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World Press Freedom Day

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Social media users are playing a starring role in the drama unfolding in the Middle East and North Africa. In many countries in the region - including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria - the Internet is serving as a catalyst for journalists, activists, and citizens alike to connect with each other and share their stories and calls for change with the world.

“We were unplugged for five days: no Internet connection, no mobile devices. We were like in a big prison in Egypt,” says Egyptian Blogger Dalia Ziada, in explaining what it felt like when former President Hosni Mubarak’s regime switched off the power to the Internet and blocked mobile phone communications in an attempt to stifle press freedom and the freedoms of citizens to access information and assemble peacefully.

But the dark did not stop people from gathering in the streets to demand change.

“The civil rights movement is not new,” Ziada explained, “but it did not succeed until the Internet appeared and social networks like Facebook and Twitter attracted a larger number of Egyptians.”

The Internet is the global gateway that has amplified demands for freedom of expression and other universal human rights, facilitated vibrant and open discussions on a wide range of topics and connected citizens with each other and with people around the world. Indeed, access to information has been profoundly altered with the arrival of the digital age.

As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said earlier this year: “The Internet has become the public space of the 21st century—the world’s town square, classroom, marketplace, coffeehouse and night club. We all shape and are shaped by what happens there, all 2 billion of us (on the Internet) and counting.”

In this new public space crowded with news and chatter, journalists play an essential role in searching for truth, analyzing trends, maintaining credibility, and providing reports to serve the public good. Undoubtedly, the arrival of the digital age – the evolution of the Internet, the emergence of new forms of media and the rise of online social networks – has sparked debate as to what it means to be a journalist, what role bloggers play, and what the effect of a blurring of lines between citizen journalists and professionals will be on the media of today and tomorrow.

World Press Freedom Day, observed annually across the world on May 3rd, was established by the United Nations to celebrate the principles of press freedom and commemorate those who have fought and died trying to exercise them. This year, the United States is partnering with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO) to host the global commemoration of World Press Freedom Day for the first time in Washington, D.C.

This year's theme could not be more prescient: "21st Century Media — New Media, New Barriers." The establishment and fostering of an independent, pluralistic, and free press is essential to the development of civil societies and democracies across the globe.

"When a free media is in jeopardy," Secretary Hillary Clinton has said, "all other human rights are also threatened. So, in that spirit, let us continue to champion those who stand for media freedom – and expose those who would deny it. And let us always work toward a world where the free flow of information and ideas remains a powerful force for progress."

We are facing a critical, transformative moment in our history. Around the world people are calling out for freedom, transparency, and self-determination. New digital tools are supporting this cause in a way that is faster and more widespread than ever before, and journalists are playing a central role in this effort. Unfortunately, many of them have been killed or injured as they've sought to report on the serious challenges facing us today. It is up to each of us to honor their legacy and do all we can – both virtually and in reality – to support press freedom as a fundamental right to be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere.