

# **Social Media in the Middle East: The Story of 2016**

**Top trends and data from the past 12 months**



**Damian Radcliffe**  
**December 2016**

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## About the Author

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His journalistic and research work focuses on digital trends, social media, technology, the business of media and the evolution of journalism. Over the past two decades he has worked in the UK, Middle East and USA.

Damian has written for a range of outlets about digital developments in the Middle East, including: ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller, BBC Academy/BBC College of Journalism, The Conversation, Georgetown University in Qatar, The Huffington Post, TheMediaBriefing, MediaShift, Northwestern University in Qatar, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, Your Middle East and others.

He writes a [monthly column](#) on tech, IT and telecoms in the Middle East for CBS Interactive / ZDNet.

As a speaker on Middle East matters, Damian has participated as a trainer, keynote, panelist and conference chair, at events in locations such as Dubai, Doha, Istanbul, London and Washington D.C.

You can view Damian’s writing and research portfolio at: [www.damianradcliffe.com](http://www.damianradcliffe.com) and he tweets [@damianradcliffe](#). You can contact him through those channels or via email at: [damianr@uoregon.edu](mailto:damianr@uoregon.edu)<sup>1</sup>

This report is the fifth in a series of annual reports designed to capture key developments and data related to usage of social media in the Middle East.

The past year has seen the continued growth of visual-led social networks, especially in the more affluent Gulf region.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the discernible growth in mobile social users (+66% notes the creative agency We Are Social) emphasizes the increasing primacy of the mobile social experience.

For many users, mobile is the only way that they interact with social networks. Mobile platforms, for millions in the region, will also offer their first online experience. Recognizing this, companies like Facebook have launched Facebook Lite, an Android app targeting users on slow networks (and with small data plans). Their Free Basics program allows customers on the Zain network in Jordan and AsiaCell, Korek and Zain in Iraq avoid data charges when using Facebook on their mobile devices.<sup>3</sup> Will other providers follow suit?

Yet, for all the positives, the social experience in some parts of the region remains beset with challenges. Networks and services can be blocked – both temporarily and permanently – and issues around freedom of expression persist. These dimensions, alongside growth stories and statistics, are explored in this round-up.

