

Translation and social media in the Middle East

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Over the first few months of 2011, the Arab Spring started in Tunisia, shortly followed by revolutions in Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Other countries are still struggling with further uprisings around the Arab world. Dominant regimes continue to be challenged due to the snowball effect in the Middle East, spurred by a potent combination of economic, social and political grievances in opposition to their autocratic political systems.

Most of the English-speaking world followed the unfolding news by checking their Twitter feeds in line at the grocery store, sitting on their dorm room beds scrolling through Facebook on their laptops and reading translated articles on *Al Jazeera* from their home offices or cubicles at work. No one was patiently waiting for the newspaper to arrive on his or her doorstep the next morning. A large part of what made this event so radical was the way it was relayed to the rest of the world. For the first time, people had immediate access to translated information, disseminated by ordinary citizens, directly from the field. Social media and the presence of the internet transformed the role of reporters and the type of information that the general public had access to. Translation was the medium through which this information passed from Tahrir Square to Times Square and everywhere else in the world. Viewers could reach out and connect with protesters even if there was a language barrier. This revolution was influenced by the raw information that was

directly translated from the people of the Arab Spring to the people abroad.

The role of translation in the media has transformed global communication and has allowed for a more comprehensive contribution of ideas and opinions. Translation has been key in this revolutionary style of reporting and international communication. For over three decades, translators have been involved in current events revolving around the Middle East.

Translation of content and historical events in the Middle East, however, has not been isolated to this one instance in the Middle East. While this is currently and arguably the most noteworthy of historical occurrences of the role of translation in this region, there has been great translation work done on stories from the Middle East since the 1980s. One of the organizations at the forefront of Middle East translation and representation has been the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). Established in 1988, MEMRI is a nonprofit organization that provides translations to television, print and web media news from the Middle East. MEMRI translates articles into English from more than six different languages. On their website, they describe themselves as an organization that “bridges the language gap which exists between the West and the Middle East, providing timely translations of Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, Pashtu, Dari, Hindi and Turkish media, as well as original analysis of political, ideological, intellectual, social, cultural and religious trends in the Middle East.”

The nonprofit is headquartered in Washington, D.C., and comprises 80 employees all over the globe. The board of directors consists of an array of esteemed members, from former FBI

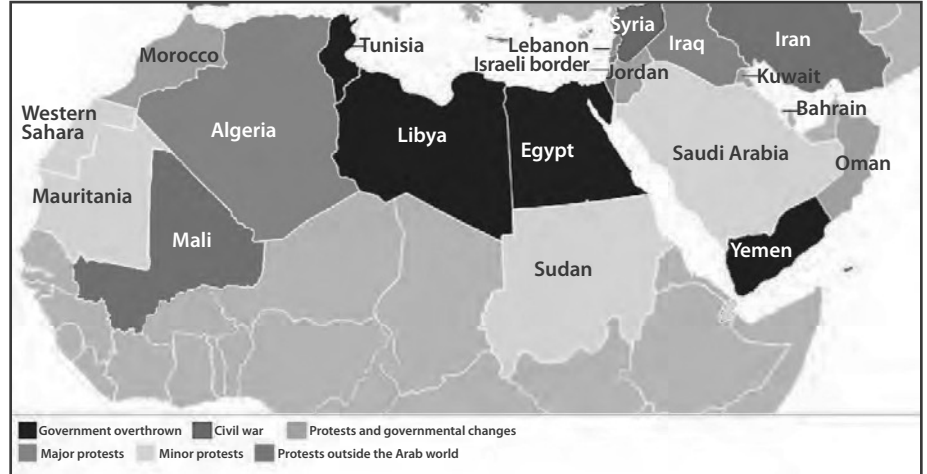
Afaf Steiert (left), president and cofounder of Afaf Translations, works as a conference Arabic interpreter and translator. She holds an MS in molecular biology from the University of Basel. Matthias Steiert (center), cofounder of Afaf Translations, specializes in German pharmaceutical translations. He holds a PhD in biochemistry from the University of Basel. Elanna Mariniello (right) is the projects coordinator for Afaf Translations, based out of the San Francisco Bay Area.



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members to UN ambassadors, to professors and Nobel Peace Prize winners. MEMRI is notable because of the impressive work that it does and the information that it allows the public access to. The organization is particularly impressive because of the varied viewpoints and diversity of topics it reports on and translates. As the mission statement outlines, not only does MEMRI provide information on events and media stories, it provides cultural, religious and ideological insight – MEMRI gives an inside look into the lives of individuals, in addition to the overarching themes and ideas that dominate the Middle East. The organization attempts to present the Middle East as a mosaic of complex, interpersonal events and stories to combat the generalizations and common misconceptions that exist due to the previous lack of this information.

This is precisely why the media coverage of the revolution in the Middle East was so striking. This event was fueled and then sustained by a sudden surge in social media reporting by individuals. Individual reporting dominated in comparison to stories delivered by larger newspapers and mass journalism efforts, providing an interesting and objective view of the events as they unfolded, second by second on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and other social media outlets.



Map of areas affected by the Arab Spring.

