



Artical Name : Power of Twitter

Artical Subject : Contradictory effects on Gulf public opinion

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Auther Name: Dr. Fatima Al-Zahraa Abdel Fattah



Subject :

Social networking site Twitter is popular among citizens of the Arab Gulf states and has had many effects on those countries' communities. Some of the effects link to the role digital media plays in shaping public opinion, by offering virtual social spaces through which to discuss real issues. Other effects are related to the specifics of Arab Gulf societies and their system of values. The Arab Social Media Report of 2017 published by the Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government notes that Saudi Arabia surpasses all other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and even other Arab countries, regarding the number of Twitter users. According to the same report, at the GCC level, Saudi Arabia is followed by the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.***Furthermore, on 30 December 2016, Twitter was among the most popular sites in GCC countries, according to figures from Alexa Internet. While Twitter occupies the 11th place among the most visited sites in Kuwait, it is ranked 12th in Saudi Arabia, 20th in Qatar, 24th in the UAE, 26th in Oman and 27th in Bahrain. Reasons for its popularity Explanations for the popularity of Twitter in GCC countries vary. Some say it is due to the widespread use of smartphones, which has hit a global record. According to a 2015 study by AppMakr, smartphone use in the UAE reached 73.8% and 72.8% in Saudi Arabia. Add to that the flexibility and ease of using Twitter, and its compatibility with mobile use, which means users can easily tweet at public events and activities. Additionally, the application enables users to express themselves freely, a feature lacking in traditional media outlets. Finally, the increasing spread of the Internet and the increased standard of living allows people to possess the necessary technology for the proliferation of this new technological culture. Finding a definitive explanation for the spread of Twitter is difficult. However, there are factors associated with Twitter's features and the way it is used in states of the Arab Gulf, notably: First - the effectiveness of Twitter for public debates: The advantages of speed, distribution, tags and exchange networks are considered stronger on Twitter when compared with Facebook, thus making Twitter perfect for launching campaigns, electoral marketing and spreading breaking news. Such advantages explain the social networking site's popularity in Kuwait, which enjoys political popularity during electoral events, various crises between the government and the National Assembly, activities of political blocs, rallies, and other activities, all of which find in Twitter a space for dynamic interaction and discussion. Second – rules on publication and the creation of new accounts: While Facebook adopts strict policies towards the use of aliases, in what is known as its “real-name policy,” Twitter allows people to establish accounts using pseudonyms that do not reveal the true identity of their users. This provides a safe space to use a new tool based on communication, openness, and exchange in otherwise conservative social environments where social media remains a new phenomenon. Third - the public nature of Twitter accounts: More like a public page, tweets can be read by following an account rather than through adding as a friend, as with Facebook. In other words, a user can create an account under a pseudonym, post what they like and be followed by thousands, without having to add friends or personal contacts. This framework was ideal for the adoption of social media's new tools in conservative societies with traditional values. Despite the subsequent growth of social media, Twitter continued to dominate a market share of users in keeping with the rule of first-mover advantage. Types of use Twitter has a set of tools for tweeting, commenting, following, and publishing using text, image, and video. These tools have allowed ample room for self-expression among Gulf Arab communities who use these tools differently. It also produced a number of phenomena that went beyond the ordinary use of a personal account and reflected the ways in which Gulf Arab citizens use Twitter. Among those seen are: 1. Gulf virtual gatherings: Howard Rheingold coined the phrase “virtual community” in 1993 with the emergence of what is known as computer-mediated communication (CMC). CMC developed rapidly in the last twenty years but made an even greater leap with the advent of Web 2.0 technologies that allow users the possibility of creating User Generated Content (UGC). Social media is considered to be one of the primary outcomes of UGC. Although Twitter is based on the concept of an account, without the option to create groups or pages like Facebook, it has also seen the creation of accounts that do not reflect an individual's shared or particular interests but those of a group. For example, there are accounts for expatriates, such as “Saudis in the USA,” accounts for writers, such as “Kuwaiti authors” or “Qatar Youth Opposed to Normalization.” All of these accounts serve to open a channel of communication, exchange ideas and cooperate with members of the group, through virtual communication. 2. Twitter activists: They are known as influencers whose accounts have a large number of followers and a significant degree of interaction through comments, likes, and retweets. They can be known public figures who use the platform to communicate with the public, such as religious figures, artists or politicians. They can also be people who found fame through Twitter itself, such as Mishari Buyabis in Kuwait who posts socially and politically critical tweets to his 1.01 million followers, Abu Asam who became famous during the Kuwaiti elections and earned 224,000 followers and Hamid al-Brashdi in Oman who tweets about various issues and is followed by 406,000 users. 3. An alternative source of news: Although the traditional media established accounts on Twitter that are followed by thousands, this did not prevent the spread of other accounts on Twitter specializing in news. These alternative accounts do not belong to the traditional press, and since they do not have corresponding websites, they do not link the reader to their pages. Such accounts serve as a quick source of news, as they may provide a source of news that does not fall within the traditional media agenda, whether for political reasons or for their interest in local areas that are not given attention by central news

