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SUCCESS STORY

Young Activists Tap Power of New Media



USAID/Lebanon

An activist trained by Social Media Exchange shows other activists how to use Twitter and other social media tools for outreach and advocacy.

“Two months ago, I did not know Twitter or what a blog was...only Facebook...and I am a computer science graduate! Now I have my own blog. You have the sense that it is your own space and you are there for the whole world to see. In one second you think you are famous!”

—Raed Harb, SMEX trainee
from Baalbeck

November 2009 – Young activists in Lebanon are using new media tools to make their voices heard and to connect to civil society actors and citizens across the country. Supported by USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), a first group of 19 have completed an intensive five-month training program on digital photography, audio and video production, mapping, and the use of online tools to advance initiatives aimed at empowering youth and promoting conflict resolution.

The program, designed by Social Media Exchange (SMEX), builds on a previous OTI-funded activity that generated demand for more in-depth social media training and one-on-one consulting. For this project, SMEX developed English and Arabic training materials, which are available online at <http://learning.smex.org>.

While Internet connectivity was a challenge, especially outside Beirut, the committed trainers-in-training found ways to complete the online program. Following graduation, the SMEX trainers organized workshops in Beirut, Baalbeck, Tripoli, Keserwan, Saida, and Tyre for more than 60 local civil society organizations, including several OTI partners. The trainers received requests for further training on new media use and plan to fulfill these requests as a team. The group also created a blog to share ideas from workshop participants (<http://smexideas.blogspot.com>).

The newly minted trainers are already putting some of their ideas into action. Nada Akl, a budding journalist who completed the program, has begun giving trainings on social media tools at a youth center in Mount Lebanon. Akl said, “The training also enabled me to inform the redesign of our independent news site to make it more interactive. We now have features that allow us to upload video and audio files, and soon through our online forum, readers will be able to recommend stories be covered that are not in mainstream news.”

In addition, two participants from an OTI partner in Baalbeck integrated a social media course into their computer training program. Another SMEX trainee is writing a social media plan for her Rotaract club, and other trainers recently held an Internet ideas fair, where they explained tools such as blogs, Twitter, and social bookmarks to other activists in an informal café-style setting.

Through this grant activity, SMEX has expanded its capacity and reach and has received multiple requests to partner with other groups on social media projects. And the group now has a committed cadre of social media trainers to help fulfill this demand.