*Damian Radcliffe, December 2016*

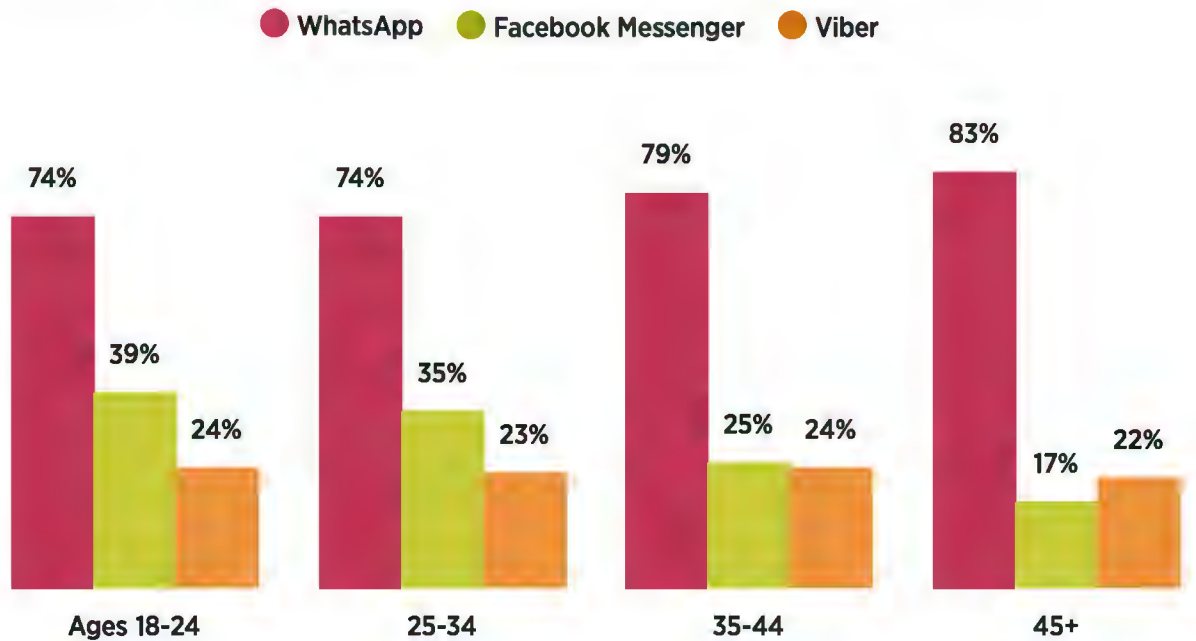


Figure 1: Digital Growth in MENA, via We Are Social<sup>4</sup>

# 1. WhatsApp

- **WhatsApp, remains the most popular direct messaging service in the region, especially with older audiences, according to data from Northwestern University in Qatar.**<sup>5</sup>
- **93% of WhatsApp users, in the six nations studied by Northwestern, are daily users of the app.**<sup>6</sup>
- Across the 16 countries covered by the Arab Youth Survey, **62% of young Arabs (those aged 18-24) use WhatsApp on a daily basis** (ahead of Facebook at 55%).<sup>7</sup>
- Reuters reported that the **Dubai based billionaire Mohamed Alabbar is planning to launch a regional rival to WhatsApp designed for an Arabic-speaking audience.**<sup>8</sup>
- The messaging service was reported to be a **key communication tool for those involved in the foiled coup in Turkey** earlier this year.<sup>9</sup>

Percent who use the following direct messaging services, by age:



Base: Nationals, internet users; n=3,355.

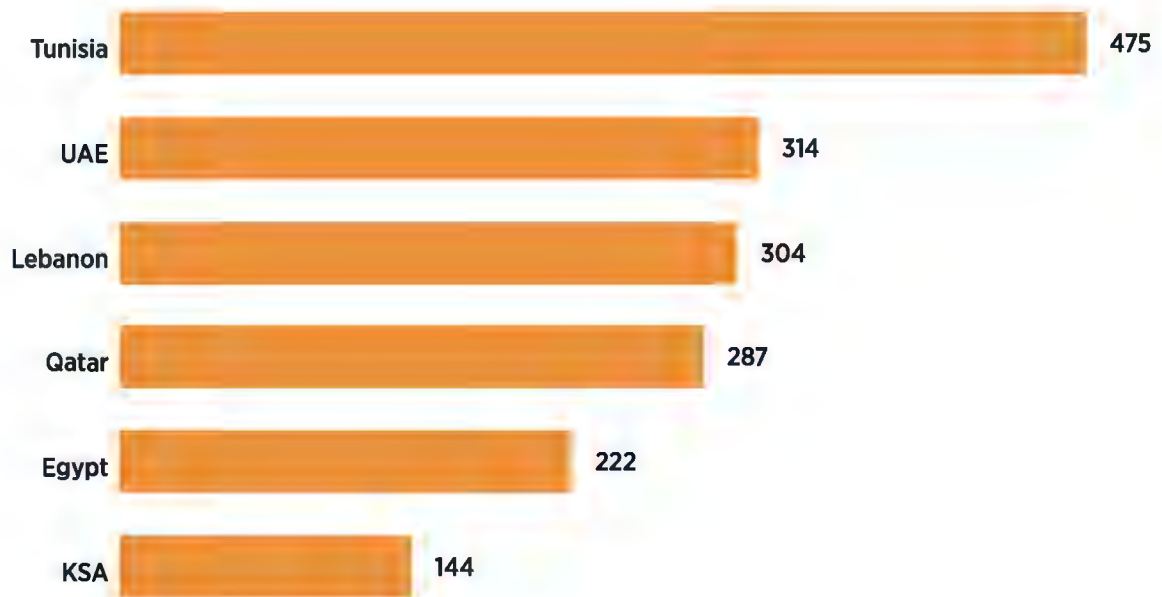
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Figure 2: Usage of major messaging apps in six select countries, Northwestern University in Qatar

## 2. Facebook

- Across the region Facebook has 136 million monthly users. 93% access Facebook on mobile. The number of active monthly users has tripled since 2012.<sup>10</sup>
- Northwestern University in Qatar found that amongst Arab nationals, “Facebook users in the region report a median of 160 friends... The median number of Facebook friends ranges from the highest in Tunisia to the lowest in Saudi Arabia (332 vs. 60).”
- Age also plays a role in determining your number of Facebook friends. Users aged 18-24 typically have 230 friends, whilst Facebookers over 45 tend to have around 80 friends on the network.<sup>11</sup>
- Tunisia is among the first countries to benefit from the roll-out of Facebook’s Messenger Lite.<sup>12</sup> The app, which is under 10MB in size, "offers the core features of Messenger for markets with slower-than-average internet speeds and a prevalence of basic Android smartphones." More than 1 billion people around the world use Facebook Messenger each month.<sup>13</sup>

### Average number of friends people say they have on Facebook



Base: Nationals, Facebook users: n=2,601.

