Social Media and Social Change in Jordan:
Opportunities and Threats

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Overview

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has great humanitarian responsibilities towards a war-torn region. Deliberately referred to as a regional entrepreneurship hub, over eight million of Jordan's citizens (86.4%) have access to the internet, and they produce more than half of the digital content available online in the Arabic language. As Jordanians navigate together through an ongoing humanitarian, economic and political crisis, the mainstream social media platforms to which they are active contributors, such as Twitter and Facebook, with the latter being the top app in the country, are turning into interactive spaces critical for public debate and socio-political transformation. The uses of mainstream social media include coping with the consequences of war, displacement, and the identity negotiations of a young nation. This policy brief identifies gaps and opportunities uncovered by the current programmes offered by organisations aiming at serving groups such as disadvantaged Jordanians and refugees. Overall, the country's social media landscape reveals underlying societal tensions, collective concerns, and hopes for progress, equity and stability. This policy brief analyses social media impacts on the Jordanian society in 2018-2019.

Context

By the time Jordan was established in 1921, first under the British mandate and later as a sovereign state in 1946, it had already been home to Arab tribes, Circassians, Chechens, Armenians, and Kurds among others. Its complexion only grew more diverse as, amid political turmoil, it became home to Palestinian refugees and Europeans from various parts of the continent, but most especially former Soviet Union nationals, who formed their distinct communities in it. Today it is also among the top refugee-hosting countries in the world; a shelter for Iraqis, Syrians, Somalis, Sudanese and others who seek safety from some of the deadliest and most complex conflicts in the world. Jordan's expanding society aspires to become a prosperous one, with long-standing ties with western powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom, closely maintained partnerships with the European Union, and a cabinet assigned especially to counter nepotism and corruption.

Trending Hashtags: The Pulse of the Public Opinion?

Hashtag activism could indeed be easily labeled as "slacktivism"- or a "lazy" form of activism. But in a region where a social media post could lead to a jail sentence, joining a public conversation on Twitter, and especially becoming an internet-based activist, is not just a "convenient" alternative to more traditional forms of participation.

Twitter, Jordan's third most popular social media platform after Facebook and Youtube, offers a conversation space comparable to a type that had previously long vanished. In the late fifties of the past century, the opposition forces grew powerful, and came to be perceived as a threat strong enough for the regime existing then to order the termination of all political parties, impose strict measures against citizen assembly (thus putting an end to numerous public places which were hubs for informal gatherings too), followed by declaring martial law, which stretched until the early nineties, as a consequence of the Israeli victory in the 1967 war. These changes resulted in the avoidance of any platforms formerly used for discussing issues of public concern, such as cultural and political salons. This condition had started to dissolve relatively recently.

One of the most notable online campaigning efforts and trending hashtags in the last two years was on the current law of cybercrime, which activists believe proposes vague and loose definitions of concepts such as online hate speech and defamation, creating conditions leading to the silencing and detention of private individuals and journalists. The conversation was active on the hashtag اسحب_قانون_الجرائم_الإلكترونية# (withdraw the law of cybercrime) until late 2018, making a comeback in 2019 too. Unfortunately, despite the government reviewing the requests made to change the law, the supposedly "edited" version remains a source of concern for civil society activists.

Previously, local campaigning on social media platforms greatly contributed to the organising of the offline action taken against Article 308, which required the civil society and women's rights groups to campaign for over a decade for it to be finally abolished in 2017.

The article stated that male rapists could be freed from legal punishment if they were to marry their female victims for a minimum of three years. Following hashtags such as الغاء_٣٠٨# (end 308), users were able to stay updated on the Jordanian parliament's decision as it looked into the proposals delivered by the civil society for scrapping the law and stay informed of events and demonstrations that were a part of the national campaign. In the same year, Lebanon and Tunisia also abolished laws of identical content.

Evening Power Distribution

Facebook's Live Streaming feature has been of phenomenal significance for social movements and protest organisers. In the summer of 2018 Jordanians protested an income tax proposed by the government (later overthrown as a consequence of the protests). This form of documentation provided more than substance for the media and watchdogs group which were monitoring the escalation of the events. The traditional power relations were challenged, allowing a more balanced form to emerge, transforming a critical situation with potentially unprocessed consequences.

Citizens participating in the protests started filming their own views from the protest and releasing it on their personal pages, often sharing their experiences in the presence of the armed forces. Most videos reported neutral through to positive encounters with the police on protest scenes, which mostly took place around the prime ministry. Subsequently, the authorities released videos and disseminated them across the internet, including some showing officers in senior positions giving directions to the public security guards and police, ordering them to avoid the use of force with any citizen participating in the protest. The videos from the protests, produced by both of the officials and the activists, circulated on Jordanian social networks, going viral in a matter of hours.

