-case basis dealing with MENA in a very episodic framework that makes it unclear and with no societal insights of the crisis vis-à-vis national security and human security (Gasiorowski 2013).

The prevailing absence of local knowledge has not only delayed any problem solving approaches, but also intensified crises and internal conflicts in the region (Musallam, 2004). The regional preoccupation with ideational and identity concerning pan-Arabism and Islam has worsened the 'complex realism' that portrays the state powers as reliant on external and structural sources of support superpower military protection and often the export market for petrochemicals to maintain hegemony (Ehteshami, 2015).

It has become evident that many non-Arab scholars failed to make connections between the particular ideas and concepts that remain entrapped in Euro-centric tones and standardizations, though each country has its own sets of issues and reasons for social unrest to continue.

On a different note, the commonalities of the region stress that civic engagement is subject to too many hurdles and the rhetorical commitment to democracy and freedom often serves the personal priorities of the chosen few at

the expense of the "all". Civil unrest and the rise of *Islamic State* (IS) "Daesh" have continued to add more turmoil and added to the crisis. Yemen agitations have become more complicated because of the dominance of different tribes and factions in the region including the "Howthieens" who took control of Sanaa, the capital in early 2015

According to the *Marsh-Maplecroft Political Risk Map* (2010), nine of MENA countries are categorized as "extreme" and "high" risk societies increased from (32 percent) in 2012 to (36 percent) in 2014. For example, Libya, Tunisia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Egypt were among the (20) countries with the biggest gap between the level of social gains and political freedoms in 2010, which indicated publics' frustration with the failure of the political class to either reform sufficiently quickly or address corruption and growing youth unemployment, or to address continued abuses by the security forces.

The MENA region has experienced deterioration in poor human development indicators of lowest personal income, decline in productivity, poor scientific research, decrease school enrollment, high illiteracy, and lag health conditions behind comparable nations. For example, the literacy rates are generally very low that range from a low of (40 percent) in Mauritania and Iraq to (80 percent) in most of the Gulf States, and into the (90 percent) in Jordan.

MENA also has one of the world's highest youth unemployment rate, where one in four young people are out of work. For example, Tunisia youth unemployment rate is (3 percent); in Egypt it is (34 percent). Unemployment rates for female youth are (50 percent) higher on average than for males (Isaacs, 2012).

The social, communication and public debates reflected flagrant gap between the rhetoric of liberty and the reality of double-standard policies, as well as the lack of credibility and debilitates the will for profound democratic progress. There are four main concerns: The first is the marginal endorsement of freedom of expression, while ignoring basic human needs and rights. The second is the superficial approach to freedom and democracy, which results in the marginalization of the interests of the majority to preserve the ruling minority's interests. The third problem is the governments' subjugation to major regional issues to maintain a solid control over the publics. And the fourth problem is the simplistic analysis of multifaceted complexities that to landslide public's attention from main challenges.

In the lack of states' vision and crisis management mechanism, many of these challenges are dealt with in isolation, or separated from the broader developments in the region. The pressing daily needs have disregarded the long term matters to deal with the crisis of political authority, the failure of economic development and new genres of mobilization and activism, especially communication technology and youth social movements.

In many settings, the role of communication in crisis management has become inconsistent and with many vulnerable spots and unjustifiable fluctuations. Since 2010, new emerging ideas has surfaced, 'competitive symbiosis' between ICT and political progress in often used celebration of technology (liberation tools) that needs to be included in the conceptual framework for grasping the current media landscape and patterns of communication. Though, there is indeed a complexity of dealing with an illuminative and blurry dimension of traditional politics and right-wing scales, social movements and civil society stack-holders perceive ICT as a new refuge to attain democracy and empowerment (Trénel, 2009).

But again ICT is incapable on its own to transform any society, which counter argues the international narrative of "facebook revoltuion" and "savvy young Egyptians." It is therefore a catalyst, not a cause. Malcolm Gladwell described the "weak ties," as the kind of ties that individuals share via social media, as opposed to strong ties that relate to personal relationships

It is thus implied that the collective marginalization of research that is based on indigenous knowledge, not to mention the lack of academic freedom hindered rigorous research, in particular within the pervading culture of censorship in the academy to avoid losing their positions, or being expelled from host countries. Besides, language is a barrier that makes many Arabic-speaking researchers do not research or publish in English. Such incompetencies leave the non-Arab and English-language academics to fill the void. In many Arab countries, most of the academic and professional publications are written in Arabic without English translators. In addition, there is a general lack of transparency in all areas that makes it difficult to obtain source materials and other specific information, whether in Arabic or English (Duffy, 2014).

