

Media Habits of Middle Eastern Youth

Since the debut of Satellite TV and the Internet in the Arab world, many international and some Arab scholars predicted major changes in Arab populace—one the populations with the highest percentage of youth. Some scholars spoke about radical revolutions and hailed the new media as an opportunity for “winning hearts and minds,” others predicted vast cultural and identity changes due to the new open information arena provided by email, online news, cross-national TV programs and a plethora of new web applications. However, the swift change never came, and the “revolutions” that did occur were directly connected to powerful political, military and governmental forces and mostly used traditional media to insight the public.

So why has that new-media-led change not transpired? One possibility is an erroneous assumption about media habits among Arab youth. Are they really embracing the information superhighway? Even so, how are they using this free information access? For instance, are Arab youth using Facebook and MySpace to connect with existing friends scattered around the world? Or are they utilizing it as a tool of political organization, or merely for entertainment? To what extent is the assumption that government-controlled local Arab TV has been replaced by the likes of al-Jazeera and YouTube? All these questions and more are the focus of a new study sponsored by the Issam Fares Institute at the American University of Beirut and conducted by Dr. Jad Melki of the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

The initial research that only focuses on three countries is a pilot study for a larger project that will examine media consumption and production habits among youth in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The project aims to generate a status report on what media do various Middle Eastern youth demographics use to access and generate news and information, particularly print, broadcast, satellite, mobile, online, and Web 2.0 media.

The study will look for indicators of such consumption and production habits, including education level, socio-economic status, national and regional origin, gender, religion, and other indicators related to country development and technology penetration. In addition, the study will evaluate the level of trust and engagement and the type of information accessed and generated.

To tackle these issues in the pilot phase of the study, the researcher will survey a convenience sample of university and high school students in Lebanon, Jordan and the U.A.E. In the next phase, the study will survey nationally representative samples of youth in various MENA countries.

Examining the media habits of MENA youth has not been seriously studied so far and is not included as a development indicator for the Arab world. Having a better picture about how this demographic consumes and produces media contributes to the understanding of social, political and commercial trends and shifts that have important policy, business and cultural implications. The findings of this study will contribute to understanding the direction in which the Arab world is moving through understanding the media consumption and production habits that predominate. The findings will help guide development policies, serve as a bellwether to important trends and behaviors, and offer a basis for the actions of youth-focused Arab institutions and NGOs.