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### Middle East Media Landscapes: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen

Cody J. Baker  
*Bridgewater State University*

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Middle East Media Landscapes: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen

Middle East Media Landscapes: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen

Cody J. Baker

Submitted in Partial Completion of the

Requirements for Departmental Honors in Communication Studies

Bridgewater State University

December 20, 2018

Dr. Jabbar Al-Obaidi, Thesis Mentor

Dr. Melanie McNaughton, Committee Member

Dr. Madhu Rao, Committee Member

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## Middle East Media Landscapes: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen

## Abstract

Following the youth-led reformative wave that swept the Middle East in 2011 during what came to be known as the Arab Spring, the media landscape in the region has continued to diversify and change alongside technology and social media. However, in order to deal with a large youth demographic that is seeking increased civil liberties and equality, and to prevent another series of protests, many governments are placing restrictions and limitations on the press, internet access, and censoring individuals who are critical of government or politically active. Through a critical analysis of the current media landscapes of five nations; Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen, as well as specific examples of media suppression and censorship, this research establishes a global perspective on free speech and suggest a protocol for youth engagement through social media and understand how regulation translates into censorship.

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## Middle East Media Landscapes: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen

**Introduction**

Since the Arab Spring in 2011 governments of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen have taken deliberate steps to decrease and limit the media and speech freedoms of their citizens. This paper will focus on the problem of mounting government regulations and censorship of media which is occurring in the Middle East presently as a result of the breakthrough use of technology demonstrated in the Arab Spring. Early in the year 2011, much of the world's attention was focused on the Middle East. Without violence or war, the attention was brought on by a massive series of protests and subsequent governmental and social reformation which came to be known as the 'Arab Spring'. Protesting initially broke out in Tunisia following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi after his frustrations with the Tunisian Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of a government building. Following this extreme display of frustration protests continued in Tunisia, with periods of civil unrest which ultimately resulted in the removal of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. From here Tunisia has managed to go on to successfully democratize their electoral process and serve as an example for the region, but the country is still facing a series of difficulties. Additionally, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, where the roots of the Arab Spring protests spread following Tunisia, are the nations where the most progress still needs to be made in terms of establishing more open and transparent governments.

Following the success of the protests in removing leaders such as President Mubarak in Egypt, the death of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, and President Ali Abdullah Salah in Yemen, the momentum of the movement hit a wall in Syria with President Bashar al-Assad. His violent

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suppression of the protests has led to an on-going and multi-sided civil war which has killed thousands and displaced millions of refugees. Yemen also experienced a setback when Houthi-minority rebels, who had begun to feel marginalized in the new government overtook the capital city of Sana'a, causing elected President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia. Yemen is currently in a civil war between Houthi rebel forces and a Saudi-backed coalition force which backs the internationally recognized Hadi government. To further hinder the progress of the Arab Spring, power vacuums soon developed in various countries, who now found themselves with weaker interim leaders after decades of strong authoritarian control or torn apart by war and different regions of the countries, such as Syria and Yemen, controlled by different factions.

This period of protests and the resulting shifts in power took many by surprise and ushered in a renewed sense of hope for this area of the world. However, the high expectations of the Arab Spring have been largely unmet. Washington Post contributing reporter Jamal Khashoggi, prior to his death, wrote exasperatedly of the potential that was shown during the Arab Spring, "The Arab world was ripe with hope during the spring of 2011... Grand expectations were quickly shattered; these societies either fell back to the old status quo or faced even harsher conditions than before" (Khashoggi, 2018). Khashoggi's sentiments echoed with many around the world who saw the youth and vitality expressed within the ranks of the Arab Spring protesters. These protests demonstrated the incredible organizational and communication capabilities of social media; particularly when wielded by individuals possessing knowledge and savviness with these new social platforms. Now, years later, we are seeing how the Arab Spring protests have shown governments what areas of their citizenry's lives they need to seize control of in order to prevent further protests. Shortly after following the success and enthusiasm of the

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Arab Spring, many governments began recanting on the promises that had been made during the active protests, or were slow to implement change, and began to repeat the patterns of authoritarianism that has plagued the region for decades.

In the years since the protest's social media, primarily Facebook and Twitter, have been given credit for facilitating demonstrators to communicate the knowledge and information necessary to structure large nationwide protests. Alternately called the Facebook, or Twitter Revolution, the Arab Spring demonstrated the ability for a motivated demographic of young people to use technology and social media to communicate and spread awareness of civil injustices and bring their platforms to the attention of the entire world.

Social media circumvents the avenues of traditional news media by allowing private, individual users to share information with huge numbers of people through posting, tweeting, linking, etc. Social media's prevalence as a driving force behind the protests did not go unnoticed by the various governments, and on January 28, 2011 then Egyptian President Mubarak shut down the cellphone and media networks across Egypt. This only succeeded in increasing the face-to-face communication of the protesters and pushed more apolitical Egyptians who had been unaffected by the protests up until that point to become involved.

Having seen how a direct and blatant assault on the speech and media capabilities of an entire nation is only sure to encourage more protests, the governments of the Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Tunisia did not attempt a similar approach. Instead, over the last several years these governments have been using a series of legislation, censorship, bans, and misinformation to limit the communicative abilities of their citizenry and prevent the people of Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia from recreating the reformative successes that took place during the Arab Spring. Many of these regulations are coming directly through the rewritten or draft

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constitutions of the aforementioned nations such as in Egypt. According to the NGO watchdog group, Freedom House, various articles in the Egyptian constitution are deliberately vague or provide no protection for media and journalists such as Article 71 which authorizes media censorship in times of war or general mobilization of Egypt's military or police force in masse. The same article, which ostensibly eliminates jail terms for media offenses, leaves room for imprisonment for crimes related to incitement of violence, discrimination, and defamation. The constitution notably fails to specify the composition and appointment procedures for regulatory bodies, meaning ordinary legislation can create structures that enable political influence” (Freedom House, 2018). Or in countries where the central government is not in complete control such as in Syria or Yemen, media is contingent upon which group has controlling interest of a particular area. For example, the Houthi-rebel controlled capital of Yemen, Sana'a , houses many of the countries' media outlets and have been controlled by the Houthi's since they seized the city in 2015 (BBC, 2018).

