

Social Media and Its Role in Enhancing Political Participation

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Abstract:

This research paper addresses the topic of Social media and its role in enhancing political participation, This is done by presenting its notion, levels, and most important concepts related to both social networking sites and political participation. It was done using the Descriptive method to know the role of social media in promoting political participation. I concluded that the use of social media sites leads to increased political participation (such as voting, signing petitions, and participating in protests) by facilitating the process of organizing and mobilization., social media sites foster the phenomenon of information bubbles, leading to the formation of homogeneous political groups on the platforms that may limit the diversity of opinion and promote political polarization.

Keywords: Social media; political participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rapid developments in the fields of information and communication technology have led to changes in the economic, social, and cultural lifestyle, and the emerging of a new type of society that relies on and is based on knowledge and digital technology, these

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developments have paved the way for the birth of what know as social networks Which play a prominent role in expressing different trends and ideas within society, as it is based on an equal dialogue between the individual, the elite and the masses., as the elite no longer play its traditional role in formulating and shaping public opinion, after developments in the flow and production of information, as for the individual now, it has a role in producing information and formulating the media message. Social networks have transformed from a mere means of transmitting or commenting on news to a tool for processing it, following it, and eliciting reactions to it, thanks to their enormous ability to spread. Sometimes, the news is transmitted from pages and their founders on social media sites print newspapers, and satellite programs, which increases their influence and spread. So Anyone with knowledge of how to create media now can reflect their perspectives and biases, especially with the huge development in the transmission and use of images and videos via social networks. In our current era; Social media plays a vital role in promoting political participation through these platforms, where individuals can now express their political views, exchange ideas, and participate in public discussions with ease., Social networks provide an open space for citizens to connect with political leaders, follow political events, and participate in electoral campaigns and social movements. In addition, these sites enhance the ability of individuals to organize and mobilize around important political and social issues. In this context, political participation is no longer limited to the elite or traditional venues such as public meetings and seminars. Still, it has become an integral part of the daily life of every individual with an Internet connection. Accordingly, and in light of the above, this study seeks to answer the following question:

- What is the role of social networking sites in enhancing political participation?

In this context, we have the following questions:

- What is meant by social networking sites? And what are their characteristics?

- What is meant by political participation? And what is the role of social networking sites in enhancing it.

2. Methodological framework of the study

2.1 Hypotheses of the Study

We propose the following hypotheses that are appropriate for the topic of our study:

Hypothesis 1: "Social media contribute to increasing political awareness among users by providing platforms for political discussions and publishing political news and analysis."

Hypothesis 2: "The use of social media leads to increased actual political participation (such as voting, signing petitions, and participating in protests) by facilitating the process of organizing and mobilizing."

Hypothesis 3: "Social media enhances the phenomenon of information bubbles, leading to the formation of homogeneous political groups on the platforms that may limit the diversity of opinions and enhance political polarization."

2.2 Importance of the Study

Studying the topic of social media and its role in promoting political participation is essential to understanding the modern dynamics of society and politics. In the age of information technology, these sites have become major tools for transmitting information and shaping public opinion, by analyzing how individuals use these platforms to express their opinions and participate in political discussions, we can understand the true impact of these media on political awareness and democracy, the study also helps us identify the opportunities and challenges associated with the use of social media, such as its ability to mobilize audiences and promote civic participation versus the risks of spreading misinformation and political propaganda, based on this understanding, effective strategies can be developed to promote constructive and informed political participation through these platforms, which contributes to strengthening the democratic process and effective civic participation.

2.3 Methodology

No study is devoid of a method, as the method is defined as the path that leads to revealing the truth by means of a set of rules that determine the processes to reach a specific result⁽¹⁾, the method is also defined as: "A set of general rules that the researcher relies on to organize his ideas or information to reach the desired result"⁽²⁾, due to the nature of the study, the researcher relied on the descriptive method. Muhammad Abdul Hamid defined it as: "One of the most appropriate scientific methods for descriptive studies in general, because it aims to record, analyze and investigate the phenomenon in its current state after collecting the necessary and sufficient data about it and its elements through a set of organized procedures that determine the type of data, its sources and methods of obtaining it"⁽³⁾.

3. What are social networking websites?

3.1 Definition of social media

There are many definitions provided to clarify the concept of social media. In this context, we specifically mention the following definitions:

Social media are a set of technological tools available on the Internet, used by individuals as personal platforms to express their opinions and interests in various fields. These platforms are used to communicate and interact with others and exchange content and information⁽⁴⁾.

