This paper explores online opportunities and challenges for LGBT people in Jordan, and how digital and traditional media coverage affects the LGBT Arab identity.
“In the midst of all that is unsafe there is a haven...[the internet] allows us to connect and access literature, film, and news reflecting similar communities.”

Interviewee, Amman

Introduction

Same sex relationships are legal in Jordan, but the LGBT community remains subject to discrimination and prejudice. Sexuality in general remains a taboo topic, and sexual expression outside the context of traditional marriage is condemned. Most Jordanians do not know any openly LGBT people and many dismiss homosexuality as part of a dangerous foreign agenda, aligned with Western thought and cultural imperialism. LGBT Jordanians are therefore often torn between their sexuality and their Muslim Arab identity.

Although there are no official legal measures taken against LGBT bloggers or journalists who cover LGBT issues objectively, they face the same discrimination. In general, the local media sensationalize and misrepresent LGBT topics. Jordanian officials will not incentivize local media to create LGBT positive content due to the prevailing anti-LGBT sentiment among their constituents. Changes in content will have to come from small, independent media that can be distributed online, like blog posts, comics, and short videos. Internet freedom is therefore central to the future of LGBT rights in Jordan. LGBT individuals deserve the right to safely express themselves online, along with mainstream segments of Jordanian society.

Yet Jordan’s legal system includes poorly defined bans on offending morals, restrictions which are viewed as a potential threat to balanced, independent content about LGBT topics. Media reports on LGBT issues frequently undermine the safety and privacy of the LGBT community, particularly online, where content is deliberately sensationalized to attract readers and advertising revenue. Dating apps used by LGBT people have been exploited to blackmail and attack users. As a result of these issues, many LGBT people view online spaces as a minefield, instead of a safe haven.

Internet Freedom and LGBT Rights

Internet access has been available in Jordan since 1996. The Jordanian government has a relatively liberal attitude towards internet access compared to other Arab countries, and internet penetration is high, with 73.6 percent of the population online as of 2016.¹ Most internet users rely on mobile phones for access, while computer access is more common at work. Jordan has several entries in the Guinness Book of World Records, including one for the street with the largest number of internet cafés per capita (University Street in Irbid) as of 2006.²

The Jordanian constitution guarantees the freedom of speech and expression, but press laws contain vague clauses that restrict media activity in practice. The Press and Publication Law of 1998, amended in 2012, governs any media in which meanings, words, or ideas are expressed by any means, including digitally. Though journalists and media activists protested against the 2012 amendments in front of parliament in the capital, Amman, they imposed significant new restrictions on online news content and

reader comments while giving authorities new powers to block domestic and international websites.\(^3\)

Article 38 prohibits "insult" to religious feeling or belief, or incite racial or sectarian hatred," \(^4\) with fines between 10,000 and 20,000 dinars.\(^5\)

LGBT relationships are not against the law in Jordan, yet journalists covering LGBT rights and issues affecting the community risk falling under a prohibition against offending morals. Jordanian law forbids activities or speech that "offend public morals" under articles of the Information Systems Crimes Law, the Penal Code and the Telecommunications Law, though without specifying what constitute these morals, according to independent Amman-based online magazine 7iber.\(^6\) Article 319 of the Penal Code criminalizes the distribution of "printed obscene material, or a drawing, a photo, a sketch, a module, or any other thing that may lead to the corruption of morals" with up to three years in prison. These laws contain scope for abuse to suppress LGBT content and punish gay rights advocates. According to the Director of the Department of Electronic Criminal Investigation, "moral" crimes are at the forefront of crimes committed online.\(^7\)

Laws are already being used to curtail freedom of expression. In 2015, Jordanian authorities detained at least nine journalists and writers.\(^8\) One more recent case seems particularly likely to cause concern among the LGBT community. On September 24, 2016, Zain Karazon, sister of popular Jordanian singer and activist Diana Karazon, was arrested and detained for several days for alleged slander in relation to content she shared on social media, which news reports said was about a local hospital.\(^9\) Zain Karazon is one of the most followed people on Snapchat in the Middle East, and has more than 591K followers on Instagram. The detention took place shortly after she shared Snapchat photos and videos of herself with Fifo, a gay Lebanese public figure.\(^10\) Many Jordanian people subsequently used social media channels to express disgust that Zain invited a gay man into her home, which they considered an "insult [to] the country's customs and traditions."\(^11\) The timing of the arrest and the social media criticism may have created the impression that officials were punishing her for publicizing her connection with Fifo.