### **Method**

This research was conducted using a multi-faceted critical analysis of the data illustrated in Table 1. For the purpose of this research a critical analysis will be defined as an, “exploration into matters relating to either academics, art or scientific exploration which is aimed to discern and exact out examination and determinism by inquiring into or assessing facts and available data” (Writeawriting, 2018). In order to grasp a complete picture of the current media landscapes of Egypt, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia several key aspects of these countries will be considered: Internet penetration rates, youth demographics, current socio-political climate, and any legislation or protocols passed or established pertaining to media, communications, etc. by the governments of the aforementioned countries. This information will be collected from the

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U.N.'s International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the BBC, the CIA World Factbook and the Freedom House Organization. Combining a U.S. governmental agency, a United Nation specialized agency, a foreign media corporation, as well as an international NGO (non-government organization) the research units will be assured accuracy as well as objectivity and balance. Corresponding to the chart is a map highlighting the five countries discussed in this research. The purpose of the map is to provide visual context of the nation's discussed, but also to show how the affects of the Arab Spring where not limited to a small region of the Middle East but took place across a large portion of North Africa, the Saudi peninsula, and the Levant region.

**Table 1**

Country	Egypt	Libya	Syria	Tunisia	Yemen
Current Socio-political climate	President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, installed by Egyptian military in 2012, removing the democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi.	U.N. backed central government holds fairly weak control over the nation. Rival governments, terrorist groups, and rebel groups operate in a multi-sided armed conflict.	President Bashar Al-Assad used Syria's military to suppress the Arab Spring protests which resulted in the current multi-sided armed conflict and humanitarian crisis in Syria.	President Beji Caid Essebsi elected after the countries first free election, progress has been made in terms of democracy however the government still uses legislation to control the media.	Yemen is in a multi-sided armed combat between the Houthi rebels and the Saudi-led coalition force which seeks to reestablish President Ali Abdallah Saleh.
Youth Demographics	19.24% of pop. age 15-24	16.81% of pop. age 15-24	19.52% of pop. age 15-24	13.54% of pop. age 15-24	21.26% of pop. age 15-24
Internet Penetration Rates	39.2%	20.3%	31.9%	50.9%	24.6%

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Legislation and Censorship	Articles 57, 58, 211 of Egyptian Constitution strip/limit protection for journalists and make arresting activists easier.	Many journalists practice self-censorship for fear of retribution from government or terrorist/rebel groups. Government operates internet access and routinely blocks websites.	Media/internet access is contingent on which area of Syria is controlled by what faction of the Syrian Civil War; ISIS, the Syrian Army, the Syrian Liberation Front, and Syrians are forced to deal with the varying degrees of censorship and restriction.	Article 7 of Tunisian Constitution makes clear definition of what is considered journalism, and Tunisian penal codes can regularly be used to arrest writers for libel/slander, or government criticisms	Houthi rebels control the capital city of Sana'a which allows them to control the major media outlets of the country which has drastically polarized the situation within Yemen.
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## Middle East Media Landscapes: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen

**Map 1**

(El Sayed, 2016 p. 19)

**Thesis Statement**

Egyptian, Syrian, Yemeni, Tunisian, and Libyan governments are actively preventing future protests by limiting the speech and communicative capabilities of their citizenry and are doing so by the passing of legislation which restricts speech claiming it is being used for anti-cybercrime/terrorism.

**Literature Review**

Current communications research regarding the Middle East and the roles which technology, youth, censorship, and the media play, have shown that the ways which people communicate in this region has shifted drastically over the last several decades. One of the most

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important attributes of this research is the way that the Middle East region has been contextualized. In his book, *Media Censorship in the Middle East*, on the topic of media censorship in the Middle East, Dr. Jabbar Al-Obaidi recognizes the shared identity of the people of the region, “in conversing with people in the street or a car, frequently one hears the phrase ‘We (Arabs) in the land of Arabism and Islam’. It is noteworthy to say that even the non-Arab nationalities such as the Kurds, Assyrians, and others consign to use the same phrase when you converse with them. This same phrase is also widely used by the print and broadcast media.... This phrase, also, denotes the exceptionally high value Arabs put on their religion Islam and nationalist sentiments” (Al-Obaidi 2007, p. 19). This sense of shared values and pride in national identity emanates strongly in the rhetoric espoused by those who took part in the Arab Spring protests. These nationalist sentiments united the organizers of the Arab Spring and simultaneously gives the governments they seek to change a definitive target to affix the focus of their censorship and speech regulation. Individual pride and egalitarianism are core-values of the regions inhabitants and can be traced back to early societies, “evidence of the moral authority of the nomad may be found in the fact that the term “Arab,” now taken as a linguistic and ethnic designation for the whole of the Arab-speaking world, was originally used by the Bedouin to refer only to themselves, and is still used by them in this way; it was appropriated by Arab nationalists in the last century in an effort to associate the whole society with Bedouin self-esteem and pride” (Lindholm p. 22, 2002).

In addition to a strong sense of identity and national pride, to contextualize the media landscape in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen it is important to understand where the problems with communication and media originate in the region. In his essay, *Internet in the Arab World: A Step Towards “Information Society?”* Henner Kirchner discusses how the issues

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come from within the region itself, “the Arab region is confronted with local rather than global problems in the development of networking; for example; with restrictive media policies and a lack of acceptance of the new media by state authorities” (Kirchner, 2001 p. 137). Kirchner establishes that many of the issues with practicing an open media come from the national governments of the countries themselves. Kirchner also discusses how media, and more importantly mass media on the internet can be used not only by governments, but by opposition groups such as the Arab Spring protesters, or groups such as Hamas or ISIS, “the “official” media are not the only ones that make use of the opportunities offered by electronic publication. An increasing number of opposition groups as well, in particular groups with an Islamist tendency. Further uses include new forms of online media, ranging from news services to satirical magazines” (Kirchner, 2001 p. 155). Most importantly, Kirchner emphasizes the importance of these technologies for the growth and development of the region as a whole, “information is one of the most important resources, along with the three other crucial economic factors—labor, capital, and natural resources. International organizations such as the World Bank of UNESCO therefore advise Third World countries to invest in modern information technologies in order to improve their people’s standards of living” (Kirchner, 2001 p. 138). By establishing the importance of these technologies to the development of growing nation’s, as well as the controlling tendency of the regional governments Kirchner helps layout one of the fundamental issues within the region; the opposing interests of the people and their own governments.