The State of Freedom of Expression and Human Rights in MENA

Though the topic freedom of expression is a buzzword and many international organizations like UNESCO give priority to journalists' safety as top priority, but it remains an international matter that is rawly localized on the grounds. The reasons might be related to the amount of prevailing freedom in any given country is determined by the type of political government (democratic or authoritarian), and the level of its national economy (Nam, 2012). But the impact of any legislation in that regard is highly idiographic and depends upon the history, social and political contexts of any country (Darch & Underwood, 2010). This makes cognizance consistently taken of the extent to which the relationship between political authorities and media dynamics adversely affect the realization of freedom (Youm, 2008).

Human dignity is not on the official agenda in MENA, and journalists face tremendous challenges covering human rights related stories, often facing death threats, imprisonment, and threats of expulsion, blackmail, offers of bribes and more on a daily basis. Many communication experts and related fields like journalists face occupational hazards; including scrutiny, debate, and mobilizations spearheaded from outside of the region. Censorship and the gatekeeping processes are implemented through technical filtering, laws and regulations, surveillance and monitoring, physical restrictions, and extra-legal harassment and arrests. As stated by a Jordanian journalist, who requested anonymity for this story: "Speaking truth to power is the ethical responsibility of every journalist,"(OHCHR, 2014).

The communication platforms in the region is most heavily censored regions with its repressive legal regimes that jailed a great number of bloggers, cartoonists and cyber-dissidents. There is an increasingly pronounced promulgation of legislation governing the rights of Internet users in the region, which urged *The International Federation of Journalists* to call for a radical overhaul of media laws in April 2009. The laws affect digital rights both directly, through specific mention of online channels in penal codes and press and publications and media laws, as well as indirectly, in anti-terrorism and anti-cybercrime laws. Political authorities intentionally use vaguely worded laws criminalizing incitement, defamation and rumor-mongering can be used to threaten journalists. In addition, these laws are backed by a state of emergency which remained in force almost continuously over five decades. Freedom of speech is thus greatly curtailed, and human rights, NGOs and journalists operate under danger of arrests and different types of law suits.

In the meantime, authorities had extensive powers to suspend basic liberties: arbitrary detention, military trials for civilians, censorship and bans on protest. In contrast to all standardized norms and values of ethics and human rights, these unlawful laws are often formulated without any input from technical experts, the private sector, or civil society and are rapidly pushed through without even being released in draft or debated. Media monitor reports that the autocratic legislation precipitated an increase in the detention and prosecution of Internet users for exercising their rights to free speech, assembly, and privacy (Najem et al., 2014).

Many countries in the region use similar restrictive laws to regulate online publishing and traditional journalism. For example, censorship of online media and print journalism in Bahrain is exerted using the *2002 Press Law* (Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, 2007). Kuwait's *2006 Press Law* allows imprisonment of journalists for making references to Islam that are deemed insulting,15 or for articles seen as "against national interests" (BBC News, 2009.). *Oman's 1984 Press and Publication Law* authorizes the government to censor publications deemed politically, culturally, or sexually offensive (Bahrain Center for Human Rights, 2008). *Syria's 2001 Press Law* sets out sweeping controls over publications printed in

Syria (Freedom House, 2008). And journalists in Tunisia have been prosecuted by Tunisia's press code which bans offending the president, disturbing order, and publishing what the government perceives as false news (Mhenni, 2008). *Yemen's 1990 Press and Publications Law* subjects' publications and broadcast media to broad prohibitions and harsh penalties (Yemen News Agency, 2008). The press law in Morocco has been used to suppress outspoken online writers (Reporters without Border, 2008).

In some specific cases, authorities use penal codes to suppress journalists and online writers as in the Yemeni cases, where the Ministry of Information declared in April 2008 that the penal code entails the government to prosecute writers who publish on the Internet content that might incite hatred," or "harm national interests." In another case, Syria's penal code even criminalizes spreading news abroad.

Double standards is another challenge in that regard, because the Bahraini government implemented new amendments (May 2008) to the 2002 Press Law that eliminate prison sentences for journalists and prior censorship on publications, but journalists can still be charged and jailed using the penal code and anti-terrorism law!

