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## ***The role of social networks in virtual political mobilization and formation of effective cyber public opinion in decision-making***

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### **Abstract**

*This study aims to analyze the role of social media in promoting virtual political mobilization among citizens, and how it contributes to shaping cyber public opinion that can be effective in the political decision-making process. Using a descriptive analytical approach, it highlights the mechanisms used by these networks to stimulate political participation and raise political awareness among individuals. It also highlights the most prominent challenges facing the effectiveness of this cyber public opinion. The study concludes that social media represents an alternative space for political dialogue and popular participation, contributing to the creation of collective political awareness, particularly among young people.*

## 1. Introduction

*The virtual public sphere is a shared space open to all individuals, allowing everyone to access it to share and interact with others, using new media, it presents issues that dominate the agenda of debate and dialogue. It has become the only rational option available in the face of the blocked horizon of dialogue and listening, the prevalence of a culture of exclusion and denial, the spread of repressive practices by the authorities, and the dominance of tyranny.*

*In parallel, social networking sites have become part of the virtual public sphere. The use of these sites (such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, and Instagram) in public discussions, especially in the political sphere, has led to the promoting of freedoms, through the freedom of speech provided by participants through these tools, which work to present all opinions without restrictions. All of this falls within what is called virtual political mobilization of supposed citizens, far from partisan colors and ideological references, based on the premise that citizens of different cultural and social levels and political references are the target of this process.*

*This leads us to argue that cyber public opinion is linked to all of this. Cyber public opinion is a phenomenon that did not exist before, but rather emerged as a result of the emergence of the virtual public space and the development of communication technologies. These are all outcomes of the transformation of the information space and the role social media plays in shaping this opinion through the dissemination of political information, blogging, participation in political interactions, and persuading others of certain political positions and opinions, etc., thus working to establish cyber democracy.*

*This research aims to explore how social media contributes to the virtual political mobilization of citizens to shape effective online public opinion in political decision-making. This research aims to study the origins and concept of social media, the main factors behind the growing political influence of social media, and analyze the role of social media in shaping effective electronic public opinion.*

*To discuss this topic, the following elements were considered:*

- The origins and concept of social media networks.*
- The main factors behind the growing political influence of social media.*
- The role of social media networks in shaping effective political cyber public opinion.*

## 2- The origin and concept of social networking:

*A network is a dynamic social structure made up of peaks and edges. The peaks refer to individuals or organizations, and they are connected to each other through social interactions. After the electronic community is formed via the Internet, it begins to search for each other through its own independent spaces (entertainment games -*



professional field - other spaces), where the individuals feel that they are the center of attention of the group. This is what is called digital individualism in the network, which generates a feeling of intimacy or social camaraderie. The concept of social networks dates back to the sociologist John Barnes in 1945. Social networks in their traditional form are represented by global correspondence clubs that were used to connect individuals from different countries, using regular written messages. The internet helped spread social communication through applications known as social media, which focuses on building relationship among people with shared interests. (Bakkūsh & ‘Azzūz, 2020, p. 22).

Before defining the concept of social networking, we must define the concept of network and the concept of communication.

### **2-1- Network definition:**

*Network: “A global information system that connects to each other via unique addresses based on the Internet Protocol (IP) or its extensions and sub-additions”. (ibn Mubārak, 2021). “The network is not owned by a country or government entity. Rather, it is overseen by a group of companies and institutions called the International Society for Internet Protocol (ISOC). Its role is to set standards and criteria for the networks it oversees, enabling any computer to connect to the network and communicate, send, and receive information”. (Bakkūsh & ‘Azzūz, 2020, p. 22)*

### **2-2- Definition of communication:**

*“The process of transferring and receiving information between two or more parties through several direct and indirect channels, including electronic social networking sites, where the sender and receiver interact within its environment through the framework of a specific message that brings the two parties together, and the semantic interaction between them appears in the form of exchange, notification, and influence, as does the behavioral effect that influences the recipient.” (bw‘mwshh & Būbakr, 2019, p. 248)*

