

Amplify Impact: A Side of the Middle East You've Never Seen

“Ok...uh-huh... Did you get her name?... I’ll be at the police station in five minutes.” [Name], a young Egyptian human rights activist, hung up her phone. She runs Imprint Movement, an organization combating sexual harassment in the streets of Cairo. One of her team members had just witnessed a Somali refugee try to report a rape and instead get laughed out of the police station by the officers on duty. Sadly, this scene is not new to [Name]. Yet, since 2012, Imprint Movement has prevented dozens of sexual assaults and nearly 100 acts of harassment.

Many of us are aware of the political turmoil that has swept through Egypt since the start of the Arab Spring, and some of us have heard about the accompanying wave of sexual violence. However, few of us know about Imprint Movement or the many other organizations across the Middle East that are working to improve their communities. Their stories deserve to be told.

Needs Statement

Most people know little about the Middle East other than what they see in the media headlines: bombings, terrorism, and conflict. It’s no wonder that a 2012 study from the University of Maryland found that 47 percent of Americans had a negative view of Arabs.¹ As recently as February of this year, respondents to a Gallup survey overwhelmingly ranked their opinions as “unfavorable” for six out of the eight Middle Eastern nations listed.²

What rarely makes the headlines is the upsurge in entrepreneurship and social activism that is transforming the region. [Startup Weekends](#) have taken place in more than 160 cities in the Middle East and North Africa; [TEDx](#) events have occurred in every country; and in 2012, more than 4,500 teams competed in the [Middle East MIT Business Plan Competition](#).³ According to a survey of Arab country residents, nearly 70 percent agreed that young people are more interested in improving their communities since the Arab Spring,⁴ and a study by Booz Allen and Google indicated that more than 40 percent of Arab digital users wanted to start their own companies.⁵

Egyptian activist [Name] is just one of the dozens of inspiring young leaders with whom Amplify Impact Project Director [Name] has collaborated over the past few years. Others have included [Name], a young scientist revamping the education system in Jordan, and [Name], a young entrepreneur producing upcycled accessories in Lebanon. Sadly, their efforts have gone largely unrecognized, and their organizations lack the resources to publicize their work.

This past summer, [Project Director] met with more than 30 leaders of nonprofits and socially-minded for-profits in Amman, Beirut, and Cairo to understand their outreach challenges and needs. Overwhelmingly, they expressed a need to build awareness for their causes—particularly outside of their home countries—and attract volunteers, donors, customers, and investors. Their budgets for outreach were generally limited or nonexistent, and the nonprofits were often constrained by the stipulations of their grants. The leader of one Jordanian social venture, which builds urban farming and water and energy saving solutions, lamented, “We’ve launched a new project to transform existing buildings into sustainable ones, and we’re seeing a lot of success. But we just don’t have the manpower to spread the word and bring in clients.”

Although publicity can be generated through myriad channels—such as website development, social media campaigns, and traditional media outreach—online video can give an organization the biggest “bang for its buck.” According to leading author and consultant Dr. Susan Weinschenk, videos are particularly effective marketing tools because human brains are hardwired to pay attention to faces and movement, voices help us convert information into meaningful content, and emotions conveyed through

body language are contagious.⁶ Video content is also the most popular on the web; video-related Internet traffic is predicted to account for 79 percent of all traffic by 2018.⁷ Most importantly for our purposes, videos humanize other cultures. By watching a person on screen, an audience connects with him or her as an individual, rather than as part of a larger (often stereotyped) group. If the nonprofits and social ventures blossoming across the Middle East could produce videos about their work, they could not only benefit from the much-needed publicity but also offer a rare glimpse into the complexity, diversity, and humanity of the Middle East that is often ignored in the news.

Project Summary

Amplify Impact aims to build global awareness for nonprofit and for-profit social impact organizations in the Middle East by offering an online platform for producing and distributing emotionally-engaging, story-driven videos. The platform “packages stories” by guiding users through a process for identifying their organizations’ core values and outreach objectives, building a compelling narrative, connecting with local filmmaking professionals or volunteers, and sharing the finished product. In addition, the platform provides video viewers with a means to connect with and share the causes they care about.

Our platform has two defining characteristics. First, we emphasize the importance of storytelling—using characters and plotlines to emotionally engage the audience. Too often, videos for social causes focus on statistics, talking heads, or somber images. According to research from Harvard University, videos that evoke surprise and joy are the most likely to attract and retain viewers.⁸ “When entertainment creates an emotional connection, it leaves a lasting effect on our minds,” explains Harvard Assistant Professor Thales Teixeira.⁹ (For an example of powerful storytelling in service of a nonprofit, watch [this short video](#) following the story of a young girl from a broken home who learns to play violin.) Through Amplify Impact’s “story packaging” process, we build storylines that inspire viewers to watch, share, and support the featured organizations.