According to the *Pew Research Centre* (2012), fourteen countries in MENA criminalize blasphemy, while twelve countries make apostasy, leaving Islam, is an offense. Many of the nations; including Iran and Syria have security agents listen in to private conversations on the street, or in the market, and use reports from informers who shop their neighbors for badmouthing the regime.

In this hostile setting, the *Arab League* has taken the unprecedented step of publicly rebuking two of its members (Libya and Syria) on human rights grounds and even organizing human rights observer mission. Such new response is in accordance with the dabbling in new under-the-radar human rights processes, such as a periodic reporting for signatories of the *Arab Charter of Human Rights*, an experiment for which Jordan and Algeria were slated to go first (Mokhtari, 2012). Nevertheless, arrest and detention of online activists is still on the rise since 2013 and pressure is exercised on independent news websites with dozens of citizen journalists attacked while reporting on conflict in Syria and anti-government protests in Egypt, & Turkey.

Table 1: The State of Internet Freedom in MENA

MENA	2013	2014	
Bahrain	72	74	
Egypt	60	60	▷
Jordan	46	48	▽
Iran	91	89	△
Lebanon	45	48	▽
Morocco	42	44	▽
KSA	70	73	▽
Syria	85	88	▽
Tunisia	41	39	△
UAE	66	67	▽

Table (1) emphasizes the decline of the online freedom in MENA. According to *the Freedom House Reports* (2013&2014), ICT has been manipulated by the governments to maintain their grip over freedom and expand government surveillance capabilities. Egypt maintained its (position as #60), while Iran and Tunisia have relatively improved only between May 2013 and May 2014.

It is no doubt that almost all nations in the region have aimed to improve their communication platforms, with reluctance to include such indicator in issues of crisis management, and reconnecting or even building the broken social contract through social marketing. Hence, IT and new communication tools arrived in MENA with a vengeance that have harmed more than helped in some ways! For example, Political PR-ization and political communication added tension that disseminated incessant narratives of conflict, destruction, and hatred. Besides, the new horizons of digitization have been mainly utilized by radical religious affiliations and associations, by promoting religious fundamentalisms (Semati, 2011). And the political authorities aimed to limit this new networked public

spheres, by restrictive practices and identifying new media activists and punishing them to set example to other pretenders (Kuttab, 2013).

In the context of conservative societies, some still argue until today that media effects of ICT disrupted conservative societies and caused political asymmetric power constellations. This has labeled many online activists as betrayals to their local identity and cultures to reproduce a sort of 'neo-orientalist' tendency in the interpretations of any political activity (Lynch, 2014). In addition, internet and the rest of the technological prophesies are resisted with the pretext that they give access to illicit topics of freedom, human rights and transparency jeopardized the traditional central power of states and shift the emphasis to the individuals.

Considering Egypt's geopolitical position, historical heritage, human resources and cultural capital has been first embraced with big success, yet explains the severity and brutalities of the autocratic government to block its further development and hamper its potentials. In 2004, there was a spark of cyber-activism in Egypt, which emphasized the hopes to establish cyber-civil society and virtual replacement of governments' hegemony (Khondker, 2011). But since 2005, there was an escalation of anti freedom strategies by the government to silence, suspend and demolish any serious steps towards more dynamic publics spheres, by arresting of online activists in many countries; including Egypt, Libya and Iraq. However, these arrests were only made possible through the use of US SmartFilter, which enabled governments to monitor internet usage (Hofheinz, 2007).

In this complex reality of radical religion, deterioration in human rights and desperate publics, it is quite rational to find the regional crisis is only becoming more intense and with devastating impact on the average laymen. Such bleak reality is characterized by almost any totaling the world's worst region for freedom of expression. *Reporters Without Borders*, puts war-torn Syria (177th) out of (180) countries on its latest annual ranking, in 2014. Iran is (173rd), Sudan (172nd), Yemen (167th), Saudi Arabia (164th) that makes it the highest any of the region's countries make it is 91st, with Kuwait, which has a democracy of sorts (The Economist, 2015).

Crisis Management & Communication Landscape in MENA

To start with, it is impossible to look into this matter without referring to its mass media, especially that it is an orality society (Armbrust, 2012). Media is the most important source of information about politics and society, as well as the primary resource for public knowledge (Mazzoleni, 2008). Although the region is endowed with considerable natural resources and educated elite, according to

'Maslow hierarchy of needs,' the priority is brining food to the table not looking for establishing and maintaining political and media liberalization remains inconsistent. Such discrepancy of popular needs versus societal needs , hinders the unlimited potential to translate its goals into an effective catalyst for reform (Calfano & Sahileh, 2008).