### **2-3- Definition of social networking:**

*“As a term, it is used to describe a group of websites on the internet. It has appeared with the second generation of the web, or what is known as (Web 2.0), which allows communication between individuals in a virtual community environment that brings them together according to interest groups or networks of affiliation (school, company, university, country, etc.), and all of this is done through direct communication services such as sending messages, or viewing the personal files of others, and knowing their news and information that they make available for display.” (bw‘mwshh & Būbakr, 2019, p. 248)*

*They are interactive social networks that allow communication for their users at any time, from anywhere. They appeared on the Internet a few years ago, and changed the concept of communication and rapprochement between peoples. They acquired their social name from the fact that they produce relationships between members of human society. Recently, their social function has exceeded to become a means of expressing protest, and a weapon for carrying out revolutions. Among the most prominent of these social networks are: (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube). ( Quṭbī, 2017, p. 107)*

*“Social networking sites can be defined as a group of websites available on the Internet that allow individuals to engage in them individually or in groups, by exchanging various information, experiences and knowledge”. (bw‘mwshh & Būbakr, 2019, p. 248)*

### **3- Types and characteristics of social networks:**

#### **3-1- Types of social networks:**

*Social media researchers have classified social networking into six forms, including: (Jum‘ah & Sa‘d nwshy, 2017, p. 41.42.)*

*Social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Google Plus.*

- *Bookmarking sites (Reddit, Digg)*
- *Social news such as Flickr, Pinterest*
- *Media sharing such as YouTube*
- *Microblogging such as Twitter*
- *Blogs and forums: Allow participants to express their opinions and open up commentary on specific topics, such as World Press*

*Social networking sites are divided into the following types according to the service provided or the purpose for which they were created: (Bakkūsh & ‘Azzūz, 2020, p. 27)*

#### **3-1-1-Networks are divided into three main types based on use and interest:**

- *Personal networks: For specific people, individuals, and groups of friends, enabling them to get to know each other and establish friendships, such as Facebook.*
- *Cultural networks: Specializing in a particular art and bringing together those interested in a particular subject or science, such as LibraryThing.*
- *Professional networks: Focusing on and bringing together people with similar professions to create an effective educational and training environment (linked in).*

#### **3-1-2- They can also be divided into three types based on services and communication methods:**

- *Networks that enable written communication.*
- *Networks that enable voice communication.*



- Networks that enable visual communication.

### **3-2- Characteristics of social networks:**

The multiple features of social networking sites give them superiority over other means of communication in terms of their multiple communication capabilities, interactivity, speed of communication, and integration of multiple media and means. The most prominent features of social networking sites are the following: (ibn Mubārak, 2021)

- **Globality:** Geographical and spatial barriers are eliminated, and international borders are shattered, allowing individuals in the East to communicate with individuals in the West with simplicity and ease.
- **Interactivity:** The individual is not only a recipient and reader, but also a sender, writer, and participant. This eliminates the abhorrent passivity of traditional media and opens up space for active participation from viewers and readers.
- **Diversity and multiple uses:** Students use it to learn, scholars use it to disseminate their knowledge and educate others, and writers use it to communicate with readers.
- **Ease of use:** In addition to letters and simple language, social networks use symbols and images that facilitate user interaction.
- **Savings and economy:** economical in terms of effort, time, and money, given that subscription and registration are free. The average individual can own a space on the social network for communication, and this is not limited to the wealthy or to one group over another.

### **4- Factors that increase the political influence of social media**

The growing influence of social media did not come out of nowhere, but was the result of a set of factors and considerations, including: (al-‘Īsawī, 2021)

- The continuous increase in the number of social media users is evident when comparing these numbers over the past few years. In 2017, there were less than 2.5 billion people on social media worldwide, while in 2019, this number reached 3.5 billion users worldwide, equivalent to approximately 45% of the total global population.
- The ability to influence public opinion: social media contributes to the dissemination of ideas and opinions related to a particular issue to a large number of people in different regions of the world, thus allowing for the crystallization of international public opinion in support of certain causes, resulting in positive change in some aspects of life. However, it can also fall into the trap of media misinformation and negatively influence public opinion when it is used to change the convictions of members of society in a particular country, especially during elections or voting on crucial issues related to the future of that country. Social media