Citizen/government relations and its confrontational nature also provides background on the cycle of leadership which has become almost a standard operating procedure within the region. A borderline systematic process of authoritarian regimes being toppled by popular

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protests or revolutions has occurred continually in the Middle East since the arbitrary boundaries originally drawn by the Sykes-Picot Agreement came into effect following World War I. This process seems to occur so frequently because the basis for personal freedom and egalitarianism has engrained a sense of equality and independence among Arabs that causes ineffective or weak leadership to be removed by the populace. Anthropologists studying early Middle Eastern tribal life, such as Charles Lindholm have noted the tendency of groups to remove unpopular or ineffectual leaders, “even when a paramount chief did manage to gain ascendancy among the shepherd his inferiors nonetheless obstinately refused to accept their subordination. This has caused considerable consternation among Marxists anthropologists, who consider the ideology to be a political chimera which serves to attenuate an unpalatable status quo. Yet this ‘chimera’ nonetheless retains its hold throughout the Middle East. Simply to dismiss these beliefs as false consciousness risks reducing deep-seated cultural values to ideological manipulations by a self-serving elite” (Lindholm 2002, p. 42). It is this high-level of independence and egalitarianism that simultaneously causes the strongmen of the Arab world such as Saddam Hussein or Muammar Qaddafi to continually come into power because they are respected for their strength and will; and what causes the people they eventually subjugate to rise up in defiance of the leader they at one point chose.

Leadership roles in this part of the world have been continually challenged by those who are under the subjugation of the leader. This almost confrontational relationship between the leaders and subjects in a society has set-up the Middle East to potentially be a continuous rotation of leaders, kings, presidents, and most prevalently dictators. This relationship has its roots in a concept that modern researchers rarely if ever take into account, “*asabiyya*, which is usually translated as ‘group feeling’ ...according to Ibn Khaldun, without kinsmen and allies of

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his own people to support him, he is instead surrounded by flatterers and sycophants, and can be easily ousted for more aggressive and unified opponents invading his realm from the periphery” (Lindholm, 2002 p. 52). This shared sense of comradeship exists in the Middle East as a result of the harsh environments, nomadic lifestyles, and patriarchal society which caused people such as the early Bedouin to band together in tight family units and adopt the value system which is still largely in place today. What this means for the modern Middle East is that deeply ingrained in the culture of the region is a sense of community and triumphing over adversity (weather, water scarcity, violence, etc.) and that a leader must be exceptional or is otherwise swiftly removed. However, if a leader is not exceptional but instead authoritarian and dictatorial they will attempt to limit the freedoms of their people in order to remain in power despite the overwhelming pressure from the society in question to step-down. This group feeling, *asabiyya*, is a defining quality of the region and has yet to be mentioned as a contributing factor for the Arab Springs and the continued efforts of governments to quell future protests.

Although the concept of *asabiyya* helps to explain the sense of brotherhood and bonds which permeate some of the material which discusses the Arab Spring protests and their triumphs, another important factor is also the use of new media and technology by the protestors and activists. Social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, have been lauded as driving factors behind the protests. However, in his essay on the growing influence of technology in the region, *New Media and Prospects for Democratization*, Philip Seib discusses the limitations of technology in regard to promoting democracy, “empowerment through information has been greater in recent years from the growing pervasiveness and influence of satellite television, the Internet, cell phones, and other such devices. The Internet, for instance, has been put to work by news organizations, governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), terrorist groups,

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bloggers, and others and has had an impact on political processes. Democratization does not, however, come easily, and it is important to resist the temptation to assume that technology can, in and of itself, transform political reality” (Seib, 2007 p. 1). Seib’s discussion of technology acknowledges the contributions that technology has made for the sake of democratization, but how the same technology benefits groups which would ultimately oppose democratizations, such as authoritarian governments, and also that technology itself does not change political reality, but that the people behind the technology do.

While some of the research on the subject of social media has become repetitive or redundant in the sense that social networks have been identified as a major contributor to the Arab Spring protests, while failing to identify the aftermath and resulting backlash of what highlighting the success of a media platform can do. In her examination of the success of the Arab Spring as a revolutionary movement Eva Bellin acknowledges how authoritarian governments have taken notice of what made the protests so efficient, “the trajectory of the Arab Spring highlights an empirical novelty for the Arab world, namely, the manifestation of huge, cross-class, popular protest in the name of political change, as well as a new factor that abetted the materialization of this phenomenon—the spread of social media. The latter no doubt was a game changer for the longevity of authoritarian regimes worldwide from now on” (Bellin 2012, p. 2). Now that the immediate effects of the protests have cooled off and hindsight takes hold, controlling governments in the region have begun tightening control on media outlets and enforcing censorship laws which the state uses to legitimize their use of punishments and arrests of journalists, activists, and any new potential revolutionaries. Ahmed El Gody’s essay *New Media, New Audience, New Topics, and New Forms of Censorship in the Middle East* also discusses the issue of how authoritarian governments deal with the Internet in their respective

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countries', "it is no wonder that many authoritarian Arab regimes/governments fearing Internet technology's power to change the status quo have imposed policies ranging from regulation and state monopolization of infrastructure to hacking and cracking Web sites in an attempt to prevent citizens from gaining access to Internet information" (El Gody, 2007 p. 232). El Gody's essay, being published prior to the Arab Spring, further emphasizes how keenly aware governments in this region were to the Internet and its potential to impact their regimes.