Perpetuating Discrimination

"Every time a story regarding LGBT surfaces in the mainstream Jordanian media, there is a sudden change in the Jordanian streets toward LGBT individuals sharing public spaces."

Interviewee, Amman

The internet plays a significant and troubling role in fueling offline discrimination and even violence against LGBT people. Articles in both traditional and new media outlets often reflect misinformation and stereotypes about the community. Publications wishing to remain neutral often opt out of covering LGBT issues entirely, rather than anger their conservative viewers with stories that might be perceived as a supporting LGBT rights. The Jordan Times, one of Jordan's biggest and most credible English-language

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\(^3\) "In Jordan, proposed amendments to censor Internet", Committee To Protect Journalists, August 31, 2012, [https://cpj.org/x/4f7c](https://cpj.org/x/4f7c)


\(^5\) Husam Abu-Hamdeh, Lawyer, July 20th, 2016, Amman - Jordan, email

\(^6\) Thoraya El-Rayyes, "Enhancing Internet Media Freedom in Jordan International lessons for progressive internet regulations [https://goo.gl/t1rIpE](https://goo.gl/t1rIpE)

\(^7\) 7iber (forthcoming) Mapping Faces of Digital Control in Jordan. Amman: 7iber media


\(^11\) Abed Al Rahman Al Ghzawi, "Fifo in Jordan (Zain Karazon), Youtube Channel: AbedAlRahman AlGhzawi, August 26th, 2016, [https://goo.gl/Sj0wbJ](https://goo.gl/Sj0wbJ)
newspapers, “refrains from discussing any topics relating to LGBT people or sexuality,” according to a journalist who worked there for three years.\(^12\)

As a result, portrayals of LGBT people in the media concentrate in outlets with less credibility, and are generally sensationalist. Media analysis reveals three concerning patterns:

- Journalists accompany interviews with LGBT individuals with comments from two supposed experts from outside the community, usually a psychiatrist and a religious leader, who discredit the interviewee with derogatory labels.
- The media’s constant association of LGBT people with drugs, sex scandals, and prostitution reinforces a public image of LGBT people as uniformly deviant.
- Journalists only cover LGBT issues in the context of western LGBT rights movements, reinforcing opponents’ views that LGBT people are a distinct “other” in Jordanian society, rather than a homegrown subset of its citizenry. This undermines LGBT activists’ work towards gradual cultural acceptance. For example, there is a false understanding that any demand for LGBT rights has to do with marriage equality, yet LGBT people in Jordan are primarily concerned with their physical safety.

Ironically, the taboo nature of LGBT issues means that articles related to the LGBT community are extremely popular. In a survey of 32 Jordanian popular social media pages conducted in mid-2016, most articles received 250-400 likes and shares. However, topics related to LGBT, sexuality or gender received between 600 and 2,000 likes and shares.

Some internet media have tried to capitalize on this effect. In October 2014, the well-known Jordanian YouTube personality Sharif el Zoubi called for a “holocaust” against the LGBT community in an episode of his online show.\(^13\) His production company Kharabeesh apologized and removed the video. In an interview, the leader of an LGBT support group in Jordan said that Sharif privately told him, “I’m really not against homosexuality, we meant to only come off as funny.”

Many websites deliberately use LGBT themes as clickbait to attract viewers and advertising revenue. All too often, a popular website without journalistic credentials will cover a story involving LGBT individuals without fact checking, and then top it with a provocative title. “Social catastrophe that threatens Jordan” is one example of a headline published by Islah News.\(^14\) The article depicted LGBT rights as part of a foreign agenda to undermine Jordanian culture. Another article on Gerasa News titled, “Engagement party (for gays) in a coffee shop in Amman,” reported that the two men played a music CD with a picture of a devil holding a microphone on the cover at their engagement celebration.\(^15\) Gay marriage is not recognized in Jordan, and negative associations and verbal provocation involving the topic is common and highly problematic.\(^16\)

Other online portals repost sensationalist material to attract readers, creating a cycle which shares inaccurate information and harmful stereotypes with thousands of people, and ultimately puts LGBT individuals at risk. Activists say the negative impact of news articles about LGBT issues is clear. “Every time a story regarding LGBT surfaces in the mainstream Jordanian media, there is a sudden change in the Jordanian streets toward LGBT individuals sharing public spaces,” said G.L., a gay individual who works on Rainbow Street, an area in central Amman frequented by artists and LGBT people.\(^17\)

In May 2015, LGBT activists in Jordan hosted an International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDOHAT) event in Amman attended by Alice Wells, the US ambassador to Jordan. Over 100 online outlets reported on the gathering in the next 48 hours, many using derogatory titles like, “Meeting for

