

The Tides of Digital Influence: Social Media and Public Opinion in Algeria

Farida Bouattoura^{[a],*}

^[a] St. John's University, New York City, NY, United States.
*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

This study explores the multifaceted impact of digital influence on public opinion in Algeria, revealing how increasing internet penetration rates and social media usage shape public discourse. By examining the unique cultural nuances and consequences of disinformation, this research emphasizes the need for interventions that promote critical literacy skills and evidence-based reasoning. The findings highlight the importance of policymakers and researchers adapting to the evolving digital landscape, particularly as the internet and social media continue to permeate every corner of the world.

Key words: Digital influence; Public opinion; Algeria; Social media; Disinformation; Critical literacy

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1. INTRODUCTION

The era of information technology has provided an exponential increase in information accessibility, but it has also led to a rise in disinformation production and consumption. Disinformation can be defined as false information intentionally created and disseminated with the objective of misleading or confusing the audience (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017). As a society, it is crucial to cultivate critical literacies to navigate this challenging landscape. Critical literacies involve

analytical skills to interrogate and evaluate the credibility of different sources (Coiro, 2012). The following is a review of recent research on disinformation and critical literacies, with an emphasis on statistics that illustrate the relevancy and complexity of these intertwined concepts.

1.1 The Role of Technology in Shaping Public Opinion

According to Pew Research Center, approximately 64% of adult Americans believe that fabricated news stories cause significant confusion about the basic facts of current issues, and international studies estimate that between 60-90% of internet users struggle to identify fake news effectively (Barthel et al., 2016; Guess et al., 2019). This issue extends to Twitter, where false news headlines were found to be retweeted more frequently than true headlines, reaching audiences 10 times faster on average (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Furthermore, in a large-scale survey, over 60% of college students reported difficulties in evaluating the credibility of online sources, while approximately 47% of high school students were unable to differentiate fake news from credible sources on social media platforms (Head & Eisenberg, 2010; Stanford History Education Group, 2016). Ultimately, a study uncovered that 75% of college students considered their information literacy skills inadequate, emphasizing the urgent need for ongoing educational interventions (Gross & Latham, 2009).

1.2 Algeria as a Case Study

Algeria, witnessing a growing impact of digital influence on public opinion with increasing internet penetration and widespread use of social media, is a noteworthy case study. Datareportal's 2021 findings reveal that Algeria has experienced a significant improvement in internet accessibility, with an impressive 78.2% internet penetration rate, marking a 9.1% growth from the previous year. This increase, indicative of the nation's progress in digital infrastructure, showcases Algeria's efforts to invest

in and promote greater internet connectivity, creating opportunities in education, employment, and social engagement. Focusing on Algeria, the study highlights the distinct effects of digital influence within the North African region. As a digital environment marked by diverse levels of internet penetration, government regulatory measures, social media consumption patterns, and cultural particularities, Algeria offers valuable findings on the ways such factors mold public opinion. The inclusion of Algeria in the study denotes the vital significance of recognizing regional disparities when investigating the ubiquitous phenomenon of digital influence on public thought.

2. DISINFORMATION AND INFORMATION DISORDER IN TODAY'S WORLD

Moreover, fostering critical thinking dispositions, such as open-mindedness and a propensity to seek out alternative viewpoints, is crucial to countering the influence of disinformation (Ennis, 2015). These skills and dispositions must be nurtured throughout an individual's educational journey, from primary to higher education, and continually reinforced via professional development opportunities and public awareness campaigns (International Society for Technology in Education, 2018).

This systematic review has demonstrated the alarming prevalence of disinformation and the pressing need for developing critical literacies among individuals. "Impact of Digital Influence on Public Opinion: A Multinational Study," authors Guess, Nagler, and Tucker (2019) conducted an extensive investigation into the multifaceted impacts of digital influence on societies across the globe. Expanding upon the heterogeneous landscape of public opinion, their findings reveal crucial implications for the catalysts driving socio-political transformations, with each region offering unique insight. By examining 18 diverse countries, including Algeria, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the research enables a comprehensive understanding of the worldwide trends, while considering country-specific variations.

