

Social Media and Political Communication in Algeria

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Abstract:

Although media pluralism exists in Algeria in the official texts but in practice there is still a situation of imperfection and disrespect of fundamental news values, media ethics, quality and independence. Public media has not been able to meet public's needs and expectations. As results, huge number of audiences has been shifting to the new sphere of social media; considered as new source of news, political empowerment and the unexpected space to express freely opinions and views. It is largely assumed that there is a positive correlation between the fast rise of social media and the level of public mistrust of the media in general.

key words: Social; Public; Media; Communication; Politics; Algeria.

Résumé:

Bien que le pluralisme médiatique existe en Algérie dans les textes officiels, or qu'en réalité, la situation est toujours marquée d'imperfection et de non-respect des valeurs fondamentales du droit de l'information, de l'éthique des médias, de la qualité et de l'indépendance.

Les médias publics n'ont pas été en mesure de répondre aux besoins et aux attentes du public. En conséquence, un grand nombre de publics s'est déplacé vers la nouvelle sphère des médias sociaux ; considéré comme une nouvelle source d'information, d'émancipation politique mais aussi comme un espace d'expression libre. Il est largement admis qu'il existe une corrélation positive entre l'essor rapide des médias sociaux et le niveau de méfiance du public envers les médias en général.

Mots clés : Social; Publique; Médias; Mobile; La communication; Politique; Algérie.

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Introduction

Although media pluralism exists in Algeria in the official texts but in practice there is still a situation of imperfection and disrespect of fundamental news values, media ethics, quality and independence. Public media has not been able to meet public's needs and expectations. As results, huge number of audiences has been shifting to the new sphere of social media; considered as new source of news, a political empowerment and unexpected space to express freely opinions and views. Clearly, it is assumed that there is a positive correlation between the fast rise of social media and the level of public mistrust of the media in general.

Political, Technological and Social Background

Before the adoption of the telecommunication law of 2000 law (MPTIC, 2017), the sector was administered by laws based on state monopoly for telecommunications and posts. This status created a series of constraints that led to cumbersome management of procedures, lack of competition, insufficient self-financing capacity. These shortcomings have forced the state to undertake legal and institutional reforms by providing it with the legislative and regulatory framework (MPTIC, 2017).

The law had provided for the separation of regulatory functions of those of exploitation and development through the creation of commercial agencies for services. Besides, the setting up of the Post and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority aims to the liberalization of the postal and telecommunications market. The Internet was introduced in Algeria in the late 1980s through universities. The centre for Research and Scientific Information (CERIST, 2018) held then exclusivity for access to websites. It was not until 1999 that the management was extended to private operators. With the participation of several suppliers, the network is present in many regions; major cities, university centres, businesses, and other institutions. But the development of these suppliers will suffer a halt with the monopoly of public Algeria-Telecom imposed by authorities on management and marketing of ADSL.

Social and Demographic Figures

Information and Communication Technologies, services, and infrastructures are not fairly balanced, but they favour the centre of the country; where is headquartered in the capital Algiers. Also, it is necessary to recall that Algeria has 2,385 million kms²; it is the largest country in Africa. However, its population distribution (44 million) is densely concentrated in the North, where almost 80% of inhabitants live in

20% of the northern part of the territory. The country has a coastal band of up to 60kms in-depth, ranging from the east to west for a distance of 1214 km of coastline, afterward appear the high hills band; as a prelude to the large desert of Sahara.

According to data released by Speed test (2018), Algeria occupies 134th place in the ranking of countries about the speed of their fixed internet connection. The speed of the fixed Internet connection is not the only one where Algeria ranks at the bottom of the ranking. It has established itself in 121st place from a total of 125 countries with the speed of mobile internet connection. This presentation enables us to have an overview of the field and provide answers to previous questions. Thus, in 2014, 43,38 million are subscribed to mobile telephony with a growth of 09.26%. out of this number, 39,79 million are connected to the global service mobile system (GSM) which represent 80.35 percent and 8.51 million are subscribed to third-generation technology (3G) which represents 19.65 percent.

Despite its wealth, youth, and particularly its strategic geographical location, Algeria lags in terms of the development of the Internet. The most recent data from Internet World Stats, which is based on data retrieved from the International telecommunication Union (ITU, 2018) indicate that Algeria has an Internet penetration rate of around 45.2%. Tunisia and Morocco are ahead of Algeria; they have already crossed the threshold of 50% of the population using the internet. Our country had only 23 million Internet users out of an estimated population of 44 million inhabitants. These data demonstrate the progress that ICTs need to make in Algeria. But if the prospects are promising especially for the Internet in Algeria, the obstacles that slow down dangerously its evolution are still very numerous due to the lack of efficient economic, social, and cultural development.

