Digital Arabic Content: an industry brief

Wamda Research Lab
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 Experts, practitioners and consumers agree that the growth in Internet penetration and online access in recent years has not translated into equal growth of Digital Arabic Content (DAC).

By 2017 over half of the Arab world will have access to the Internet, an increase from the 32% that were online in 2012.\(^1\) Estimates suggest that the region has been home to the world’s largest increase in Internet usage since 2001, experiencing 600% growth in the number of users over this time period.\(^2\) In fact the number of Arab Internet users grew by 5,296.6% from 2000-2013.

Currently, the percentage of Arab speakers on the Internet is 36.9% with the Arabic language ranking fourth in the top 10 most-used languages online in 2013.\(^3\) In parallel, social media usage in the region has increased substantially. There are an estimated 17 million tweets in Arabic everyday and Arabic was the fastest growing language on Twitter between 2010-2011.\(^4\) Facebook penetration in the region is also notable as the Arabic interface now accounts for at least 39% of all MENA users.\(^5\)

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2. Internet Usage in the Middle East, Internet World Stats, 2014
3. Internet World Users by Language, Internet World Stats, 2013
4. MENA Digital Digest, Digital Qatar, 2014
While Internet penetration in the Arab world has grown considerably and should continue to grow for the foreseeable future, there is a substantial perceived gap in terms of both the quality and quantity of current DAC.

Numbers on the exact representation of Arabic content online vary. According to Connect Arab Summit 2012, the percentage of DAC available online is 1.5% and is expected to reach 3% in 2015. According to other estimates, less than 1% of online content is in Arabic and under 0.2% of digital content is hosted in MENA.

**Arabic Wikipedia in focus:** The number of Arabic Wikipedia articles increased from 125,100 to over 260,000 between 2010 and 2013. Similarly, monthly page views grew from 85 million to 135 million from 2011 to 2012. However, these figures still lag far behind those of other languages. During the same time period, English Wikipedia had an average of 18 billion page views per month. Benchmarking amongst global languages, Arabic Wikipedia content ranks 13th out of 140 languages.

Uneven openness: Barriers to MENA representation on Wikipedia (2013)

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Notes:

6. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) - Status of the Digital Arabic Content Industry in the Arab Region 2012
7. Digital Arabic Content, Connect Arab Summit, 2012
DEFINING DIGITAL ARABIC CONTENT

Identifying discrepancies as well common trends between the varying definitions of DAC can help shape the region’s understanding of what comprises this field, and which players are needed to advance its growth.

How the stakeholders define DAC:

**Anas Abbar, Managing Director - 7awi**

The Arabic content - specifically digital, be it video, audio or text, has two categories - user generated through forums and it is really ad hoc content- very little schema in terms of structure and trying to data mine it is difficult. The other category is far more important- premium original content: content that is generated by professional publishers and editors.

**Kaswara Al Khatib, Chairman - UTURN**

First it was about written content now it’s all about video content - that is what will help Arabic content overall. Unfortunately, whether written or video, there isn’t enough of it.

**Omar Sati, Managing Director - Dash Ventures**

Digital content includes all content that is publishable and transmittable on the Internet or through Internet derivatives, mobile platform or any digital forms. There are no restrictions to what can be considered digital content as it could be in many forms - voice, animation, video etc. - of any length.

**Fayeq Oweis, Language Services Manager, MENA, Africa, Emerging Markets - Google**

Arabic content is any element that can provide knowledge or information to the user - whether that element is generated by another user or generated by a company. Video is a major part of that content and you can also add photo albums, still images, maps.

**Dr. Haidar Fraihat, Director of Technology for Development Division - UN-ESCWA**

Anything audio, video, textual online / digitized and in Arabic. Different types of content needs to be delivered via different mediums/formats depending on Internet user behavior in that country.
CHALLENGES FACING THE DAC FIELD

CHALLENGE 1: Monetization

By and large digital content creators in MENA must rely on the advertising model to generate revenues. One challenge in this method that entrepreneurs and investors have pointed to is that advertising agencies are only gradually shifting their budgets from offline to online to keep pace with the surge in online consumers. In turn, content creators have few opportunities to generate revenue through advertising and thus face difficulties in sustaining and scaling.

"You have a lot of talented people out there - but they often struggle when it comes to packaging or positioning their content in a way that allows them to monetize it effectively."

Karim Khalifa, Co-Founder and CEO, Digital Republic

"Ad agencies and media agencies bear a lot of responsibility for the slow evolution towards digital content. We have not kept pace with the shift in our audience from analog to digital and mobile/social channels."