- **Social media** refers to the modern methods available for interaction and communication between individuals in the digital environment, as they allow small groups of individuals to meet and

(1) Fawzi Abdel Khaleq, et Ihsan Shawkat Ali, Scientific research methods concepts, methodologies and final reports, Dar Al-Maktab Al-Arabi Al-Hadith, 2007, p76.

(2) Abdul Hadi Al-Fadhili, *Research Principles*, 1st ed; Vol. e1, Scientific University of Islamic Sciences, 1992, p52.

(3) Amer Misbah, *Research Methodology in Political Science and Media*, Office of University Publications, Algeria, 2008, p11.

(4) Dalia Mustafa Al-Sawah, The Role of Social Networking Sites in Supporting the Concept of Social Accountability among University Youth: A Field Study on a Sample of Egyptian University Youth in Public and Private Universities, *Journal of Public Relations Research, Middle East*, 2019, pp 161-323.

communicate online to exchange information and benefits. These social sites are considered interactive platforms that enable their users to communicate with friends, family and acquaintances in a virtual environment that resembles natural reality. They also allow them to establish new friendships with people of different ages, nationalities and cultures, who share common interests and activities despite the diversity of their awareness, thinking and cultural backgrounds⁽¹⁾.

• **Electronic communication media** are a group of virtual sites on the Internet that represent individuals, groups or institutions, and allow millions of people the opportunity to introduce themselves and their interests, and enable the exchange and dissemination of images, written materials, videos and other content through practical applications on the Internet⁽²⁾.

• **Social networks** are interactive platforms that allow their users to communicate at any time using various means of communication such as voice, images and written words. These networks enable users to share images, videos, discussions and many other interactive capabilities⁽³⁾.

• **Electronic communication networks** are online platforms used to interact and communicate with others, and enable their users to share content in text, visual, audio or multimedia form. These platforms include various and renewable sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others⁽⁴⁾.

• **Social media sites** are defined as electronic platforms that allow individuals to interact and communicate in the digital environment.

(1) Saud Bin Sahl Al-Qaws, The Role of Social Media in Shaping Social Awareness: A Field Study on a Sample of Saudi Youth in the Riyadh Region, Journal of Educational and Psychological Sciences, Riyadh, 2018, p28.

(2) Muhammad Ali Al-Bata, Electronic Media and Social Communication and their Religious and Intellectual Effects, a Dawah Study, Journal of the Faculty of Sharia and Law, 2018, pp1815-1882.

(3) Hassan Niaz Al-Sayfi, Factors Influencing Consumer Attitudes Towards Social Networking Advertisements and Their Relationship to Their Behavioral Response, Arab Journal of Media and Communication, May 2018, p123.

(4) Mahmoud Fawzy Muhammad Kader, Employing Electronic Communication Networks as Social Capital, a Field Study on a Sample of People with Special Needs; Buhuth Journal, May 2021, p63.

These sites provide members with the ability to develop their communication with friends and groups, and enhance interaction and sharing between them online. These platforms include various types of applications that encourage members to use them and invite their friends to participate. With the development of these platforms, they have come to provide multiple capabilities such as sharing photos, videos, and texts, which contributes to greatly facilitating communication⁽¹⁾.

They are also known as interactive social networks that allow users to communicate at any time and from anywhere around the world, making them a powerful and effective means of expression⁽²⁾.

They can also be defined as a system of networks and websites that allow users to create personal sites and communicate with individuals who have similar interests and inclinations. These platforms have evolved over time to provide a variety of capabilities including interaction via text, images and videos, reflecting the advancement in digital communication tools. From these definitions, it appears that "social media sites" are considered electronic programs and a group of websites, electronic networks and services.

These sites include various programs and applications such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and are considered part of the Internet, as they rely on the Internet infrastructure to provide their services. These platforms aim to facilitate communication and build relationships between individuals, and provide an interactive environment that allows sharing content and exchanging ideas and opinions.

3.2 Characteristics of social networking sites

Social networking sites are characterized by a number of basic features that distinguish them, including⁽³⁾:

(1) Amani Mujahid, Using Social Networks to Provide Advanced Office Services, Journal of Information Studies, May 2010, p11.

(2) Amer Ibrahim Qandilji, et Fadel Al-Samarrai Iman, Information and Communication Network, Dar Al-Masirah for Publishing, Jordan, 2012, p339.