*represents a qualitative shift in the world of digital media, transforming the world into a connected village, particularly as it allows for the creation and exchange of electronic content online and provides an important window for interaction between individuals. This is why some describe it as "globalized media," which is not bound by national borders, but rather presents invisible virtual borders drawn by information and communication networks. This has made this media more influential in shaping individual behavior, shaping and modifying attitudes, and shaping and generating ideas.*

*The intense interaction that characterizes social media is its highly interactive features, which enable it to create group conversations with large numbers of participants in a short period of time. It also empowers any member of the public to become an independent media outlet in their own right. Social media applications also offer broad possibilities for polarization, mobilization, and crowdsourcing, as witnessed during the events of the Arab Spring, where they played a vital role in political mobilization by calling for demonstrations and protests, disseminating news and videos, expressing opinions, and engaging in political debate free from the censorship of traditional media outlets. Social media has become one of the most important international actors. Its influence is no longer limited to the internal system of a country, but extends to the field of international relations.*

*It has begun to play a role in international political interactions and can be considered one of the non-state actors capable of influencing regional and global developments. Perhaps the reported Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections is one manifestation of the potential impact of social media in this regard. Cambridge Analytica exploited the data of 50 million Facebook users for Russian companies to influence the US presidential elections.*

*French reports also revealed that Cambridge Analytica collaborated with the Canadian firm AggregateIQ to vote for Britain to leave the European Union. The two companies helped the Brexit movement win the referendum, which was decided by less than 2% of the vote.*

### ***5- The role of social media networks in shaping cyber public opinion is politically effective.***

*Social media contributes to shaping cyber public opinion through virtual political mobilization of citizens, leading to effective political decisions. Based on the characteristics and advantages of social media, it can be said that they contribute significantly to the political mobilization of citizens, shaping effective cyber public opinion in political decision-making. Examples of social media and its pivotal role in*





political mobilization include presidential elections, such as during the 2008 US presidential campaign for Barack Obama, the 2009 Iranian presidential election protests via Twitter, the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions, and the 2011 protests by unemployed youth in Spain, who called themselves “Indignados” or “Disaffected Protesters,” known as the “May 15 Movement” demonstrations. The internet played a major role in these protests. In this context, we note that social media created a virtual public sphere that facilitated the emergence and spread of protest and political movements that contributed effectively to shaping subsequent political decisions. (Abd al-Ṣādiq, 2021)

### **5-1- Cyberspace and "electronic" public opinion:**

Electronic public opinion is described as the opinion that expresses the largest possible segment of the public in this vast space on the Internet. Electronic public opinion in this imaginary world is every (idea - suggestion - opinion - participation) or even an expression of angry objection or a joke that expresses a certain trend or defends a certain ideology or stems from a personal experience, whether individual or collective, to reach a general political result that is delivered as a communication message through that network (the Internet); to take its role in viewing and viewing by everyone who owns or can use that service, and at the same time viewing those channels that others use to form what we know as “electronic opinion. (Abd al-Ṣādiq, 2021)”

#### **5-1-1- Public opinion making**

Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and others, have had an important impact on the history of public opinion formation. After the widespread spread of the Internet among various social classes, even the poorest, it is considered a revolution of the twenty-first century in terms of media, given the importance of the role it has come to play in various fields, including politics, as well as social and marketing. It is worth noting that these social media have been able to take this dimension in terms of influencing public opinion as a result of the Arab revolutions that have taken place in those societies, especially since public opinion has come to occupy an advanced position, after it was forcibly absent at the hands of the existing regimes. (Ma‘tūq , 2021)

Over the past ten years, social media has gained its role by adopting these innovative forms of communication in new practical forms in the field of its use in several fields, not exclusively in the pursuit of acquiring new followers or forming a broad network of communication with them, which was the character it took on at the youth level in its beginnings. However, today it has begun to achieve a different kind of conquest, attracting more mature groups after it transformed into a first-class media outlet, especially after it began to play a prominent role in disseminating news and