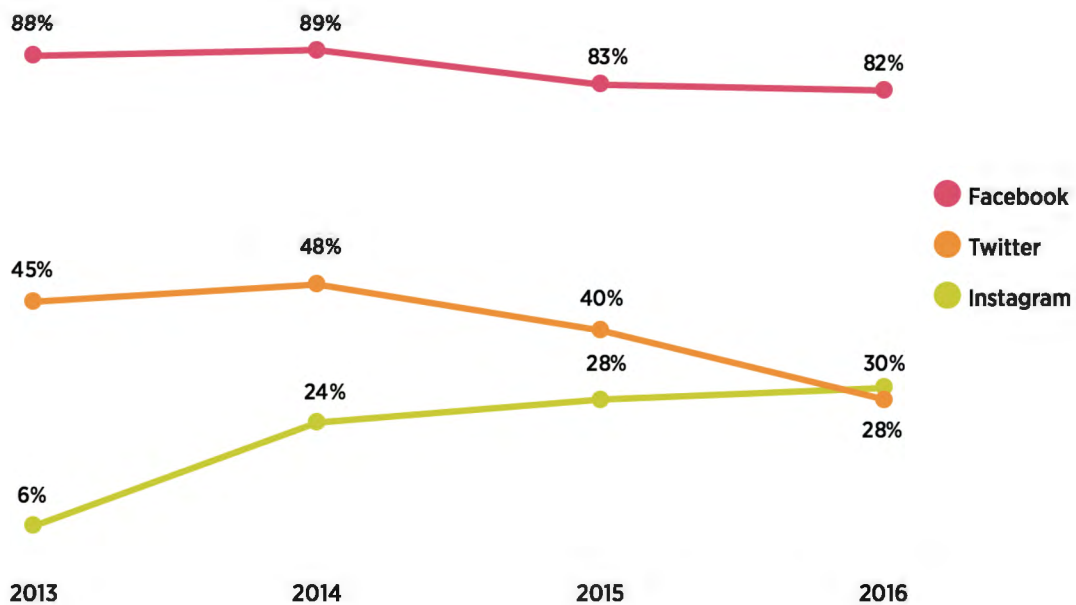
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Figure 3: Average number of declared Facebook friends (Arab nationals only), in Egypt, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and UAE. Northwestern University in Qatar

### 3. Instagram

- **Instagram has overtaken Twitter in the region** according to a survey of internet users (nationals only) in Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and UAE.<sup>15</sup>
- Data published by Northwestern University in Qatar, shows that **use of Instagram in these markets increased by 24% between 2013 and 2016. The number of Twitter users fell by 17% in this time**, including a 12% drop in the past year.
- **Instagram usage has grown from 38% of Internet users across UAE in 2014 to 60% in 2016. Usage in Saudi Arabia has jumped from 57% in 2014 to 82% in 2016.** The global average is 42% (2016) up from 24% two years ago, according to the *Connected Life* study published by the research agency Kantar TNS.<sup>16</sup>
- **Netflix invited applications for photographers (“Grammasters”) in the Middle East and Europe** to take pictures of iconic film and TV locations using the app.<sup>17</sup> The two-week gig paid \$4,000.<sup>18</sup>

Percent who use the following social media platforms:



Base: Nationals, internet users; 2013 n= 2,856; 2014 n=2,427; 2015 n=2,764; 2016 n=3,355.

