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Social Media Use, Trust, and Surveillance in the Arab Region: Insights from the Arab Opinion Index (2024-2025)****

استخدام وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي والثقة والمراقبة في المنطقة العربية: قراءة في نتائج المؤشر العربي (2024-2025)

Abstract: Drawing on data from the 2024-2025 Arab Opinion Index, this report explores evolving public attitudes toward social media across Arab countries. It examines how individuals use digital platforms to acquire and engage with news and participate in political and social discourse, especially in the context of ongoing regional conflicts. The findings reveal high levels of reliance on social media for information, alongside growing concerns over misinformation, censorship, and cultural harm. Despite widespread support for content regulation, many continue to use these platforms to discuss political and social issues. The report underscores the complexity of digital awareness and engagement in the Arab region and calls for more qualitative research to unpack public views on censorship, freedom of expression, and the impact of social media on political awareness and democratic values.

Keywords: Arab Opinion Index; Social Media; Misinformation; Censorship; Freedom of Expression.

الملخص: استنادًا إلى بيانات مؤشر الرأي العام العربي 2024-2025، يتتبع هذا التقرير تطوّر الرأي العام تجاه وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في 14 دولة عربية. ويدرس كيفية استخدام الأفراد للمنصات الرقمية للحصول على الأخبار والتفاعل معها والمشاركة في الخطاب السياسي والاجتماعي، لا سيما في سياق الصراعات الإقليمية المستمرة. تكشف النتائج عن مستويات عالية من الاعتماد على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي للحصول على المعلومات، إلى جانب المخاوف المتزايدة بشأن المعلومات المضللة والمراقبة والخطر الثقافي. وعلى الرغم من الدعم الواسع لتنظيم المحتوى، لا يزال الكثيرون يستخدمون هذه المنصات لمناقشة القضايا السياسية والاجتماعية. ويؤكد التقرير على تعقد الوعي الرقمي والمشاركة فيه في المنطقة العربية، ويدعو إلى إجراء المزيد من البحوث النوعية لتحليل آراء الجمهور عن الرقابة وحرية التعبير وتأثير وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي على الوعي السياسي والقيم الديمقراطية.

كلمات مفتاحية: المؤشر العربي؛ وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي؛ المعلومات المضللة؛ الرقابة؛ حرية التعبير.

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Introduction

Survey data on social media use and public opinion in the Arab region point to a complex and evolving relationship between citizens and digital platforms. On one hand, reliance on social media for news consumption and engagement with current events has grown significantly. On the other hand, there is a marked increase in public scepticism regarding the reliability of the information circulating on these platforms, as well as growing concerns about censorship and control of information flows. Moreover, the increasing reliance on social media for information is unfolding against the backdrop of ongoing wars in the region – in Palestine, Lebanon, and Sudan – which appear to have further shaped how people interact with and perceive social media.

This report examines key trends in public opinion toward social media based on the latest wave (2024-2025) of the Arab Opinion Index (AOI)¹. It focuses on the ways in which people use social media for social and political engagement, their concerns about misinformation, and their evolving views on censorship and surveillance. We analyse both the extent and nature of social media engagement, as well as public perceptions of its societal impact. We conclude with remarks on the potential implications of these developments for political engagement and attitudes toward democracy, and with questions that require further research on social media in the Arab region.

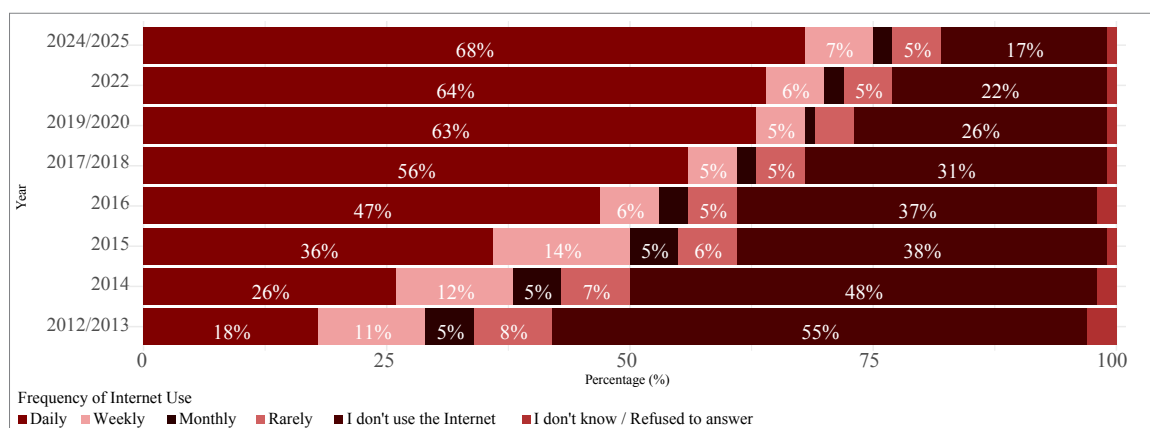
Internet and Social Media Use in Arab Countries

Since its first round of implementation, the AOI survey has documented the rapid increase in internet and social media use across the region. The 2024-2025 survey has been no exception to this trend. As Figure 1 shows, 82% of the population in the Arab region uses the internet to varying degrees, and 68% report using it almost daily. This data highlights the extent to which internet access has become as integral to daily life as access to electricity and water. Indeed, in some countries, it is often more consistently available than either. Tracking internet use over the years reveals a steady and significant increase: the percentage of those who use the internet to varying degrees rose from 42% in 2012-2013, to 61% in 2016, 77% in 2022, and 82% as of 2024 (Figure 1). The highest rates of internet usage at least daily were recorded in Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Morocco, and Kuwait, where over 80% of the population are daily internet users. By contrast, less than 70% of respondents in Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, and Mauritania reported daily internet use, with approximately one-third of the population in each country not using the internet at all. Overall, people were divided between using the internet daily and not using it all, and only a few – less than 4% on average – reported using it only weekly or monthly.

It is also noteworthy that over 90% of respondents reported accessing the internet via mobile phones, an increase from 88% in 2022. This highlights the increasingly blurred boundaries between digital and non-digital worlds. As described by many scholars, smartphones have increasingly become an “extension of the body”,² reflecting a shift in how people connect to the internet.

¹ The Arab Opinion Index is a public opinion survey conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies to gauge public attitudes in the Arab region toward political, social, and economic issues, including democracy, governance, and foreign policy. It is the largest social survey project in the Arab region in terms of sample size, geographic coverage, and thematic breadth. Since its launch in 2011, nine rounds have been completed. The 2024-2025 edition includes data from 14 countries. The total sample includes 35,218 respondents.

² Moran Quinn Ross & Joseph B. Bayer, “Explicating Self-Phones: Dimensions and Correlates of Smartphone Self-Extension,” *Mobile Media & Communication*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2021), pp. 488-512; Yue Lin et al., “Smartphone Embodiment: The Effect of Smartphone Use on Body Representation,” *Current Psychology*, vol. 42 (2023), pp. 26356–26374.