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\(^{12}\) Anonymous, Freelance Journalist, June 3rd, 2016, Amman - Jordan, Personal interview

\(^{13}\) “Statement: The roots of Homophobia are fear”, Facebook: My.Kali magazine, October 24th, 2014, [https://goo.gl/8VzG6Hz](https://goo.gl/8VzG6Hz)

\(^{14}\) [http://islahnews.net/65981.html](http://islahnews.net/65981.html)

\(^{15}\) [http://www.gerasanews.com/print/56419](http://www.gerasanews.com/print/56419)

\(^{16}\) “Amman: Engagement party (homosexuals) in a coffee shop... The bride and groom are two men, watch in pictures!!”, www.gerasanews.com, 20/9/2011. [https://goo.gl/rSwjja](https://goo.gl/rSwjja)

\(^{17}\) G.L., Sales worker in an Urban store, July 1st 2016, Amman - Jordan, Personal interview
Homosexuals and Perverts in Jordan Sponsored by the US Ambassador.” Lawyer Tareq Abu el Ragheb condemned the 2015 IDAHOT event on his television show, “Face the Truth.” He also tried repeatedly to file a lawsuit against Ambassador Wells for attending the event, and against Social Development Minister Reem Abu Hassan for failing to shut it down under Jordan’s Public Gatherings Law. Two lawyers known to Mr. Tareq, speaking on condition of anonymity, said he adopted an anti-LGBT stance to please his audience of over one million followers.

The widespread negative coverage preceded a noticeable uptick in offline attacks against LGBT people. Several videos surfaced on social media portraying physical and verbal homophobic attacks, included one showing a man being beaten in the street in a conservative area in Amman. “He totally deserves it…Everybody who is one of those [LGBT] people needs to be caught and beaten down,” one comment on the video read. “Beat him up with a rock…we need to educate them before they reproduce…they [will] think twice before going to the street next time,” said another.

Activists reported the videos to social media platforms like Facebook for violating community guidelines, and many were removed, but the climate for LGBT people had already deteriorated. One man said, “I walk on Rainbow Street every day, as I both live and work in the area. Before the IDOHAT incident, I rarely received any comments. Now I often hear comments from passing cars, who yell things like, “you want your rights?” because they guess that I’m gay.”

Blackmail and Exposure

“There really isn’t much online safety for the LGBT community in Jordan…You never know how safe your own private pictures are.”

Interviewee, Amman

“I started my blog on February 1, 2007 as the only way to express myself, my feelings, fears and hopes about living a gay life in Jordan,” a blogger who uses the name Doctor Rainbow said in an interview via email. He chose the name “Doctor Rainbow” because he was studying medicine and hoped to be a doctor as well as a free homosexual man. “Back then, blogging was one of the main ways for self-expression before social media outlets like Facebook, and it was easy to establish a blog in the Arabic language.”

The blog covered the daily struggle involved in leading an ordinary life as a gay man in Jordan, along with HIV awareness—including a personal account of getting tested for HIV and his fears during the procedure—international news about the LGBT rights movement and his hopes to develop a similar movement in Jordan. The blog also provided a platform to criticize those who would suppress gay voices in the region.

Yet LGBT bloggers and internet users in Jordan, like other LGBT people, are frequently subject to blackmail by outsiders or even other community members seeking to exploit the enforced secrecy surrounding their identities for financial gain. “My last post was on July 16, 2008,” Doctor Rainbow said. “The mother

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19 see also, “In the presence of the US Ambassador, celebrating homosexuality” Al Khaleej Online, May 26th, 2015, https://goo.gl/WvcF4L
22 Anonymous, 2 lawyers who work for a private consultancy firm, May 10th, 2016, Amman - Jordan, private and personal interview
23 “Hitting a fag in Jabal el Hussein”, Facebook page @man.mooz. September 22nd, 2015, https://goo.gl/3RWk06
24 “Hitting a fag in Jabal el Hussein”, Facebook page @man.mooz. September 22nd, 2015, https://goo.gl/3RWk06
25 Anonymous, manager assistant in an art gallery, June 1st, 2016, Amman - Jordan, personal interview
26 Doctor Rainbow, Blogger, April 18th, 2016, Amman - Jordan, email
of a gay friend who attempted suicide called my father and told him about my blog and many other details about my personal life. I did not deny my homosexuality when my parents confronted me about my blog. I was under a lot of family and financial pressure to stop my blog, otherwise I would not have a roof to sleep under.”