(3) Abdl-Razzaq Al-Dulaimi, New Media and Electronic Journalism, Dar Wael for Publishing and Distribution, Amman, 2011, p22.

- **Interactive platforms:** Social media provides global interactive rules and platforms on the Internet, where users can comment and interact with content.

- **Renewable content:** It includes a wide range of content such as texts, videos, images, and audio, and is interacted with through multiple tools and means.

- **Communicate with people with common interests:** It allows users to find people with similar interests, such as friends or customers, through the World Wide Web.

- **A new marketing tool:** It is an effective means of marketing products and ideas, which helps determine future trends at a low cost, These features are reflected in three main aspects:

- **Increased media alternatives:** New media provides more options in the field of communication, which expands the alternatives available to users.

- **Interactive media:** It gives users more control over information and data, which enhances interaction and participation.

- **Fast tool:** It provides fast ways to link information and personal and community activities on a global level.

3.3 The most prominent social networking sites

Social networking sites have witnessed great development and wide diversity in recent years, which contributed to providing many services and meeting the various needs of users. The most prominent of these sites are⁽¹⁾:

A. Facebook : It was created by Mark Zuckerberg, a student at Harvard University, with the aim of organizing students into one network. Since 2006, Facebook has been available to anyone with an email or phone number to become a member. Facebook is a global social network that allows friends to meet and communicate through its pages, exchange information and news, and follow social and political events. It also provides users with daily updates and sharing photos and video clips.

(1) Ali Khalil Shakra, New Media, Social Networks, Dar Osama for Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, 2014, p63.

B. Twitter: Twitter appeared in early 2006, and provides a micro blogging service where users can send "tweets" containing information and news with a maximum of 140 characters per tweet. Users can interact via instant messaging, and Twitter is one of Facebook's most important competitors, with more than 320 million users according to 2016 statistics.

C. YouTube: YouTube provides a video file sharing service, where users can upload and publish videos. YouTube allows users to search for and share content, and is considered one of the largest and most important video sharing platforms on the Internet. It is also used in many political and media fields to publish and present ideas and broadcast events live⁽¹⁾.

In addition to these sites, there are many other platforms such as **Instagram**, **Blogs**, and **MySpace** that provide different types of services and fast and continuous features.

4. The nature of political participation

Political participation is the process of citizens' participation in the political life of their society, which includes activities such as voting, attending political meetings, engaging in public discussions, and expressing opinions through various means, which is what we will try to address in this axis.

4.1 Definition of political participation

The word "participation" is derived from the verb "participate", which means to contribute. It indicates cooperation in achieving social gains and sharing profits and losses⁽²⁾.

In English, the word "Participation" comes from the Latin word "Participare", which consists of two parts: the first "Pars" which means part, and the second "Compar" which means to do, and thus the word participation literally means "To Take Part", is to play a role, Gerrant Barry defines "political participation" as "participating in some political

(1) Mohammed Jiad Zain Al-Din, Public relations use of social media in managing corporate reputation, International Conference on Digital Communication in the Age of Disclosure, 26-28 June 2014, p16.

(2) Sherifa Mashti, Political Participation is the Basis of Democratic Action, *Social Researcher Magazine*, 2010, p13.

actions and deeds, with the participant expecting that he is able to influence the decision"⁽¹⁾, while Ibrahim Abrash defines it as "giving the citizen the opportunity to play a role in political life through his contribution to issuing decisions"⁽²⁾.

4.2 Motives for political participation

A. General motives : They are represented by:

- A sense of duty and commitment towards society, which imposes on individuals to participate effectively in public life.
- A love of public work and the desire to improve society through work and participation.
- The availability of legal and constitutional guarantees that ensure security, a democratic climate, and freedom of expression in line with the interests of society.
- The desire to strengthen ties between the groups of society and its associations to achieve integration and common interests⁽³⁾.

B. Private motives: Represented in:

- Trying to influence public policy-making in a manner consistent with the needs and desires of individuals in society.
- Achieving personal interests such as influence and material benefit.

4.3 Levels of political participation

Karl Deutsch identified three levels of political participation in his study conducted in the early sixties⁽⁴⁾:

The first level: It is known as the highest level and includes activists in political work. Deutsch set six conditions for this category, but a person is considered to belong to this category if he meets three of the following conditions:

- Membership in a political organization.

(1) Muhammad Sayid Al-Fahmi, Women's Political and Social Participation in the Third World, Dar Al-Wafa for Publishing and Distribution, Egypt, 2007, p70.

