

Web platforms between communication and influence: A study of their role in shaping social and consumer awareness in Algeria

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Abstract:

This research paper aims to illuminate the digital revolution, which has contributed to the emergence of new patterns and emerging pathways for the production and consumption of information. At the same time, new methods for circulating information have emerged, leading users to rely on these methods to receive, produce and share information with others, which in turn has facilitated the formulation of a new concept: Online public opinion, which now takes shape around the issues raised, whether social, political, economic or even religious. We began with a general question: What challenges do social media platforms pose to individuals? We assumed that a user's use of a particular form of web communication leads to the formation of social awareness regarding the issues of their lived reality. After careful consideration, we have reached a consensus that the virtual world has become a significant driver of awareness across various sectors, with users relying heavily on it.

Keywords: media, online public opinion, social awareness, web.

Introduction

The changes that have affected the social structures of both European and Arab societies were due to changes in communication methods and information production. Since the advent of the print press as the inaugural professional media outlet, mass media has played a pivotal role in the evolution of novel and contemporary communication formats, exemplified by social media platforms, which are intrinsically linked to the utilisation of internet services. According to Boyd and Ellison, "Social networking sites are a category of websites that provide services based on web technology. These sites allow individuals to build a profile that is either public or semi-public within a bounded system. They also allow for the building of a network of relationships and access to others' networks"¹. The evolution of social structures brings about new social patterns, with the significance of these patterns lying solely in the activity and transformation of social actors' practices as a key element in the social and communicative process.

The researchers' interest in new media has emerged across various fields of knowledge, particularly in sociology, media and communication, because of the digital revolution. This has contributed to the emergence of new patterns and pathways for the production and

consumption of information, as well as new methods for the circulation of information”², and the consumption of information leads us to a very important concept in social media studies: public opinion, which is shaped by social media due to the freedom of expression it affords and the opportunity to craft a media message, thereby enabling the user to assume the role of a communicator within the media ecosystem.

What new media offers has made it the number one choice in terms of usage and transformed it into a factory for public opinion on many issues, reaching a global scale that reflects the ability of communication media to make the world a small village, as envisioned by McLuhan. In the same context, comparing two types of media—traditional and social—researcher Nicholas Negroponte presents his “concept of new media by focusing on its characteristics compared to traditional media,” stating “New media is the replacement of physical units with digital ones—bits instead of atoms—as the primary tools for conveying information in electronic rather than physical form. The most significant feature, however, is that this media has broken free from the grip of authority—represented by the leadership of society, the tribe, the church, and the state—and has passed into the hands of the people.”³

Escaping the censorship imposed by the ruling elites on communication channels is a distinctive feature that has made social media a real game-changer in the hands of users. Therefore, the following question can be posed:

What opportunities do social media platforms offer at the individual level?

1. Research Hypothesis

The use of a particular form of web-based communication by a user may lead to the formation of social awareness regarding issues in their lived reality.

2. Conceptual Framework

Web: A substantial, online repository of data that enables users to access and navigate a variety of services and software provided by web browsers—that is, applications that utilise the Internet to access information. ⁴

User: A social actor who exercises their right to communicate using virtual media such as Facebook and other platforms, provided that an internet connection is available; this connection transforms them into a virtual actor.

Awareness: A cognitive psychological process involving topics that directly or indirectly affect the individual.

Individual: is fundamentally a social actor who possesses social, cultural, economic, and other roles and functions within the social system to which they belong.

Public sphere: is a symbolic space where individuals are allowed to position themselves within society and its direction, where we find two fundamental ideas: first, that it is a public sphere for free expression and is viewed as a communicative space; and second, that individuals within it articulate their views during public debate by resorting to rational arguments.⁵

3. Research Methodology:

Every academic work in the social sciences and humanities requires a methodological effort to ensure a balanced and theoretically and methodologically sound approach. This process requires significant focus when the subject involves field research; we adopted a descriptive approach to achieve two methodological objectives: the first concerns the interpretation of observed data reflecting lived reality, and the second involves understanding the virtual space's influence on the individual or communicative actor from the perspective of consciousness.

