Facebook as a Contemporary Public Sphere for Opinion Expression and Participation: Jordan as a Case Study

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Abstract

Social media has been changing the way Jordanians consume news and engage in politics. The ongoing debate surrounding social media's potential as a public sphere and as a tool for contributing to democracy motivates this paper's inquiry. Drawing on Dahlgren's three dimensions of the Public Sphere, this paper examines a case study in which young Jordanians used Facebook to express their opinions and participate in a news story about the new drafts of the election and political parties' laws in Jordan. This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews to investigate students at Zarqa University. The study found that the participants used Facebook to express their voices, stay informed, and engage in news stories. Facebook was found to be a platform that provides news information and enables communication, which leads to participation (the structural dimension). Additionally, the study revealed that Facebook, as a social media platform, provides an unrestricted space for the public to share information and express their voices (the representational dimension). Finally, the study found that the participants primarily engaged with news stories through posting, commenting, or sharing videos but were lacking in offline participation in real-life settings such as seminars, conferences, and public discussions (the interactional dimension).

Keywords: Facebook, social media, public sphere, opinion expression, participation

1. Introduction

The original perception of the internet's potential for expanding and deepening democratic involvement remains a compelling subject. With the increasing immersion of societies into cyberspace and the vastness of the internet, communication spaces have become a platform for voices to thrive. Numerous researchers have explored the potential of the internet to foster participation and democracy. For instance, Hindman (2008, p. 7) has noted that "If citizens could write their news, create their political commentary, and post their views before a worldwide audience, this would surely have profound implications for political voice." With the advent of communication technologies, such as the internet and social media networks, the opportunity for more voices to be heard has expanded. Today, people can participate from anywhere, at any time, through their laptops or mobile phones (Prueksuralai, 2014).

The media including social media aims to shape public opinion by conveying information and opinions on various topics (Al-Jalabneh, 2020). With the advent of social media platforms, such as Facebook, deliberations and information sharing among users have become more accessible and facilitated (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Al-Jalabneh & Safori, 2020). Researchers have also shown that online political expression can contribute to offline political engagement (Sharadga & Safori, 2020; Vaccari et al., 2015), and those who express their political views online are more likely to participate in political activities offline (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). Moreover, research has indicated a positive relationship between social media use for news and political participation, both online and offline (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014).

A report from the Pew Research Center examined social media adoption worldwide, with Jordan included as one of the countries surveyed. The report found that the Middle East has a higher rate of social media use compared to other regions (Pew Research Center, 2018). The section of the report that analyzed social media use among internet users highlighted that some countries, particularly those with emerging economies, have seen a significant increase in social media use. Jordan stood out in this regard, with 94% of internet users also active on social networking sites (Poushter, Bishop, & Chwe, 2018). This suggests that social media platforms in Jordan could be important channels for opinion expression and participation. However, more research is needed to explore the role of social media in Jordan as a news source and a tool for public engagement (Safori, 2016).

The impact of social media has become pervasive in many aspects of our culture, society, and politics (Al-Jalabneh & Safori, 2020; AL-Jalabneh, 2023). However, analyzing the role and effects of social media across all of these domains is outside the scope of this study. Moreover, this paper only looks at the use of social media as a tool for opinion expression and participation in Jordan within the lens of the theoretical framework of the dimensions of the public sphere, according to Dahlgren (2005) to any given society or technological communicative spaces. In addition, Jordan's population is listed as one of the youngest populations globally. Jordan has 63% of its growing population below the age of 30 (Unicef, 2019). This could have many ramifications on politics and social life in Jordan. Especially, since these young citizens are more active and educated on how to use social media. Also, they would form the workforce gear of the country in the future. This research is important for understanding the potential of social media as a tool for opinion expression and participation in a society like Jordan, where social media use is prevalent, and the population is young. By examining the role and impact of social media on the public sphere in Jordan, this study can contribute to a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges presented by these technologies for democratic participation and civic engagement in a rapidly changing technological media landscape and developing region. Additionally, this research can help shed light on the ways in which young people are engaging with and shaping the public sphere through social media, and how this may impact social life in Jordan in the future. Therefore, this study aims to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the role of social media in Jordanian society and its potential for promoting democratic engagement and participation.