(2) Muhammad Lamin, Aajal Laajal, The Problem of Political Participation and the Culture of Peace, Journal of Humanities, 2007, p 243.

(3) Ismail Ali Saad, et Muhammad Hassan Muhammad Hassan, Theories, Doctrines and Systems, Dar Al-Ma'rifah Al-Jamiaya, Egypt, 2005, p381.

(4) Ibrahim Abrash, Political Sociology, Dar Al-Shorouk, Cair, 1998, 244.

- Donating to a political organization or to a candidate in the general elections.
- Participating in election campaigns.
- Sending messages on political issues to the executive or legislative authority or the press.
- Discussing political issues with people outside the individual's narrow circle.

The second level: Includes individuals who are interested in political activity, such as those who vote in elections and follow political events.

The third level: Includes individuals who participate seasonally in political work or who participate by necessity in times of crisis when their interests are threatened.

4.4 Channels of political participation

- **Participation through voting in elections:** It is one of the most important aspects of political participation in democratic systems, as voting is directly linked to representative democracy. Through it, representatives of the people are elected, and the citizen's voice in the elections is considered an expression of the will of the nation. However, the impact of this vote depends on the nature of the political system and its compatibility with the principles of democracy that are reflected in the election results.
- **Participation through a popular referendum:** It is used in democratic systems to implement laws or procedures that require popular approval. The referendum may be mandatory or optional depending on the system, and is used to measure public support for the proposed procedures.
- **Participation through civil society organizations:** It includes women's associations, student unions, cultural and religious associations, and other civil society organizations. These organizations play a role in shaping public opinion that puts pressure on the government, and are particularly effective before elections. They also contribute to directing citizens to vote for specific parties, which makes parties and the political system interested in cooperating with them.

- **Participation through pressure:** This includes the use of strikes, demonstrations, civil disobedience, and sometimes violence against state institutions or symbols. This form of participation is considered one of the most dangerous, as it may reflect a complete rejection of the political system or an attempt to change it through a popular movement with a gradual rise.

- **Participation through the press:** The press plays an important role in informing public opinion of news and shaping and directing this opinion, which contributes to raising political awareness and enhancing political participation⁽¹⁾.

5. The role of social media in promoting political participation

Below, we will present the manifestations of the role of social media in promoting political participation:

5.1 The role of social media in increasing political awareness

When talking about the relationship between social media and political awareness, it can be said that these sites have contributed greatly to creating a special kind of interest in political affairs. Thanks to their features that allow political discussion and exchange of opinions, they have turned into platforms for open discussion and the formation of diverse political opinions, including opinions opposing those that existed previously.

Today, social media sites are a public space for expressing political ideas and national sentiments, as well as for circulating news and information through various means such as videos and articles. These sites have helped young people express their opinions and participate in political discussions in innovative and unique ways⁽²⁾. These networks have become platforms where users meet to exchange ideas and join specialized groups on various topics, which has helped to diversify

(1) Hanesh Khadija, et Yinun Fatima Al-Zahra, Media contribution to activating political participation among university media and communication professors, Study a sample of media and communication science professors of the University of Algiers3, Journal of Social and Human Sciences, December 2022, p222-223.

(2) Al-Sadiq Al-Hamami, Tunisian Media... A New Horizon, Dar Afak for Publishing, Tunis, w.d, p68-70.

opinions and positions. From this standpoint, some consider these networks to have become a new public space that interacts with the masses and allows for open democratic discussions, making them an essential area for modern democracy⁽¹⁾.

Social networks represent a new cultural force that enables users to interact and participate in the public space in a way that was not possible before. This force is considered a form of resistance against traditional social hegemony, as it allows users to construct new meanings and express their identities in an independent way.

5.2 The role of social media in increasing actual political participation

The second stage of political participation is political knowledge; through citizens' interest in political affairs, they can obtain political information that varies in size based on the degree of political interest and the level of exposure to political topics. Given the characteristics of social media, it can be said that these sites provide a huge amount of political information, which contributes to the formation of political knowledge. They have also helped facilitate access to information from direct sources and transfer it to the public without external control. The Internet has provided its users with a huge and increasing number of news and information sources that are free from the restrictions of place and time⁽²⁾.

John Herman confirms that the Internet, including social media, has become the most influential media outlet in stirring up controversy and democratic debate. These sites add new dimensions to communication compared to other media, such as high interaction, difficulty of controlling and monitoring them, not being bound by borders, and the expansion of the social, geographic and political base of users.