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Figure 4: Nationals usage (internet users only) of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, 2013-16, in Egypt, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and UAE. Northwestern University in Qatar



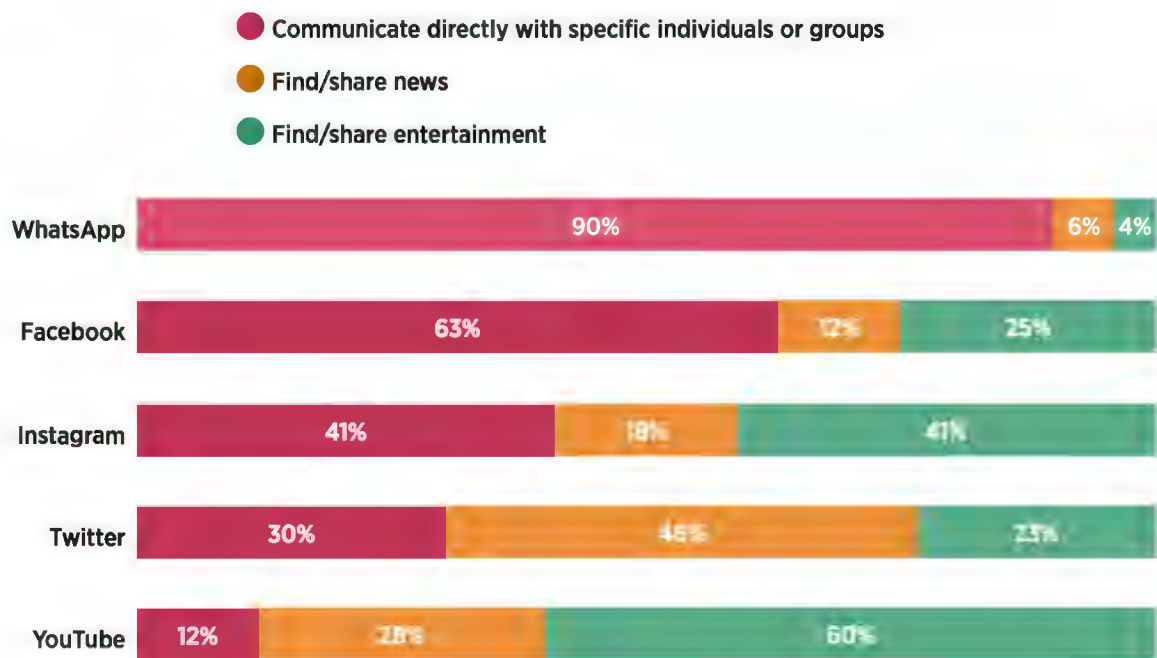
## 4. Twitter

- The Guardian reported at the start of the year that **Twitter had deleted more than 125,000 accounts linked to ISIS terrorists since mid-2015.**<sup>19</sup>

*“We condemn the use of Twitter to promote violent terrorism.” Twitter said in a statement on 5 February. “This type of behavior, or any violent threats, is not permitted on our service.”*

- Northwestern University in Qatar reported that **the number of active Twitter users in the region had dropped substantially** (12% in the past year). But **the micro-blogging network remains – by a considerable margin – the leading platform for Arab nationals to find news on social media.**<sup>20</sup>
- In June, **Algerian authorities temporarily blocked access to Twitter, Facebook, and other social media sites in a bid to prevent people posting high school exam papers online.**<sup>21</sup>

### Users of each social media platform who say they use it most often to...



Base: Nationals, users of given platform.

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Figure 5: Most popular activities on social networks. Nationals usage (internet users only) of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, 2013-16, in Egypt, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and UAE. Northwestern University in Qatar

## 5. Snapchat

- In Saudi Arabia and UAE usage of Snapchat has tripled in two years amongst internet users, noted Kantar TNS' *Connected Life* study.
- Usage in Saudi Arabia grew from 24% - 74% during 2014-16. In UAE, it increased from 15% - 53% of internet users during the same period. This compares with a global average of 12% - 23%.<sup>22</sup>
- Snapchat hosted their first ever regional event at Dubai Ice Rink on 27<sup>th</sup> May, supported by Platinum Records, MBC and others. It featured Snapchat stars and musicians from the region.



Figure 6: Al Arabiya presenters Omar al-Nashwan and Mahira Abdelaziz with Palestinian singer Mohammed Assaf (Center, left) and Moroccan singer Abdel Fattah Abdel Fattah Grini. (Courtesy: Platinum Records)<sup>23</sup>

- The ephemeral social network announced plans to open a field office in Dubai towards the end of the year.<sup>24</sup> This would be their first office in the region.
- [Saeed Al Remeithi at 32-years-old](#), is the UAE Federal National Council's youngest member. Al Arabiya English quoted him explaining how he was “one of the only candidates to talk to our voters exclusively on Snapchat, from the moment I registered my candidacy to the ballot box.”<sup>25</sup>