On August 8, 2014, an unidentified person published a blog post containing nearly 100 pictures of the Jordanian members of Grindr and Scruff, dating apps used by LGBT people.27 In Jordan’s intolerant climate, exposing these individuals’ use of the apps without their consent made them targets for ostracism and even hate crimes. “I got a phone call from a friend of mine telling me that someone is outing random gay men by posting their pictures on a blog...My picture was posted to the blog an hour later,” Ahamd Burqawi, a Jordanian student now in the U.S. said by email. “My reaction was anger and fear for the men out there who could be harmed.”

LGBT users rallied together to circulate the information and warn their peers, and report the blog to law enforcement. “It was a tough time, but it also showed the beautiful solidarity we have as a community,” according to Ahadm Burqawi.28 Efforts to have the content removed proved fruitless, however, because the same information was simply republished on other websites. Jordan’s LGBT community watched the disaster unfold as link after link continued to reveal sensitive personal information. “Many guys left these apps...social media is no longer safe!” said one gay blogger.29

Unfortunately, that incident isn’t the worst to come out of LGBT dating apps. Like many countries in the MENA region, non-LGBT people have used dating apps to identify and punish LGBT people. “After the IDAHOT event that took place in May 2015, a friend of mine was lured in on Grindr,” an Amman-based blogger who requested anonymity said. “When he went to his date’s car, he was met by a group of guys who beat him. They asked him who organized the event and whether or not he wanted to “fight for his rights.” After hours of terrifying him, he was hospitalized. He refuses to report anything to the police as he’s afraid to come forward.”30

Others exploit dating apps to blackmail LGBT users. “I thought I was going out on a date with this guy that I had been talking to for weeks,” one victim, who has since relocated to the U.S., said by email on condition of anonymity. “He stopped to pick up another man, against my objections, and then both men became threatening. They told me they would out me if I didn’t give them money. He was driving at over 45 mph, but I opened the door and threw myself out. Afterward, the guy kept calling and texting me. Since he knew where I lived, I paid him nearly 1,500 USD over several months. It ended when he borrowed my car...a few hours later I got a call from policeman in another city in Jordan saying that the man had been caught blackmailing several people by posing as a policeman himself. Luckily, the officer who took my statement and returned my car did not ask me anything regarding the dating app.”31

Since the 2014 incident revealed many of its Jordanian users, Grindr has collaborated with Jordanian activists to publicize digital security best practices, but the community’s trust in digital tools was undermined.

“There really isn't much online safety for the LGBT community in Jordan,” an LGBT person based in Amman working for a technology company said by email. “You never know if this virtual being you are talking to is a decent human or not. You never know how safe your own private pictures are.

“Yet, at the same time, in the midst of all that is unsafe there is a haven; the LGBT community has access to information it never had before...[the internet] allows us to connect and access literature, film, and news reflecting similar communities.”32

**Recommendations**

27 "Grindr... ... is no longer safe!!", blog: iStudJo, September 1st, 2014, [https://goo.gl/ugtMtu](https://goo.gl/ugtMtu)
28 Ahadm Burqawi, Organisational and Corporate Communication Student, September 10th, 2016, US – Texas, Email
29 "Grindr... ... is no longer safe!!", blog: iStudJo, September 1st, 2014, [https://goo.gl/ugtMtu](https://goo.gl/ugtMtu)
31 Anonymous, Manager at a Tour guide company, June 12th 2016, US - San Francisco, email
32 Anonymous, Designer at a social media company, September 12th 2016, Amman - Jordan, Email
For policymakers:

- Prioritize education to increase Jordanians’ understanding of sexuality, gender, and orientation, which are currently absent from health curricula.
- Health campaigns from the Ministry of Health should be expanded to include representations of the LGBT community.

For the media:

- Protect identities and locations in news stories about LGBT communities. Publicly disclosing LGBT meeting places makes them unsafe.
- Conduct training sessions about applying journalistic standards and practices, particularly objectivity and fact-checking, to coverage of LGBT issues.
- Elevate LGBT voices without immediately discrediting them.
- Report on LGBT communities in the context of the unique cultures of the Middle East.

For LGBT activists:

- Study and share best digital security practices to communicate more securely online.
- Understand your platform. LGBT activists should look for opportunities to participate in public debates, but choose trusted media outlets that will represent LGBT issues objectively.
- Develop digital media campaigns that depict LGBT individuals working on other social or environmental issues, emphasizing that they share common concerns in the public interest; and engage conservative audiences on different aspects of the LGBT experience, like health campaigns and HIV awareness.