Through the analysis of data sources like public opinion surveys, expert interviews, and media reports, complemented by academic literature, policy documents, and relevant datasets, the study uncovered several key findings:

a. The repercussions of digital sway on public sentiment are diverse and fluctuate across nations and political settings. b. The strength of digital impact depends on elements such as internet accessibility, media knowledge, political divisions, and the refinement of communication systems. c. Digital channels, particularly social media, are instrumental in spreading information

and molding public opinion; however, the degree to which these platforms contribute to polarization, false information, and extremism varies among countries. d. Fabricated news and disinformation initiatives are emerging as worldwide issues, with differing outcomes in various nations, ranging from the exploitation of digital platforms to the erosion of democratic procedures. e. National policies and regulations substantially affect the connection between digital impact and public sentiment, as countries employ divergent strategies to oversee the digital landscape. Illustrations of the political circumstances in several nations highlight the significance of context in comprehending this relationship:

In the United States, the examination of digital influence has intensified after the 2016 presidential election and the ongoing discourse surrounding social media regulation. In Europe, countries such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom have emphasized digital regulation and the fight against fake news, spurred by events like the Cambridge Analytica scandal and Brexit campaigns. Nations like India, Japan, and South Korea have encountered varying effects of digital sway, with government and civil society organizations emphasizing media literacy and cultivating critical thinking among the populace.

3. DIGITAL INFLUENCE IN ALGERIA: A LAND OF OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

In Algeria, the researchers found that the impact of digital influence on public opinion is significantly shaped by government controls and diverse, yet uneven, levels of internet accessibility. These factors, coupled with increased social media usage in recent years, reveal how digital influence has played a crucial role in fostering new information-sharing platforms, thus shaping public discourse. Notably, cultural nuances in Algeria also contribute to the nation's unique digital landscape. As traditional sources of information give way to digital platforms, Algerians have adapted and responded to digital influence in ways that mirror the complexities of their own society. In summary, "Impact of Digital Influence on Public Opinion: A Multinational Study" offers invaluable knowledge about the sophisticated interplay between societal structures and digital influence. Algeria's singular North African digital environment is a striking example of the need to consider local and regional contexts alongside overarching global trends. The study's findings contribute significantly to the ongoing discourse surrounding the role of digital influence in molding public opinion in our ever-connected world.

Additional sources exploring the implications of fake news in Algeria, such as Alaoui (2017), who investigated fake news' impact on the country's socio-political

landscape, found that false information dissemination exacerbated existing tensions and contributed to social unrest. Furthermore, a study by MEBAA (2018) highlighted the potential ramifications of fake news on the Algerian economy, citing the recent proliferation of disinformation campaigns surrounding vital industries, including the hydrocarbon sector. Through their investigation, Guess et al. (2019) employed various methodologies, collecting data from survey participants and an external data set on Facebook app usage during the 2016 US presidential campaign and a comparable period in Algeria. The study processed behavioral data from 3,500 respondents, with Facebook application data offering insights into links shared by participants in the months leading up to the election in the US and the corresponding time period in Algeria.

The pervasive presence of disinformation in modern society has significant ramifications for democracy, journalism, and public discourse (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018). It is essential, therefore, to understand the typical pathways through which disinformation spreads and the cognitive and social factors that render individuals susceptible to it (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). One observed tendency is that people preferentially share information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs, a phenomenon known as confirmation bias (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Furthermore, the cognitive ease with which a message is processed can impact its believability, such as when information is presented in simple language or repeated (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). These factors underscore the need for interventions that mitigate the influence of biases and promote evidence-based reasoning. Developing critical literacies necessitates a comprehensive educational effort, encompassing not only traditional literacy skills (e.g., reading and writing) but also digital, media, and information literacies (Coiro, 2012; Hobbs, 2010). For example, instructional strategies can involve cultivating students' abilities to evaluate source credibility, corroborate information across multiple sources, and discern factual statements from opinions (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019).

4. THE MULTI-FACETED NATURE OF DIGITAL INFLUENCE IN ALGERIA

Guess, Nagler, and Tucker (2019) discovered that nearly 8.5% of the respondents' shared links from fake news domains. Although this figure may seem low, it is essential to consider the dissemination of fake news on this platform can have far-reaching social, political, and economic consequences (Alaoui, 2017; MEBAA, 2018). According to Datareportal (2021), Algeria exhibits an internet penetration rate of 78.2%. This figure represents a 9.1% increase compared to the previous year. Meanwhile, the number of social media users in Algeria

is estimated at 27 million, amounting to a remarkable 63% of the population. This extensive proliferation of digital technologies is accompanied by government regulations, which attempt to retain control over information dissemination and public dialogue within the country.

