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Five-Year Retrospection of Media Use in the Middle East

Doha, Qatar – May 30, 2018 – A report released today by Northwestern University in Qatar, that reveals long-term trends in news and entertainment consumption, social media preferences, and attitudes about the media indicates a lasting impact of the Arab Spring on media habits in the Middle East.

The study, which consists of findings derived from surveys of seven countries NU-Q conducted annually from 2013 to 2017, provides unparalleled insights into shifts in news and entertainment consumption, as well as social media use in the Middle East.

The report titled, *Media Use in the Middle East, A Five-Year Retrospection*, offers comparative data and a detailed analysis of the only longitudinal study of its kind in the region and one of the few in the world. The research began in the wake of the Arab Spring and has tracked developments to distinguish between ephemeral, short-term media shifts and those that are more dramatic, the report says. It provides a portrait of peoples' internet activity, especially tracking the rise of social media

Over five years, there have been nearly 30,000 face-to-face interviews with 5,000 conducted on the phone, covering between six to eight representative countries each year across the Middle East. Begun with internal funding in 2012-13, the studies have been supported by an initial \$850,000 grant from the Qatar National Research Fund, which was recently renewed through 2020. Earlier, major funding for a three-year period came from the Doha Film Institute and other sources.

“This retrospection covers a period just after the Arab Spring to the present, tracking developments in how people interact with media in their daily lives,” said Everette E. Dennis, dean and CEO of NU-Q. “Our findings suggest significant differences and changes in attitudes about various media and their use throughout the Middle East over that time. Understanding the implications of these changes can help both to inform teaching and academic research, as well as shape industry practices and public policy in the region.” The retrospection allowed for the first time, a comprehensive review of year by year findings with what the dean called “a thoughtful search for meaning.”

“Among the noteworthy findings is the rise in the use of social media across the region as a medium for free-speech activities as well as a tool for self-expression and more utilitarian purposes connecting people with each other,” added Dennis. “Using social media to influence political discourse and mobilize masses was at its peak during the Arab Spring and is considered a turning point of social media use in the region, while developments since that time have been more subtle and less dramatic, but still important as people express themselves on a myriad of issues and problems.”

The retrospection, which covers Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates, includes the following highlights:

- **Internet penetration** has increased in every country since 2013. The biggest increase occurred in Lebanon – from 58 percent to 91 percent in the last five years;
- **Smartphones** are the ‘go-to’ device, connecting 97 percent of people to the internet as declining numbers of people (45 percent) rely on computers as their primary source of internet access;
- In terms of **social media**, fewer Arab national now use Facebook (74 percent) and Twitter (27 percent), while Instagram and Snapchat have risen to 40 percent and 29 percent respectively, due perhaps in part to the privacy these applications provide;
- **Direct messaging** is ubiquitous, with 97 percent of people using it; 47 percent of people send messages to group chats;
- **Trust among Arab nationals in mass media is widespread**, but figures have declined in several countries such as Tunisia (from 64 percent to 56 percent) and Qatar (from 69 percent to 64 percent);
- **Most Gulf nationals say news media in their country is credible**, but nationals elsewhere tend to disagree (Qataris are among the highest group in this respect with 62 percent saying their national media is credible, and Jordan among the lowest, at just 38 percent - down from 66 percent in 2013);
- At the same time, the belief that international **news organizations are biased against the Arab World** has grown. An average of 37 percent of Arab nationals thinks this.

The five annual studies from which the report was drawn were produced by a research team that included Dennis (lead principal investigator), Justin Martin and Robb Wood (principal investigators) as well as Mariam Saeed and Najwa Al Thani (research assistants).

In addition, the retrospection includes brief expert commentaries by leading media professionals, researchers, and scholars including Jeffrey Cole, director of the World Internet Project; Dima Khatib, managing director of Al Jazeera's AJ +; and columnist and commentator Rami Khouri, as well as several NU-Q faculty researchers: Professors Banu Akdenizli, Ilhem Allagui, Khaled Al Hroub, Justin Martin, and Amy Kristen Sanders.

Published annually since 2013, the *Media Use in the Middle East* study by NU-Q examines all forms of news and entertainment media with special emphasis on the internet and social media use, news consumption as well as attitudes and perceptions towards political expression on the internet, online regulation and privacy, entertainment and preservation of cultural values. A separate chapter offers a detailed focus on Qatar which has the highest internet penetration in the world.

Each year the survey was conducted among 1000+ residents in each participating country and in collaboration with Harris Poll in conjunction with Pan Arab Research Center (PARC). Data from the report are shared with the World Internet Project at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communications and are the sole source of Middle East data for that biennial study.

In the five years since the NU-Q Media Use project began it has become a major source of academic data and business intelligence for the region and internationally. Presentations of the annual survey are made at major academic and media industry meetings and shared with business, government ministries, and educational organizations the world over. Media coverage has been extensive and one commentator called studies the "most important single source" for understanding Middle Eastern media and their societies in the world today.

To view the full report and explore the findings directly using an interactive tool, visit <http://mideastmedia.org>.

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About Northwestern University in Qatar

Northwestern University in Qatar draws from its parent organization, [Northwestern University](#) (Evanston, Illinois), a distinguished history, famous programs and an exceptional faculty. Founded in partnership with Qatar Foundation, NU-Q provides a framework through which students explore the world and, ultimately, shape its future through its distinguished schools of [communication](#), [journalism and strategic communication](#), and [liberal arts](#).