Figure (1): Internet Use (2012-2025)

Most if not all internet users across the region report being social media users in 2024-2025. On average, 98% of internet users across the 14 countries studied have an account on at least one social media platform. As of this year, WhatsApp has become the most popular social media platform in the region, followed by Facebook, which saw a slight drop in the percentage of respondents with accounts. This shift may be explained by several factors. First, these results suggest that social media use in the region is becoming more centred around messaging, and less around other affordances of social media like content posting. The increasing centrality of private and group messaging has made platforms like WhatsApp more attractive for daily communication and news-sharing. In addition, concerns over privacy, disinformation, and algorithmic manipulation have contributed to a gradual erosion of trust in Facebook, pushing users toward alternative platforms perceived as more secure or less politicized. Lastly, platform-specific policies and accessibility issues, such as temporary bans or limitations, may also influence user behaviour and platform preferences across the region.

A large proportion of respondents (46%) expressed a preference for interactive posts and videos over written text (27%). This may be attributed to the overwhelming flow of information on local and global events, which fuels demand for fast, easy-to-consume content. In fact, following the news, staying informed about current events, and sharing opinions remains the second most common reason for using social media platforms, with an average of 24% of the population citing these motivations (Table 1). In this context, primarily chat-based social media, such as Telegram, has seen a remarkable rise in adoption: usage increased from just 8% in 2016 to 30% in 2022, reaching 44% by 2024-2025. Such growth could be driven by Telegram's recent role in Israel's ongoing war on Gaza, where it has served as a means to bypass censorship and access alternative news sources, particularly as various Palestinian armed groups have used it to communicate directly with audiences and provide real-time updates on developments during the war.

Table (1): Reasons for Use of Social Media Platforms

Primary Reason for Using Social Media	Algeria	Egypt	Iraq	Jordan	Kuwait	Lebanon	Libya	Mauritania	Morocco	Palestine	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	Sudan	Tunisia	Average
To communicate with friends and acquaintances	38	23.8	51.1	22.3	15.7	20.3	15.5	18.2	17.7	27.6	22.1	42.4	32.6	27.5	26.8
To follow and share political information and views	19.2	19.5	10.1	31.1	25.2	28.2	28.6	25.6	19.5	38.2	21.7	14.6	30.6	22.6	24

To fill spare time	11.8	15.5	16.6	18	9.8	16.7	7.9	8.4	11.4	10	8.2	6.1	4.2	10.6	11.1
To stay up to date with trending topics	7.5	11.3	4.7	5.3	12	4.5	12.5	15.3	7.1	3.1	16.2	10.6	7.4	14.7	9.4
To follow content I'm interested in	6.3	9.8	4.6	9.6	10.3	9.7	8.3	10.3	10.7	6.9	13.4	2.5	6.5	9.8	8.5
To share my updates with friends	3.1	7.3	2.4	6.5	8.4	9.1	7.5	8.4	9.7	5.7	9.2	2	4.8	3.4	6.3
To meet new people	5.5	5.5	5.2	0.8	4.7	3.4	0.8	4.2	7.7	1.3	1.9	8.1	4.1	3.2	4
For work or to promote my field of work	5.9	4.3	3.4	3.6	4.9	3.8	3.4	1.6	4	2.8	3.8	5.1	2.7	5.2	3.9
Refused to answer	2.4	0	0.9	0.2	2.2	1.1	10.9	0.8	2.5	1.2	1.9	7.1	3.5	0	2.5
Don't know	3.5	0.6	0.1	0.5	2.2	1.2	9.4	1.6	2.5	1.1	1.7	3	2.8	0	2.2
To become an influencer	0	0.9	0.1	0.6	3	0.1	0.8	2.1	4	0.4	1.3	1	0.7	0.5	1.1
Other	0	0	0.3	0.8	0	0	0	0	0	0.4	0	0	0	0.5	0.1

Social Media Use in Light of Current Political and Social Issues

Across the Arab region, social media has become a central mode of political news consumption and expression. The survey reveals that 82% of users report turning to social media, albeit to varying degrees, to access political news and information. Over time, the proportion of people using social media to follow political news has increased from 75% in 2022 to 82% in 2025 (Figure 2). When asked about their primary source for news content in general, social media ranked as the second most popular option amongst internet users (35.1%) after TV news channels (46%), as shown in Figure 3. The ongoing wars in the region, particularly in Gaza, Lebanon, and Sudan, likely explain the increased use of social media for following real-time political developments.

Daily use of social media for political news consumption is highest in Palestine, at 82%, compared to 42% in Iraq and 50% in Saudi Arabia. This can be attributed primarily to the ongoing war in Gaza and the continuing occupation of the West Bank, making political news for Palestinians an integral part of everyday life. The limited coverage provided by traditional, especially local, media outlets, along with a general lack of trust in mainstream reporting, likely contributes to the increasing reliance on social media as an alternative and more immediate source of information.

Figure (2): Use of Social Media for News and Political Information

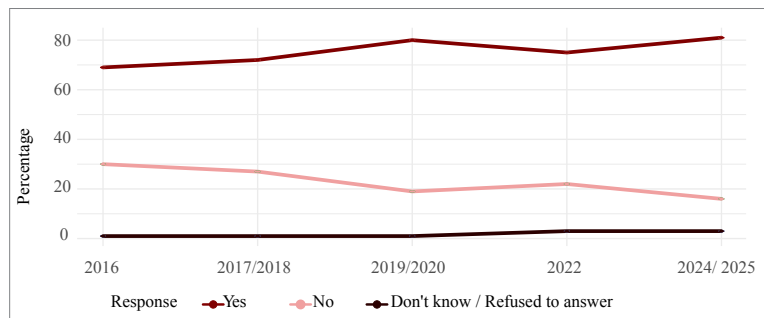
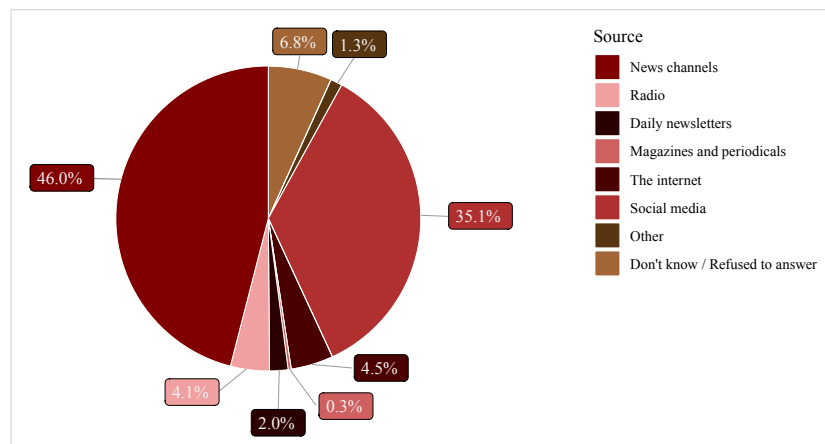
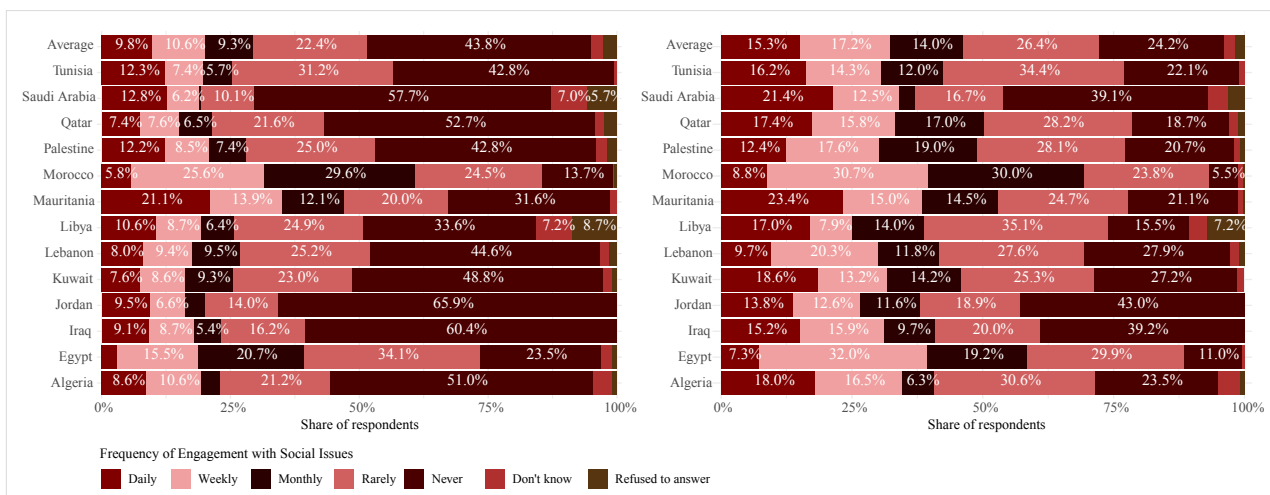