There is a dichotomy between public agenda versus, political agenda and media agenda that makes the whole scene like "a cat on hit tin roof." The news media framing of current affairs determines the way in which the public and policy-makers perceive the causes, consequences and importance of events. But the silence of the matter is also determined by the amount of media coverage and the nature of the language describing the unfolding of events and the positioning of different that will insinuate the level of engagement or disengagement (Evans, 2010). Therefore, authorities control the media discourse, and the daily talk shows sets the agenda, about different matters such as Syrian migration or Arab-Israeli conflict, which makes the mobilizing of public anger occasionally spill out into the streets. The media narrative usually focuses on the West and the rest relations that gear up the sentiments of the street politics into either a friendly or anti-American sentiment.

The Arab new media genre has its particularity, and reflects the daily local issues and human pain, which makes it more complicated than just "news versus entertainment." In MENA, the news values are responsive to what presidents say or do, followed by religion, then narrative dramatic serials, then music videos, then everything else. Such a hierarchy is only a product of technological determinism that prioritizes the social effect of the technology rather than the technology itself that counter argues the global idea that media effects of technology to bypass political boundaries and could instigate political transformation (Armbrust, 2012).

Communication is responsive to the negotiation games with authorities about the margin of freedom and the red lines. Hence, private media does not mean independent. For example in the last two years the Egyptian president has repeatedly called on journalists not to engage in reporting "supports terrorism" or "discredits state institutions" and many media houses have heeded this call.

As part of the cultural collateral idea and group think, most of the Arab nations after their gained their independence in the second half of the 20th Century, through the *League of Arab States* formed a committee to unify legal and judicial terms, structures, and processes to achieve a more integrated and harmonized legal system. In order to put the recommendations of this regional project, the *League of Arab States* established the *Arab Centre for Legal and Judicial Studies* in Beirut, Lebanon. Later in 1981, at the *Second Conference of Arab Ministers of Justice in Sana'a*, the capital of Yemen, the «Sana'a Strategy» that aimed to unify the regional domestic legislation. Such mechanism followed

series of integrated codes, including civil law, civil law procedures, penal law, penal procedures, juvenile law, prison standards, combating information technology crime, and matters related to personal status, and judicial organization and regulation (Saleh, 2012) . In addition, the *Arab Summit* in Algeria established a legislative body in 2005 the *Pan-Arab Parliament* to ensure that the consecrated (Islamic Shari'a) represents a solid foundation for Arab jurisprudence. But other legal systems employed in the region, such as the Latin system in Egypt and other North African states and the Anglo-American system in Sudan (Saleh, 2009).

The whole communication landscape with all its channels, structures and agencies have undergone profound changes since the beginning of the 1990s, which extended communication spaces beyond the local, national, and regional realms (Hafez, 2001). This trans-border flow of communications provided many citizens with better access to new technologies and the capacity to interact with a global discourse, while bypassing the limits of authoritarian information control (Lynch,2014).

Since the Gulf war in 1990-1991, the publics in MENA tuned into *CNN* to receive fresh news from the Gulf, both indigenous and external factors have determined media development in the area (Nawawy & Iskandar, 2002). However, the most recent surveys and media studies have indicated a swift of this special status quo as a result of many professional and political reasons.

It is also noticeable that the increasing impact of political economy on media has had its imprint due to the influx of external media and the establishment of indigenous agencies. The MENA states have reluctantly deregulated their media monopolies, and focused on offering more entraining services such as pay-per-view or pay on demand without supporting a new diverse media that echoes what the public hopes to find in its media (The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2003).

The rate of internet penetration in MENA has grown since its initial introduction, though the majority of the Arab Internet users are less than (40 years) old, using at least two or more social media networks for several hours a day. Between 2005 and 2011, Internet access in MENA expanded from (13 percent) to (40 percent) of the population in the oil rich nations that positions the *Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)* countries at the forefront for Internet usage of social media & smartphone penetration (The Arab Social Media Report, 2014). Blogging became a popular form of political activism and mobilization as it grew in popularity from 2005 onwards as new social media platforms emerged.