Yousef Tuqan, Chief Innovation Officer, Leo Burnett/Publicis Group MENA

CHALLENGE 2: Governance

Although legal frameworks that support digital content creators in MENA are gradually being amended, DAC experts’ point out that the bureaucracy and legal costs associated with combating piracy are still challenging. Additionally, knowing what is legally permitted content at a country level is difficult, which may limit creators’ ability to steadily scale across the region and requires many to revise their content based on the geographic location to address cultural sensitivities.

"What kinds of content can you safely distribute or produce that you can't produce in another? There is no constant cultural norm, which places restrictions on how exploratory someone can be in the content space."

Con O’Donnell, CEO Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture

"The most critical challenge is a lack of an ecosystem, including copyright and intellectual property rights."

Dr. Nibal Idlebi, Chief, Innovation Section, United Nations - ESCWA
CHALLENGE 3: Talent and quality

Content creators and investors indicate that accessing local talent is a challenge facing the DAC industry. A lack of talent can lead to a lack of quality, which directly hinders the industry’s growth. These constraints can also stifle monetizing and funding strategies, which is problematic not only for creators but for consumers as well. According to 2012 figures, 48% of Arab youth stated that they are not satisfied with the quality of local websites.

“We have a shortage of the talent needed to grow digital media sales. There are not enough people experienced in digital media business.”

Omar Christidis CEO and Founder of ArabNet

“It is not very easy to find people who have the skills to create good content in Arabic. Also, if you want to improve content distribution you need technical skills, where there is another lack of talent.”

Elsa Aoun, Co-Founder and Managing Partner of ounousa.com

B. Understanding the Arabic Digital Generation, Booz&co and Google, 2012
THE WAY FORWARD

There are now more Arabic users online than English speakers in the region and with over half of MENA able to speak only Arabic, the need to create more DAC is more important than ever.9

“If information online is professional, easy to access and payments are easy to make and efficient, this is good for the economy, society and culture.”

Dr. Haidar Fraihat, Director of Technology for Development Division, UN-ESCWA

Despite the challenges discussed in this research brief, there are many opportunities in the DAC field. Conversations with experts suggest that hyper-localized content in lifestyle verticals such as health, nutrition and fitness have yet to be explored comprehensively. Additionally, academic content tailored for high school and university students along with e-book and audio book platforms are all under-developed areas that could bring new opportunities.

Moreover, the minimal data regarding the supply of DAC in MENA provides an opportunity. This knowledge gap can give way to future research focused on quantifying the current DAC representation and proposing actionable solutions to the highlighted challenges.

Understanding the full value-chain of players contributing to this industry, their roles, challenges and areas for collaboration needs to be a high priority. Writers, editors, filmmakers, producers, investors, advertisers and policymakers, among other stakeholders, all contribute to shaping the DAC industry. Any initiative that seeks to improve conditions for creating Arabic content online must take these players into account.

The DAC ecosystem, the players and the opportunities within it can be a catalytic force in enhancing access to information and resources across the MENA region. In future research we hope to shed more light on this important topic and to identify more opportunities for collaboration and impact within it.

9. Digital Arabic Content, Connect Arab Summit (2012)
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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About the Wamda Research Lab: The WRL is Wamda’s research program that conducts studies on entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and seeks to foster thought leadership in this field. Its agenda is to inform investors, policymakers, and other stakeholders on barriers to and solutions for developing MENA’s entrepreneurship ecosystem.

This report was written as part of Arabic Web Days, a month-long campaign that Google, Taghreedat, Wamda and other partners have run since 2012 with the aim of raising awareness amongst users in MENA to increase Arabic content on the Internet.

METHODOLOGY

For this report, the Wamda Research Lab interviewed 42 stakeholders in MENA who are currently working in the digital Arabic content (DAC) field. We would like to extend a large thanks to the following individuals who participated in interviews for this research. Their time and guidance were critical to informing our thoughts and analysis.

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- Rami Olwan, University of Sharjah
- Walid Mansour, MEVP
- Rudolf Jabre, 2Pure
- Muna Abu Sulayman, Meedan
- Sara Chemmaa, MBC
RECOMMENDED READINGS

1. Digital Arabic Content, Connect Arab Summit, 2012
2. Status of Digital Arabic Content Industry in the Arab Region, ESCWA, 2012
5. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) - Business Models for Digital Arabic Content, 2013
7. Understanding the ADG, Booz&co, Google, 2012
8. The Digital Landscape, IPSOS MediaCT, 2014
9. Differences and Similarities across the Arab generations, PWC, 2013