4. Theoretical Framework of the Study

4.1. Web 2.0 (Second Generation of the Web)

Web 2.0 is a term applied to websites and applications that possess a set of characteristics qualifying them for this designation. This term was coined during a brainstorming session between O'Reilly and Media Live International in 2004. During this session, experts from both sides sought to establish specific criteria for classifying websites into traditional Web 1.0 sites and the new generation of Web 2.0 sites. At the meeting's outset, they presented examples of Web 1.0 sites and their counterparts, which they designated as "Web 2.0." The philosophy of Web 2.0 is to facilitate communication, collaboration and information sharing among the online community.

In this context, we can highlight the characteristics of online broadcasting within the Web 2.0 framework. The fundamental spirit of the Web 2.0 era is networking, which is considered its primary goal. The foundation of this era lies in connecting various applications to the network and allowing users to utilise them for deep communication rather than mere connectivity ; this is one of the most significant characteristics of this era. On the other hand, content—whatever it may be—is the property of whoever broadcasts it online, and they can modify its display properties as they wish. and thirdly, there is the democratic aspect that allows the recipient of any content to engage with it actively rather than merely passively receive it, by commenting on or critiquing it through text or any multimedia, or even via a link. From a fourth perspective, we find an increase in the ease and simplicity of interacting with the software interfaces that manage the user's relationship with the Internet.⁶

Web 2.0 represents a shift toward a less restrictive, more human, and more democratic internet, transforming the user from a passive recipient into an active and positive partner. Web 2.0 is defined as the second generation of virtual communities and web-hosted services. And although the definition may seem unusual, it simply speaks of a new knowledge revolution on its way to us. The old Internet was built on a relational structure (one-to-many), meaning a single website serving many users, and most websites have been built around this concept since their inception. Web 2.0, on the other hand, seeks to create a new concept, based on a "many-to-many" relationship. Its structure is centred on creating a new Internet that is more human-centred and more interactive than the old one.⁷

4.2. Practical Elements of Web 2.0

Supporting connectivity: Web 2.0 applications make communication easier within the online community; they connect websites and bring individuals together in social networks

such as Facebook and MySpace, while also bridging the gap between internet technologies and mobile technologies.

Prioritizing Users: Perhaps one of the most significant changes brought about by Web 2.0 applications is that they have given internet users a major role in adding content. Looking at applications such as blogs or wikis, we find that the user is the primary editor of these applications and is primarily responsible for their content, whereas previously, content addition was limited to website owners and publishers. However, now the field is open to any internet user to edit the content they want.⁸

The emergence of Web 2.0 coincided with the rise of interactive applications and websites that allow users to actively participate in the creation of digital content, as users shifted from web reading to active reading and writing practices on the web (Read-Write Web) —that is, from consumption to production. Concurrently, the term “Web 2.0” emerged in 2004, sparking diverse debates among researchers and scholars of information and communication technologies and marketing. and the term continues to this day to evoke a degree of ambiguity and confusion, as some researchers have come to view the emergence of Web 2.0 as a revolutionary shift in the field of internet communication, while others see it merely as a marketing tool and advertising mechanism reflecting the philosophy of a new profit-driven commercial system on the Internet.

On the other hand, *Time Magazine* published an article on December 25, 2006, titled “Person of the Year Is You,” and the second-person pronoun “you” in refers to the user, acknowledging their role as an exceptional figure, as the modern virtual consumer reflects the transformations taking shape at the core of the web, namely the democratization of the potential for collective contribution and knowledge-building(collective) As a result of the developments taking place within online communication and interaction spaces, Web 2.0 is considered a social phenomenon requiring sociological study based on the application of accumulated sociological concepts and approaches, and some have dubbed it the “Social Web” (Social Web) due to its role in fostering and sustaining social relationships, especially after the emergence of Social Networking Sites (SNS), which contributed to the development of online relationships (Online Relationship) in addition to providing a virtual dimension (Virtual dimension) to various social concepts such as social relationships, communication, social participation, social capital, and others.

4.3.The Genealogy of Social Networks

Most studies that sought to establish a clear and accurate history of social networking sites focused on the history of those sites that emerged after the Web 2.0 era; thus, they trace their history starting from MySpace to Facebook and the other sites that followed, overlooking the pre-Web 2.0 period. Perhaps the most important study on the history of social networking sites is the one presented by Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, as we found that all the studies we reviewed on this topic partially, if not entirely, cited what the two researchers wrote about the history of social networking sites.⁹ They provided a chronological account of social networking sites from 1995 to 2006. The emergence of social networking sites can be divided into two phases:

1- **The first phase (1995 to 2000):** Classmates is considered the first social networking site, founded in 1995 by Randy Conrads. It was a social networking service aimed at helping users find friends, classmates, and coworkers. The site's name was changed to Memory Lane in 2010 after it began featuring content related to memories of the past, such as photos, music clips, and memories from school days, and the site's name was changed to attract more users.