Figure (3): Primary Source for News Content Among Internet Users



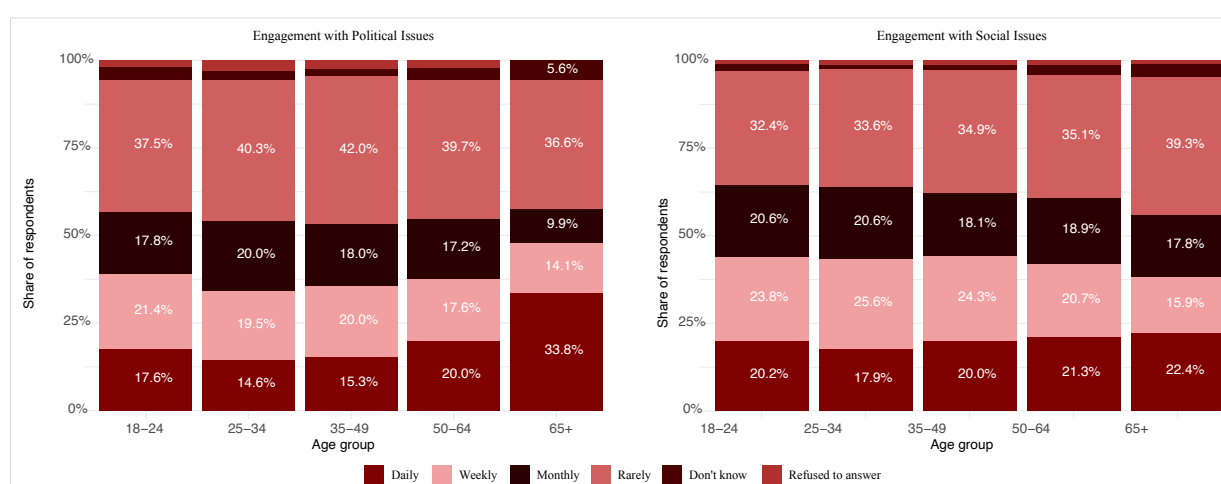
The results also show that 72.9% of respondents use social media to, compared to 52.1% who report using it to engage with political issues across all the countries surveyed (Figure 4). These percentages reflect varying degrees of engagement, from daily to rare use. This gap can be attributed to several factors, most notably the widespread interaction with local social concerns that people may consider more directly relevant to them. Furthermore, it can stem from fears of surveillance or a sense of the futility of expressing political opinions in authoritarian contexts. Some users may also prefer silent observation over public engagement, particularly on themes where openly expressing views is deemed risky.

Figure (4): Social Media Use for Engagement in Public Debates on Political and Social Issues



Surprisingly, the highest levels of very frequent engagement with political issues on social media are found among the oldest age group in the survey (65+), while the lowest are observed among the three youngest age groups (18-49), as shown in Figure 5. Daily use among those aged 65 and above for this purpose is more than twice that of respondents aged 25-34. This suggests that older social media users may be more politically active online, whereas younger users are more likely to use these platforms for social interaction and connecting with friends and acquaintances, rather than for political engagement. However, this generational gap disappears when it comes to engagement with issues the participants considered “social”. In fact, younger age groups were slightly more likely to engage regularly with such content. This could indicate that younger users perceive social issues as more immediately relevant or actionable, while the discussion of political topics, especially in authoritarian contexts, may feel more futile.

Figure (5): Engagement with Political and Social Issues on Social Media Across Age Groups³



Social media platforms add a new dimension to people’s engagement with political news, namely their ability to share rather than simply reach or consume content. However, survey data indicate that most people engage with social media in a predominantly passive manner, primarily for obtaining information, rather than expressing opinions. On average, two-thirds of the population across the countries surveyed reported that they never or only rarely used social media to express political opinions. In some countries, such as Jordan, this figure was even higher, with three-quarters of the population reporting lack of use for this purpose. There were notable exceptions: 68% in Morocco and 45% in Egypt reported using social media regularly (at least several times a month) to share their political views.

When asked specifically about engagement with Israel’s war on Gaza, which has stirred widespread regional attention, only about 9% on average said they actively posted content, while the majority (58%) said they only followed news related to the war on social media without any form of active engagement. While political repression and perceived risks can partially explain these figures, it is important to note that similar response rates were reported regarding the expression of opinions on social media about any issue, political or otherwise.