Pluralism Media Policy

Media is intrinsically part of the present political system of Algeria and the adoption of the 1989' constitution marked the end of the unique party system; National Liberation Front. Afterward, the political system had decided to shift to multiparty, pluralism, and diversity in the media and press freedom. The 1996' constitution reconfirmed that tendency, however, in practice authoritarian attitudes and monopolistic practices still prevail and the transitional period to political and media pluralism seems to be endlessly long. Further, journalists' self-censorship is still prevailing in their work, 'soft censorship' or indirect censorship which is defined as 'an array of official actions intended to influence media output, affects several newspapers through financial constraints and political pressures (Zaghlami, 2018).

Highly expected changes that are supposed to bring about more democracy, media pluralism, and freedom in the political system appear to be superficial and cosmetic rather than politically authentic and sincere in everyday life (El Issam, 2017).

The Algerian media landscapes have not changed in terms of quality and independence despite the existence of media pluralism official texts and laws. When it comes to assessing media quality performance, news values and ethics, the results are quite disappointing and discouraging. As consequences, social media tools have gained more credibility and popularity by challenging the public media influence and impact (Belkadi, 2018). Analysis of media shows that the political system is still dubitative and unclear in its strategy. On one hand, it tends to promote democratic values, on the other hand, it shows some reluctance and ambiguity if not overtly opposed to real democracy and press freedom (El Issam, 2017).

Emergence of Social Media

The main difference between social networks and traditional media is that they offer two very different models of information flow (Badouard, 2017). In traditional media, journalists play an essential role in the selection of information: as gatekeepers, they decide what should be brought to the attention of the public. On the web and social networks, everyone can express themselves, and all sources of information are at the same level. What makes a piece of information visible is the way it will be relayed by Internet users themselves via sharing and recommendation practices. The problem, we are experiencing today is that all these sources are not equal in terms of respecting the professional rules in force in the journalistic profession, particularly in terms of cross-referencing and verification of facts, which explains why to party the success of rumours and conspiracy theories on the web. That said, contrary to popular belief, it is the articles and contents of traditional media that remain the most shared on social networks (Fuchs, 2013).

Social Media and Mobile Communication

Information and Communication Technologies have marked an increase in internet rate penetration and the growing use of social networks and social media. Thus, the Internet as communication technology has been used in political campaigns to spread messages and contribute to inform and engage voters. However, the use of digital network technologies to shape public policy is met with incredulity by most politicians, public servants, and citizens (Chadwick, 2013). In Algeria, the internet was sources of hopes and expectations for citizens to primarily contribute to the availability

of the number of extended channel and an immense volume of information, which can be turned into knowledge.

Further, it should have led to enhance freedom and transform informed users into more interactive. But, in practice, it has been for so long confined to administrative tasks and did not generate any new economy, new kind of politics, and new values. Thus, the Internet is most active and for online consumption for instance; young people spend more time online. The computer has become a natural part of their everyday life (Dahlgren, 2007). In contrast, in Algeria, though the situation is improving still some social, bureaucratic, political, and cultural hurdles persist and become sources of obstruction and delay. Internet as a tool for communication and knowledge development presents by its virtual reality and its ubiquity another facet. The democratization of computer tools (PCs, laptops, tablets) and smart phones increasingly sophisticated, accelerated in recent years with digital convergence, now allows more than two billion Internet users to talk, to consult databases of data, and trade online (Morozov, 2010).

Social Media and Political Communication

During American elections in 2016, the support of social media; Twitter was overtly determining for Donald Trump, who communicated with his followers on Twitter and then expanded to his followers. He reached Americans and the rest of the world with his favourite tweets discussed with his presidential counterparts with tweets. Presently he governs with the same tools as he has been showing since his inauguration. ‘Trump’s success story’ with Twitter is a source of inspiration and communication policy for Google, Apple, Face book, Amazon group and Microsoft (GAFAM). They have found out that social media have become neural; then they have deployed their investment in all spheres of social, economic, and political life.

In Algeria, politicians and their parties are still reluctant to shift to social media usage as they are not ready yet to embrace new communication tools and approaches (Kahlane, 2018). It is time to adapt as quickly as possible to a paradigm shift in the communication field. It is also high time that we moved to other types of communication, which must be more inclusive and usefully intrusive, in a world where everything goes very fast.