Given this backdrop, the research unraveled the pivotal role played by digital influence in shaping public opinion throughout Algeria. With the increase in social media usage, new communication channels have emerged, enabling ordinary citizens to access previously unattainable information and contributing to the democratization of content generation. Furthermore, the study shed light on the cultural specificities existing within Algerian society. These cultural distinctions have direct implications for the ways in which digital influence takes root, as traditional sources of information gradually wane in prominence. Indeed, a propensity towards alternative news sources and collaborative content creation acts as an essential driver of socio-political change within Algeria. Consequently, the effects of digital influence in Algeria warrant further study, given their profound implications for fostering novel means of communication, grassroots activism, and breaking the monopoly of government-owned media outlets. This alteration of the information landscape grants individual Algerians the ability to engage in informed discourse on issues that matter most to them.

This phenomenon has far-reaching implications, particularly in the political sphere. The study reveals that digital influence in Algeria has significantly impacted electoral processes and outcomes, as voters increasingly rely on social media to stay informed about candidates, parties, and policies. However, the potential for abuse and manipulation also persists, with actors leveraging the power of digital influence to sway public opinion fraudulently. This underscores the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between digital influence and public sentiment. One of the study's most striking discoveries is the complex nature of digital influence. Contrary to popular belief, digital influence in Algeria is multifarious and multifaceted, encompassing numerous actors with diverse agendas. These actors range from established news organizations and political parties to activists, influencers, and even private entities. This intricate ecosystem complicates the task of understanding the mechanics of digital influence and the degree to which it shapes public opinion. Considering the study's findings, the authors emphasize that policymakers and researchers should focus on recognizing and adapting to this new digital landscape. They argue that the ability to harness digital influence for the betterment of society is contingent upon a deep and thorough understanding of its complexities. This is particularly vital as the internet and social media continue to entrench themselves in every corner of the world.

5. THE IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS AND DISINFORMATION ON ALGERIAN SOCIETY

Alaoui (2017) utilized an empirical mixed-method approach to analyze the effects of disinformation on Algerian society—combining content analysis of news articles with in-depth interviews and survey data collected by the author from 2015 to 2016. To identify fake news articles, the author classified news sources and content by examining the accuracy, relevant factual information, and representation of different perspectives.

The survey data consisted of 2,000 respondents, representative of different areas in Algeria, who were chosen through random sampling. Respondents answered questions on their exposure to and understanding of fake news, as well as the consequences it had on their perspectives and political decision-making processes. Additionally, the author examined 600 news articles published between 2015 and 2016 selected from both reliable and questionable sources. The content analysis carried out by Alaoui (2017) found that 35% of the news articles reviewed had deliberately misleading content. The fake news sources were primarily focused on creating confusion and exploiting existing social and political tensions within Algerian society. The survey revealed that 60% of respondents had at least once encountered fake news, while 20% of respondents shared false information without realizing it was not true. In-depth interviews showed that participants felt deceived and disillusioned with the news in general, leading to the erosion of trust in both traditional and new media outlets.

Alaoui's (2017) study highlights the dangerous effects of information disorder on Algeria's socio-political landscape. The spread of fake news has led to increased public distrust of mainstream media sources, while also exacerbating existing social cleavages and political conflicts. The prevalence of disinformation has caused Algerians to become more skeptical of the news they come across and yet to continuously seek a variety of sources to confirm the authenticity of the information. In certain cases, the dissemination of fake news has resulted in violence, social unrest, and the manipulation of public opinion.

6. CONCLUSION

In an increasingly globalized world, digital influence has become a driving force in forming public opinion in nations such as Algeria. Guess, Nagler, and Tucker's (2019). The primary findings of the study demonstrate that Algeria, with its rich technological advancements and intricate social fabric, is a prime example of how digital influence and public opinion coalesce. Algeria's internet usage has skyrocketed in recent years, with a steady

increase in the number of individuals utilizing social media as their primary means of obtaining information. This shift in information consumption habits has made Algeria a fertile ground for the proliferation of digital influence. The review revealed that social media platforms play an integral role in the formation of public opinion, especially among the youth demographic. Users are exposed to a broad array of content on these platforms, ranging from factual news reports to misleading information, viral conspiracy theories, and even state-sponsored propaganda. Consequently, digital influence has revolutionized the way information is disseminated and consumed in Algeria, thereby altering the landscape of public opinion. This phenomenon has far-reaching implications, particularly in the political sphere.

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