The introduction of Twitter and Facebook in 2007 was quickly adopted by which Egyptians for political activism. Though Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags were an integral part of any political protest in 2011, we need to be cautious about the variations in these rates. For example, only (33 percent) of the

regional population had internet access prior to 2011, and Facebook penetration is even lower (7 percent). In Egypt, the internet penetration at homes is less than (9 percent), and in Yemen it is only (3 percent) according to 2009 survey conducted by The *Gallup Organization*. In Tunisia the figure climbs to (21 percent) and in Bahrain to (80 percent).

It is important to note the exponential growth of social media and the utmost utility of its capability by the younger generations is a case in point here. By 2011, there were then more than (16.8 million) Facebook accounts in the region representing about (13 percent) of the population, and more than (40,000) Twitter users, of which Egyptians accounted for about half (Kerjan, 2011).

In conjunction with the escalation of political agitations and aggregate view about the struggle for freedom, the rates have been remarkably increased. Facebook is the leader with a massive (94 percent) of users on it, and (56 million) being active users. Twitter, the second most popular social networking site has over (3.7 million) active users in the region, tweeting around (10 million) Tweets per day. The region also boasts around (300 million) views on YouTube daily, the second highest of any region worldwide (Thottathil, 2014).

The ramifications of online political activism is evident in all across MENA, though their timeline, and vocality and intensity have been rather different within the continuum of the different Arab states.

Tunisia was the first country to witness the fall of its president (Bin-Aly), but Egypt had more intense and vibrant activism, especially with the facebook page 'We Are All Khaled Said' that served as a sign of how online activism is captured and moved to offline protests, when public anger and discontent spilled onto the streets of Egypt. What initially began as a series of 'silent stands' later erupted into the protests in *Tahrir Square*. Asmaa Mafouz another Egyptian activist, created a vlog (video blog), asking people to join her in protest against government corruption on Jan. 25 2011 that served to mobilize the public to take action by protesting instead of suppressing their frustrations to only 'cyber-protest' (Barrons, 2012).

In a research that analyzed the content of more than (3 million) tweets, several gigabytes of YouTube and thousands of blog posts, findings indicated that during the week before the former Egyptian president was outset tweets ballooned from (2,300/day) to (230,000/day). Videos featuring protest and political commentary went viral with the top (23) videos receiving nearly (5.5) million views and the amount of content produced online in Facebook and political blogs, increased dramatically (O'Donnell, 2011). And in another study that analyzed (52 million) Twitter users, findings indicated that their IP addresses of (14,642) users, or (0.027 percent) are identified in Egypt, Yemen or Tunisia. Within this

percentage, only (88.1 percent) were from Egypt, (9.5 percent) from Tunisia and (2.13 percent) from Yemen (Evans, 2011).

In 2013, two years after the official launch of "Arab Spring,"the *Northwest University in Qatar* conducted a regional research on mass media consumption, a sample of [10,027) of (18-25 years old) in eight countries (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, KSA, Lebanon, Qatar, Tunisia and UAE) between (December 26, 2012-April 18, 2013).

Chart 1: Media Consumption in MENA
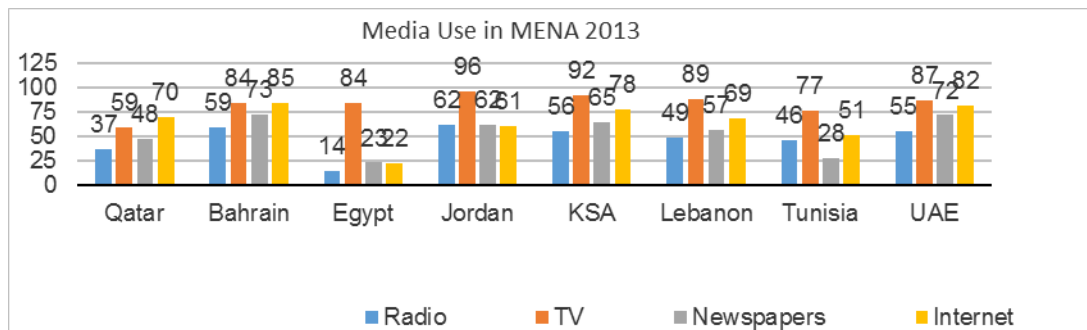
Chart (1) indicates that the regional media consumption is quite diverse, though there are some commonalties that were picked up. For example, TV remains the main media platform with penetration exceeding (84 percent), except in Qatar (59 percent). Internet use is generally on the rise exceeding (51 percent), except in Egypt (22 percent) and with insignificant presence in UAE. Newspapers still play a powerful tool with the exception of Egypt (23 percent) and in Tunisia (28 percent). Radio is still prevalent tool in MENA, except in Egypt (14 percent).