Social Media, Politics and Empowerment

Initially, social media focus on what people do through platforms rather than airing critical issues of ownership, rights, and power (Dahlgren, 2013). But, some

social media scholars tend to approach the topic the same way, asking how people use the sites and with what costs or consequences: In fact, some scholars focus on the platforms' force as actors in the socio-technical economy (Wilhelm, 2000). Arguments stated that they support human needs for social interaction, using web-based technologies to transform broadcast media monologues (one to many) into social media dialogues (many to many). Also, social media tools can take various and fulfil various needs, which may have existed previously or may not. Thus, the use of social media is nowadays associated with web technology. Further, social media can reach small or large audiences; they can be user-friendly and can virtually instantaneous responses: (Dahlgren, 2013).

Political arguments and moral lessons on social networks (Belkadi, 2018) take place in Algeria and more societal issues are now the subject of virulent debates on social networks, the 'hash tag' has been used hundreds of times, each "post" bringing its share of subtle and metaphoric explanations - even if a certain number of Internet users also use it to hijack, mock, or point out to his misogynistic character. Face book pages called on Algerians to portray themselves as 'men', with the same use of the imperative, and push their wives to wear the veil. The campaign become popular and Internet users had replied by publishing, for example, patriotic parade clichés taken in the 1970s and on which we saw teenagers scroll in skirts, in a pure socialist style.

Social Media as New Space for Political Expression and Press Freedom

The role and place of social media are valued in gaining more spaces to become a new space of political expression and press freedom. More importantly, as the political public sphere has shifted to the new electronic and virtual arena, 'netizens' are offered different tribunes to express freely their political opinions on different topics. Social media tend to become a new source of political empowerment, promotion of democracy, media pluralism and diversity. Several virtual public spaces are providing debates, discussions and challenges they are mushrooming after many years of exclusion.

The advent of social media is perceived as an opportunity to enable ordinary citizens to express their views, opinions and speak out their minds and worries. Inversely, public media which for so long, have been restricting their reports, have prevented citizens from airing their concerns and denying their access. Social media have become in a short period a social, cultural and political phenomenon and their contribution to social and political life is likely to offer more impetus and credit to the functioning of democracy.

Furthermore, they are playing important role in the promotion of a free public debate and become one of the main sources of information, communication and empowerment. Thus, the new space has imposed its new style and way of promoting pluralism and democracy. During April 2014 presidential elections in Algeria, social media content was prolific and active, numerous contributions were made to the point that local press had described it as a potential political area that managed to mobilize and coordinate actions calling to boycott elections boycott and ask for political openness and participation.

Social Media and Society

The impact of Face book is so great; Algerian pages were inspired by daily life of citizens (Belkadi, 2018). Using words of the typically Algerian dialect as what the case of: "Tekariidj el djazairi" "1.2.3 lived Algeria" "Intik" "Rouhi 3awni yema kyatafla" "Zawaliya club" and many other pages. The user finds refuge in these pages. These use humor to forget the harshness of life. Algerians use the site to keep in touch with distant family, something very important in Algerian society, especially since the latter is Muslim, and the Islamic religion has always encouraged family union. Also, Face book allows us to make new knowledge, which makes the world small. From these rather positive points, Face book has been able to gain an important place in the lives of individuals.

Social Media, ICT and Political Parties

Although, the trends show that youngers are less politically motivated and less involved (Zaghlami, 2018), but they are well aware of political issues. They use social media to make comments or communicate. The virtual world is considered to be an extension of a real social and political life and that identity can be built up both socially and virtually. Thus, social media emerge as adequate space for real democratic and public debate. Being excluded from conventional media, political leaders have their own Face book account to freely communicate. Their comments are news sources for other media. Face book is an easy tool to interact with militants and civil society, websites aim for political communication and participation. "Où va l'Algérie?" Where does Algeria Go? is one of the active and popular accounts on facebook lead by some Algerian political opponents that virulently criticize local authorities' policies

Social Media and Social Movement of 22nd February 2019

As already mentioned, there is a big shift of young audience habits from watching news on television to internet and social media. Internet connection computer,

telephone or tablet screens have offered a wide range of Information and communication possibilities. So, assets of flexibility, rapidity, immediacy, interactivity and mobility that internet connection offers, have 'downgraded' television. The shift to social media is now entrenched and became part of everyday life, a privileged space for interactivity and mobilisation. With regards to current situation in Algeria, since mid-February 2019, tens of thousands of Algerians have been protesting in the streets against Abdelaziz Bouteflika's candidacy for the fifth consecutive term. Events that till gathering a lot of people, Friday, March 1st, 2019, protest movement started from social networks, afterwards, he prospered and organized himself online.