Figure 7: Saeed Al Remeithi's Snapchat account, as captured on his Instagram page:<sup>26</sup>



## 6. Video Content

*'People are watching and enjoying a lot more video on many different platforms but particularly in mobile and we know that as much as 25% of mobile time will be video within the next couple of years.'* Ian Manning, Head of Agencies, Facebook MENA.<sup>27</sup>

- In September, YouTube launched a new hub called Mosalsalat. Featuring more than 500 iconic Arabic television series, it offers over 7,000 hours of content, produced in the region. The hub contains material dating back to 1962, searchable by genre and country of origin.<sup>28</sup>
- The network created an offline viewing mode on the YouTube mobile app for users in Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Yemen, and Algeria.<sup>29</sup>
- Meanwhile in October, YouTube launched Batala ([youtube.com/batala](https://youtube.com/batala)) a hub for female creators from MENA, featuring more than 100 female creators and over 1,000 videos.<sup>30</sup>
- Comedy, news, and music are MENA's favorite online video genres Northwestern University found.<sup>31</sup>
- BBC Media Action produced a mobile-first video designed to help the viewer experience "the confusion and fear facing refugees making a perilous journey by boat."<sup>32</sup>

*"In times of crisis, we know that information can be as important as food, water and shelter. Yet in this digital age, many refugees travelling through unfamiliar territory lack reliable information to stay safe and survive. Whether it is following conflict, flood or famine, this film shows communication is essential in any humanitarian crisis."* Alexandra Buccianti, BBC Media Action



## 7. Youth News Habits

- As charted by the annual<sup>33</sup> Arab Youth Survey, the media and news consumption habits of this demographic are also continuing to change and evolve at a rapid pace.<sup>34</sup>
  - **63% of Arab youth claim they get their news from television**, down from 79% in 2011.
  - **More than half (52%) of Arab youth share stories with their friends on Facebook, up 11% in the past year**, mirroring the “social sharing” and “social news” trends in other markets.
  - **Only 17% of young Arabs aged 18-24 use newspapers as a source for news; on a par with radio and some way behind family and friends (30%), social media (32%), online news channels (45% cent) and television (63%)**. In 2011, nearly two-thirds of Arab youth (62%) claimed that they used newspapers as part of their news media consumption.

*“Whichever way you look at it, this decline – from 62 %to 17% in just five years – represents a phenomenal loss of [newspaper] audience.”*

*Damian Radcliffe, essay on “The Age of Social,” 2016 Arab Youth Survey<sup>35</sup>*

**ON A DAILY BASIS, MORE YOUNG ARABS GET THEIR NEWS ONLINE THAN FROM TV OR PRINT MEDIA.**

**32%**

read news online daily

**29%**

watch TV news channels daily

**7%**

read newspapers daily



Figure 8: How young Arabs get their news, Arab Youth Study

- The power of social media influencers – especially in the areas of Food, Fashion & Beauty – continues to grow in the region. A study produced by YouGov for BPG Cohn & Wolfe, revealed **71% of UAE residents will take advice from Social Media Influencers before buying a product.**<sup>36</sup>
- Facebook continues to be the most popular channel to follow influencers across these areas.