Next came Sixdegrees, founded in 1997, which was the first social networking site to allow users to create accounts (profiles) and browse friend lists. In 1998, it added another feature: the ability to browse friends' lists. Although some of these features existed on most dating and community sites before Sixdegrees appeared, this site was the first to integrate them, serving as a tool to help people connect and send messages to others. It attracted millions of users but failed to become a viable business model, so it shut down in 2000.

From 1997 to 2000: Numerous online social networking platforms emerged that supported profile systems and allowed users to view friend lists, such as Blackplanet, Asian Avenue, and Migente, which allowed users to create personal, professional, or dating accounts. Users could introduce their friends on their personal pages or identify them using descriptive keywords without needing to obtain consent. The same applies to LiveJournal, which launched in 1999 and restricted one-way connections on user pages as well as privacy settings. Around the same time, the Korean virtual world CyWorld, launched in 1999, added social networking features in 2001. The same applies to the Swedish community site Lunastorn, which was redesigned as a social networking site in 2000.¹⁰

2- **Phase Two (2001 to 2006):** The second wave of social networking began with the launch of Ryze.com in 2001, designed to help people grow their businesses by connecting entrepreneurs, merchants, and investors, alongside Tribenet. Alongside Ryze, there were Friendster and LinkedIn, which supported both personal and professional use. However, Ryze never gained widespread popularity, while Tribe.net drew attention for its more emotional applications. As for Linked.In, it became a powerful business service, whereas Friendster was the most prominent of the major social networks on the internet at the time.

From 2003 onward, as many new social networks were founded, a trend emerged to limit social networks, initiated by social web analyst Clay Shirky under the name "Yet Another Social Network Site." Most of these were sites centered around a specific personality, geographic location, demographic group, or similar focus, attempting to achieve what Friendster had accomplished, while the social organization of social networks targeted broad audiences and professional sites such as LinkedIn, VisiblePath, and Xing, which are business-focused. Other networks focused on emotional aspects also emerged, such as Dogster, which helps strangers with shared interests connect.¹¹

5. The Web and the Virtual Sphere: A Study of the Formation of Social Consciousness

In light of the growing number of users in various web spaces and the expansion of the virtual landscape and its intertwining with the terrain of the real social landscape, numerous epistemological issues emerge that must be addressed, understood, and their social and cultural implications predicted. Within this framework, in this research paper, we seek to

analyze the content of online media—or what is known as the media message—and how it has transitioned from the physical to the virtual world, and how the latter has facilitated its crystallisation, dissemination, and consumption, particularly regarding social issues such as social awareness campaigns. This has become a new behaviour adopted by users of new media, so that this user now produces and disseminates media messages, awaiting their outcomes through the interaction of other users, given the features these applications offer, which allow any user to process messages—a development that has effectively eliminated the role of public opinion leaders in addressing these campaigns, thereby reducing all roles—from senders and receivers to communicators and into a single role now performed solely by the user.

Mobilization and the expression of positions and trends now originate on social media and then spill over into the real world, with online spaces serving as the primary meeting grounds. Here, the structures from which these trends emerge appear not entirely defined, but they necessarily rely on the activity of elites, as in the traditional model. The difference is that online elites rely more on their own activity and communication skills than on social or professional status, as previously noted. Furthermore, the ability of political systems to control information has become a hopeless endeavour for them, owing to the new global system's production and emergence of communication spaces that transcend temporal and spatial boundaries—spaces that constitute dynamic communication structures.

The topic of public opinion formation in Arab societies is a research obsession for many scholars, especially in light of the proliferation of social media, which has produced an online public opinion without relying on a real issue of concern to broad sectors of the public. However, it seems that it is not important for the issue to be significant, or even realistic. As **Gustave Le Bon** previously emphasized, what matters to the masses is not whether the issue is realistic/true or unrealistic, but rather that it captures the public's attention¹² , Here we touch on an important point raised in the field of media and communication studies, namely the study of audiences who have come to play the role of communicators in the production and promotion of news, to the point of mobilizing heterogeneous groups to shape public opinion.