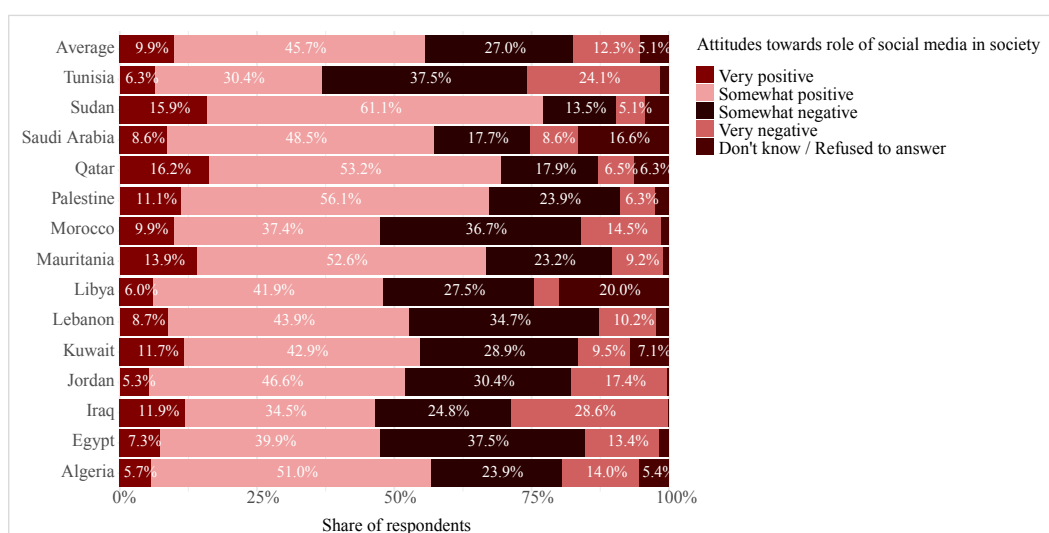
However, the fact that only a minority use social media for active engagement in political or public debates does not necessarily indicate low engagement overall. These figures must be understood in relation to levels of engagement prior to the advent of social media, when such opportunities were far more limited. In this sense, while the proportion remains a minority, it is likely greater than it was before social media platforms. Future research needs to explore not only the extent, but also the nature of these engagements, to understand how political expression is navigated under authoritarian constraints.

³ Only percentages over 5% displayed on the stacks.

Attitudes Toward Social Media's Role in Society

Continuing the trend from 2022, the majority of Arab citizens maintain a generally positive outlook on the role of social media in society (Figure 6). In the most recent survey, 55.6% of respondents viewed social media as having a positive impact, while a significant minority of 39.3% thought it played a negative role. Sudan stands out as the most optimistic, with 77% of respondents perceiving social media's impact as positive. When compared to 2022, there is a notable decline in overall positive sentiment, which stood at 66% that year. This drop of optimism has been particularly pronounced in countries like Egypt, where positive views fell sharply from 81% in 2022 to just 47.2% in 2024-2025, a 34-point decrease. Similar declines were observed in Kuwait and Iraq, with each registering a 23-point drop (from 78% to 54.6% in Kuwait, and from 70% to 46.4% in Iraq). Similar trends persist from the previous year, with populations across North Africa displaying more tempered views on social media's role compared to the Levant, where people remain more optimistic.⁴

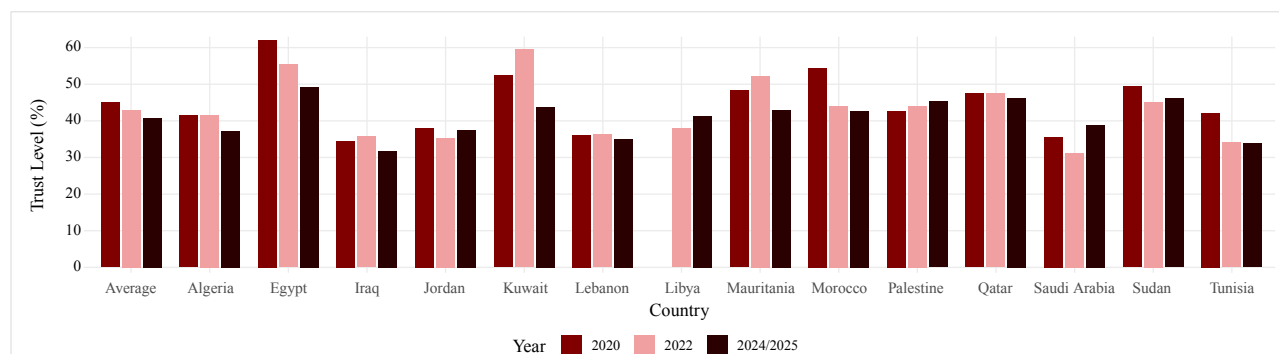
Figure (6): Evaluation of Social Media's Role in Society



The trust index for social media content has remained relatively consistent across survey waves, averaging around 40 on a 100-point scale, though certain countries have exhibited significant decreases (Figure 7). Kuwait and Egypt saw a 15- and 10-point drop from 2022 and 2020, respectively. By contrast, the index of trust for Saudi Arabia saw a slight increase, although it remains lower than the average index.

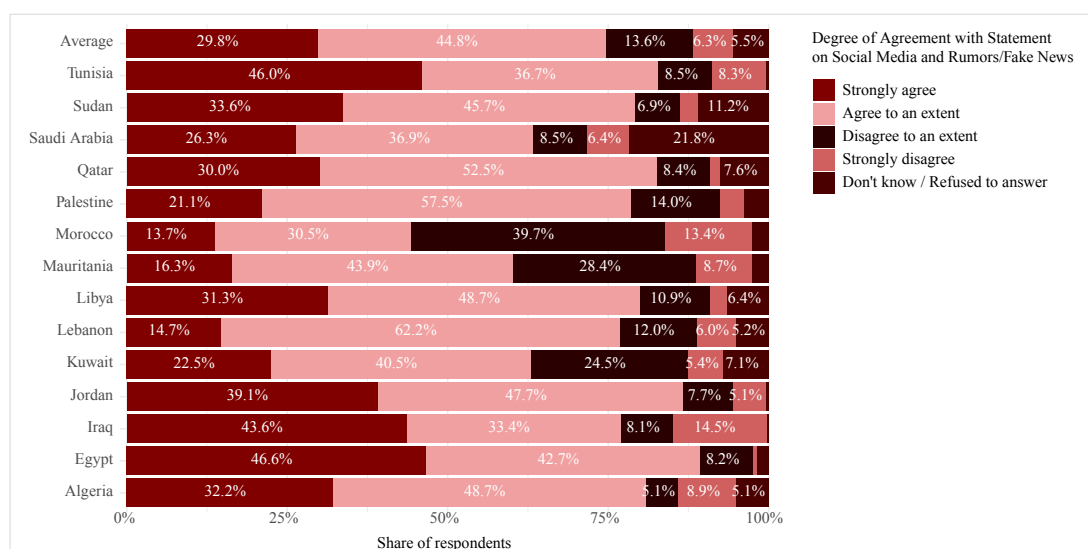
There are widespread concerns over the spread of false information on social media platforms. Across the region – with few exceptions, namely Morocco – over half the population believes that social media has become a hotbed for the spread of rumours and fake news (Figure 8). In Egypt, 89% of respondents believe this to be the case at least to some extent. Furthermore, when asked about the statement that “much of what is published on social media is false and has the potential to misguide people”, an average 71.5% either agreed or strongly agreed, with the highest percentages observed in Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt. Interestingly, these countries are also among the most positive about social media's role in society. This suggests that, while many recognize the spread of false information, they may attribute it to content sources rather than the platforms themselves – or that the perceived benefits of social media outweigh concerns about misinformation.

⁴ Adel Maalel, “Social Media's Socio-Cultural Impacts: An Analysis of the 2022 Arab Opinion Index,” *Al-Muntaga*, vol. 8, no. 1 (January/February 2025), pp. 96-106.