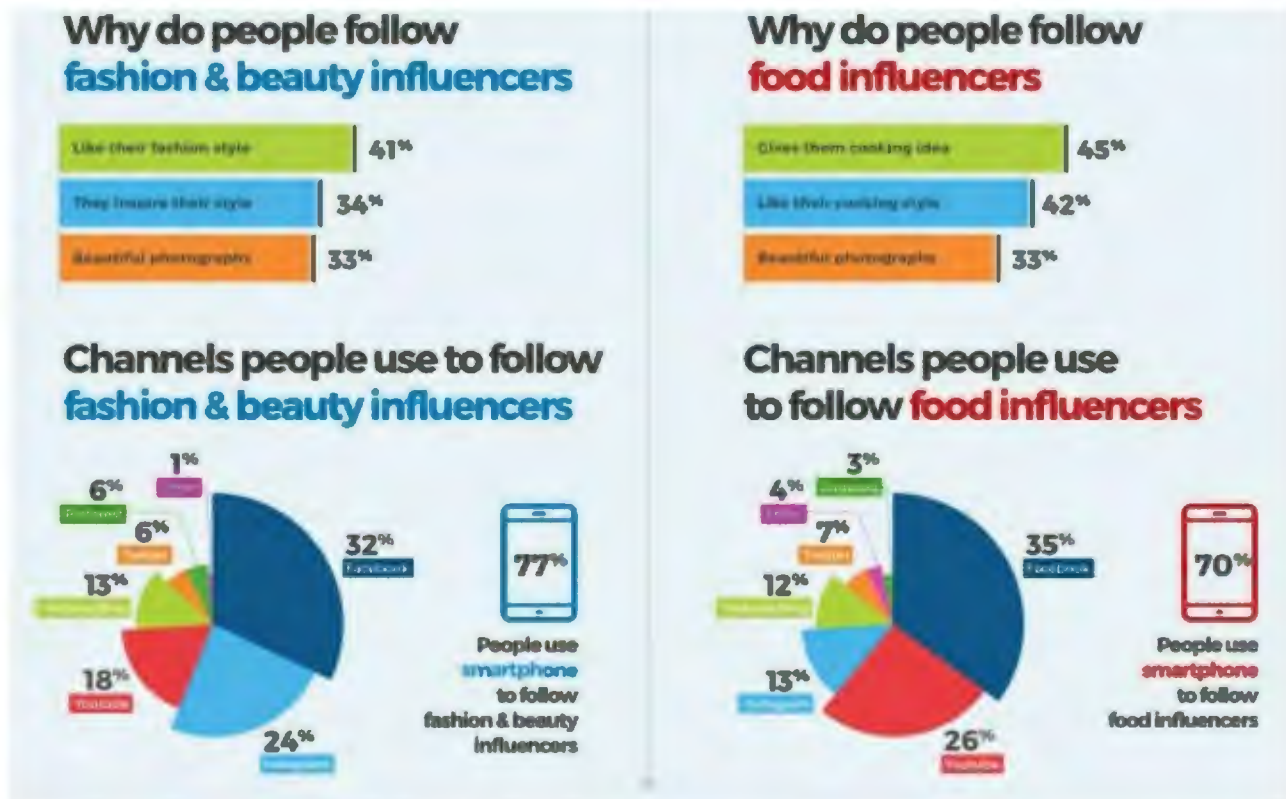


Figure 9: Why people in UAE follow different influencers online

- **Ahead of Eid Al Adha**, Arabian Business reported that **sheep were being sold on Instagram**, noting: “Traders say [the] photo-sharing app is an easy way to display the sheep.”<sup>37</sup>
- In May the Saudi Gazette reported that a very different type of online sales activity had been spotted online in the Saudi capital of Riyadh. **The General Directorate of Narcotics Control apprehended five suspects who were selling drugs through Snapchat.**<sup>38</sup>
- **A fake Facebook page offering free first class flights with Emirates, emerged online during August.**<sup>39</sup> The page now appears to have been removed.

## 9. Service Outages, Blocks and Closures

- The past year has seen a myriad of issues across the region with social networks being closed or blocked. Here are some examples:
  - In Morocco, Maroc Telecom, Meditel and Inwi, blocked access to services which allow users to make free calls through an internet connection. Skype, Viber, Tango, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, were among the services affected, Middle East Eye noted at the start of the year. “Morocco’s Telecommunications Regulatory National Agency (ANRT), which was behind the ban, justified its decision by stating that none of the services providing voice over IP (VoIP) or other “free internet calls” had the required licenses.”<sup>40</sup>
  - YouTube and Facebook “have quietly started using automation to remove extremist content from their sites,” Reuters reported over the summer.<sup>41</sup>
  - In July, UAE issued a new law banning the use of VPNs.<sup>42</sup> These tools are used by expats to access streaming TV services (like Netflix) as well as VoIP services like Skype.<sup>43</sup>
  - Saudi Arabia added calls from the app Line to its list of blocked services this September.<sup>44</sup>
  - In October, Houthis banned usage of WhatsApp in Yemen, Middle East Monitor stated.<sup>45</sup>



