

## Social Media Use Worldwide

The human need for communication has existed for thousands of years: some of its earliest documentations are Paleolithic cave paintings expressing hunting scenes, and hand imprints left behind by our prehistoric ancestors. Since then, the role of the narrator and artist has changed dramatically; today's storytellers share their narratives and art on social media, where often the stories are amplified, multiplied, and modified. Some stories are "fake news" and others contain only traces of the truth. Rather than being set in stone, it takes only a couple of clicks to edit or delete today's communications on social media.

In the Western world, Facebook sits atop the list of the most popular social networking sites with an estimated 2.1 billion monthly active users in June 2017.<sup>1</sup> It is followed closely by YouTube with an estimated 1.5 billion users per month<sup>2</sup>; Twitter is a distant third with 328 million unique monthly visitors.<sup>3</sup> On a global scale, however, the social media landscape is surprisingly diverse. Different parts of the world favor different social media platforms, reflecting both preferences and circumstances, and more importantly what gets seen or not seen.

For example, Western social media favorites Facebook and Twitter are blocked in China in what has been called the "Great Firewall of China." While there are ways to skirt such blocking, indigenous Chinese social media platforms (such as Sina, Weibo, and Renren) have filled the gap and become the Chinese equivalents of Facebook, while Qzone has replaced Twitter. Chinese users rely on Tencent, QQ, and WeChat for mobile communications and private social networking while Youku and Tudou substitute for YouTube. Mostly unknown and hardly used in the West, these platforms generate large user numbers in China, the world's most populous country with about 1.38 billion people. QQ alone has more users than the overall users of LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram combined. The estimated number of Chinese active social networking users is twice the population of the United States (which has about 323 million people).<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, users in Russia and in many Russian-speaking former Soviet states prefer Vkontakte (VK) and Odnoklassniki over Facebook. As of 2017, VK has more than 420 million users, and is ranked fifth on a list of worldwide websites with the most traffic;<sup>5</sup> Facebook, in contrast, is only used by 13.7% of Russian internet users.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Ukraine just banned VK and Odnoklassniki in an effort to shake off Russia's influence. As a result, millions of Ukrainians are now using Facebook instead.<sup>7</sup>

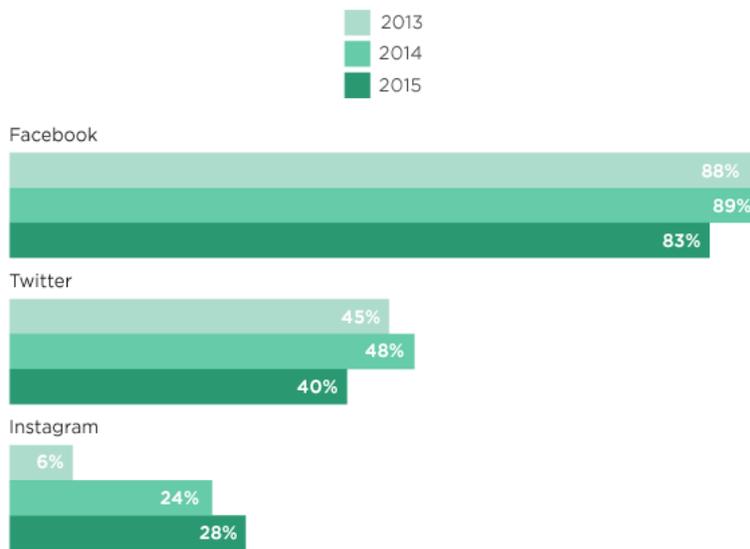
In other countries, such as India, the social media revolution is still waiting to happen. 28.4 percent of the Indian population (about 1.32 billion people) is using the internet. While social media use continues to grow and has reached growth rates of 26 percent from 2014 to 2015, in 2016 only 10.3 percent of Indian internet users were active on social media.<sup>8</sup> It is predicted that, even at this rate, it will take another 16 years before half of all Indians will use social media. Among the Indian social media users, Facebook is the most browsed social network, attracting 83% of internet consumers.<sup>9</sup> However, it should also be noted that the sheer number of competing television news channels that support a multitude of individual political parties, especially in India's democracy, can negatively impact debate on policy issues as they compete with each other to be the most outrageous and bombastic.<sup>10</sup>

While social media users in the Middle East use Facebook (88% in 2013) and Twitter (45% in 2013), use thereof has fallen in recent years, whereas Instagram’s popularity has exploded from a mere 6% in 2013 to 28% in 2015.