Figure (7): Trust in News and Information on Social Media Platforms

It should be noted that, compared to 2022, public perception of social media as a source of false or misleading content has slightly declined across most of the region. In 2022, 84% of respondents agreed that social media platforms have become spaces where fake news and rumours are spread, and only 13% disagreed. In 2024-2025, less people (74.4%) agreed with this statement. The most notable decreases were observed in Mauritania (from 84% to 60%) and Morocco (from 66% to 45%). In most other countries, the percentage of those who agreed remained relatively high, and in some cases, such as Sudan, it slightly increased (from 75% to 80%). The higher percentages of agreement observed in 2022 are likely attributable to the Covid-19 pandemic, which heightened public anxiety about social media's role in spreading fake news about the virus.

Concerns about fake news on social media are echoed in the general lack of total or very high reported levels of trust in social media content. However, one might expect that widespread agreement with the statement that “social media is a major source of fake news” would correspond to even lower levels of trust. Yet only a minority of respondents in most countries, including those where agreement with the “fake news” statement is highest, reported having little or no trust in the news and information circulating on social media. This contrast may point to a perceptual bias known as the third-person perception, which has been well documented in studies of fake-news beliefs on social platforms,⁵ whereby people recognize that misinformation is rife on social media yet still trust the content they personally consume.

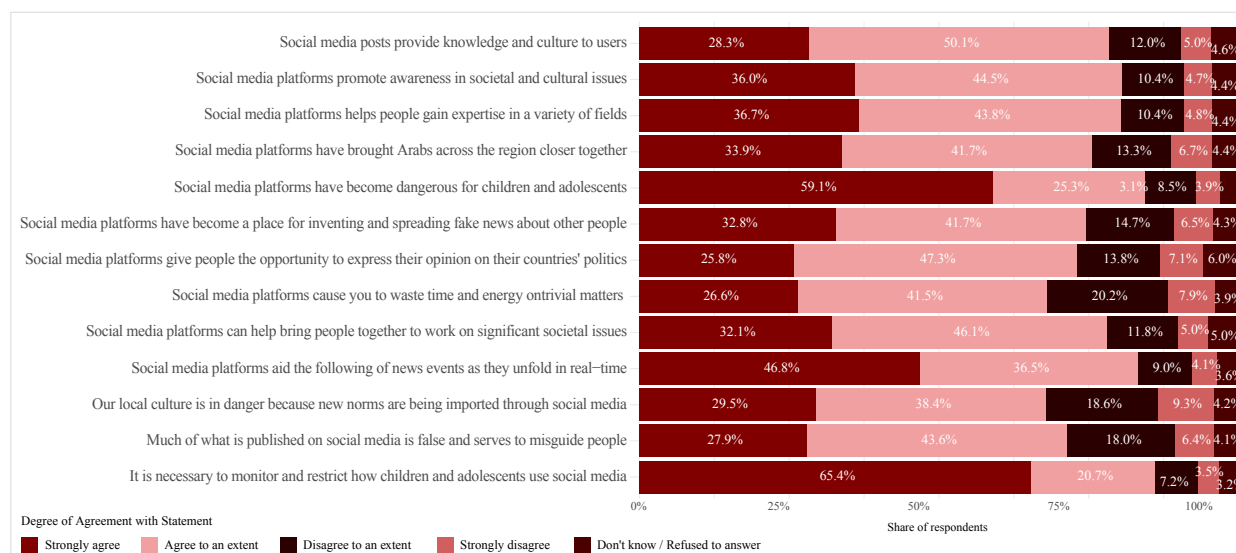
Figure (8): Spread of Rumours and Fake News on Social Media

⁵ Oana Ștefăniță, Nicoleta Corbu & Raluca Buturoiu, “Fake News and the Third-Person Effect: They Are More Influenced than Me and You,” *Journal of Media Research*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2018), pp. 5-23; Nicoleta Corbu et al., “‘They Can’t Fool Me, But They Can Fool the Others!’ Third Person Effect and Fake News Detection,” *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2020), pp. 165-180.

Across the countries surveyed, more respondents tended to agree with statements asserting both a negative and positive role of social media in society, reflecting a general acknowledgement of its multifaceted impact (Figure 9). Importantly, a majority of the population across the region expressed concern about the danger social media poses to local culture. Except for Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, and Morocco, over 50% of citizens in the countries surveyed agreed with the statement that “social media poses a threat because it introduces new customs that do not pertain to the local culture”. It is noticeable that the agreement with this statement is highest in countries where concerns about the spread of fake news on social media are more pronounced. However, the statements with the highest levels of agreement across the region relate to the dangers social media poses to children and teenagers. This is unsurprising, given the long history of “technology panics” focused on its impact on children and adolescents, who are often perceived as especially vulnerable to manipulation or external influence.⁶

Despite these concerns, the majority of the populations in Arab countries express a positive outlook on social media’s ability to educate and inform people on particular issues. For instance, more respondents agreed that social media can raise awareness and facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and culture than those who believed it causes users to waste time on trivial matters.

Figure (9): Social Media’s Role in Society



Perceptions and Attitudes on Censorship and Surveillance Activities

The 2025 AOI survey dedicated a set of questions to understanding the extent to which people in the region are aware of the surveillance, censorship, and control of information flows on social media, and their opinion on these practices. When asked whether they thought their activities on social media were being monitored by any party, a modest majority of respondents across the region, on average, believed there was little or no surveillance (Figure 10). However, there is significant inter-country variance regarding perceptions of surveillance. For instance, in Jordan, almost 60% felt there was at least some monitoring, with one-third feeling a high degree of surveillance, whereas 54% in Iraq said there was no surveillance at all. Similar contrasts emerged when respondents were asked about surveillance by specific parties, whether the state, companies, or the social media platforms themselves. In Iraq, at least 70% discounted the possibility of state monitoring, whereas in Jordan, the highest percentage (56%) amongst surveyed countries felt that the state was surveilling their content. On average, 38% of respondents reported perceiving surveillance from their government and state apparatus, at least to a moderate extent (Figure 11).

⁶ Amy Orben, “The Sisyphean Cycle of Technology Panics,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, vol. 15, no. 5 (2020), pp. 1143-1157.

It is noteworthy that a non-negligible segment of the population either refused to answer or stated they did not know whether surveillance of content occurs. On average, 11.2% of respondents chose “I do not know” or declined to respond when asked about general surveillance perceptions. These rates were especially high in Saudi Arabia (32.1%), Sudan (22.8%), and Qatar (20%). High non-response rates to this question likely reflect genuine uncertainty or lack of knowledge about surveillance practices. When asked about specific actors, the highest levels of “I do not know” or “declined to respond” responses were recorded for foreign governments (13.7%), companies (11.9%), and domestic governments (11.3%).