stations. Among them is the account Oman News, which is followed by 594,000 people, Emirati Affairs, followed by 34,000 people and carries the slogan "We tell you honestly what the media doesn't report," Jeddah Now, which is followed by 1.7 million people and HashKSA, which is followed by 7.5 million users. The accounts are not just concerned with political and local news, but extend to specialist content offered attractively, and that interacts with the needs of its followers in real-time, such as the Kuwaiti account For Women Only, which is followed by 509,000 users.

4. Digital campaigns: The hashtag on Twitter, is a useful tool for users to gather tweets around a cause or a particular subject, which Arab Gulf citizens have used not only for political purposes, but to reject economic decisions such as the Kuwaiti hashtag campaign which read in Arabic "We reject the gasoline increase", through which Kuwaitis rejected new gas prices in August 2016. It has also been used for campaigns to collect donations and coordinate volunteer efforts, especially during emergency situations. This happened, for example, when flash floods swept through the Tabuk region in 2013. Saudis launched a Twitter campaign to aid those affected by using the Arabic hashtag "Tabuk is like Jeddah." At the same level, innovative methods have been created to express solidarity, including the utilization of an image or a uniform logo to represent a particular position in place of the profile photo. This happened among Twitter users in solidarity with the "Tabuk is like Jeddah" campaign to aid victims of the floods.

5. Electoral marketing: Twitter has provided a cheap, popular and fast way to connect with a broad base of users who belong to the youngest age group. This serves as an excellent opportunity for political blocs and candidates during electoral events. Twitter was a hallmark of the Kuwaiti National Assembly elections last November. It was used by candidates not only to promote their political programs and political communications but also to launch campaigns to attack and undermine their political opponents as well, which provoked criticism due to the spreading of lies and rumors. In an article titled "Twitter and the Kuwaiti elections" for the London-based al-Sharq al-Awsat on 10 December 2016, a sociology lecturer at Kuwait University, Dr. Mohammed Al-Rumaihi pointed to the influence Twitter had on the elections by promoting some and discrediting others. He also noted that it has a future role as a tool to monitor these candidates at a later date.

6. E-petitions: These are statements of solidarity launched by users through organized campaigns that seek to collect electronic signatures to support a particular cause. The signatures are given by filling out electronic forms or through sites dedicated to this purpose, such as Avaaz or iPetitions. Among the examples of such petitions, in August 2016 under the Arabic hashtag "Saudis against normalization," Saudis opposed normalizing relations with Israel and demanded the punishment of offenders. Users can sign up to these campaigns by registering their data through a digital form.

7. Government tweets: With the spread of Twitter among Arab Gulf citizens, especially its youth, governmental institutions as well as officials started to create accounts on Twitter to communicate with the public. They publish data, guidance, and news, which provides a valuable channel for direct interaction between the government and citizens. In the UAE, Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid's account is the most popular Emirati account in terms of numbers of followers, totaling 7.2 million, according to the site Socialbakers which specializes in social networking platforms statistics. In Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom published its Vision 2030 plan on Twitter, which prompted a discussion featuring 190,000 users who posted 860,000 tweets, according to the French company Semiocast, which described it as "a debate sponsored by the government." In spite of the positive role of government tweeting, it has faced some criticism because of a lack of interaction among the concerned accounts, which have a policy of unilaterally publishing statements. This is according to a monitoring report published in the Saudi al-Madina newspaper in April 2016, which analyzed the content of government institution accounts in the Kingdom.