MEDIA USE IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 2015: EGYPT | LEBANON | QATAR | SAUDI ARABIA | TUNISIA | UAE

### Instagram exploded in popularity between 2013 and 2015; use of Facebook and Twitter fell

Percent using social media platform



Base: Nationals, internet users only

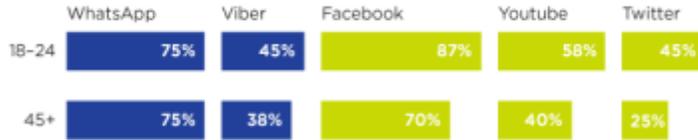
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Graph 1: Middle East: “Instagram exploded in popularity between 2013 and 2015; use of Facebook and Twitter fell”, Northwestern University in Qatar, <http://www.mideastmedia.org/survey/2015/chapter/social-media.html#subchapter0>.

WhatsApp (77%) and YouTube (54%) are now dominant social media platforms. A 2015 survey found that individuals that felt less comfortable expressing political opinions were also less likely to use social media, and people who feel comfortable voicing political opinions online use more social media.<sup>11</sup>

### Unlike other social media, direct messaging use similar across generations

Percent who use each social media platform, by age group



Base: Nationals, internet users only

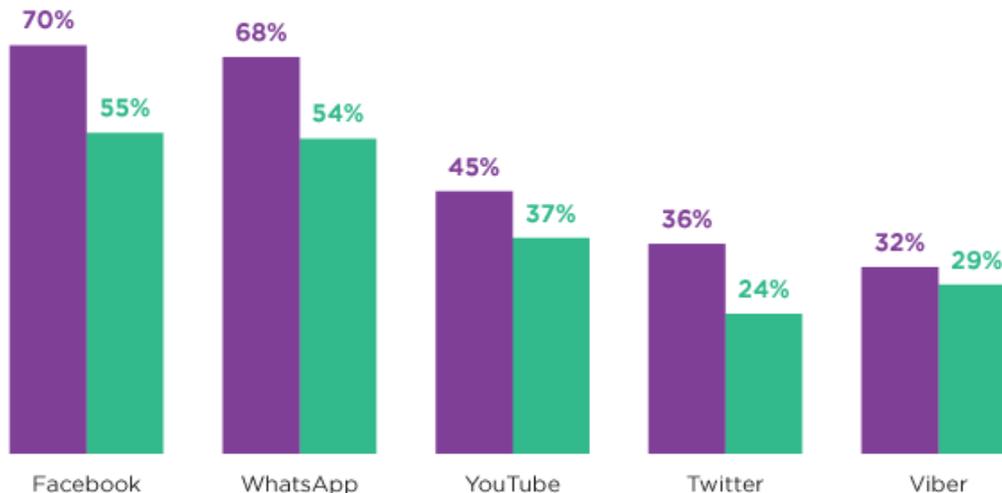
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Graph 2: Middle East: "WhatsApp leads the direct messaging revolution," Northwestern University in Qatar, <http://www.mideastmedia.org/survey/2015/chapter/social-media.html#subchapter1>.

A 2017 survey indicates that where government monitoring is a concern, WhatsApp is the preferred source of news.<sup>12</sup> This may be attributable to the fact that current versions of WhatsApp software are free and include end-to-end encryption.

### People who feel comfortable voicing political opinions online use more social media

■ Percent of users comfortable voicing political opinions online  
■ Percent of users NOT comfortable voicing political opinions online



Base: Internet users

\*In Qatar: "politics" worded as "public issues"

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Graph 3: 2015 Survey, Middle East: "People who feel comfortable voicing political opinions online use more social media," Northwestern University in Qatar, <http://www.mideastmedia.org/survey/2015/chapter/social-media.html#subchapter2>.