*influencing the feelings of the masses. It has transformed into a means characterized by the extreme speed of conveying information and keeping pace with events, which explains its appeal to secret or terrorist organizations, such that it has become the preferred means of conveying messages to those concerned. For these reasons, social media sites have become a center of interest and attract attention and focus, not only from the general public, but also from print and audio media. (Ma'tūq , 2021)*

*Social media networks have acquired a new dimension by keeping pace with events and developments, one that perhaps was not anticipated at their inception. Perhaps their use of their mobilizing power and ability to mobilize minds by focusing on narrating specific events and detailing them with sound, image, and words, was often a prelude to actual action outside the virtual nature of social media networks. From here, it can be considered that they have brought about a qualitative shift in the nature of these networks, by transforming them from virtual communication to a tangible, lived, sensory reality. Although these media were called in their beginnings the virtual world, they have proven that they are not isolated from lived reality. Rather, they have formed, in many cases, a mirror of this reality, to which researchers resort to sense the pulse of the street and ordinary people. (Ma'tūq , 2021)*

### **5-1-2-The political use of social media networks**

*Experts believe that the political use of social media comes within the framework of a modern phenomenon termed "digital democracy," with the use of new communication tools in the democratic process in the mid-1990s. This term refers to the use of digital information and communications technology tools to freely exchange information related to the practice of democratic principles. Digital democracy has a diverse role, extending from initiating direct dialogue between people, to shaping public opinion, to directly influencing political decision-making. This is a decision increasingly imposed by these digital masses on ruling institutions and existing authorities. (Ma'tūq , 2021)*

### **5-1-3-Politics, Digital Publishing, and Social Media**

*Social media has become an additional open space for those working in politics in all its aspects. While politicians in particular have been exploiting the media to convey their messages since the inception of politics, this process has begun to take on different dimensions through social media, especially since Barack Obama won the 2008 US presidential election, after a campaign in which communication media was well utilized and played a fundamental role. Recourse to communication consultants (who care about the candidate's image, speeches, clothing, and public appearances...) during election campaigns has become a global system, to which communication is currently being added through the use of digital services. ( Nūn, & Ghassān, 2021)*





According to Brian Stelter, Barack Obama turned to Chris Hughes, one of the founders of Facebook, for his election campaign. Hughes managed to gather half a million activists who later became "envoys" on the web and formed a key and effective part of the campaign. This prompted politicians around the world to exploit these virtual spaces to become actual spaces for mobilization, fundraising, persuading users, and attempting to change their views, either legally or illegally. This was the case with Cambridge Analytica, which exploited Facebook to influence individual behavior. It hacked 87 million user accounts in the US and Britain, studying their profiles, the number of "likes," and everything they did to identify their tendencies and influence their behavior by directing messages tailored to their personalities, encouraging them to make choices that suited them. According to studies, this helped in the 2016 US presidential election, as well as in modifying the results of the referendum held in Britain to leave the European Union. ( Nūn, & Ghassān, 2021)

There is no doubt that social media can be an effective medium for influence, raising political awareness, and changing issues that benefit or harm political actors. Politicians also adopt different communication strategies; some invest in multiple platforms, but the most important remain Facebook and Twitter. These different communication strategies are open-ended in nature and appeal to the same audience. They often target young voters active on social media, who can influence campaigns and participate by disseminating ideas. In Lebanon, for example, most of the top politicians tweet, but their accounts are run by supporters. Each politician has a team with which they coordinate the tweeting process. In the May 2018 parliamentary elections, Saad Hariri ranked first in terms of followers (556,000), Samir Geagea second (146,000), Walid Jumblatt third (143,000), Sami Gemayel fourth (137,000), and Suleiman Franjeh fifth (55,900). The least active was Michel Aoun (35,600 followers). In June 2013, European Council President Donald Tusk announced via tweet that eurozone leaders had reached an agreement on a bailout loan for Greece. ( Nūn, & Ghassān, 2021)