2. The Habermasian Public Sphere

As conceptualized by Habermas (1991), the public sphere is a free space where private people come together to discuss or share issues of public concern without any restrictions posed by a state or authority. Habermas's bourgeois public sphere is still relevant today, as it is a critical element in political discourse and deliberative democracies (Maia, 2007). In his work, Habermas went back over the emergence and expansion of the bourgeois public sphere in contrast to the spheres of commodity, corporate and elite-dominated public spheres. Habermas highlighted the various institutions and social forms in which the public sphere was realized through an early modern period in Europe. In his traces to the bourgeois social forms, Habermas recovered the concept of the public sphere in which he primarily hypothesized an idealistic public sphere where the free flow of information, free expression, and free debate are met in any given space in the society. Habermas is still used today in many scholarly works as an indication or a representation of an ideal democratic theoretical model. According to Habermas (1991), the requisites of the public sphere are absent in modern mass media due to the influence of corporate interests, ownerships, and commercial interests as well. Habermas believed that today's mass media institutions had segmented the public sphere rather than strengthened it (Habermas, 1991).

Several scholars have criticized the work of Habermas such as Fraser (1990) and Hallin (1994). However, the concept is still compelling for many researchers committed to democracy (Dahlgren, 2005). The term itself is frequently used in a singular form; however, sociological realism directs our attention to the plural in which the concept public sphere has to be understood as an overarching term for many different spaces (Dahlgren, 2005). likewise, it is unrealistic to believe that in today's pluralistic societies, all people and actors of society could come together to debate common public matters in one open space such as the Agora that existed in early Greece. Moreover, it is undeniable that political deliberations can occur and be scattered over various platforms (Maia, 2007). These platforms could still achieve some degree or elements of a public sphere, if not all, in some cases.

3. Facebook and the Dimensions of Dahlgren

Facebook has become one of the most important platforms for opinion expression and participation across the world (Yu & Oh, 2018; Meth & Yang, 2015). In an era of digitalization and the growth of the internet, Facebook has provided a global public sphere for people to discuss and debate a variety of politics-related topics (Steenkamp & Hyde-Clarke, 2014). It allowed users to create accounts, post their opinions, and interact with other users who shared similar interests or opinions (Winkler et al., 2022). It also facilitated users' ability to join different groups and engage in meaningful conversations and debates with others (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Through Facebook, people can express their opinions on current affairs, learn more about political happenings, and even advocate for causes they believe in (Shamsu, 2020). Research on the role of Facebook as a communicative space in Jordan within the conceptual frames of the public sphere did not gain any academic attention. Therefore, I revisit the three dimensions of the public sphere by Dahlgren (2005). These dimensions can be applied to study any given society or the contribution to democracy made by any communication technology. According to Dahlgren (2005), these dimensions are named as structural, representational, and interactional.

Typically, any functioning public sphere is measured against its potential in providing a space that facilitates the circulation of ideas, knowledge, deliberations, and public opinion expression in an unfettered environment (Dahlgren, 2005). In the structural dimension, Dahlgren (2005) highlights two aspects first, the formal organizational features of media institutions such as their ownership, the financing of these institutions, regulations, and control. Second, the legal

contexts define freedoms of communication and the restrictions imposed on it. Therefore, in this dimension media institutions can be measured against issues of inclusivity/ exclusivity, access, and freedom of speech. Dahlgren (2005) also discusses the political institutions outside the media organizations within a society and how information gets circulated. Dahlgren (2005) pointed out that any weak implementations of democracy within these organizations would lead to a less healthy structure for the public sphere. Regarding social media, the structural dimension could be thought of as how relevant these spaces are for democracy. This could be echoed in the organization of these online spaces in terms of social, cultural, legal, and technical features and to the degree to which this structure allows openness and accessibility (Ahmad, 2022; Dahlgren, 2005; Batorski & Grzywińska, 2017).

In the representational dimension, Dahlgren (2005) alludes to the media outputs which can be simply measured around issues such as agenda-setting, accuracy, and pluralism of views (Dahlgren, 2005). Whereas regarding the interactional dimension, Dahlgren (2005) reflected on two aspects. First, individuals' interactions with the media as well as interpreting and making sense of its output. Second, interactions of citizens among themselves could take any form of communication whether simply between two citizens or even larger forms of communication (Dahlgren, 2005).