In analyzing the impact of these governments and their policies on free speech and Internet access in countries such as Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Tunisia, many researchers take a Westernized view of the ways in which communications in the Arabic world are discussed which causes incorrect assumptions to be made. One of the most egregious failures is the lack of acknowledgment towards how Islam impacted the Arab Spring and how it is used as a justification for certain actions taken by the various regional governments. While not every Muslim is an Arab, nor is every Arab a Muslim, to not address the influence which Islam has on Arabic society is a glaring oversight which fails to take into account a major cultural force on national media development. Major religions within a region have the power to set the value system for the people within their area even if they are not practitioners; in the same sense that Judeo-Christian values permeate the laws and moral codes of most Western nations the moral and ethical standards of Islam have been applied in the Middle East and must be taken into consideration when discussing how communication occurs, especially in a religion which values oral communication and recitation (Lindholm 2002, p. 151-155).

Not only do researchers misrepresent or mischaracterize varying aspects of events in the Middle East; journalists, media analysts, and even reporters on the ground have taken liberties in reporting the facts by failing to achieve a contextualization of the events they witness as well as

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failing to grasp the culture of an Islamic society which at times seems to clash with Western values or standards. Western newspapers reporting on the Arab Spring differed in their coverage of the protests from their Middle Eastern counterparts, for example in covering the events in Egypt following President Morsi's ousting in 2013 showed how even after the initial Arab Spring events were still being incorrectly reported on. After the events of the Arab Spring unfolded the coverage of the events could be analyzed and revealed the imbalance of sources and informational outlets used by Western media organizations, preferring to cite political parties and spokespeople rather than official government outlets, "one can also notice absence in the sources used in the news stories in the three newspapers. The New York Times, for example, cited a huge number of Muslim Brotherhood leaders, members and supporters while Asharq Alawsat and the Jerusalem Post cited mainly official sources and spokesmen from the new government (El Maghreby & El Ela, 2014 p. 34). By relying on political parties as a source of information rather than official spokespeople or government sources journalists misrepresented the real events unfolding in the tumultuous post-Mubarak Egypt and poorly prepared Americans, for example policymakers, for the resulting series of elections and additional protests the removal of the elected President Morsi. These oversights emphasize the need for an accurate account of what is currently transpiring in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, "The news media play an important role in society. They set the stage for political news, manage their agenda and sources and control information. They function as a window to the outside world and possess the ability to shape public knowledge, attitudes, and voting behavior. It is no surprise then that the media are one of the most criticized institutions in world" (El Maghreby & El Ela 2014 p. 1), as such it is imperative that the analysis of the region be all-encompassing and take into account the various cultural, religious, and socio-political factors of each country involved in the research.

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**Analysis**

Overall, the evaluations of each country's media landscape have supported the main argument of the hypothesis which stated that the governments of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen are actively working towards limiting media and communication and censoring their citizens speech through regulations which are labelled as anti-crime and counter-cyberterrorism legislation. Alternatively, if a government is not actively engaged in media regulation or censorship it is due to the current socio-political climate, particularly Syria and Yemen, where the lack of a strong central government and war has led to a fracturing of the country's media landscape with different factions holding dominion over certain areas and controlling the media and/or internet access in that area. Through the course of analyzing the data certain attributes of the data lent themselves to further clarification through the use of Encompassment theory, which aided the analysis by providing possible explanations for why certain aspects of media has changed as well as why these nations experience continuous rule by authoritarian governments as well as what causes the public to almost systematically dispose of their own leaders.

Controlling the access to technological revelations has been a strategy of authoritarian governments for centuries, one early example being the Licensing of the Press Act of 1622, passed by the British Parliament. This piece of legislation required printers to be licensed by the crown and the license-holders of the printing presses had to meet the qualifications for licensure as laid out by the English government. The act specifically contained language designed to suppress the printing of seditious treasonable and unlicensed books and pamphlets and for regulating the printing presses and printers. However, the main reason for the act was to prevent unpopular or revolutionary rhetoric from being printed and handed out to the public which would cause eventual resentment and disfavor towards the crown. By disguising the true intentions of

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the legislation through a claim to monitor the publishing of unlicensed books the English government was able to act authoritarian without appearing as so.

Similarly, the governments of Egypt and Tunisia have begun to insert language into the new and reformed constitutions of their specific countries. Ironically the concept of drafting new constitutions for these countries came as a result of the Arab Spring and contemporary governments are seizing on the opportunity to place legislation which prevents future protests. In Egypt specifically the most direct and drastic legislation is being passed, “of the hundreds of Internet-related arrests in Egypt, I was only able to document 28 cases with counterterrorism-related charges since 2012. Instead, the government relies primarily on an anti-protest law to stifle online speech. On November 24, 2013, the government banned unlicensed street demonstrations. This ban is now the most commonly used legal framework to criminalize online speech by activists. On November 24, 2013, the government banned unlicensed street demonstrations. This ban is now the most commonly used legal framework to criminalize online speech by activists” (Ben Hassine, 2017, p. 1). By requiring licenses for things such as public demonstrations and publications which are integral aspects of mounting a successful revolution the government has stripped potential protestors of very fundamental tools.

In Tunisia similar legislation has been passed, but the Tunisian government has taken an additional approach to targeting potential activists which include defamation, libel, and fake drug charges, mainly marijuana possession. Tunisian defamation codes label defamation as an arrestable offense in article 86 of their media codes and regulations, “the best-publicized cases involving online activity have related to ‘defaming’ the state or the military. For example, in April 2014, Rached Khiari, director of the Al Sada News website, received a three-month suspended sentence for defamation after publishing a video in which a third party insulted a

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judge. The specific defamation provision Khiari was prosecuted under comes from article 86 in the Telecommunications Code 45 for “insulting others through public communication networks” (Ben Hassine, 2017 p. 6). Anti-drug laws have been used in Tunisia prior to the Arab Spring for politically-motivated arrests but have found a new use in post-Arab Spring Tunisia, “fabrication of charges founded upon marijuana possession is a practice traditionally used by Tunisian authorities both before and after the uprisings to disguise politically motivated arrests. In November 2015 alone, the Ministry of the Interior arrested over 2,000 people, 516 of which were arrested for the alleged consumption of cannabis—many of them were activists or prominent voices on privacy and security online. Before the terrorist attacks in 2014, there had been only 10 to 12 people arrested on the charge of cannabis consumption or possession. In November 2015 alone, the Ministry of the Interior arrested over 2,000 people—516 of which were arrested for the alleged consumption of cannabis” (Ben Hassine, 2017 p. 6). The Tunisian governments use of fake drug charges was not predicted in the thesis statement, but it does further illustrate the lengths which governments are going to in order to control media and those involved in it.

