



How The Revolution In Connectivity Is Remaking The Middle East--And The World

*This article is by Saj-Nicole Joni, chief executive of [Cambridge International Group](#) and an advisor to executives worldwide. *The Right Fight*, by Saj-Nicole Joni and Damon Beyer (HarperCollins, 2010), is available in book, e-book and audio formats.*

[Marc Andreessen](#) recently predicted that within five years there will be five billion smart phones, each with the equivalent computing power of a supercomputer, connected to the full power of the Internet—and on everyone’s person, all the time, everywhere. It’s not news that this inclusive, connected infrastructure irreversibly changes transparency and gives human discussions a global reach by creating unfettered access to knowledge.

Yet as I circle the globe working with CEOs and top executives, I see people everywhere—across all industries and sectors—struggling to fully comprehend what to do next. Yes, we have these tools. But how do we put them to use to solve the problems we care about most? How will others use them?

I recently invited Christopher M. Schroeder, author of [Startup Rising](#), to discuss these questions and share what he’s learned from the connectivity-enabled explosion of entrepreneurship that’s occurring in the Middle East.



Saj-nicole Joni



Christopher M. Schroeder

Christopher Schroeder: In most emerging countries we’ve reached a tipping point in the diffusion of basic technologies. A simple cell phone, a rudimentary media and communications infrastructure, and basic payment and transportation systems are allowing people to fundamentally change the way they see their situations and their options. People everywhere can now look around and say, “No one understands my backyard better than I do. I’m not going to wait for the authorities to fix the problem. We don’t need to wait. We can do it now, our way.” Mass smartphone penetration only compounds this, exponentially.

My generation or older think like this: If Cairo has terrible traffic, which it does, it will take a generation to fix the roads. And the authorities have to make it happen, which is hard and slow. Or if the education system is terrible, it will take a generation to turn around. The young people say, “Wait a minute, that generation is us! We will fix it now!” So Beyollak is a crowd-sharing app where millions share the best routes to work around traffic. And this kind of app gives us the data needed to make severity of an issue visible to all, and it forms the basis for figuring out the best way to change the roads over time.

Change in education is moving even faster. Approximately 20% of all the startups I've seen offer solutions for supplemental education, from regular mobile texting to video solutions. Nafham has crowdsourced more than 12,000 videos in Arabic in Egypt in math, reading, writing etc. Now anyone with access to the Internet can learn.

Saj-nicole Joni: This is something that most top-down organizations have not yet fully understood, let alone figured out how to deal with. How did the time you spent with startups in the Middle East help you get ahead of the curve?

Christopher: The narrative that people in the West have about the Middle East is very monochromatic. It's based on one view of political unrest and instability. When I got there, I was confronted with a counterfactual: The challenges were very real, yet there was growth and vitality pretty much everywhere. I realized that I had failed to deeply consider what happens to societies when they gain ubiquitous access to technology and connectivity. These new capabilities create demand for a political and societal voice, debates about religion, debates about the role of women. And they can change the way people imagine their economic future. We've seen this happen in every emerging growth market. Why should we expect different in the Middle East?

I realized that I had been stuck in my own narrative trap about the hopeless cycles of violence and corruption in the Middle East. When I went there and looked for myself, I saw just how much the new infrastructure of connection makes possible, even when the larger structures are crumbling. I began to see how the enormous potential of bottom-up problem solving is taking hold and changing everything.

Saj-nicole: We've both seen many examples in which inclusive connection allows people to see how someone like them can change things on their own terms. When this happens, something fiercely human is unleashed. It gives people the inspiration, stamina, and passion to go for it. This seems to be a universal phenomenon, reaching from new entrepreneurs in emerging countries to employees in the bottom rungs of large hierarchies and to communities fed up with the unresponsiveness of government. In this new era of connectivity, technology, and inclusive access to knowledge, there are so many ways to solve problems that we are often limited only by the bounds of what we can imagine.

Bottom-up problem solving is highly resilient, too. Your work shows us with new insight just how true this is. It doesn't require full stability to flourish. Top-down organizations—by which I mean large institutions in the for-profit, nonprofit, and public sectors—that can't embrace this grassroots innovation will be overtaken by their competitors.

Christopher: I could not agree more. Never underestimate our human will to create for ourselves and our communities. Once people realize that they need not rely exclusively on—often cannot rely on—the system of top-down command and control, that is empowerment. And there's no going back.

Dina Sherif, a corporate social responsibility expert in Cairo, has said that the top-down approach views people as problems: "Look at all those poor people. I, in Washington or New York or wherever, have the answers for them, and I can deploy these answers everywhere else." Those who take a bottom-up approach think of people as assets instead of problems. Their on-the-ground view of a situation enables them to identify the resources that can be brought to bear on existing problems. Now, for the first time, people have affordable tools at their disposal that enable them to come up with amazing innovations. These solutions may initially be only good enough for people's backyards—that is, in the developing country's context. But I firmly believe that before long you'll see bottom-up solutions applicable across the globe—including throughout the developed world.

Saj-nicole: This means that we in the West are putting ourselves at real risk if we can't broaden our perspective enough to be able to get on board with all the grassroots-led innovation that's taking place below the radar of organizational and societal control.

Christopher: Yes. Embrace such innovation in our backyards, and embrace it wherever it may come from. Because it will come from everywhere. My travel in the Middle East taught me that connectivity-enabled empowerment allows people to understand that they're not alone, that their dreams and aspirations are not crazy, and, again, that if someone like them tries something and succeeds, they can also. That's why I wrote *Startup Rising: Everyone needs to learn from this amazing groundswell of initiative and creativity from people around the world who have been written off by the traditional power structures*. There is no going back, no avoiding or stopping the power of bottom-up problem solving in our newly connected world. What we must do is understand, embrace, encourage, amplify, and partner with it.

Saj-nicole: So if I care about my community, organizations, and teams, what new questions do I need to ask?

Christopher: At least once a month, ask yourself and your teams:

- Where can I encourage and unleash bottom-up empowerment to solve my organization's and my community's problems?
- What new stories of success am I using to change my own thinking and catalyze hope and determination in others?
- Where am I at risk of being on the wrong side of bottom-up innovation? What can I do to change this, fast?

We've reached the technology tipping point, and it's also very early days. Now it's up to leaders everywhere to break out of their own narrative traps and learn how to use connection and bottom-up problem-solving expertise to create the sustainable world we all want.

Read this article online at: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesleadershipforum/2013/12/05/how-the-revolution-in-connectivity-is-remaking-the-middle-east-and-the-world/>