A lack of awareness regarding surveillance might also explain why a majority, even in authoritarian contexts, say that they feel more rather than less free when expressing their opinions on social media. For instance, the average rating (out of 10) of one’s freedom in Egypt was 7.3. The lowest rating was in Palestine, where the average was 4.6, indicating that more people had rated their freedom as below 5. Nevertheless, when asked whom they feared most when expressing their views online, the government was the most cited source of fear in most countries. However, in some contexts, people were more likely to cite fear of family, as in Iraq, or the possibility of account deactivation, as in Kuwait. These findings need to be considered in relation to the questions on the extent of political expression on social media, where a minority reported using these platforms for such purposes.

Figure (10): Perception of Surveillance Activities

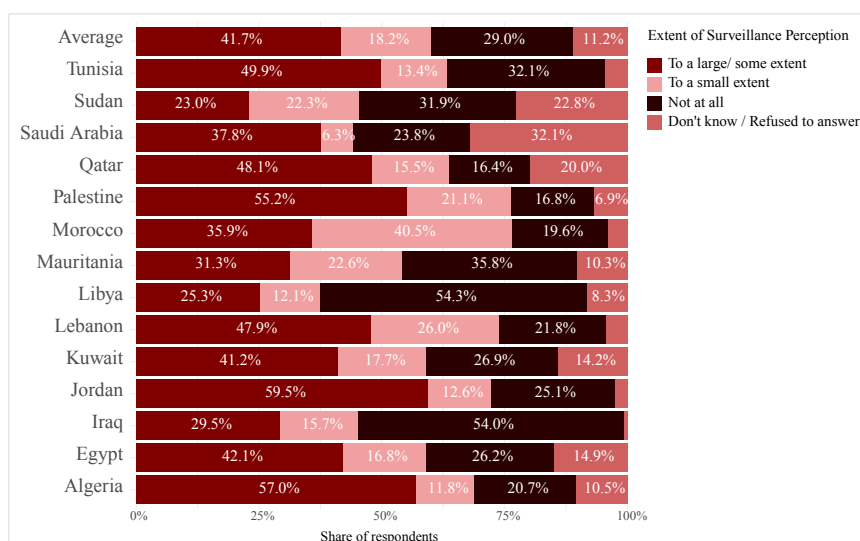
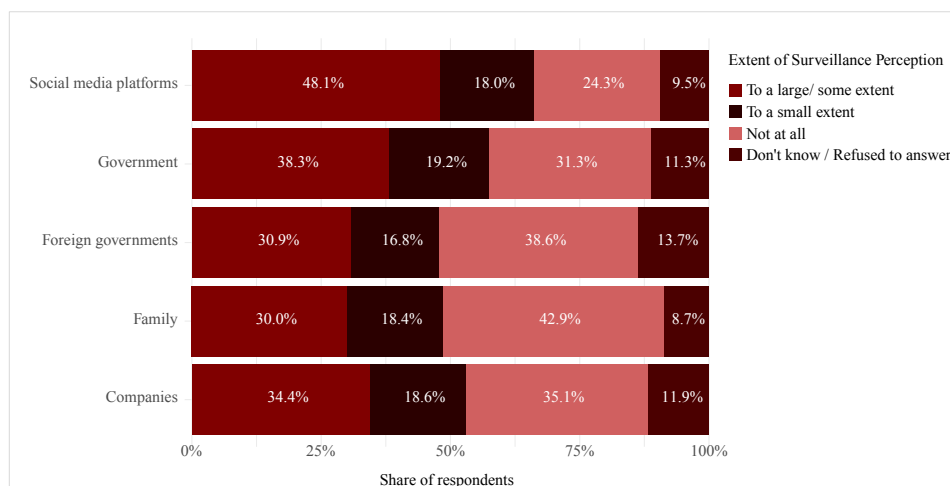


Figure (11): Perception of Surveillance by Different Parties

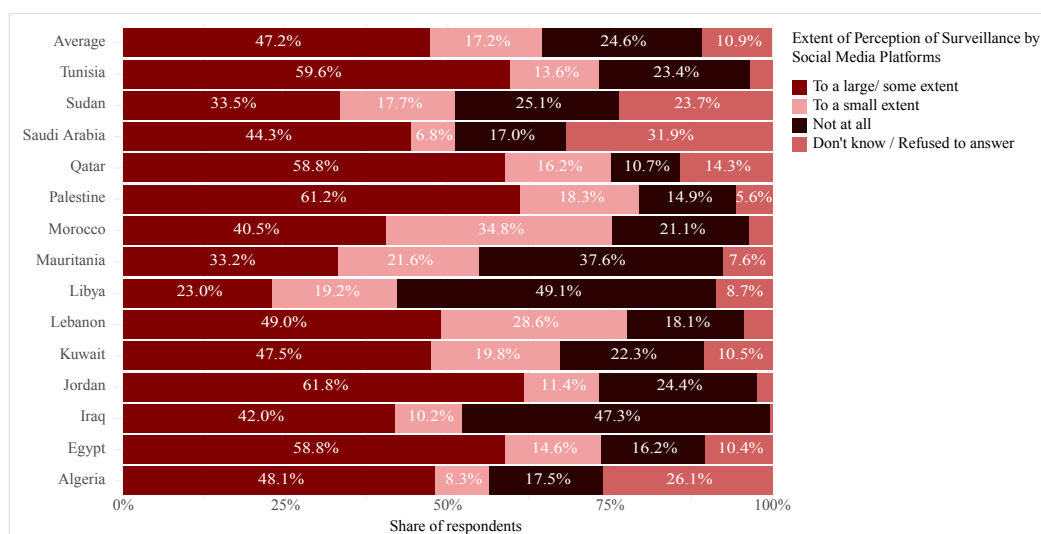


Among all the entities respondents were asked about, social media platforms were the most commonly recognized as engaging in surveillance activities (Figure 12). In some countries, up to a third of respondents believed these platforms conduct a high degree of monitoring. However, in Iraq, Mauritania, and Morocco, more than half the respondents thought there was very little or no surveillance by social media platforms, compared to those who thought there was at least some monitoring. Additionally, only a small minority (10% on average) across all the countries surveyed considered the possibility that certain content on social media was not reaching them or their audiences. This suggests that even as people may be aware of the surveillance activities of social media platforms, few reflect on how these platforms shape information flows and content control. The lack of awareness around this signals that discussions which became especially prominent during the war on Gaza, on how social media platforms censor and/or limit the reach of content that touches on particular themes, remains mainly confined to media-literate and politically engaged circles.

This limited awareness can partly be attributed to confirmation bias, a cognitive tendency to seek, interpret, and recall information in ways that affirm one's preexisting beliefs. In practice, users who already support the Palestinian cause and frequently engage with Gaza-related content are more likely to encounter similar material in their feeds. This reinforcement creates the perception that relevant content is widely accessible, even when it may not be. As users continue to see what they expect, they are less likely to recognize when other perspectives or critical content are being suppressed. This effect is amplified by algorithmic echo chambers, which work hand in hand with confirmation bias by clustering users with other like-minded individuals and filtering out opposing views. These dynamics reinforce dominant narratives not only by hiding alternative perspectives,⁷ but also rendering the effect of content suppression less visible. Filter bubbles and the personalized content ecosystems shaped by users' past behaviour,⁸ isolate individuals in "ideologically safe" environments, making it difficult to perceive the extent of existing censorship.