Second, we help organizations utilize resources that already exist within their support networks in order to reduce the cost of video production. For example, members of some organizations may have friends or colleagues who can operate a camera, edit video footage, fill an acting role, or provide locations for production. Amplify Impact’s platform will identify the types of talent needed for a given video and offer users the option to work with professional talent or select their own volunteers. The production quality will not necessarily be the same for the two options, but when attracting and retaining viewers, it is the story that matters, not the style. Consider some of this year’s viral videos; most of them were filmed on camera phones. The content of the video and the distribution efforts are what made the videos go viral.

Our emphasis on story, use of organizations’ existing support networks, and focus on the Middle East distinguish us from other websites for producing digital videos, including online marketplaces [Amass Media](#), [Veed.me](#), and [Nabbesh](#). Amass Media connects Bay Area nonprofits with freelance filmmakers; Veed.me does the same for startups in the Bay Area and Israel; and Nabbesh helps Middle Eastern businesses hire freelancers for a wide variety of tasks.

An organization can hire a filmmaker through these websites but is unable to assess how much impact the video produced will have in advancing the organization’s mission. Amplify Impact focuses on the most important aspects of video production for drawing wide audiences and engaging them in an organization’s work: pre-production story development, as well as marketing and distribution. We build powerful storylines and disseminate them to global audiences to build awareness across physical and cultural borders, and we make it easy for organizations to produce videos using their own resources rather than hiring outside freelancers.

Project Implementation

Our team is currently focusing our efforts in Amman, Beirut, and Cairo because of the vibrancy of their social innovation and filmmaking scenes and the strength of our networks within those communities. We have already established a local network of 23 production companies and independent filmmakers who are interested in producing videos through Amplify Impact. We are also continuing to validate our idea by interviewing local nonprofit and startup leaders to supplement the more than 30 interviews [Name] conducted this summer. Based on these interviews, we will design a basic website to assess customer interest on a larger scale.

Throughout this process, we will market the videos on our platform to diaspora population audiences and others who have an interest in the Middle East. Ultimately, we aim to reach a broader audience that includes those who know little about the region, but our target audience initially will be those who already care about the region and about spreading inspiring stories from the region. We will reach these audiences through our personal networks as well as by partnering with diaspora organizations, like the Lebanese American Association and the Egyptian American Organization.

Our expectation is that our initial audiences will not only build awareness outside of diaspora communities for Middle Eastern social impact organizations but will also generate new revenues for the organizations, including donations for the non-profits and new markets for the social ventures. These revenue streams will increase as our distribution network grows and our platform develops. By keeping production costs low and developing efficient, targeted distribution channels, we hope to open opportunities for monetizing the platform in the future.

The Amplify Impact team envisions a world where initiatives that are catalyzing opportunity, hope, and positive change receive the attention they deserve. Our focus is on the Middle East, but we hope that our platform can be a model for spanning other cultural and physical divides around the world.

Team Biographies

[Name], Project Director: [Name] has a passion for cross-cultural understanding between the US and Middle East. For the past two years, she ran [Beyond the Bombs](#), a multimedia online publication about Middle Eastern arts, culture, and entrepreneurship. Previously, she worked as a Middle East desk editor for an online journal and a political analyst in Washington, DC. [Name] received her BA in International Relations from Stanford University and is now pursuing her MBA at UC Berkeley.

[Name], Finance and Business Development: [Name] has experience consulting for a wide variety of nonprofits and governmental organizations with a focus on financial analysis and business planning. Currently, he works as the Senior Project Analyst for a renewable energy startup company. [Name] holds a BA in International Studies from the University of Washington and is an MBA Candidate at UC Berkeley.

[Name], Operations: [Name] is the youngest winner of the [MENA 100 Business Plan Competition](#). He has launched two companies for software development and learning solutions, and he now works as an operations officer at a startup in Dubai. [Name] is a mentor for Startup Weekend Dubai and a member of Young Arab Leaders. He has a degree in Computer Engineering from the Jordan University of Science and Technology.

[Name], Technology: [Name] is an engineer turned product manager. Since 2011, he has served in both roles for a mobile commerce platform and developer program for Hewlett-Packard. He earned a BS in

Electrical and Computer Engineering from University of Illinois, Urbana- Champaign, and a Certificate in Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management from Berkeley Extension. [Name] is currently pursuing an MBA at UC Berkeley.

[Name], Distribution: [Name] is a political science major on exchange at UC Berkeley from the University of Warwick. She has conducted research on European immigration from the Middle East and North Africa and has worked with NGOs on immigrant welfare. Most recently, she volunteered at a refugee shelter and an immigration center in the UK.

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 - ³ Schroeder, Christopher M., *Startup Rising: The Entrepreneurial Revolution Remaking the Middle East*, 2013, pg. 115.
 - ⁴ Buckner, Elizabeth, Sarina Beges, and Lina Khatib, “Social Entrepreneurship: Why Is it Important Post Arab Spring?” Stanford University, March 2012, http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/23656/White_Paper_Social_Entrepreneurship.pdf.
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 - ⁸ Nobel, Carmen, “Advertising Symbiosis: The Key to Viral Videos,” Harvard Business School, 17 June 2013, <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/7267.html>.
 - ⁹ Nobel, “Advertising Symbiosis.”