8. Twitter ads: Despite the fact that one of the main features of Twitter is to be an open space for public debate, commercials and even political adverts have found their way into accounts with over a million followers, especially during election periods. Kuwaiti elections have witnessed the phenomenon, according to a report issued by the al-Arabiya news channel during the National Assembly elections in 2013. Tweeters earned 8,000 dinars per every twenty tweets for publishing posts for a particular candidate. The same was repeated in Kuwaiti elections in 2016, albeit at a slower pace, with a report from newspaper Al-Qabas on 6 November 2016 which pointed to the phenomenon of electoral ads on Twitter accounts, and that some users bought fake followers to increase returns on the adverts. The report also said the phenomenon was not limited to Twitter ads but included the use of polls sent out to followers with a question about a candidate and their chances in the elections or on a particular issue and their opinion of some candidates' positions. The polls are determined based on the candidate's relation to the advertising contract with the contracted account, according to the report. In Bahrain, the cost of a single Twitter ad on accounts with fewer followers than 100,000 costs between 2,000 to 5,000 riyals, while the cost of advertising on accounts above a million followers rises to 20,000 riyals, according to a report from the London-based al-Hayat newspaper on 9 February 2016. The al-Arabiya news site also published a report on 16 January 2014 which said that one marketing company in Saudi Arabia pays monthly salaries to about 9,000 Twitter accounts whose followers total more than 30 million.

9. Tweeting anonymously: Despite the lack of statistics on the number of anonymous accounts, or the proportion of such accounts in the Arab Gulf, many reports indicate the popularity of obscuring one's identity. Reasons for anonymising accounts range from social, political motives to immoral reasons, or to defame and insult others.

Positive changes

Theories of social and cultural change refer to technology as an example of the human tendency to invent and use knowledge and science to manufacturing tools and exploit natural resources to effect change. Social media represents a technological change that helped to bring about social change, or at least prepared the ground for it. Given the consequences of using Twitter as part of social media in the Gulf Arab societies, one can reflect on a number of points that indicate positive transformations.

1. Supporting the public sphere: The term public sphere, which German sociologist Jurgen Habermas theorized, refers to the space in which people exchange their ideas and opinions. Joseph Ernest describes it as a "distinctive discursive space" where individuals assimilate as a political force, including both the elite and the general public. Social media including Twitter has strengthened that sphere. Professor of Media and Communication Studies at the Lund University in Sweden, Peter Dahlgren, specified three dimensions of the public sphere, namely: the structural dimension that relates to official institutions, the representative dimension linked to media output and the interactive dimension of citizen representation in the press, as well as the debates among them. Twitter has an impact on the three dimensions by creating new channels of communication between public institutions, media, and citizens on the one hand, and between citizens and each other on the other. In sum, this results in promoting community debate on public issues and fosters a kind of interactive relationship based on dialogue and discussion. This contributed to transforming the relationship of the individual to the public domain from being a passive receiver to becoming a positive actor in an environment that prioritizes people's aspirations.

2. Amending the agenda of concerns: If the traditional media offers a list of issues that are consistent with its priorities, Twitter provides a means to launch new discussions that advance an agenda that includes issues more compatible with the interests and needs of its users. This has had an effect on traditional media and fostered new issues, pushing them out of the shadows and into the center of public attention, as everyone can use Twitter as a