The debate around the popularity of social media and its accessibility had encouraged many to argue for the return of Habermas's public sphere and posed many questions about its effects on political discourse and its potential for political engagement (Safori, 2018; Valtysson, 2012; Smuts, 2010). For example, during the Arab Spring, the use of social media such as Twitter, and Facebook provided activists with opportunities to spread their campaigns through Facebook events and YouTube video-sharing services. Likewise, it's used for coordination during the Arab movements (Barrons, 2012). Tunisians and Egyptians back then used Facebook to spread information and awareness about the ongoing demonstrations (Mourtada & Salem, 2011). However, as social media can be used for connecting citizens, it can also be as equally disruptive depending on the perspective you examine social media or the context it is embedded within (Lawson, 2015). Regarding Facebook use and popularity in the Arab region, the Arab Youth Survey (2019) found that Facebook is the most popular news source among young Arabs. The survey stated that 80 percent of young Arabs get their news from Facebook. Whereas 50 percent get their news on Facebook daily, ahead of online sources which gained thirty-nine percent, television news channels thirty-four percent, and newspapers four percent. Sweis and Baslan (2013) stated that in Jordan, social media such as Facebook have allowed Jordanians not only to seek news stories about their country and their local communities but also served as a platform for interaction with each other and joining groups.

4. Method

This research used a purposive sample that was taken from a sample of 40 students who were interviewed face-to-face by the researcher. The researcher conducted a selection criterion based on interviewing students who followed or interacted with the major news event that occupied space and momentum within the public in Jordan. The news event was about the new drafts of the election and political parties' laws that were assigned to the Royal Committee to Modernise the Political System in Jordan. This news story was relevant to many in Jordan especially the youth as they are part of these two laws. The two laws described the right for a more representative democratic political participation of the youth in the country. All interviews took place inside the university campus, in familiar settings but mostly inside available and empty classrooms. Interviews were semi-structured, lasting between 30 to 60 minutes. The interview guide was designed to respond to the main research aim but have the flexibility for back-and-forth discussion with the participants, building upon the main research exploration aim around the subject. All interviews were audio-recorded, translated from Arabic to English, transcribed, and then underwent a labeling process in which many labels were generated and then compressed into broader themes that were comprehensive and more meaningful to all data analysis. The coding processes used a deductive approach to compare the extracted data against the dimensions of the public sphere by Dahlgren.

Table. 1Examples of extracts from the interviews coding process

Interview Extracts	Codes	Sub-Themes	Themes	Frequency	Percentage
I decided to like the page then a lot of news feeds started to pop up	Participation and affordance	The platform features	Interactional	36	90%
These tools made it easy for people to get heard, they broke many barriers, and people now can go live on Facebook	Access and exclusivity				
I do not generally fully engage with news discussions over Facebook, but when something is going on then, yeah, of course, I do, I leave a comment or get involved in a debate with other people	Interaction and exchange				
It is a great tool to express your opinions about such issues	Expression of opinion	Opinion expression	Structural	28	70%
It is a fantastic space for expressing my opinions on such matters.	A valuable space for individuals to voice their opinions				
All of us have Facebook these days, so yeah, we can get our voices heard on it and share things as we wish.	A space that allows voice expression to many.				
Yes, I believe Facebook is a powerful tool these days as you can simply go on share a video, you can go live and you can get easily heard these days [long pose] well, at least this is what I noticed. For me Facebook makes me informed about all the news happening in	News and views that are diverse	Diverse setting	Representational	22	55%
There are different views [On Facebook] I posted about the two laws to try and help raise awareness	Diverse views				

5. Results

5.1 The Interactional Dimensions

The participants were asked if they engage in informed news discussions on social media. This was echoed by many of the interviewees as one participant indicated, "I do not generally fully engage with news discussions over Facebook, but when something is going on then, yeah, of course, I do, I leave a comment or get involved in a debate with other people. However, all of that is not necessarily on that deeper level like the discussions usually people have when face to face. I usually leave my opinion there to just make a point sometimes." (Second year, Female Participant, Humanities). In the same vein, another respondent highlighted, "Not usually serious talks but more about sports or other societal topics to be honest but when there is something major or an event that is happening then yeah why not I leave a comment on Facebook." (Fourth year, Female Participant, Health). This was also true even when there were some unsure answers as one participant expressed being unsure yet showed an emphasis on his point of participation during major important news events, he stated: "I'm not so sure but depends on what is going on around in the country or the region in general so maybe I would press the like button or leave a comment." (Fourth year, Male Participant, Humanities).

When the participants were asked how they knew about the two new draft laws for elections and political parties, most of the participants stated that they knew about it from television or Facebook news feeds or posts by friends. One of the

participants shared, "I saw many posts about it on Facebook. Then I decided to read more about it as well." (Fourth year, Female Participant, Humanities). In the same way, another interviewee stated, "After seeing the news about the laws shared on Facebook, I decided to share it too and discuss it with my family to see if they knew more about it." (Second year, Male participant, Sciences).