#### ***5-1-4 Social Networks and Decision Making***

Many politicians are keen to participate in new social networking sites, especially Twitter, due to their conviction of the importance of political media through social networking sites, as they play an important role in directing the masses towards a certain behavior towards a certain political trend, especially in the field of political parties and elections, where social networking activists influence the masses to support and champion a certain trend through organized social media campaigns, personal, international or global social relations, and through influencing public opinion and gaining its support. ( Nūn, & Ghassān, 2021)



*Politicians have used social media in their election campaigns, to communicate with voters, to advertise their activities, and to disseminate their statements through what are known as "tweets," which are the most popular means of social communication on Twitter. This has encouraged and facilitated its use in political activity, and this has been evident at the presidential level, as Donald Trump's statements have sparked controversy regarding his regular use of Twitter, which he believes allows him to directly address Americans without resorting to the American media. ( Nūn, & Ghassān, 2021)*

*Governments around the world use social media, primarily because entry costs are relatively low and because of missed opportunities. Social media use is by no means limited to top-level executive institutions, as departments or programs also have strong levels of social media presence in some countries. In the United States, the 2012 census showed that nearly 700 federal departments, agencies, and initiatives had an inventory of approximately 3,000 Facebook pages, 700 YouTube channels, and 500 Flickr pages (Mergell, 2013). This often includes accounts for specific public service areas that are better recognized by the public. (Mickoleit, p. 8)*

*Social media influences our political behavior and puts pressure on our democracies. These platforms have revolutionized the way we live politically, make decisions, and raise political awareness, by engaging more citizens in the political process and enabling the voices of minorities to be heard. (Vespe , 2021)*

*In political life, for example, social media plays an important role in political communication for election campaigns such as the Obama campaign in 2008, which is considered one of the most successful examples of the use of social media, highlighting a new model of political practice with a focus on open governance and citizens' digital access to public data, accountability, oversight, economic openness and willingness to cooperate, leading to e-governance, through the involvement of social media in governance, and the participation of a greater number of citizens, allowing their views to be incorporated into policy formulation, through a new operating model focused on citizens' priorities and needs. (Sideri & Autre, 2021)*

*The ongoing Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 have given rise to a debate about the role of social media and networking as a political tool for mobilizing for regime change and pro-democracy movements. Critics, academics, and journalists have embraced social media as an important means. (Storck, 2011, p. 04)*

## **6- Conclusion:**

*The study addressed the role of social media networks in the virtual political mobilization of citizens to form an effective cyber public opinion in building political decisions, focusing on how social media networks contribute to the virtual political*



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*mobilization of citizens to form an effective cyber public opinion in building political decisions. The study addressed the emergence and concept of social media networks, the main factors behind the increasing political influence of social media, and the role of social media networks in shaping an effective political cyber public opinion. The study concluded that social media and networks contribute effectively to political mobilization and shaping public opinion.*

*social media networks play a prominent role in political mobilization and shaping cyber public opinion, through the campaigns and proposals they contain, which can influence people and shape public opinion.*

*The emergence and widespread use of social media has also brought about changes in all fields. Governments, organizations, agencies, and politicians use these platforms to ensure greater civic participation and promote electronic dialogue and e-democracy.*

*Thus, social media networks contribute to shaping cyber public opinion through the virtual political mobilization of citizens, leading to effective political decisions. Based on the characteristics and advantages of social media networks, it can be said that they significantly contribute to the political mobilization of citizens to shape effective cyber public opinion in political decision-making. They have acquired a new dimension by keeping pace with events and developments, utilizing their mobilizing power and ability to mobilize minds by focusing on narrating specific facts and detailing them through audio, video, and written texts.*

*The political use of social media networks ultimately falls within the framework of a modern phenomenon termed "digital democracy," through the use of new communication tools in the democratic process. This term refers to the use of digital information and communications technology tools to exchange information related to the practice of democratic principles and decision-making. They are considered an effective medium for influencing, raising political awareness, and changing certain issues.*

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