To illustrate an issue that represented public opinion for the Algerian masses and users of mass media in 2018, the boycott of car purchases—which users of virtual communication spaces dubbed the “**Let It Rust**” campaign—gained widespread traction and engagement among Algerian consumers. This campaign spread throughout the virtual world and had a significant impact in the physical world, leading to a decline in revenue for many car manufacturers in Algeria. As a result of this campaign, other parallel campaigns emerged in other sectors, such as boycotts of fish, red meat, and certain food items.

From the beginning of **2022** through **2025**, Algeria also witnessed a large-scale crackdown targeting individuals with social media accounts on platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and others—those with high view counts who claim to be influencers—arresting anyone who opposes Algeria's social and religious values. In response to these influencers, virtual groups have formed to combat any actions or behaviours opposed to Algerian society by reporting them to the cyber police and circulating videos that promote

and contain verbal or non-verbal violence / immoral speech or actions / or conduct alien to Algerian society. This campaign culminates in the arrest and imprisonment of anyone implicated, accused, or convicted. The investigators note here that social media has effectively become a fifth estate, such that the public/user acts as a communicator in producing and disseminating news, ultimately mobilising diverse groups to shape public opinion on the social issues raised.

Social media has become a threat, or what some researchers call “media phobia.” Researcher Sakina Al-Abed has pointed out the source of its danger in its influence on people’s attitudes, opinions, and practices due to the absence of a gatekeeper role. With the emergence of new media technologies and the rise of social media, the role of this gatekeeper has been stripped of its former substance, causing its previous function to collapse. Consequently, the (digital) citizen now acts as both sender and censor simultaneously, leading to the formation of a new media and communication environment.¹³ This empowerment granted by communication technology to the social actor has transformed the characteristics of societies in terms of expression, awareness, and participation.

Building on **Jean Baudrillard’s** conception of the media’s influence on the recipient—that it reshapes material reality—we, as researchers in the fields of media and sociocommunications, argue that an individual’s position within a communication structure enables them to use the medium to express their concerns and voice their anger regarding the realities of lived experience.

The researchers highlight a very important idea in the context of this research, one that simultaneously opens up prospects for a research project on the structural transformation of the concept of the public sphere in the context of social media use. Social media has altered the public sphere’s features and reinforced many of its elements—particularly public opinion—within a virtual space where control over information and its circulation is impossible.

In practice, it is impossible to control users’ production of messages and content in the media sphere; consequently, the opportunity to form and shape public opinion on issues of public concern is seamless, flexible, and more widespread. Thus, the process of shaping awareness within the virtual public sphere—as a forum for public debate and for supporting or opposing the actions of the authorities or economic outcomes, etc.- has turned it into a public sphere of opposition that seeks to protect its interests against the other side.

The “Let It Rust” campaign did not emerge from a vacuum but arose amid a conflict between social groups with distinct economic and consumer backgrounds; thus, the concept of conflict here reflects a natural state of affairs, but we wish to argue that this type of consciousness cannot persist within our social structure, as it is a transient, circumstantial phenomenon produced under conditions whose motivations and configurations are difficult to pinpoint, although we may assume that other forms of consciousness are emerging within the virtual sphere, to penetrate physical reality, as we acknowledge that consciousness in society consists of accumulations of conscious practices that lead us to new forms of consciousness affecting the various systems that constitute the social structure .

6. Conclusion

In the wake of technological development, modern societies rely on digital mechanisms to construct social, political, religious, and consumerist economic consciousness through the formation of virtual practices to achieve this. Virtual practices create a virtual public sphere that brings together diverse groups—both in terms of gender and culture—who engage in dialogue and discussion on a topic of common interest.

The participation of social actors in the physical public sphere regarding a consumer issue or an ethical issue, as illustrated by the “Let It Rust” campaign in our Algerian society—triggered by the rise in used car prices, which led to a severe economic downturn at the consumer level—as well as in the issue of following influencers. To wrap up, the use of Facebook by actors within the research community demonstrated that consumer and social awareness are indeed shaped by various Facebook pages and hashtags, which enabled virtual actors to adopt a boycott stance and launch a campaign of boycotts against influencers.

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