platform. Scholar Jane Kinninmont noted in her paper published in Chatham House in February 2013, titled "To What Extent Is Twitter Changing Gulf Societies?", that the site is part of a redistribution of information control from government to individuals, particularly the youth. Furthermore, even when it is not used for political reasons, it influences the relationship between the state and society and among generations, since no monopoly can be had on media.³ Communication among youth: A report by Northwestern University in Qatar on the use of media in 2015 indicates that 50% of those who use Twitter in the Middle East are between the ages of 18 and 24. This is consistent with a study by the iMENA Group, which said that the same age group in Saudi Arabia is the biggest users of Twitter. These results show the importance of Twitter in communicating with that age group, which abandoned traditional media outlets for its digital heir.⁴ Exploring trends in public opinion: If polls take a long time to conduct and protest events carry social and economic costs, tweets and other social media network posts offer an opportunity to sense a crisis, explore views and achieve rapid communication with citizens, without losing or abandoning traditional means such as polls and meetings, etc. However, social media's feature is the provision of instantaneous indicators that are easier to monitor and interact with, with the caveat that they reflect only their users.⁵ Social capital development: Social capital has been associated with positive results from mutual interactions between two or more members of a community, from the family to major institutions. Despite the focus on traditional establishments in this regard, the connections created by social media contributed to the promotion of these interactions. This can clearly be seen in the use of Twitter campaigns for charity and volunteering, where personal accounts are used by their owners to invite followers to participate in social and voluntary activities and deploy hashtags to promote active participation in community events through virtual means. Adverse effects Against those positives that encourage and communicate the values of dialogue and involvement, the spread of Twitter and other social networking platforms has given cause for concern, in light of the phenomena arising from day-to-day interactions. The obvious negative consequences include: 1. Spreading rumors: The networked nature of Twitter provides an opportunity to spread rumors that snowball, especially in periods of crisis. This is one of the most negative aspects of its spread. The risk of spreading rumors is increasing given the phenomenon of anonymous accounts where owners can tweet without revealing their identity. Despite the decline of this phenomenon since accounts were linked to telephone numbers, and efforts to link numbers to identities in light of attempts to link all mobile lines in circulation in the Gulf market to their owners, those accounts still exist, with some enjoying millions of followers. This phenomenon should be confronted by means other than legal prosecution, which has its complications. The solution should be to build a serious and effective mechanism to counter the rumors using the same tools to communicate with the public. Here, informal initiatives emerged to raise awareness and confront the phenomenon. They are represented by the "@NoRumors" account in Saudi Arabia, which is not an institution as such but an initiative launched by engineer Ryan Adil in August 2010, via his personal account. He then established a special account for that purpose, whose followers number 723,000.² Media for terrorist groups: Extremist organizations have found in open digital media, such as Twitter, a media channel to broadcast their news, declare victories and even recruit followers. For example, the leadership of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) in Najd province claimed responsibility for the attack on the al-Sadiq mosque in Kuwait, July 2015, through an account on Twitter. Extremists' activity on the internet caused controversy in January 2016 when the widow of an American killed in a terror attack in Jordan filed a case against Twitter, accusing it of providing a platform for terrorist propaganda and providing support to terrorists by giving them free access to spread their messages, recruit adherents and collect funds. This prompted the site to respond and state it would follow stricter policies towards content that promotes violence.³ Sectarian feuding: Another aspect of the open space for debate created by Twitter is the room it creates for sectarian feuding that includes the justification of violence and its incitement. On 20 December 2015 Carnegie Middle East Centre researcher Alexandra Siegel published a study titled "Sectarian Twitter Wars" which analyzed over seven million Arabic tweets published in 2015. The analysis showed that the use of sectarian language was increasing because of increasing violence on the ground, and because of the language's popularity amongst religious figures, extremists, the media, and elites.⁴ Warnings of apathy towards real participation: Although Twitter plays a decisive role in enriching public debate, some research studies point to fears about the effect involvement in virtual events has on an individual's ability to get involved in real life events. Though there have been overestimations about the consequences of social media on political participation in light of the Arab Spring, studies have downplayed the impact of digital activism on active public involvement. Moreover, political participation over the internet does not necessarily entail actual political involvement. In this context, in a treatise on "deep democracy" published by researcher David Howards in 2005 in the yearbook of the American Academy of Social and Political Science, Howards believed that although digital technologies had a role in deepening democratic practice through the dissemination of political information, and in fostering the diversity of its players and views in the public domain, it weakened citizenship by allowing individuals the ability to express political views without being truly interrelated.⁵ Promoting a new tribalism: This is originally a term which refers to the existing racial or ethnic groups that tend to commit acts of violence. However, as Professor Dave Frohnmayer of Oregon University in the US made clear in an article titled "New Tribalism", the media plays a role in the creation of this phenomenon and modern communications technologies made it possible for individuals to build low-cost sub-groups to communicate with each other without there being a common denominator between them save for enthusiasm for a particular, narrow subject. These are the virtual gatherings that can generate a significant amount of energy and money to serve what he called single-issue politics. This is consistent with the study conducted by researchers Mareike Transfeld and Isabelle Werenfels and published in the Washington Post on 2 December, 2016, concerning the use of Twitter in the Arab world and concluded that the utilization of the site promoted identity politics and formed communities based on sect, ethnicity and religion that stand opposed to one another, reflecting conflicts and divisions, and even reproducing them. It also noted that Twitter debates that occur across nations and ethnic groups are usually among people with similar ideas in what resembles an echo chamber. Finally, much of the influences of social media, including Twitter in the Arab Gulf States, are linked to its inherent behavior and culture, which differ from the conservative values of communities in the Arabian Gulf, raising fears of a clash in some ways. Moreover, the security risks that now surround the region and the use of terrorist groups of these new media platforms raises additional concerns. The concerns affirm the importance of strengthening a Gulf strategy that includes real-time mechanisms to monitor social media and trends, and other long-term mechanisms to understand its societal impact and the public political contexts in which to promote its positive aspects while dealing with its negative repercussions.

*** Some of the available indicators suggest that the number of active Twitter users in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is 3.5 million, according to the sixth edition of the Arab Social Media Report issued by the Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government in July 2014. Statistics from Global Media Insight show that the number of Twitter users active in Saudi Arabia alone reached 6.37 million in 2016, representing 31% of the total number of active Internet users in the

Kingdom and 20% of its population. The number of active Twitter users in the UAE was estimated at 2.58 million 2015, representing 27% of the total population.