In June 2016, Iran had 56.7 million internet users (more than 68.5 percent of the population). In a 2012 study, 58% of Iranians were found to use Facebook regularly despite restrictions imposed by the Iranian government. In 2016, Facebook remains among the most popular social media platforms, despite still being blocked.<sup>13</sup> However, 69% of the Iranian youth use Virtual Private Networks (VPN) to bypass the government's filtering. Instagram seems to have been fitted with "intelligent filtering," but is currently not blocked, with the exception of criminal and immoral content. Celebrity Instagram accounts are also not accessible without VPN connections. Nonetheless, Instagram is reported to be the most popular social media platform in Iran.

In Africa, a number of governments (among them Uganda, Congo, Chad, Burundi, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia) block access to social media sites in their countries, including WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook. In 2014, 100 million people were using Facebook each month across the continent; that number grew to 120 million users in 2015, with 15 million users in Nigeria, 12 million in South Africa, and 4.5 million users in Kenya.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Company Info," Facebook Newsroom, accessed August 1, 2017, <https://newsroom.fb.com/company-info>.

<sup>2</sup> Lucas Matney, "YouTube has 1.5 billion logged-in monthly users watching a ton of mobile video," *The Crunch*, June 22, 2017, <https://techcrunch.com/2017/06/22/youtube-has-1-5-billion-logged-in-monthly-users-watching-a-ton-of-mobile-video>.

<sup>3</sup> "About Twitter," Twitter, accessed August 1, 2017, <https://about.twitter.com/company>.

<sup>4</sup> Travis Hunter, "The Social Media Landscape of China – What You Need To Know," *Social Media Authority*, <http://socialmedia-authority.com/2016/06/24/the-social-media-landscape-of-china-what-you-need-to-know>.

<sup>5</sup> "Momentous Entertainment Group's Chimera Games Unit Launches Its Hit Game on the Russian Social Media Platform VKontakte (VK)," *Marketwired*, July 6, 2017, <http://www.marketwired.com/press-release/momentous-entertainment-groups-chimera-games-unit-launches-its-hit-game-on-russian-social-otcbb-mmeg-2225058.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Adrien Henni, "Russia's top 10 websites include Facebook, Google, Instagram, and YouTube," *VentureBeat*, October 1, 2016, <https://venturebeat.com/2016/10/01/russias-top-10-websites-include-facebook-google-instagram-and-youtube>.

<sup>7</sup> Damien Sharkov, "Ukrainians Join Facebook by the Millions after Russian Social Media Ban," June 20, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/ukrainians-join-facebook-millions-russian-social-media-ban-627488>.

<sup>8</sup> "Active social media users in India grow by 15% from 2015 to become 136 million: Yral Report 2016," *exchange4media*, January 4, 2017, [http://www.exchange4media.com/digital/active-social-media-users-in-india-grow-by-15--from-2015-to-become-136-million-yral-report-2016\\_67225.html](http://www.exchange4media.com/digital/active-social-media-users-in-india-grow-by-15--from-2015-to-become-136-million-yral-report-2016_67225.html).

<sup>9</sup> "Ernst & Young Social Media Marketing," *India Trends Study 2016*, [http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/PI/EY-social-media-marketing-india-trends-study-2016/\\$FILE/EY-social-media-marketing-india-trends-study-2016.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/PI/EY-social-media-marketing-india-trends-study-2016/$FILE/EY-social-media-marketing-india-trends-study-2016.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> "Number of TV channels rises by 37 in one year," *Z News*, [http://zeenews.india.com/news/india/number-of-tv-channels-rises-by-37-in-one-year\\_1510793.html](http://zeenews.india.com/news/india/number-of-tv-channels-rises-by-37-in-one-year_1510793.html).

<sup>11</sup> "Social Media – Sharing information and connecting online nearly universal," Northwestern University in Qatar, Survey 2015, <http://www.mideastmedia.org/survey/2015/chapter/social-media.html#>.

<sup>12</sup> Mariella Moon, "WhatsApp is becoming a top news source in some countries," *Engadget*, June 25, 2017, <https://www.engadget.com/2017/06/25/whatsapp-news-source-reuters-study/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Iran profile - media," *BBC News*, May 2, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14542234>.

<sup>14</sup> Phoebe Parke, "How many people use social media in Africa?," *CNN*, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/13/africa/africa-social-media-consumption/>.