Stadiums as Arena for Protests

The revolt began from football stadiums and arenas like 'Ain Mlila stadium event in the East part of Algeria', when supporters brandished a large flag (tifo) that showed photos of Saudi Arabia King at the mercy of US President Donald Trump, followed a rapid reaction from Algerian authorities to punish and blame Ain Mlila squad. These first reactions meant that protests had left football stadiums to the streets, relayed through social networks, without there being a major player behind, (Sadi and Zaimi, 2019). At the beginning of February 2019, a slogan is circulated to call in particular for a big mobilisation for the day of Friday 22 February. Although, it was difficult to trace the origin of this call, what is incredible with this challenge is that it is anonymous (Belgacem, 2019). This is what we call today 'the call of the people', even though we know very well that there was someone behind. The call to protest has been shared by many Algerian Face book pages, regardless of their category.

Political Mobilisation on Social Media

The mobilisation is organized mainly via Facebook, because the Algerians are not too much on Twitter. Face bookers speak about this, messages are broadcast via the pages of some influencers, however, the issue of anonymity remains unclear and politicians, journalists, and artists relay the slogans of the mobilisation, like the rapper Lotfi Double Kanon, political activist Amira Bouraoui, already at the forefront of the protest against the 4th term of Bouteflika in 2014 and which brings together more than 110,000 subscribers on her Facebook account. Some influential pages also organize online protest; DzWikileaks, youth revolution, or Bejaia City. It is also necessary to evoke the role played by youtubeurs, like Anis Tina and DZjoker, who do not hesitate to attack the Algerian president in their videos (Belgacem, 2019).

The Supremacy of Face book

So, Algerians have been demonstrating regularly against a new candidacy for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and the challenge was born on social networks in a country which has 40 million inhabitants and 50% have Face book accounts according to the figures of the "Digital 2018" report. Thus, the site founded by Mark Zuckerberg is mainly used in Algeria to lead the slingshot. It includes a page called "1, 2, 3 viva Algeria" and that informs more than 800,000 people. A rapper also calls to protest: he is followed by 6 million fans. On the eve of the first rally of 22nd of February 2019, the regime, worried, made cuts to the Internet, which did not prevent Algerians to go out on the street and brandish their phones, like weapons of mass propagation (Belgacem, 2019). It is noticed that social networks have played a determining role, with the advent of the Internet, the gift of ubiquity is multiplied. Smart phones equipped with cameras are used to broadcast events live on social networks. The last rally saw the police were overwhelmed, they tried to forbid people to film, but there were thousands of them in streets, so they avoided provoking protesters (Sideris, 2019).

The Protest on Internet

The calls to protest are live broadcasts and dispute is organized on social networks. Face book groups, videos on YouTube, calls to protest are available on WhatsApp, the mobilisation against the fifth term of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was organized on social networks, demonstrations are gaining more popularity, social networks have massively mobilised calls for mobilization. They play a key role in the organization of the challenge; social networks are also used as a medium to disseminate the images of the various events that the traditional media could not show. While traditional media are struggling to exercise and ensure their function of counter-power, Algerian citizens have decided to organize the revolt on the Internet. They were tens of thousands to demonstrate this Friday in the streets of Algiers, and the dispute seems to be growing day by day on the Net. There is no more media power in Algeria, citizens are forced to take to the streets, and Face book appears as the only way to coordinate and organize (Sideris, 2019). The generalization of Internet access since the launch of 3G in late 2013 and 4G in 2016 has allowed millions of Algerians to connect to the virtual world and to have accounts, pages and channels on the different social networks. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube.

From Citizens to Netizens

On the Web, the mobilization force of social networks is planned. So, the organization of several marches simultaneously across the country by protesters and Friday highlighted the weight of social networks in the national politico-media landscape. An action launched and coordinated only on the networks led to unprecedented popular mobilization in Algeria's contemporary political history (Belgacem, 2019). Simple messages and comments calling for a popular march in all wilayas (provinces) of the country launched anonymously on social networks on the evening of February 10 have quickly resonated with tens of thousands of Algerian Internet users. The call quickly went around Face book, Twitter, but also YouTube. People known by their influence on the canvas were quick to join the action. Singers, actors, commentators, journalists, politicians and even young unknowns have produced videos, texts and poems to convince Algerian netizens to take to the streets each Friday. In spite of many attempts to reduce Internet speeds during the weekend of Algeria (Thursday night and during the day on Friday). According to the non-governmental organization Net Blocks, the Internet has been disrupted in Algeria several times since the beginning of the dispute, many cuts in particular recorded in the region of Algiers and surrounding areas.