On-site, both the protesters and the security forces would offer each other water and food. Photos of this sharing was spread on Facebook by users from different political and ethnic affiliations, but most especially those participating in the protests or affirmative towards these acts; to reassure the public that the protests were not a coup attempt, but rather a call for reform and a push for dialogue. This was crucial as, on the outside, the scenes from the protests brought flashbacks from the media coverage of the Arab Spring, which quickly escalated (despite the many changes it brought) into revolutions and unresolved armed conflicts in nearby countries.

Growing more aware of the utilisation of such features and social media in general for local citizen action and participation purposes, the Jordanian government increased its own presence online during and after the protests. The government also shifted its post format to infographics, short videos, and released digital portals through which ministries could accept complaints and comments from the public online directly.

Crisis Relief

When Jordan's borders with Syria were announced to be closed in 2016, smaller numbers of refugees, mainly women, children and elderly were still allowed to enter. At times, thousands of refugees, depending on the frequency and volume of shelling, would appear on the Jordanian borders, forming informal camps with little to nothing in their possession, hoping to be granted a permit to cross the borders.

Non-partisan, self-organised groups and collectives emerged in response, utilising social media, especially Facebook, for outreach, coordination of donation collection, and for delivering aid to refugees who were prevented from basic protection and rights in "no man's land"- parts of deserted areas along the closed borders.

While conservative voices in Jordanian politics supported the decision of the government, which announced its inability to accommodate additional numbers of refugees and invited countries with capacity to split the responsibility toward the crisis, the Jordanian public raised the conversation again on social media. They demanded that Syrians escaping the June bombings of Daraa be allowed seek refuge in Jordan under the campaign #Open_the_Borders (#افتحو_الحدود). Informal citizen groups continued to use social media to connect individuals wishing to contribute or make a donation which were delivered to the no-mans-land camps. Nevertheless, the borders remained officially closed.

In late 2018, it became possible for Jordanians to [visit Syria](#) for tourism or business purposes. However, Syrians visiting Jordan, to date, is only possible through a special security clearance. More recently, the Syrian regime is calling for the return of refugees from Jordan and elsewhere to Syria, promising safety and fair treatment to returnees. Nevertheless, human rights groups [state](#) that systemic violations are ongoing, and include arbitrary arrests, torture, and forced disappearances.

Online Community Support Groups

Regulations affecting the refugees in Jordan are subject to change, and can be vague on multiple issues, such as the refugee access to secondary school education, as well as the job market of some industries. Members of refugee and migrant communities came to use Whatsapp and Facebook groups effectively to offer each other help and support under this uncertainty. The following were observed to be among the uses for these groups:

- Finding information about nationality-specific opportunities such as scholarships, courses, and professional training in Jordan and abroad, which group members share with each other.
- Connecting with others who live in nearby areas, and asking for opinions about moving to live in parts of the city of which they had little prior knowledge. Users commonly ask each other about the extent to which they think there is an acceptance of newcomers among the locals inhabiting an area in which they are interested, and the availability of jobs and transportation.
- Access to information on financial support from local institutions for projects and business ideas.
- Exchange experiences with civil society organisations, and recommendations for trusted charities.
- Sharing freelance job opportunities, as well as paid volunteer positions.

As a result, these social media groups complement the work of non-profit civil society organisations, and fill the gaps in the outreach efforts of these organisations. They act as a more trusted source of information in some cases due to personal affiliations and the shared experiences of the group members.

In spite of the many advantages of social media in this critical context, as in the case of any other country, risks and threats develop as social media platforms themselves grow and offer more possibilities.

Cyberbullying, Harassment and National Values

In June 2019, Netflix released a series titled Jinn, revolving around a group of high school students who come in contact with supernatural creatures. Based in the capital Amman, with back and forth scenes in Jordan's most popular tourist landmark, Petra, Jinn was marketed from the time of its early development stages as a Jordanian production and the first Arab world-centred Netflix series.

Unfortunately, the series was met by an overwhelmingly negative response and criticism which was translated into petitions demanding the relevant authorities take measures against it. Jordanian social media networks were swamped by posts about Jinn, with the majority accusing the series of delivering an "inaccurate" representation of the Jordanian way of life.

The series included scenes showing illegal substances consumption among teenagers, the crossing of what the traditional society considers to be "red lines" for premarital relation-ships, as well as the use of slurs throughout the season. Put together, these resulted in a broad debate online on whether a series produced and filmed in Jordan, in which Jordanians are acting, should in fact, reflect the reality of Jordanians, or if it has the space and *right* to do otherwise, and represent only a certain narrative, class, group, or a lifestyle.