Standing in a unique position in the post-Arab Spring world, Libya has made strides towards improving their citizens overall living conditions following the death of Qaddafi, but the country is still plagued by a relatively weak central government and intervention from rival governments, as well as militia groups, and minority special interest groups. However, this weak state does not mean that the government is incapable of wielding power when it faces criticism, “The most prominent instance of politically motivated blocking since the Qadhafi era was seen in early 2015 with the temporary blocking of the news site al-Wasat by the LPTIC. The move came in apparent response to al-Wasat’s criticism of militia groups affiliated with the Tripoli-based government” (Freedom House, 2018). So, while the Libyan government still remains

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centrally weak the government is still intent on preventing criticisms and dissenting opinions from being heard by the citizenry and resorts to authoritarian tactics to restrict or outright block access to unfavorable content. Libya stands out as unique in this research, as it straddles the positions of the four additional nations in the research. An intact if ineffectual central government and a largely intact state making it more akin to Egypt and Tunisia, but still plagued by infighting, and the threat of militia groups and rival governments within the country such as Yemen and Syria. This places the Libyan government at a crossroads with the choice to either engage in more or less authoritarian behavior and activity.

In regard to Yemen and Syria, both countries face mounting struggles in the face of civil war, humanitarian crises, lack of food and medical supplies, and terrorist attacks from groups such as ISIL and ISIS. Syria's government still run by President Bashar Al-Assad is actively engaged in crushing the rebellion sparked by the Arab Spring and the resulting chaos has left room for militant groups such as ISIS and ISIL to gain footholds in villages and small cities as well as rebel groups such as the Syrian Liberation Front. The fracturing of Syria has been mirrored in the activities playing out across its media landscapes. In region's controlled by the government internet access is contingent upon the Al Assad regime, as is the case with areas controlled by ISIS or the SLF. In addition to Al Assad, terrorists, and rebels, foreign governments have also intervened in Syria's media landscape, "the government has carried out extensive and repeated internet shutdowns since 2011. Damage to the telecommunications infrastructure led to a disconnection in Aleppo from March to November 2015. When Turkey initiated Operation Olive Branch, a military operation in the Afrin area, north of Aleppo, against Kurdish People Protection Units (YPG), Turkish authorities cut off internet service in most areas of northern Syria" (Freedom House 2018).

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While Syrians face the struggle of living in an active civil war they are concurrently faced with the challenge of communication and obtaining information with little to no access to the internet or traditional media outlets and a government which is ramping up its censorship and surveillance capabilities, “censorship is implemented by the STE and private ISPs, using various commercially available software programs. Independent reports in recent years pointed to the use of ThunderCache software, which is capable of “monitoring and controlling a user’s dynamic web-based activities as well as conducting deep packet inspection.” Authorities have also used technology provided by the Italian company Area SpA to improve their censorship and surveillance capabilities, according to evidence from 2011” (Freedom House 2018). While the Al Assad government is dealing with fighting a multi-sided armed conflict and managing the international impact of the Syrian refugee crisis, they are still intensely focused on controlling and monitoring their citizens to prevent future dissemination.

Conversely, in Yemen the Houthi rebels were able to capture the majority of the country’s media outlets when they seized the capital Sana’a thereby polarizing the country’s traditional media outlets as well as gaining discretion as to which journalists were free to practice. Many Yemeni journalists have begun self-censorship rather than risk arrest and indefinite incarceration at the hands of the Houthi forces. Prior to the Houthi control of Sana’a the Yemeni constitution did advocate for some protection of journalists but only insofar as the government allowed, “the constitution allows for freedom of expression “within the limits of the law,” and the relevant laws are restrictive. The few protections that the legal system provided for journalists’ rights were effectively unenforceable during 2015 due to the breakdown of government functions and armed groups’ occupation of various parts of the country” (Freedom House, 2017). As a result of the conflict in Yemen the Yemeni constitution is incapable of being

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enforced and reporters as well as citizen-journalists and bloggers have been closely monitored, “Houthi forces carried out dozens of raids on media outlets and detentions of journalists during the year in an attempt to suppress dissent” (Freedom House, 2017). Chronicling the events unfolding in Yemen has also proved extremely dangerous due to Saudi-led airstrikes, “at least seven journalists and media workers were killed in connection with their profession, with most falling victim to air strikes by the Saudi-led military coalition supporting Hadi’s government” (Freedom House, 2017).

Yemen’s current status demonstrates not only the ways in which media influences politics in the region, but also foreign governments, religion, and terrorist groups. During the reformation of the Yemeni government following the Arab Spring the Houthi rebels, a Shia religious minority group, began to protest the new constitution, initially over the division of Yemen into six federal regions, claiming they were being marginalized in the construction of Yemen’s new government. Following the seizure of Sana’a, a Saudi-led coalition force began airstrikes on Houthi targets as well as blocking the Port of Sana’a to cut off supplies to the rebel forces. Saudi Arabia, a majority Sunni Muslim nation supports the government of the currently displaced Yemeni President Hadi; however Yemen’s relative proximity to Iran, the only majority Shia nation in the world, has allowed the Iranian government to openly support the Houthi rebel forces in the form of weapons and training, as well as additional backing from Iraqi militia groups and other underground militia and para-military groups in the region (Browne, 2018, p. 1). How these foreign governments flagrantly support the agents of chaos which reside in their neighboring countries’ and do so in their own interest illustrates the ways in which power and order is sometimes reconciled in these countries. Yemen’s interior situation places the interests

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and well-being of its citizens below that of international governments and religious groups who have taken advantage of the disorder caused by the countries' civil war.