The participants were then asked to elaborate on how they used social media to express their opinions as well as the level of access and freedom social media offered about the newly drafted laws. The majority narrated they only engaged through the comments below the news videos broadcasted on the pages of the local television stations in the country. These pages as elaborated by the participants belong mostly to newspapers electronic websites, radio and television stations, and influencers. As one of the participants mentioned, "Some of my friends shared a video from a page then I decided to like the page then after that a lot of news feeds started to pop up and I saw so much engagement with it." Although she emphasized, "I did not engage in any debate myself, but it was all civilized and constructive." (Third year, Female Participant, Humanities).

5.2 The Structural Dimension

The participants were asked if their participation on social media fulfilled their need to know about the new laws. Many of the participants were satisfied with naming Facebook as a tool for participation with the new laws as one stated, "Yes, I believe Facebook is a powerful tool these days as you can simply go on share a video, you can go live and you can get easily heard these days [long pose] well, it least this is what I noticed. For me Facebook makes me informed about all the news happening in Jordan and now there is a culture of news sharing especially if there is something important". She added, "These tools made it easy for people to get heard by the authorities as well. For example [short pose] …sometimes you see a senior figure from the government engaging with a Facebook post, or their Facebook followers so yeah participation through online venues seems a future imperative." (Second year, Female Participant, Humanities). Similarly, another respondent echoed the same emphasis on participation through online means especially Facebook as he stated, "Facebook is amazing; everybody can post whatever they like." He added, "You can now know about everything on Facebook… it has moved beyond personal communication with others and stuff like that, I immediately knew about the party law from news videos online. I cannot remember the source, but it was heavily covered." (First year, Female Participant, Sciences).

The participants were further asked to elaborate on the level of engagement over social media with the two laws and whether the news on social media provided them with varied different views about the new laws. More than half of the participants echoed the belief that Facebook is the right tool for youth to express their views on many local affairs in the country. As the following interviewees highlighted, [On Facebook] "There are different views I posted about the two laws to try and help raise awareness for all of our youth in Jordan. It is the only way forward for us to get our voices heard regarding matters such as unemployment. And yeah, there was much engagement by others as well on my posts." (Third year, Male Participant, Sciences). Likewise, another interviewee expressed, "I like Facebook; it is a great tool to express our views and opinions about such issues regardless of whether we agree or disagree with these issues." (Third year, Female Participant, Humanities). However, some individuals took the chance to criticize the law online. As one participant narrated, "Many of my classmates have posted about these two laws and how impactful and enabling for youth, yet a lot of people were sarcastic that these laws are not going to change the difficulty of the economic situation and rising prices the country is going through." (Second year, Male Participant, Sciences).

5.3 The Representational Dimensions

Finally, the participants were asked about their role on social media in posting, sharing, or informing others either online or offline about the two laws. Some respondents indicated that they used the hashtag to look up the latest news updates or specific news. As one of the interviewees mentioned, "I did not discuss it with anybody because I was busy, but I was following the news on Facebook by simply writing the hashtag symbol with words such as [long pause] the Royal Committee then so many news updates would come up and not only that as there are many pages that are discussing the two laws with so many inquires asked by individuals and being answered by the government." (Fourth year, Female Participant, Humanities). Similarly, another participant stated, "Well, I did search for some aspects or answers regarding the law on Facebook. Usually, I and my family gather in the living room every evening and chat for hours then we look at our phones all of us in the family use Facebook and we discuss what news, public affairs, and matters are there that concern us so yeah, we discussed about the new election law several times." (Second year, Male Participant, Sciences). The use of a unified trending hashtag symbol as well as the overload of information on Facebook also reflects the amount of engagement with the subject being discussed which will lead the news story to be observed by international news outlets and audiences. This was stressed by many interviewees as one indicated "I make sure to publish all my posts using the hashtag symbol because I know how important it is, I know it would get the attention of the international media" (Fourth year, Male Participant, Humanities).

6. Contextualizing the Results

Scholarship on the role of social media and its democratic potential in terms of providing a platform for news information or as a Habermasian public sphere is scarce in Jordan. Therefore, this paper has documented some aspects of the influence of social media as a news source as well as a platform for opinion expression and participation in Jordan. This study highlighted that Facebook is the only mentioned platform by all the participants. This result is consistent with Arab Social Media Report (2017) which underlined that Facebook is the most used and widespread social media platform in the country. The report also underlined that over 90 percent of Jordanians are on social media. This high use of social media can be linked to the structural dimension of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005).

