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Arab Health Care and Online Development

The Jordanian startup Al-Tibbi is leveraging the Arab World's growing online penetration rates to enhance the region's health care agenda.

By [Jamil Wyne](#) | Nov. 29, 2012

During the past two years, Internet penetration in the Arab world has increased dramatically. It has proven to be a powerful civic participation tool and is developing into a facilitator for commercial opportunities. As access continues to grow, it is important that the government, private sector, and general public leverage it to enhance the region's social development space, in particular health care, which is evolving in the region.

As of June 2012, **3.7 percent** of the world's Internet users were in the Middle East and North Africa region, with Internet penetration reaching 40 percent of the population (compared to the world average of 30 percent). Between 2000 and 2012, Internet penetration **grew by more than 2,600 percent**. Further, between January and November 2011, the number of Facebook users in the region increased by 68 percent, and as of June 2012, Arabic was the **fastest-growing language on Twitter**.

Much of the recent fascination with online penetration is due to the Arab Spring. Twitter and Facebook became part and parcel of the discussion surrounding Tahrir Square and events in most countries that saw uprisings. **Facebook usage at least doubled** during times of protests across the region.

This conversation now also includes e-commerce—in fact, business-to-customer online sales in the region could reach USD\$15 billion by 2015 (MRG International—October 2011). In a **recent report** of 8 countries by the Dubai School of Government, 84 percent of 4,000 Internet users said that social media tools can assist in developing entrepreneurial skills, and 86 percent thought that social media was an important tool for startups. This suggests that Internet users are looking to the online space to shape civic and commercial participation, helping them to learn and enhance

productivity.

But an issue often overlooked in this conversation is the role that online space can play in Arab health care systems—a cornerstone of the region’s social development agenda. Parallel to rising online activity, health care in the region is changing. Increasing incomes have led to **new demand for health services**, calling for more institutions and facilities to answer. As more players demand information on where and how to obtain services, enhancing basic health care knowledge is increasingly important.

As new suppliers and consumers enter the field, online information hubs can play a huge role in educating patients and enhancing awareness of different health care providers. One company in particular offers a model for how this framework could operate.

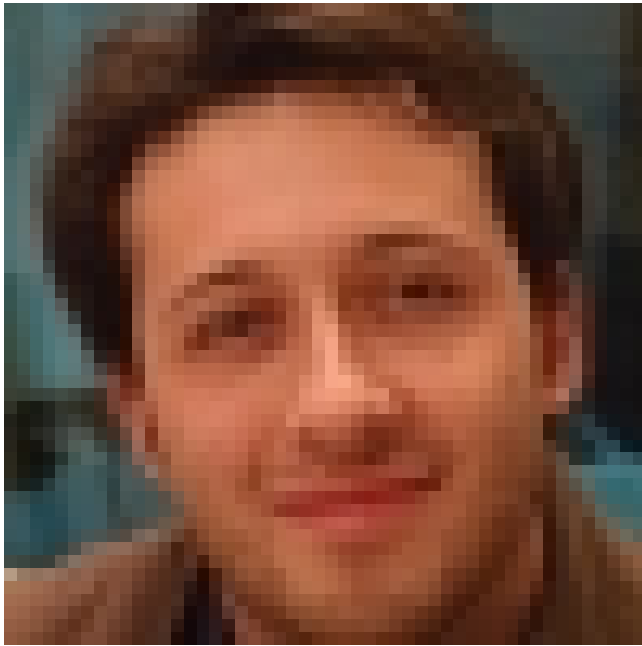
The Jordanian company **Al-Tibbi** began in 2009 with a simple agenda: to build the first online Arabic medical dictionary. From there, founders Jalil Allabadi and his physician father created a one-stop shop for online health care information, which now receives 50,000 unique visitors a day, or roughly 1,500,000 unique visitors a month—and those numbers are growing at a rate of 17 to 20 percent every month.

Al-Tibbi’s mission is to expand health awareness and application. The online resource makes information on hospitals, clinics, physicians, and other medical facilities publically available for Arabic consumers. It also helps visitors learn about different health risks, ailments, and treatments—information that can directly inform their decisions and lifestyle. Perhaps most important is the fact that the information is provided only in Arabic. Though Arab physicians and health care professionals study the same materials as their English-speaking peers, relaying the same concepts to Arab patients can be done only through accurate translations.

Al-Tibbi has also created a portfolio of “firsts” in the Arab world. Its Symptom Checker is an online tool that helps patients better understand ailments and maladies. The company has also built **the largest Arabic health channel on Youtube**, with 2.9 million views to date. Additionally, 750 physicians contribute expertise to site visitors, and 100 more join in each month. The incorporation of physicians is part of Al-Tibbi’s larger strategy to change the way experts, patients, and other stakeholders communicate about health care. Supporting this goal, Al-Tibbi recently became an Endeavor-supported company that has grown from 5 employees in 2010 to 23 in 2012, plus 10 freelancers.

The region needs many online players to contribute to its health care space, which must go beyond information sharing and education. The same is true for the rest of the region’s social development agenda. Online tools are critical to advancing knowledge and to increasing well-being and opportunities. Companies such as Al-Tibbi demonstrate how online and social development objectives can intersect, and provide a blueprint for other players to follow and for millions to leverage.

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Tags

Internet, Middle East, Social Media

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