Nevertheless, when respondents were asked specifically which platforms they thought were limiting the flow of information related to the Palestinian cause, as many as 40% in countries like Jordan and Mauritania identified Facebook. However, very few, only 1% in Sudan and 3% in Egypt, considered the possibility that Instagram, another platform owned by Meta, also restricted content. Further research should consider the extent to which perceptions of censorship are based on first-hand experience and how the existing debate on censorship activities of social media platforms shapes their perceptions.

Figure (12): Perception of Surveillance by Social Media Platforms



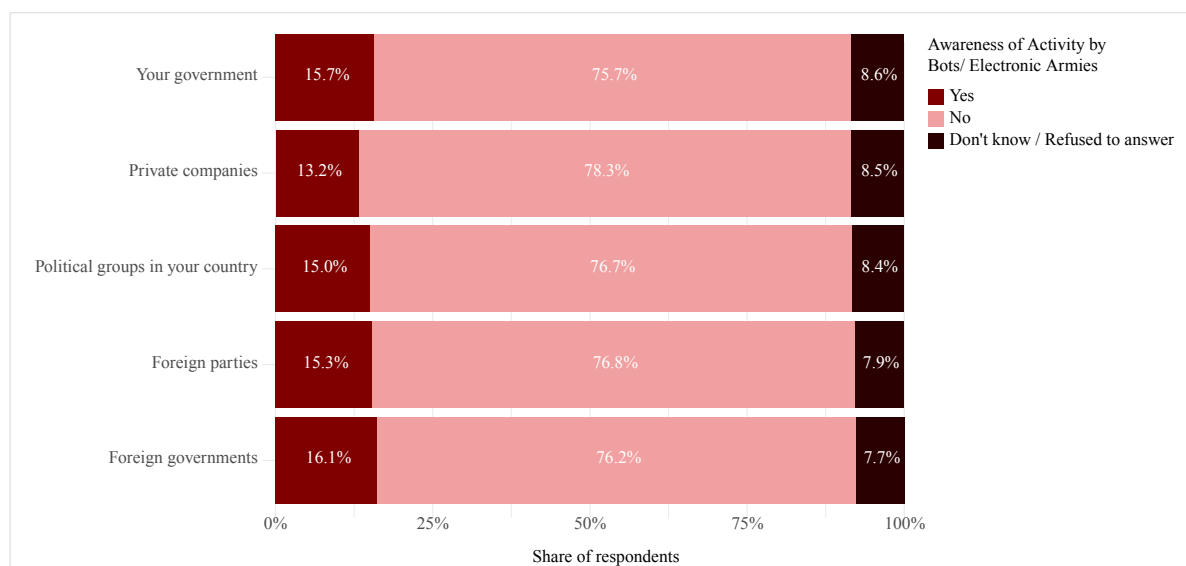
⁷ Cass R. Sunstein, "The Law of Group Polarization," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2002), pp. 175-195; Matteo Cinelli et al., "The echo chamber effect on social media," *PNAS*, vol. 118, no. 9 (2021), pp. 1-8.

⁸ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (London: Penguin Press, 2011).

Survey results across the Arab region reveal that public awareness of “electronic armies” or bots remains limited, with some variation across countries and types of actors involved (Figure 13). On average, only 15-16% of respondents reported being aware of bots affiliated with foreign governments, foreign entities, political groups within their country, or their own governments. Awareness was slightly lower for private companies (13%). The vast majority consistently answered “no” to all categories. Among the countries surveyed, Lebanon exhibited the highest degrees of perception, with 26-29% of respondents indicating awareness of bots linked to various parties. Other countries with higher-than-average awareness were Iraq, Egypt, and Palestine. On the other hand, Qatar consistently showed the lowest levels of awareness, with only 2-7% of respondents reporting knowledge of bots. Similarly, Jordan and Kuwait showed low awareness.

While the use of bots and digital propaganda is widespread and well-documented in the region,⁹ public acknowledgement remains very limited. However, the relatively high percentage of people denying knowledge of bot activity across all countries does not necessarily signal the absence of such activity. Instead, these responses may reflect a combination of limited media literacy, self-censorship, and fear of surveillance.

Figure (13): Public Awareness of Bot Armies in Relation to Their Attributed Affiliation



Responses reveal that people have generally favourable attitudes toward government censorship and control of social media content. When asked about their view of government restrictions of access to control of social media content, more people, on average, agreed with such measures than disagree. In Tunisia and Iraq, for example, 65% and 67% of respondents, respectively, supported government restrictions (Figure 14). With some exceptions, disagreement with both statements was generally lower than 10%. In Libya, 20% of respondents fell into this category. One possible interpretation could be the country’s political fragmentation; with two competing governments, respondents may be reluctant to trust either authority to carry out censorship, even if they might otherwise support such measures under a unified or more legitimate government.

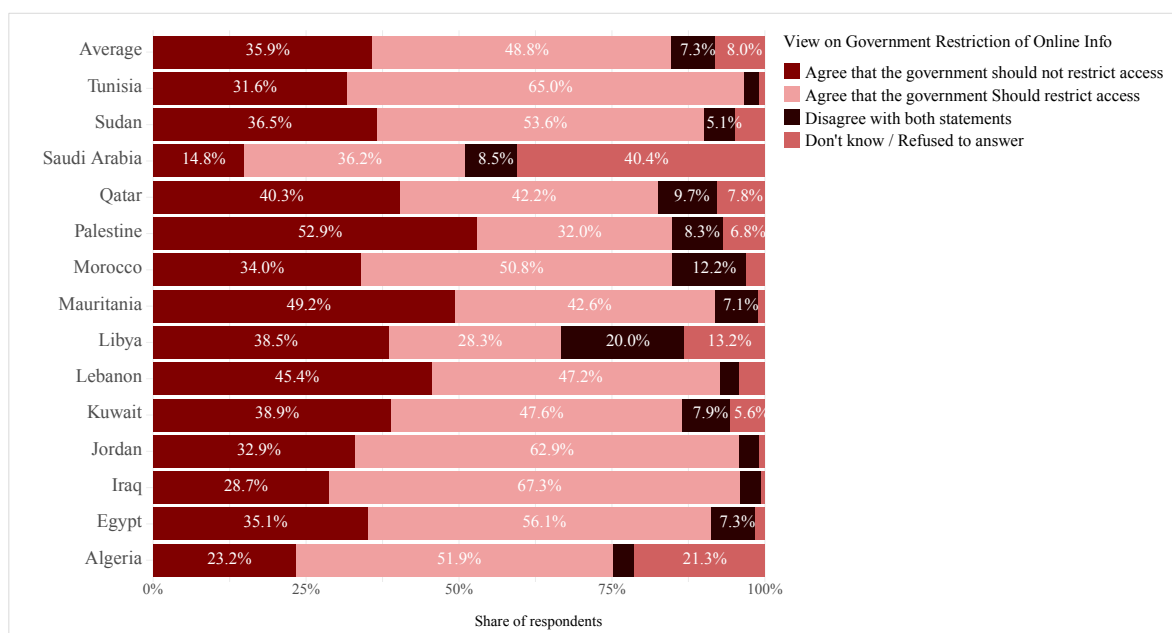
In some countries, an unusually high percentage of respondents reported that they did not know or refused to answer questions about government restrictions on content. In Saudi Arabia, a notable 40.4%