### **Discussion**

Accounting for the various aspects of how the contemporary media landscapes of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Yemen have come into their current form the next step for communication research to propose would be solutions to these issues. It is also important to recognize that as these nations will continue to move forward in terms of access to technology and the internet, despite their governments efforts to prevent that. Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen are nations which already have relatively fragile informational infrastructures, with the national government possessing most if not all of the power in terms of access and control. With this in mind it is also important to highlight the link between how social media and technology has become an important part of civil demonstrations and revolutionary groups, “the link between dissent by technology and dissent in the streets is growing stronger. The fact that ordinary citizens can get, and share information instantaneously not only provides them with the tools to resist authority and evade arrest; it also delegitimizes that authority on practical and philosophical levels. Controlling information, after all, is one of the most important ways a state wields its power (Schiffrin & Kircher-Allen 2012, p. 239)”. Regionally, internet penetration rates have tripled in the last 8 years (Kader, 2017) and Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen have all experienced growth in this area to at least some extent. Keeping these factors in mind it is important to apply the lessons regarding social media and information sharing that have already been learned in other parts of the world where free speech online has been practiced for much longer.

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As these nations progress it is important to examine the issues which perpetuate throughout government and regime changes, and as the citizens of these countries attempt to move into more democratic systems of government understanding the culture and societal norms which influence the way these societies come to some form of consensus. Tangible help such as media education, journalistic training, increased contact with civil liberty groups, and continued international aide are all important to further media in these countries. But within the framework of Encompassment theory the issues which prevent media in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen from advancing can be further explained and supplement the data gathered through the initial media research.

### **Continuous Influence of Dictators**

Numerous factors influenced the Arab Spring protests but at their base was an immense dissatisfaction with the governments of each nation, with each nation being run by a strong, charismatic, and long-term leader such as President Mubarak in Egypt who had been in power for 30 years at the time of the Arab Spring and President Muammar Gaddafi in Libya who had been in power for 42 years. Men such as these rose to power and managed stayed in power for decades despite being generally unpopular with large portions of their population for reasons such as religious discrimination or running openly corrupt and inefficient governments. Dictators such as Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, or more presently Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and President El-Sisi in Egypt seem to appear continuously in this part of the world, and during their rule these men are in charge of controlling the media of their nations.

While communications research does not typically account for anthropological or sociological factors, through Encompassment theory these factors can be used and applied to examine their impact on media and communications. Dictators come to power in nations such as

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these because of the region's proclivity towards strong leaders, but the roots of the Middle East as an egalitarian society sets up leaders for failure due to the inherent pride and independence that Arabs possess.

Anthropologist Charles Lindholm discusses the early life of Bedouin camel herders and how their history and value system was used as a way to unite and empower members of developing nations as many Middle Eastern countries took form following the end of colonialism in the region (Lindholm 2002 p. 19 ). He stresses the ways that egalitarianism became an integral aspect of life for nomadic people who lived in small familial units, possessed little in the ways of material possessions, and lived their whole lives harsh and unforgiving terrain, "the moral values of these nomads can be, in some measure, correlated with the ecological conditions they face. The vaunted courage and love of personal independence found among camel herders are a consequence of their need to range widely during the winter to take advantage of scattered rainfall and pasturage" (Lindholm, 2002 p. 19). The lives of the camel herders has become romanticized by popular culture and this way of life is now only lived by a minority in the region, however the personal independence and equality that originated in the small familial life of nomadic Bedouin tribes has become a fundamental bedrock of the value system in this region and set the stage for the relationship between the ruling class and the public, "the state could not simply assert sacred legitimacy for itself, but had to appeal to the values of free communities for validation, offering in return legal codes defining the rights of the people and the obligations of the government to its citizens...such concepts as "freedom, equity, and justice" are the legacy of this social balance of forces—and the West, no less than the Middle East, is in debt to this ancient heritage for our central values (Lindholm, 2002 p. 48)." As a result of possessing an inherent sense of equality and independence, inefficient, weak, or unpopular leaders are ousted

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or removed quickly because the people demand strength rather than innovation or progress, and leaders who possess strength, ruthlessness, and political cunning are able to make their regime last through decades by strict authoritarian governance.

However, in the age of social media the publicized ousting of so many leaders during the Arab Spring, particularly the bloody footage released following the death of Gaddafi at the hands of his own people, showed that the longevity of authoritarian rule is demonstrably shorter during the digital age. Regimes such as the aforementioned Mubarak and Gaddafi regimes were brought down in a matter of weeks after the momentum of the Arab Spring protests were brought into full effect. With the advent of social media expanding the worldview of many citizens the impetus for increased civil liberties and personal freedoms are likely to increase as internet penetration rates rise and more citizens of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen gain internet access. This increase in access requires attention as well, as the advent of new technology brings on new challenges to its users as well as the societies which embrace them.

### **Media Literacy**

Practical media literacy will become a critical tool for new internet subscribers in the countries of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen, as first-time users begin to sift through the potentially infinite amount of information that has just become available to them. As the internet penetration rates in these countries continue to grow, more and more users will be accessing information and making connections at extremely high rates. This growing consumer base has attracted companies such as Facebook to help build and operate Wi-Fi hotspots in remote regions of the world to help facilitate access (Castillo, 2018). However, Facebook has begun to be problematic in the informational and factual world.