Chart 2: Arabs access to internet
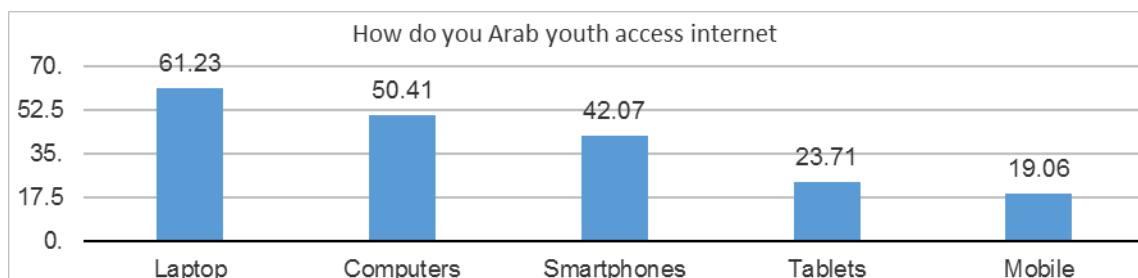
Chart (2) emphasized that access through the use of laptops are the most prevailing trend (61.23 percent) among the sample, accessing internet through mobile phones are the lowest in percentage (19.06 percent).

But chart (3) below reflects the findings of another research project that was conducted by *Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs*

(IFI) and sponsored by the *American University of Beirut (AUB)* and the *United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF),* which surveyed a sample of (2,744) (13 to 28), who live in three countries: Jordan, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates (Melki, 2010).

Chart 3: Motivations for using internet
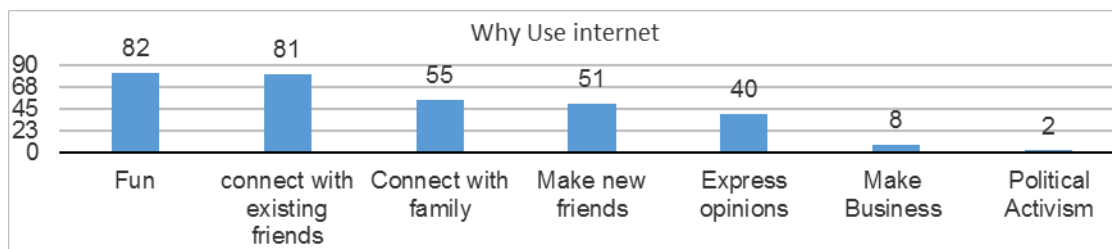
Chart (3) echoed that entertainment is the main motivation for the access and use internet (82 percent), while political activism has an insignificant percentage in such use. Such finding negates any claims that online activism in MENA could have caused the 2011 political uprisings.

Social media was thus heavily used for the dissemination of information amongst various populations of countries across the MENA region during the political upheavals (2011-2013), however different roles were attributed to various social media forums. For example, Facebook was used for scheduling, Twitter for coordination, and YouTube to gain a wider audience, which highlighted ability of the publics, especially the young ones, to go around communication blockade as a result of the Egyptian government's desperate attempt of internet and phone suspension. Having said so, the younger generations (18-25) in MENA were at the center stage in MENA (Asseburg, 2012), in particular the minority elite , who are educated and are digitally literate (Khondker, 2011), which exemplified the level of power based on the basis of network-centric warfare (Van Niekerk, Pillay & Maharaj, 2011). As one activist explained: "We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and to tell the world" (Whittaker, 2011).

Today, the total Arab internet users today make up less than (0.5 percent) of the global Internet population at best, though the fast annual growing rate exceeds (20 percent). And according to *The Arab Social Media Report Series,* Mohammed bin Rushed School of Government, internet penetration rate in the Arab region as a whole stands at (36 percent) with more than (71 million) of active users and around (400 million) mobile devices (Arab World Online 2014).

Despite the strategic use of social media throughout the various uprisings, and the solid reality of how the proliferation of ubiquitous digital connectivity created new opportunities and challenges for governments, businesses and

societies on the economic, social and policy levels. Nonetheless, the access to ICT alone can never independently instigate the dynamics of public spheres, nor capable of overcoming the political and socio-economic inequalities. Thus, new politics in MENA had a robust effects on the society without enhancing their political participation and representation (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Lotan et al., 2011).