Some of the questions posed in online discussions included why did the first series of this kind show a group of a very specific socio-economic status. Jin features attendees of a private school with good standing, with their personal choices unaffected by considerations of local "norms" and tribal affiliations- a "luxury" unattainable to most. They also speak a mixture of English and Arabic, something that is associated with the upper classes. However, in more constructive conversation threads, social media users seemed to agree that the storm caused by the series highlighted the divide in the different parts of society. For some, if not most, economic class and ethnicity determine the ability of individuals to make private life and future-related decisions.

Online "stalkers" of actors and actresses who starred in the series left thousands of shaming and threatening public and private messages and comments on the social media profiles of the starring team. Prince Ali of Jordan, a member of the royalty particularly close to youth because of his support of sports and cultural activities, became involved in the controversy by releasing a statement in the form of a Facebook status that addressed the social media attack on the participants, arguing that the series is not a "documentary", does not advocate for violence, and therefore should not be subject to attacks as such.

Hate Speech

Social media users may become aware of private messages attacking them directly because of online or offline activities such as the ones which are connected to the communities they identify with, as well as direct responses to social media post threads on which they may be active. But other forms of digital content such as memes with misogynistic or homophobic content can often pass as mere sarcasm or humour; when in-depth, they are reflections of intolerance or hate. For example, in reference to certain scenes in the Netflix series

discussed earlier, memes circulating on local social media networks ridiculed women who reject non-consensual encounters with men, citing a scene where a lead actress rejected another character. The meme hinted that women with non-traditional ways of life "ask for it", and do not have the right to object to men- a narrative women and human rights movements firmly oppose.

As waves of misogynistic and hyper-masculine comments spammed the pages of the young series participants, the production company, Netflix, responded to public pressure by stating that it will not tolerate the violation of the series' team. The response on social media, especially towards the actresses, was alarming. The same individuals who claimed the series promotes moral degradation, made abusive public responses and insults which to date, went unaccounted for.

The example from the case of Jinn reflects a broader practice. Comments frequently refer to as immoral those women who are public figures or who represent success stories. They are referred to as sources of shame, and as causes of problems for society for not adhering to the traditional roles assigned for their gender. Similar sentiments also appear in the comments section of video posts of interviews taken by local TV stations featuring special guests such as female politicians and entrepreneurs. Such threads often require "filtering", a Facebook feature which allows page administrators to sort comments from the page's users and remove the unwanted ones, such as these with abusive content. This affordance also appears to be regularly activated on documentaries or news videos showcasing the rituals of religious minorities too.

Extremist Recruitment

While exposure to extremist content does not necessarily lead to an individual's participation in a violent act or a movement, the use of social media for the purposes of promoting violent groups that foster hate and division, particularly among young people, has been a topic of concern among Jordanians.

Despite the reports in international media of the defeat of many extremist groups such as ISIS in some of the most critical locations, extremists continue to recruit young people throughout the region. It has led government agencies, such as the King Abdullah Fund for Development (KAFD) to conduct awareness sessions and social media courses which enable youth to spread a counter-ideology and views among peers. Through these trainings, youths become equipped with an increased awareness of how social media can make them, and others, vulnerable to such threats. No publicly available studies provide estimates of the number of people recruited by terrorist groups through social media in particular[1]. It is however expected that most of the stories and trials of citizens involved in such cases are kept confidential, and not published online.

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[1] See "Jordan: Extremism & Counter-Extremism" 2017, Braizat et al 2017, Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2018.

Fake News

The first fake news-combatting initiative was released in Jordan in 2015 in an attempt, unique in the Arab world, to respond to the phenomenon. It is ongoing to date and is titled فتبينوا (Fatabayyanu- *seek clarity*). Organised by a group of students, it is mainly focused on correcting information on discoveries, events, and current affairs which go viral in the form of social media posts among Arab audiences. Its stated purpose is to steer the Arab public towards informing content that is based on accurate, verified information. The Facebook page of Fatabayyanu has over five hundred thousand subscribers, managed by volunteers, and is the main communications portal for the initiative.

On the official website, Fatabayyanu states that the volunteer "fact-checkers" undergo examination, whereby their ability to conduct research and verify the information is tested, before being approved as members of the initiative. It also indicated that if checking the correctness of a post is not possible through online and open-source resources which they mostly rely on, the initiative attempts to contact individuals or institutions who could be mentioned in the texts of the posts concerned. Finally, the fact-checked content goes through editing and proofreading, also done by specialised volunteers, before being published online.

In 2018, the Jordanian government released an initiative titled حقك_تعرف# (*it is your right to know*), which consists of an online fact-checking platform with the purpose of combating the spread of misinformation online regarding topics of concern for the Jordanian public. It was supported by a social media campaign which promoted it.