My study further shows that Facebook facilitated the spread of news information and the exchange of communication which is essential for opinion expression and participation. This agrees with the numerous previous studies (Jost et al., 2018; Al-Quran et al., 2022; Al-Jalabneh et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2023). The participants also reported that the hashtag service was relevant in some instances to search for news information about relevant events in Jordan. They also highlighted that trending hashtags are important means of opinion expression and participation that are effective to get messages heard by not only a local widespread audience but to a global audience. These aspects are linked to the interactional dimension of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005).

Although, the data from the Arab social media report (2017) revealed that 94 percent of Jordanians are on social media. The result of the Arab social media report does not reflect that Facebook could necessarily lead to a high level of engagement on the ground (Theocharis and Lowe, 2016). This could also be evident from the results of my study as participants indicated that their participation is measured by the current atmosphere or events taking place within the online or offline public sphere. However, one would argue that Facebook could act to a certain degree as a public sphere in some large news events as stated by the interviewees. This result is consistent with the results of Batorski and Grzywińska (2017). On the other hand, social media is still criticized for what is defined as a "filter bubble" which is the current existing commercial algorithms built within these platforms which essentially could create ideological polarisations and decrease the flow of heterogeneous perspectives on news content (Spohr, 2017; Haimk, Graefe and Brosius, 2018; Bechmann and Nielbo, 2018). This argument is tied in with the authors Kruse, Norris, and Flinchum (2017) that social media can engage citizens in communicative actions that, in some cases, can lead to social movements. Furthermore, the findings revealed that social media users do not frequently engage in communicative activities typical of the public sphere, such as engagement, which may occur more frequently with similar others. The results of my study regarding the indication by some participants that they could freely express their opinion and participate through commenting and sharing are consistent with the representational dimension of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005).

While, regarding the interactional dimension of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005), when relating the use of social media i.e., Facebook to participation, the participants' forms of participation with the news story about the law were mainly through posting, leaving a comment or sharing a video but not necessarily actual joining with the regular seminars or debates that held by the government, parliamentarians, media institutions which took place offline in real life settings. This result takes the discussion in two directions, first, the students were possibly busy with their studies or simply not seeing the necessity to participate in offline settings as they could do it online. Thus, this moves the discussion toward what is real and effective participation. According to Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero (2012, p.1536), political engagement is defined as "offline conventional forms of political participation and political knowledge". However, more recent definitions have argued that engagement has also taken place online with terms such as 'e-participation' and 'digital network'. Christensen (2011), on the other hand, discussed the impact of e-participation on real-life politics, defining it as a form of slacktivism. This term was meant to highlight the lack of political substance that existed online which is deemed politically ineffective by some authors. Therefore, social media platforms may be a space that could contain different and varied segments of society or may have a role in improving citizens' knowledge about political news events and activities. The online sphere may lack authentic political engagement on the ground according to what some of the participants echoed. However, some authors look at political engagement in a different light. For example, Emler (2011) proposed that the political engagement of individuals is a developmental process that requires attentiveness which eventually shapes political information and results in political knowledge forming more stable political identities. Barrett (2012), however, contended that political engagement is a precondition to participation, and there is an element of behavioral attachment that needs to be present to constitute political engagement. Otherwise, individuals may engage cognitively and emotionally; however, a lack of participation in any overt actions towards the polity would suggest a lack of being behaviourally engaged.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this research have significant implications for future studies investigating the potential of social media for democratic participation in Jordan and the Arab world. Specifically, this study focused on the use of Facebook as a

platform for expressing opinions and exchanging information. The results demonstrated that Facebook is widely used in Jordan and can effectively serve as a space for engaging diverse segments of society and disseminating news and political information, thus facilitating opinion expression and participation (the structural dimension). Moreover, the study revealed that Facebook users in Jordan feel comfortable expressing their views openly and that the platform provides an unencumbered forum for the sharing of information and viewpoints (the representational dimension). However, the study also found that participants tend to engage with news stories and political events primarily through posting, commenting, or sharing videos on Facebook, rather than through offline participation (the interactional dimension). Taken together, these results offer valuable insights into the potential of social media as a tool for promoting democratic participation and civic engagement in Jordan and the wider Arab region. Future studies can build upon these findings to explore the extent to which social media can foster more meaningful and substantive forms of civic engagement, both online and offline.

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