**UAE Federal Law No. 12/2016 amending Federal Law No. 5/2012 on combating information technology crimes.**

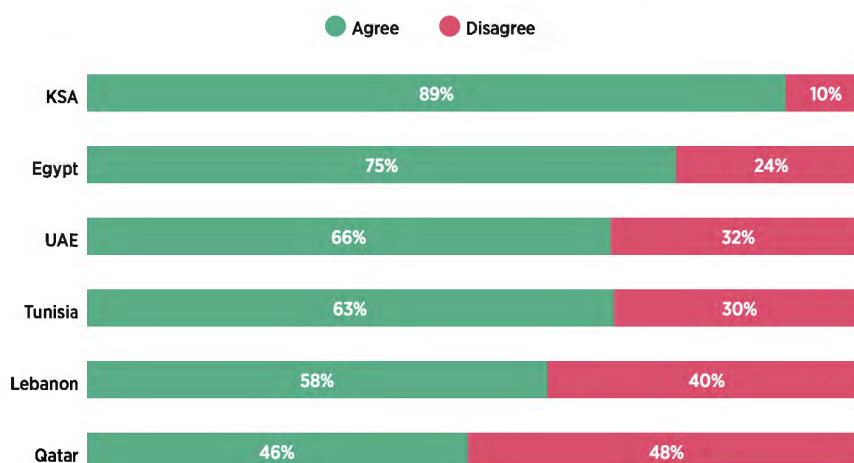
“Whoever uses a fraudulent computer network protocol address (IP address) by using a false address or a third-party address by any other means for the purpose of committing a crime or preventing its discovery, shall be punished by temporary imprisonment and a fine of no less than Dh500,000 and not exceeding Dh2,000,000, or either of these two penalties.”

Figure 10: Apps blocked in Saudi Arabia. Figure 11: Fines in UAE akin to \$136000 – 544,000.

## 10. Privacy and Freedom of Expression

- **In May, a Turkish court convicted Merve Buyuksarac, a former Miss Turkey, of insulting President Erdogan online.** She received a 14-month suspended prison sentence. The BBC noted that this followed sharing a satirical poem on her Instagram account in 2014.<sup>46</sup>
- **Turkey also blocked access to social networks at various points over the year.** In July, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were blocked in Turkey during reported coup attempt.<sup>47</sup> In November it was reported that Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube were being blocked following the arrests of “at least 11 pro-Kurdish politicians.”<sup>48</sup> The TurkeyBlocks monitoring network also reported<sup>49</sup> that Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and a partial block of Instagram was in place after a bomb attack in Gaziantep. The blast killed over 50 people.<sup>50</sup> Networks were also blocked following an attack on Ankara in March.<sup>51</sup>
- **A Gulf national was sentenced to three years in prison and fined AED50,000** (to then be deported after serving this jail term) **after ridiculing Emirati martyrs** in Yemen, “describing them as 'cowards' on WhatsApp,” the state news agency WAM said.<sup>52</sup>
- Research from Northwestern University in Qatar found: **“Nearly seven in 10 national internet users say they changed how they use social media due to privacy concerns**, with proportions ranging from 89% of Saudis and 75% of Egyptians to 46% of Qataris”.<sup>53,54</sup>

Percent who agree/disagree:  
“Concerns about privacy have changed the way I use social media”



Note: Does not include don't know/refuse responses.  
Base: Nationals, internet users; n=3,384.

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Figure 12: Impact of privacy concerns on online habits of Arab Nationals. Northwestern University in Qatar



### *Selected research recommendations:*

- **We Are Social:** [Digital in 2016](#) (Jan 2016)
- **Arab Youth Survey 2016:** [Presentation](#), [White Paper](#), [Top 10 Findings](#) (April 2016)
- **Northwestern University in Qatar:** [Media Use in the Middle East, 2016](#) (May 2016)
- **Pew Research Center:** [Global Technology Report](#) (February 2016)

### Previous reports

- **Damian Radcliffe:** [Social Media in the Middle East: The Story of 2015](#) (January 2016)  
*(also available on [Scribd](#), [SlideShare](#) and [Academia.edu](#), + the UNESCO Media Literacy Portal)*
- **Damian Radcliffe:** [Social Media in the Middle East: The Story of 2014](#) (January 2015)  
*(also available on [Scribd](#), [SlideShare](#) and [Academia.edu](#))*

*Please also see previous annual round-ups produced when I worked for Qatar's Ministry of Information and Communications Technology ([ictQATAR](#)):*

- **Social Media in the Middle East: The Story of 2013** ([English](#), [Arabic](#))
- **Social Media in the MENA – 2012 Review** ([English](#), [Arabic](#))

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Cover image: <https://static.pexels.com/photos/6335/man-coffee-cup-pen-large.jpg>
- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.qatar.northwestern.edu/news/articles/2016/05-mideastmedia.html>
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