The platform allows users to verify the news they have come across through sending the information to the relevant government department or institution to receive a check. This remains the only attempt of its kind, but it has also been criticised for promoting a singular view on "facts".

Mapping Responses to Social Media Threats and Opportunities

The majority of digital media training initiatives designed to foster the positive growth of social media are delivered either by the Jordanian government and or in partnership with it through United Nations' agencies or European Union-funded organisations. Relevant programmes include the UNESCO Media and Information Literacy Club. Spread across various schools and community centres in Jordan, the programme equips students with the skills to create digital content and examine content they come across more analytically. It also touches upon online news analyses, and user rights and freedoms.

Another example is Leaders of Tomorrow (LoT), a youth-led local organisation which directs initiatives aimed at engaging young people through linking them with positive opportunities such as scholarships, jobs, and training via a digital portal, For9a, which has a strong presence on platforms such as Facebook. The multiple-award winning platform bridges the knowledge gap and challenges the exclusivity of information around such resources and vehicles of upwards social mobility, in a country where youth represent the

majority, yet are stricken by high levels of <u>unemployment</u> which puts them at risk of exclusion and radicalisation.

Other activist grassroots movements which address issues relevant to the impact of social media platforms on society as well as the factors which influence the ecosystems of online social networks, seem to appear in response to triggers such as changes of laws and regulations. These movements tend to dissolve or become inactive upon either success or failure to obtain an intended outcome. For example, a movement most active on Twitter, entitled <u>7oryanet</u> (free internet) partnered with local politicians and media practitioners to push for improved internet freedoms and rights for Jordanians. The movement called for changes in the Jordanian cybercrime law starting from 2012, with an aim of preventing the blocking or censoring of activists' portals and websites by public agencies. It also called for the arrest of activists and social media users based on content posted, such as material in which they are expressing their opinions online, and other similar objectives. However, as of December 2018, despite still being available online, it has remained inactive.

Recommendations

Developing response

Social media analysis can offer insight into social conditions, narratives and tendencies. One way to do it is through analytics-based textual analysis software, which is increasingly becoming more accessible for professionals who are not necessarily specialised in text mining or data science. For example, organisations working with refugees, vulnerable youth, minorities, women in crisis contexts or other groups at risk, can collect the comment threads on their posts, such as those found on campaigning material (e.g a fundraiser, announcements for scholarship opportunities). They can then analyse the discourse surrounding it to see if certain narratives are dominating the conversations online, and whether they are indicating repetitive misconceptions which can affect the real-life dynamics between these groups and those surrounding them, especially if they are at the centre of divisive debates.

If the organisation is relatively small or has a limited or new social media presence, it can potentially combine the responses to its own social media posts with those found on the pages of partner organisations.

Stakeholders such as refugee youth themselves can also be consulted. Focus group discussions could take place on the key issues which keep resurfacing in the online discussion as determined by the analysis, and the programmes addressing social media threats can be adjusted accordingly to target these challenges with more focus.

Alternative partnerships

Whereas civil society organisations and donors have been collaborating closely with local governments and international development agencies in Jordan, non-formal groups, like the ones that appeared in response to the borders' closure, communicate with audiences which may be otherwise inactive or uninvolved in vital conversations. Future outreach plans can

include partnering with these informal collectives, who can spread the word about programmes and available engagement opportunities through more personalised channels, such as community groups on WhatsApp and Facebook.

Expanding the conversation on abusive content

Hate speech, including misogynistic comments or threats, should be acknowledged by youth and community trainers and mobilisers, as well as social media consultants and other professionals in similar capacities. As a face of social media threats, it can encourage internalising and acceptance of these streams of thinking. Moreover, it is particularly this form of content to which young social media users can be more exposed. Therefore, when introducing hate speech to audiences such as students, activists, volunteer collectives or others, it is important that more "subtle" forms of it are not going unnoticed.

The Author

Diana Ishaqat is a development practitioner based in Amman, Jordan. She has experience working with international organizations and nonprofits, including United Nations agencies in the contexts of youth leadership, women's rights, and crisis relief. Her interest in societies in transition was inspired by the experiences accumulated from growing up between the North Caucasus and the Middle East. Outside Jordan, she has participated as an emerging researcher and a member of several advocacy networks that promote causes such as gender equality in the MENA region, as well as refugee and indigenous peoples' rights in a wide range of projects that took place in South Korea, Lebanon, Denmark, Canada, and Germany. Diana is a former Chevening Scholar at the University of Westminster in London, with a Master's degree in Media, Campaigning and Social Change.

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