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As was evident with the Russian Facebook misinformation campaigns which impacted the 2016 United States Presidential Election, and in Sri Lanka which is experiencing violence in some parts of the country due to misinformation found on Facebook (De Sayrah, 2018 p. 1), it is extremely important for information to be properly vetted, researched, edited, and checked by professionals before being consumed by the public, or public awareness of these same skills. Unfortunately, this sort of skillset is not likely to be provided by the governments of these nations as it would be counterintuitive to their organizational goals. This is apparent in the placement of leaders in the fields of communication and information within these countries. In terms of the type of leaders who typically run these countries, “this is a region where the respect a leader garners is based on toughness, not innovation. Where compromise is equated with weakness. With few exceptions, nice guys don’t make it to the top, and if they do and if they want to stay there they have to remold their image by creating what is often a mythology of stern rigidity and omniscient authority” (Al-Obaidi, 2007, p. 29). Conversely, those within administrations who are assigned to media or informational posts, “one unique characteristic of the men who are appointed as ministers of information and culture is that they are weak, with no vision or new initiatives, and have no power to risk any new ideas. Their daily business is to convey to the people of their country the glory of the leadership and the outstanding national achievements” (Al-Obaidi, 2007 p. 29). Therefore, the goal of making the population media literate falls to non-government organizations, international efforts, and the citizens of these countries themselves.

Media literacy remains an important goal for these nations and the region as a whole, “in November 2013 and February 2014, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) organized two workshops on Media and Information Literacy (MIL) for educators in Cairo,

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Egypt, and Fez, Morocco (Torrent, 2016 p. 49)”. Continual efforts to improve the working conditions of these country’s journalists and media workers is also needed; organizations such as Reporters Without Borders work in conjunction with local news outlets to provide education and service, while other’s such as Amnesty International work to free those journalists and bloggers who have already been arrested or fallen victim to the authoritarian regimes of their country but progress is slow when dealing with the oppositional nature of these countries governments.

### **Protocol for Youth Engagement through Social Media**

In Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Yemen, and Libya the majority of the population is demographically young, between the ages of 15-54, and as was demonstrated in the Arab Spring, very knowledgeable with new technologies and using them to mobilize large numbers of people in a very short amount of time. One of the main issues being addressed during the Arab Spring was the high unemployment rate According to the International Labour Organization, “With respect to the employment situation, the extremely high youth unemployment rates in the region averaging more than 23 per cent, adding that for young women, the average unemployment rate of 31.5 percent is even worse – besides the fact that their labour market participation is already much lower than anywhere else in the world” (Schmidt, 2018 p. 1). When a population of unemployed young people, a large number of whom are connected via the internet, are allowed to express themselves and organize freely that is the type of environment that allows for events such as the Arab Spring. Unemployment equals free time, which can be spent on revolutionary or counter-government activities, however with control of the internet and complete blocking and access power, the governments of Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen have the ability to cut off access at their discretion. Mubarak’s Egyptian government attempted this amidst active protesting during the Arab Spring, the result being increased interpersonal connectivity among

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middle-class Egyptians and a motivating factor for previously politically unengaged Egyptians.

As a result, the governments have since learned that complete restriction is a viable but not ideal option and have begun chipping away at internet freedom and free speech in the ways mentioned prior.

Therefore, it is imperative that while access to social media sites have not been blocked by these governments, or in the cases of Syria and Yemen, rebel and terrorist groups; a concentrated effort on youth engagement through social media between activist groups, bloggers, citizen/professional journalists, media professionals, educators, and public servants should be implemented to help establish a more global online community with the purpose of promoting connectivity and outreach between these groups of people. Civil liberty groups in the United States such as the ACLU, the NAACP, and the American Center for Law & Justice, are an integral part of monitoring government activities and ensuring federal laws are not violated or abused and their cooperation with outreach through social media would be just one example of how social media can promote youth engagement.

International organizations have noted that the post-Arab Spring state of the region has overall left it more permeable to aid as well as education and international cooperation, “a new era of increased openness has prompted OHCHR to adapt its work in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, in view of opportunities and challenges to promote and protect human rights. A lack of freedoms, social justice and democratic participation has been central to the uprisings witnessed since late 2010” (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2016 p. 1). By adapting to the new ways that people are engaging with each other and optimizing the technologies that are already being adopted in these countries it is possible to establish a network of organizations within and outside of these countries. By establishing

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connections with groups outside of their region the same activists, bloggers, and protestors who started the Arab Spring will be able to further improve their governments as well as promote technological education and advancement in their region.

### **Global Perspective on Free Speech**

One of the most critical aspects to the success of the Arab Spring was the open communication which was facilitated online through social media. As a result, the governments of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen have taken to targeting sites like Twitter, Facebook, Skype, and YouTube as a means of oppressing free speech and preventing further protests. This tactic shines a light on social media as an important bastion for free speech, particularly in the face of authoritarian governments, but also as a way for the people of the Arab world to ensure their own independence and free speech in the face of globalized interests, “the masses involved in the Arab revolts are right to demand that their economic plight be addressed, being as they are at the receiving end of the ravages of a militantly globalizing neoliberalism. Leading Arab intellectuals are warning that US imperial domination will either helped beleaguered Arab leaders suppress the uprisings or else will ‘support’ the Arab Spring in order to keep Arab nations in line with the priorities of neoliberal economics” (Dabashi, 2012 p. 61).

Due to the Middle East’s location in regard to a large portion of the world’s oil reserves, global interests have been miring progress in this region for decades, “two vast and competing empires—the Soviet and the American—contested each other’s domination around the globe during the Cold War period, which included the control of oil and the strategic map of what both parties called ‘the Middle East.’ The lived experiences of people struggling against domestic tyranny and foreign domination alike, however, taught them the hollowness of this particular geopolitical designation: for they didn’t feel they were in the middle of anything” (Dabashi, p.

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237). Contestation for the region's natural resources has left many inhabitants impoverished, unemployed, starving, or they have fled their countries as refugees such as in Syria and Yemen.

Social media has offered free speech in this region a new chance by helping the citizens of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen continue to communicate and remain politically active and engaged within their nations. As the blocking and total removal of social media has already been proven a poor tactic by Mubarak's former government in Egypt, the tactics discussed previously in this paper such as arresting journalists and bloggers for slandering the government or enacting anti-protest laws have become the preferred strategy. How swiftly governments are reacting towards social media shows how effective the organizational and communicative powers of social media sites are, and how important they are to the causes of civil liberty and social reform.