Even more impressive was the role that translation played in this event, as citizens needed access to instant computer and human-generated translations to spread their stories. Arabic language translators around the globe were busy translating articles and information with tight deadlines for TV channels, radio stations and websites. The quality of the translation was essential in order to preserve the messages being delivered. During the revolution it was as important as ever to rely on qualified translators and interpreters who understood the various dialects of videos on YouTube, and it was

important to keep personal biases out of the interpretation.

The ever-present conundrum in translation is that of *traduttore, traditore* – the Italian phrase meaning *translator, traitor* – the challenge of manipulating something linguistically while still trying to stay faithful to the original meaning of the text. This is particularly interesting in the case of media translation, where words carry so much weight in the representation of a story or an event. In the Middle East, the situation was so controversial that even the slightest variation in media translation could alter a reader's viewpoint.

In "Translating the News: Reframing Constructed Realities" written for *Translation Watch Quarterly*, Ali Darwish states that all news and reporting is a form of translation itself. Reporters and individuals, when telling their stories, are relaying a personal account of their observed reality, thus translating the situation from their perspective. Darwish argues that "translation-mediated news reporting is largely a reframing process of already framed text, which entails a reconstruction of an already constructed reality." In the case of the protests in the Middle East, the civilian reporting via Twitter from a cell phone is constructing one reality of the situation, while the CNN reporter is constructing his or her own separate reality of the same situation. This results in varying primary translations of the same event. Inaccurate media translation is inevitable and "is a serious problem that is increasingly causing misrepresentations, misunderstandings and communication breakdown across nations and cultures

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in globalized news media” says Darwish. In the simplest of terms, a media translator must tread carefully. To that same extent, a reader of translated media must read carefully and critically.

Although these issues are present and important to recognize, they exist out of a necessity to share information in this increasingly globalized society. It is quite amazing that we have witnessed a historical event that was translated through millions of constructed realities and varied viewpoints rather than a select few. The world reacted strongly and was glued to social media as a result.

What does this mean for the future of social media and news reporting? Social media outlets are only continuing to grow, and the main lesson learned from this event (aside from all political implications) was that people want to listen to people. Those on the receiving end of reporting want to hear their news directly and personally. They want constant updates from a plethora of people, and they want these updates at their fingertips – their cell phones, their computers and their televisions. Social media is on a move to center stage in the grand scheme of information sharing, and, as a result, media translation is as well.

Meedan, which describes itself as a “digital town square,” is an organization dedicated to the translation of social media content, particularly from Arabic to English. Everything that gets posted on the site is mirrored in Arabic and English, from the headlines to the comments. Meedan’s main goal is to harness the momentum from the social media frenzy that was the Arab Spring to propel media translation tools into the web market. In his July 2012 article “Translating Tweets from the Arab Spring: Towards a Translation Workbench for Twitter” on Meedan’s website, senior program officer George Weyman describes the impact and growth of the media in the Arab-speaking world, noting that there are already 60 million Arabic speakers online in the Middle East, and internet penetration growth is one of the highest rates in the world. “Google is predicting the number of Arabic-speaking web users to grow by 50% by 2013,” writes Weyman. “That means more content, more commerce and more knowledge exchange. For example, there were 30,000 tweets published per day in Arabic in July 2010 compared to a staggering 2 million per day by October 2011.”

Meedan currently runs a social media translation site and is in the midst of developing a platform through which twitter users themselves can translate tweets from Arabic into English. This is a departure from the more utilized machine-generated translations, and a response to the growing number of Arabic-speaking twitter users. Meedan even facilitates the use of a site called Yamli, where Arabic speakers can type a word phonetically in Arabic, and the site will convert it to Arabic text. Hence, Meedan is the first social network explicitly built to facilitate collaborations across languages.

Weyman discusses the presence of a new generation of young bilinguals in the Middle East who have the potential to transform the Arabic-speaking online world. He speaks of current efforts to develop numerous sites in Arabic and expands on the growing popularity of internet services within the Middle East. While general knowledge may be that the web is expanding all over the globe, it is interesting to see this expansion through the lens of a single culture and community and the political implications that this technology has offered.

Translation has always been an extraordinary tool used to bridge languages, cultures and the sharing of information. In the case of the Middle East, it has allowed for a new form of connec-

tion with the rest of the world and has provided a platform for the innovative use of new technology and social media tools. What’s more, however, it has helped to bridge the large gap in understanding, trust and cultural conceptions created by distance and language. Beyond basic reporting, translation-based media in the Middle East has enabled cross-cultural conversation surrounding controversial topics and previous misunderstandings. Meedan’s mission is “to create a better understanding between the peoples of the Arab Region and the West through dialogue online.” The organization notes in its About section that the emergence of the social web marks an opportunity to “connect people from different places, faiths, languages and cultural backgrounds.”

As we’ve seen in this turbulent Arab Spring, translation in the Middle East is ever changing, as it is across the world. Translation provides what the people need, and during the past Arab Spring, the people needed fast, up-to-date news. We saw a shift toward internet translation, and in order to support the rapid changes underway, much translated information was provided freely in order to deliver the news as quickly as possible. We will probably be seeing more of these same translation methods employed across the media as the world struggles to get its news as it happens. **M**

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