However, these actions did not prevent the street to mobilize (Dumonteil, 2019). Internet users have found another solution to the partial blocking of Face book. They quickly migrated to YouTube social network that served as an alternative plan. Also, direct video is counted, by tens on the world's first social network dedicated to video.

4.3 Supremacy of Face Book The social movement in Algeria is a horizontal one, without leaders and intermediate bodies, political parties, unions. So unsurprisingly, it has been organized on Face book, a bit like the “yellow vests” in France (Dumonteil, 2019).

“1.2.3 viva l'Algérie” as Catchphrase

From the beginning of the protest, calls for sit ins were broadcast and shared by many Algerian Face book pages. The most popular page, "1.2.3 lived Algeria" has been liked nearly 900,000 times since mid-February. Social networks have also been used as a means of disseminating images of the various events that traditional media have often not been allowed to show. Face book page "1.2.3 viva l'Algérie" publishes dozens of videos every day, mostly live on the platform. According to statistics, about 90% of the 21 million Algerians registered on that platform connect via mobile devices. Added to this, are more than 100 Algerian Face book pages that exceed one

million fans. These figures testify to the penetration of this network in the life of Algerians.

Inversely, the traditional press is under strict governmental control, journalists have great difficulty working, collecting information, maintaining editorial independence from the authorities (Dumonteil, 2019). The wind of freedom is the social networks that succeeded in to impose in Algeria. YouTube, WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram tools for communication, have contributed to enable a hyper-connected population (Sadi and Zaimi, 2019). The online challenge is organized on YouTube. Videos are viewed millions of times and have found a real echo in a hyper-connected population. As already mentioned, Algerian population is ultra-connected. It quickly adopted these new communication tools, especially Face book, which has a very particular resonance there (Dumonteil, 2019). The network connections should be made available to enable gradual democratization of Smartphone and increase Internet popularity in Algeria.

Social networks a platform for good news, bad news and fake news

It is assumed that social networks are not just a space for free expression but also for spreading false information. The most popular digital platform in the world is equally used to broadcast fakes news and hate messages. The social networks as animators of political and social life are alternative information tool" to "traditional media" (Grar, 2019). In the absence of traditional media, social networks are an extraordinary help, it is not Face book that pushed people to go out to protest. These are the people who decide to go out (Grar, 2019). However, new technologies serve to coordinate and help individuals to organize well in the event of the collective initiative. Face Book is a very powerful way to help inform as many people as possible to participate in or attend a movement.

It is worth recalling that new technologies like many inventions are "a double-edged sword"; it can be used to defend a good cause, as it can be used for criminal purposes. However, 2019 events with street protests and social movements in Algeria should not be blamed or derived because of acts of manipulation and fake news, from the main reasonsfor popular demonstrations. In practice, the blame should be addressed to decision-makers and those who are in a state of usurpation of citizens' rights from democracy, social justice and order, freedom of the press and more importantly, a real shift to power alternative.

After all, social media and networks and its different platforms, websites, accounts and blogs serve only tools of expression of ideas and opinions and the emanation of popular willingness for a better life, with dignity and pride.

CONCLUSION

Social media are becoming an integral part of contemporary society and discourse; they serve as platforms for spreading the word, for mobilisation and participation. The youth population tends to be more inclined to use Facebook as primary tool for information and communication. In fact, it is considered a social phenomenon and even some political figures are using it as a personal and political tribune to promote their policies, views and programs. Although, it is too early to reach its 'maturity' because of many 'hurdles' such as digital illiteracy, mismanagement, lack of genuine freedom of the press and genuine democracy. Nevertheless, social media has become a new social phenomenon, gradually expanded to more political and media public spaces especially for those excluded from the political arena and media mainstream sphere.

Thus, by being heavily present on social media and also critical to the political system, the public is exerting some pressures on authorities, through these networks, asking for more political and democratic changes. The rise of so many 'dissident and seditious web sites' abroad is a source of empowerment for those who are excluded from political debates, they express their views and concerns, very often they speak out their minds in a provocative style by revealing tiny details about politicians and relatives' private lives. Also, political figures from an opposition are using all tools of social media to mediate their strategy and reach their supporters in the absence of a fair and sincere public media space.

Ultimately, authorities will and should ineluctably respond to growing demands for more democracy, justice and freedom of press and opinions. They will be obliged to reconsider social media as an integral part of their future communication and information strategy if they want to keep up connections with growing members of the 'virtual' community, which sooner or later will become real, palpable and active.

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