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Arabs Facebook users increase by 30 percent since 2011, report

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Facebook users in the Arab world have increased by 30 percent since the beginning of the year, according to a report released today by the Dubai School of Government.

The report, called the Arab Social Media Report (second edition), focuses on the “exponential growth” of Facebook and Twitter users in the 22 Arab countries as well as Iran, Israel and Turkey, with particular attention given to those that have experienced uprisings.

Egypt experienced the largest increase in number of users, adding nearly two million Facebook users in the first quarter alone, despite lagging behind several less populous nations in terms of total users.

The report also found that in the first quarter of 2011, the focus of online social media shifted from socializing toward political mobilization.

“The growth of social media and the shifts in usage trends have played a critical role in mobilizing, empowering, shaping opinions and influencing change among the youth in the Arab world,” said Fadi Salem, director of the school’s Governance and Innovation Program and co-author of the report. “A critical mass of young and influential social media users exists today, who lead the shift of usage trends from social into political nature across the region.”

Eighty-five percent of people surveyed in Egypt in Tunisia, the two countries that have so far succeeded in toppling their leaders, responded that social media was used mainly for social and political activism during the uprisings. Sixty percent indicated their belief that government attempts to curtail online activism by restricting the internet only provided more ammunition and inspiration for the opposition movements.

Members of the Governance and Innovation Program are now working with governments to promote the latter's use of social media.

“Governments in the region have responded to the rise of social media in a variety of ways. While some have tried to block it, others have used social media to engage directly with their citizens,” said Racha Mourtada, research associate with the Governance and Innovation Program and lead author of the report. “The [program] has worked closely with governments in the region to develop official guidelines to promote social media usage by the government.”