In this historical moment, it is very important to be cautious and even skeptical about the potential effects of social media that still remains available only for the elite on one hand, and a space for battlefields between patron states and the majority of the publics on the other hand. This is particularly valid argument within the current political culture in MENA that is still dominated by the 'like-minded' individuals with their 'deliberative enclaves,' in which communication only serves their predetermined positions and practices (Harmon, 2004). The Egyptian case sadly illustrates the radical polarized virtual space that excludes any otherness in any political debate (Sunstein, 2009).

Conclusive Remarks:

In this research, there has been an attempt to offer indigenous knowledge and domestication about the crisis in MENA. Most of the time, the discussion of the endless challenges in MENA is either seen as of a crisis, or a cultural crisis. But the crisis refers to the political, social and economic, while the cultural dimension delves into the history of stagnation and the loss of identity.

My argument here is that the crisis is a result from many internal and external factors. However, they are deeply entrenched, structural and functionally complex, and subject to overlapping, mergence that makes the regional crisis one of a crisis of culture and a culture of crisis. In other words, a multifaceted crisis that tends to have causes and effects that keep it evolving and becoming more harsh and intense.

My understanding about this situational analysis endorses the need to revisit the local conceptual idea and its particularity resulted from the kind of societies, systems and power involved. I still see some hope in redressing the opportunities born from the intersection of conflict, history and tradition. My explanation coincides the KAD model (Dowthwaite, 2011) **to give a more holistic critical analysis of the agency and change in the crisis. Hence, it configured the reciprocating role of the media and the socio-political transformation brought about by internal social forces, by collectives and individuals.**

To assess the impacts of the social media effects are very complex and unpredictable, especially that the body of literature is fragmented with inconclusive empirical results due to a number of factors like the multitude of disciplines and

theoretical approaches (Badr, 2015). And he historical trajectories in the region is multilayered and circumstantial that adds to the burden of unpacking its facts and details. But the youth grassroots movements have evidently gained popularity among new social classes and ages across the board. And radical religious groups and oppressive patron states stall play key roles in all scenes, and continuously control the cyber-activism through different direct and indirect maneuvers.

'Complex realism' (Ehteshami, 2015) of the media effects in MENA is still prevailing because until today simplification, stereotyping and the lack of contextualization are spotted in every media and political event without no hind of improvement. For example, Samia Bourouba at the Higher School of Magistracy in Algeria mentions that the judicial institutions such as the quasi-international courts in Iraq and Lebanon, the variants of Truth and Reconciliation committees in Algeria and Morocco, only to divert the apparent 'democracy deficit (Bourouba, 2014).' The hypothesis that more access to ICT and youth engagement with media reflects more freedom and more empowerment is denied because patron states in the region are mainly repressive, indicating an escalating trend of intolerance and nervousness by authorities of mass citizen action and dissent (State of civil society, 2012).

In the meantime, the hopeful potentials of ICT in MENA are jeopardized by historical narratives in official variants of Arab nationalism continue to be formed by the time-honored postcolonial tropes of Arab, Islamic and pre-Islamic history, linguistic and cultural heritage and the struggle against outsiders "otherness". For the official discourse revolves around the negative implications of ICT to further incite criminal civil disorder that have been accommodated with further repressive policies of restricting Internet access, while internet censorship is on the rise. The scope and depth of filtering are increasing through governments' investment in censorship technologies, while western companies provide the censors with technologies and data used to filter the internet.

The main conclusion of this research is that the communication effects on the regional crisis are proximate rather than definitive in causing political transformation. Further, governments leveraged the technology to repress rights and crouch the publics. It is thus a long, painful way ahead before any direct affects can be tangible to replace the current bleak reality of submerge in violent oppression and conflicting narratives of past and present.

There is an urgent need to bypass the typical deterministic approaches of crisis management in MENA into more in-depth contextual and holistic research approach that integrates domestication of events and stats with cultural values and semantics   could end with a more coherent data analysis. In contrast to the presumed.

ICT could stipulate digital politics in MENA,but the current outcome is

neither directly linked to political change, nor assuring any liberating effects. The final assessment that I attempt to forward is the shifting interplay of online communication and offline actors as they develop over time in MENA regardless its preposterous situation and the little hope of any real change or progress.

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