(1) Yasser Muhammad Ali Awda, Political participation, trend and practice and its relationship to social responsibility and peer influence among students of Al-Quds Open University, Master's thesis in Psychology, Islamic University of Gaza, 2014, p19.

(2) Fatima Al-Zahraa Adel Fattah, Electronic blogs and political participation , Dar Al-Alam Al-Arabi, 2012, pp44-45.

5.3 Social media and political behavior

Political knowledge and interest in political issues are not enough to make an individual a political participant, but political participation appears through the behavior, actions and reactions of individuals towards political issues in their society, which is the way in which individuals express their opinions, ideas, beliefs and attitudes. Social media also provide an opportunity for unconventional political expression (political behavior) that is characterized by three main characteristics⁽¹⁾:

- **Speed and unconventional methods:** Usually immediate.
- **Few time and financial commitments:** Does not require affiliation with specific organizations.
- **Ease of participation:** An individual can express himself at the time and place of his choice, unlike elections or organizing demonstrations.

Wright & Coleman believe that social media sites are an effective tool in enhancing political communication between citizens and politicians, as they achieve benefits that support the values of accountability and transparency, such as:

- Reducing the distance between producing and receiving the message: which creates a non-mediated communication pattern.
- Enhancing interactive dialogue: by enabling the recipient to respond directly to the content of the message.
- Providing the opportunity for the producer of the message to modify its content according to the recipients' comments.
- Introducing new forms of grassroots concepts and participatory journalism.
- Opening new horizons for virtual opposition movements: which have taken on a global character with the enhancement of the ability to communicate via the network.

(1) Ben Aoun Mona, Social Networking Sites and Political Participation, Journal of Social and Human Sciences, 2016, p472.

6. CONCLUSION

In light of the rapid digital transformations, social media sites have become an integral part of the daily lives of millions around the world, and their importance is not limited to social communication and entertainment only, but has gone beyond that to become a major arena for political participation and influence in decision-making. These platforms have become effective means of expressing opinions, discussion, and political organization, through which individuals can overcome the traditional restrictions imposed by traditional media, and engage in political issues in a more interactive and immediate manner.

Social media sites have created a new space for political discourse, where citizens can freely express their opinions, discuss issues that concern them, and demand change without having to go through traditional official channels. This freedom and interactivity have enhanced the ability of individuals to influence public policies, contribute to shaping public opinion, and motivate governments to respond to the demands of the people.

But with these great benefits come challenges that cannot be ignored, such as the spread of fake news, hate speech, and the negative use of these platforms. Therefore, it is necessary to enhance efforts to educate users on how to use these tools responsibly, and develop effective mechanisms to monitor content and ensure its credibility.

➤ Analyses of the hypothesis

When evaluating the three hypotheses of the study based on the actual role of social media in political participation, it can be said that the following hypotheses are supported by evidence and analysis:

Hypothesis 1: "Social media contribute to increasing political awareness among users by providing platforms for political discussions and publishing political news and analysis."

▪ **Hypothesis Verified:** This hypothesis is largely verified. Social media provides multiple platforms for users to view political news and participate in discussions, which contributes to increasing political awareness. The presence of diverse content of political news and

analysis enables users to follow political issues instantly, which enhances their understanding of contemporary political issues and increases their political awareness.

Hypothesis 2: "The use of social media leads to increased actual political participation (such as voting, signing petitions, and participating in protests) by facilitating the process of organization and mobilization."

▪ **Hypothesis Verified:** This hypothesis is also verified. Social media plays a pivotal role in facilitating the organization of political campaigns and mobilization to participate in political events such as voting and protests. The immediacy and ease of access to a wide audience have made these platforms effective tools for mobilizing human resources and motivating individuals to participate in politics.

Hypothesis 3: "Social media promotes the phenomenon of information bubbles, leading to the formation of homogeneous political groups on the platforms that may limit the diversity of opinions and promote political polarization."

▪ **Hypothesis Verified:** This hypothesis is clearly verified. Social media sites rely on algorithms that display content to users that matches their interests and previous opinions, leading to the formation of information bubbles where existing opinions and beliefs are reinforced rather than challenged. This may lead to the formation of homogeneous political groups on these platforms, and increase political polarization by reducing the diversity of opinions displayed to users.

Based on the above, it can be said that all three hypotheses are generally verified. Social media sites contribute effectively to increasing political awareness and political participation, but at the same time they promote the phenomenon of information bubbles that may lead to further political polarization.

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