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**S**ocial media (SM) usage is increasing across the globe. Of the 7.6 billion people populating earth, 4 billion are believed to be Internet users. Over 3 billion are SM users, representing over 40% global penetration (1), (2).

In this issue of *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, we contemplate SM; we can postulate effects on political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, legal, and environmental (PESTLE) factors. We reviewed how social networking sites (SNS) are channels used to socio-politically raise awareness and mobilize people during elections. We reviewed opinions shared by females who face strict gender segregation rules.

We brought special focus to the Middle East, the transcontinental region with an estimated 130 million active SM users (up almost 40% from 2017) and 164 million Internet users (or 65% penetration) (1), (2). Our authors confirmed findings from previous studies (3): SM users in the Middle East describe a lack of freedom of expression, and worry about legal consequences when creating and sharing content. Some users can face fines and prison sentences if posts are interpreted as critical or insulting, or if photographs or videos of others are posted without consent (4).

Some clerics, or others in authority in this region, have blamed SM for uprisings. Therefore, some governments block, restrict, or prohibit pop-

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ular sites and services. Yet, SM are not the causes of discontent or disaffection. SM are channels of communication. Discontent and disaffection are upstream, flowing downstream into many various tributaries for communication; tributaries can be online and offline channels.

Yet, undeniably, SM continue to prove powerful. Communication is a formidable tool for empowerment. Citizens can use SM to communicate to influence large audiences, to build group identity and unity, and to expose abuses. SM can give voice to the voiceless. People can become empowered.

In an interconnected world, the autocratic will continue to face challenges with the digital. Savvy users persist to find methods to bypass communication suppression, much like the 46% of survey respondents in Arab regions reporting multiple accounts on a single SNS platform (5).

With all the suppression efforts aimed at avoiding political instability, perhaps the autocratic misjudge the empowerment borne through SM. Particularly, because empowerment/civic participation is believed to be one of the four necessary conditions required to achieve sustainable political stability (6).

### Author Information

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