What social media; as well as the internet, satellite television, and traditional news outlets also offer to the citizens of these countries is a look at the rest of the world and that an improved living standard and better form of government is possible. Such as in Syria, which to many initially seemed like the last country primed for a civil war, "maybe it was the satellite TV that began to beam into people's homes in the early 2000's...The internet definitely played a role, connecting dissidents in the huge Syrian diaspora with free thinkers in the country. Or it could have been the rapid economic liberalization that Bashar Al-Assad promoted, which some said introduced a new inequality and the experience of serious poverty. Probably, as in so many Arab countries, the revolution had to do with the dignity and pride, for Syrians certainly love their country" (Schiffrin & Kircher-Allen 2012, p. 70). Social media perpetuates the idea of the 'global village,' first introduced by Marshall McLuhan, which predicted that through the internet societies will be connected by a global electronic 'nervous system' which connects and

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integrates people across the globe. As people become more connected and their ability to communicate improves, authoritarian governments face an extremely daunting challenge if they hope to stifle future protests.

In terms of internet censorship and content blocking, the North Korean government has been taking drastic measures to limit its citizens access to the internet since the North Korean government began using the internet in 2001. As the North Korean government controls all ISP's and subsequently all internet access, they have complete control over the internet in their country and access is highly restricted to government officials or visiting tourists who have to pay a high rate for limited access through the company Koryolink (Warf 2013, p. 109). North Korea's government, culture, and economy differ drastically from that of Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Libya, and Yemen which makes the task of controlling the internet in North Korea more feasible. However, what is important to emphasize is the extreme measures the North Korean government has gone to in order to control the flow of information in their country. Controlling information is an integral part of operating a successful authoritarian government, infamous Nazi propaganda strategist, and film maker Joseph Goebbels used Germany's press as a way to manipulate public opinion before and during World War II, "Think of the press as a great keyboard on which the government can play" (Goebbels, n.d.), and today North Korean news and statistics are blatantly manipulated to make the countries economic and political status seem elevated for the benefit of the countries leader Kim Jong-Un.

As a result of the intrusiveness of authoritarian governments citizens take it upon themselves to guard against potential arrest or jail time. Many journalists, activists, bloggers, etc., in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen have begun self-censoring as a preventative measure to protect themselves from arrest at the hands of their own governments. By knowing

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what is likely to get them into trouble with their respective governments these people outright avoid certain topics such as being critical of the government and its policies, economic setbacks, losses against rebel/terrorist groups, or other areas that make the government look negative. However, these are the topics which are the most important for a countries media to be covering; without a balanced media with protected free speech to report on a government, and ultimately a nations, successes and failures the public is unaware of what is really going on outside of their immediate personal-life. By keeping the public poorly informed authoritarian governments hold an advantage over their own citizens by knowing what is actually taking place in the world and having contextual knowledge of real-time events.

Around the world the concept of free speech can mean different things depending on where it is being practiced and in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen the practice and ideology of free speech is being perpetuated through social media. Extremely strong public sentiments prevent the governments of these countries from blatantly blocking and restricting access to all social media sites. As a result, the practices of arresting individuals based on anti-protest, anti-cybercrime, etc. legislation, has increased which shows that governments are keenly aware of social media's capabilities in promoting free speech and are actively passing regulation to promote fear of being arrested and encourage self-censorship. Globally other nations such as China, North Korea, and Russia have taken steps to more closely monitor the activities of journalists, activists, bloggers, dissidents, etc. and suppress free speech especially when it concerns governmental matters. In a country the media, the press, the fourth estate, whatever its title, is directly intertwined in the activities of the government; framing, monitoring, and contextualizing a government and its policies while remaining a separate institute for the benefit of the public. The ability for these institutes to practice free speech is an integral part for an open

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and transparent government and globally free speech is considered a birthright in some countries while in others it is still a long-ways away from being practiced openly.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the purpose of this research was to perform a critical analysis of the post-Arab Spring media landscape of Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Libya, and Yemen in order to ascertain how the governments of these nations are using legislation and regulations to censor the media of their countries as well as encourage self-censorship among journalists and citizens. By examining where these countries stand in terms of their current socio-political status, internet penetration rates, youth demographics, and specific examples of regulation and legislation being used to promote media censorship, we can capture a snapshot of each nation's media landscape which can be analyzed and contextualized.

Each nation is helmed by a government which is actively seeking to move their respective nations backwards in terms of free speech, freedom of expression, and the freedom to publicly protest, all through either the rewritten constitutions or government structures initially called for by the Arab Spring protests, or through arrest/intimidation/kidnapping by either central governments or rebel and terrorist groups which hold control over parts of Syria and Yemen. Following the protests in 2011 these governments have come to understand the capabilities that the public has when given access to the internet and social media. By taking steps to restrict access to social media sites, controlling internet access, passing anti-protest and libel laws which make criticism of the government a crime, and offering little or no legal protection to journalists, the governments of Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Tunisia are eroding the power of the media, one of the few tools citizens have to use against authoritarian governments. Media organizations stand as separate entities from the government and the public as a civil liberty group which helps

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monitor government activities and keep the public informed. By weakening these institutions Egyptian, Libyan, Syrian, Tunisian, and Yemeni governments are demonstrably making the effort to bring their countries back to a level of control that mirrors or even surpasses that of pre-Arab Spring times. This effort perpetuates the cycle of authoritarian leadership which has been a continuous problem for these nations, but through an international effort to continue to promote internet access, media literacy, and journalistic training in these countries it is possible to work towards a more free and open media in the Middle East.

In this research the application of a multi-faceted critical analysis has been used to frame and contextualize various aspects of the media landscapes of Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen. By examining media and communication-related issues using an intersection of anthropology, political-science, communications, and sociology the larger topic of media censorship in the Middle East can be understood more completely. While pulling information from various sources and academic fields may seem contradictory to researching and understanding media and communication, how information is shared within a particular culture can have an impact on that cultures relations with the rest of the world and needs a multi-dimensional approach to fully understand it. As media become a more integral part of people's daily lives and access to the internet expands across the globe the need for a more comprehensive theory to conduct research through will allow for a deeper understanding of media as it is changing rather than after it has already changed.

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