⁹ Samantha Bradshaw & Philip N. Howard, *Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation*, The computational propaganda project (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2018), pp.1-26; Marc Owen Jones, “The Gulf Information War| Propaganda, Fake News, and Fake Trends: The Weaponization of Twitter Bots in the Gulf Crisis,” *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 13 (2019), p. 27; Mona Elswah & Philip N. Howard, *The Challenges of Monitoring Social Media in the Arab World: The Case of the 2019 Tunisian Elections*, The Computational Propaganda Project (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2020), p. 2.

of respondents said they did not know or refused to answer whether they agreed with their government-imposed content restriction. While Saudi respondents tended to score high on “I do not know/refused” responses throughout the survey, this was the only instance where the percentage surpassed 40%, making it particularly noteworthy. This pattern could reflect several underlying factors: refusal to answer may suggest fear of openly sharing views on politically sensitive topics, while saying “I do not know” might indicate uncertainty or reluctance to take a stance. These potential explanations need further consideration, especially given the country’s political and media contexts.

When respondents were asked whether they trusted their government to censor social media content deemed to have a negative influence on society, a majority across the region expressed at least some level of trust. High trust in the government on this issue was reported by more than 40% of the population in Qatar, Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait. Taken together, responses to both questions on attitudes toward government restriction of content and on trust in government to conduct censorship, indicate that a majority of people in the region support government control over social media content.

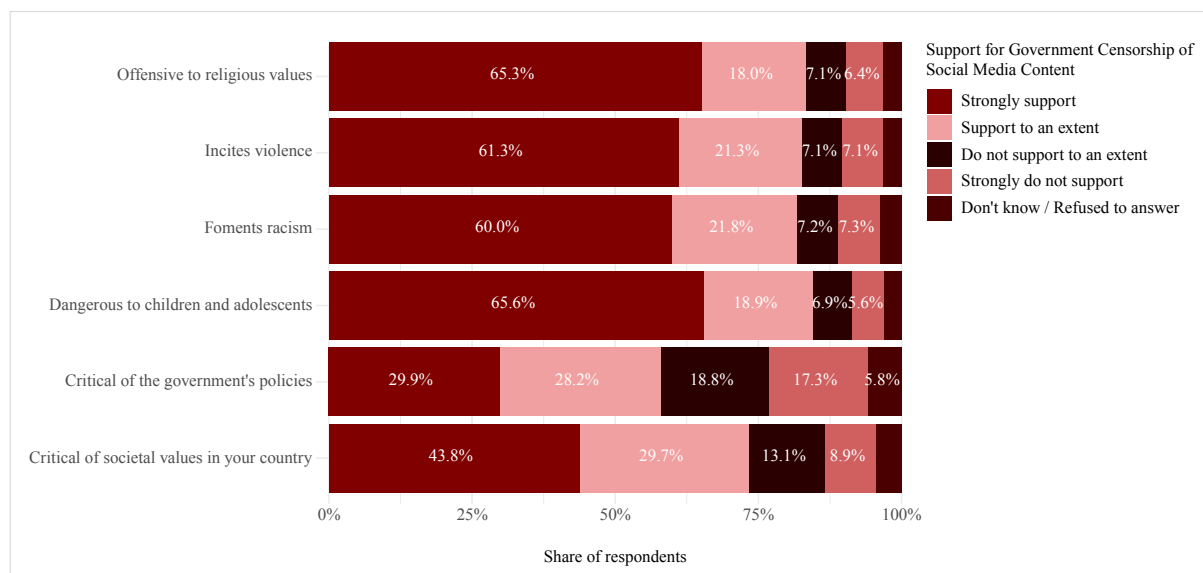
Figure (14): Opinion on Whether the Government Should Restrict Access to Content



The type of content that respondents most frequently supported for government censorship is that deemed offensive to religious values, followed by content considered dangerous to children and teenagers, as well as that inciting violence and racism (Figure 15). The most divisive content regarding government censorship was content critical of government politics, which received the lowest level of support compared to other content categories. In some countries, public opinion was split over whether content critical of societal values should be censored by the government, but on average, a significant majority (74%) supported such measures. Moroccans were the least likely to support government censorship of any content, whereas Jordanians were the most likely to strongly support it, with approval peaking at 82% in the latter country for censoring content offensive to religious values and material dangerous to children and teenagers. With the exception of Morocco, which was more equally divided, at least 80% across all countries surveyed supported at least to an extent (a majority of whom supported to a large degree) government censorship of content deemed offensive to religious values, while at least 70% supported censorship of content critical of their society’s values. These results point to overwhelmingly conservative views in the region regarding the creation and sharing of content that is critical of societal and religious values. Further research is

needed to understand how people reconcile their support for government censorship on such potentially sensitive topics with their demands for increased freedom of speech and democracy. Integrating questions on government censorship of social media content into studies of popular political culture can provide valuable indicators to shed light on the specific vision of democracy that people advocate.

Figure (15): Attitudes Toward Government Censorship of Content Categories



Conclusion

This report has examined patterns of social media use across 14 Arab countries, focusing on public attitudes toward digital platforms, as well as perceptions of misinformation, surveillance, and political engagement. The findings suggest a complex and sometimes contradictory relationship between users and social media: while these platforms are widely used as sources of information and spaces for discussion, concerns about their societal impact remain strong.

While most people in the region hold generally optimistic views about the role of social media in their societies, they also expressed concerns over the negative influence on younger generations and the threat it poses to local culture. An overwhelming majority in most surveyed countries support government censorship of content they consider as inflicting such harm, reflecting the generally conservative views toward freedom of speech on social media. Despite this support for censorship, a significant proportion of the population continues to use social media for public discussions of political and social issues, as well as for accessing news. Thus, more qualitative research is needed to understand the kind of censorship that people are requesting, and more analytical work is required to examine the factors that drive support for censorship, particularly on potentially socially contentious themes, such as religiosity, support for democracy, and liberal values.

Receiving news and political information ranks among the most popular reasons for social media use in the region. Large proportions of the surveyed populations report using social media for news about the wars in Palestine, Lebanon, and Sudan. Political engagement on the platforms tends to be more passive, with users more likely to consume rather than produce content. Nonetheless, a significant proportion of the population actively engages with political information and in discourses about social issues. Further research is needed to determine which topics elicit higher levels of engagement and how such engagement shapes public perceptions on these themes, particularly in authoritarian contexts, where many respondents report not fearing expression on social media.

Much scholarship has explored how social media has changed the landscape for public debate through its particular affordances, designed to serve a market logic, that have the power to change the meaning of participation or deliberation, increase polarization, and lock people in echo chambers. This research needs to be extended to the region and elaborated with respect to non-democratic contexts, where it appears that there is significant use of social media for debate on publicly relevant topics.

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