

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

Farida Bouattoura<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> Saint John's University, New York, United State.  
\*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 disinformation's unique cultural nuances and consequences, 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; Internet penetration; Information disorder

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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 literacy involves 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, emphasizing 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 ten 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 how 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 general thought.

## **2. DISINFORMATION AND INFORMATION DISORDER IN TODAY'S WORLD**

Cultivating critical thinking dispositions, such as open-mindedness and a willingness to seek alternative viewpoints, is instrumental in combating the spread of disinformation. These skills should be nurtured throughout an individual's educational journey and continually reinforced through professional development opportunities and public awareness campaigns (International Society for Technology in Education, 2018).

This systematic review underscores the prevalence of disinformation and the urgent need to foster critical literacies among individuals. A particular cause for concern is the trend of foreign interference in higher education, as highlighted by Long and O'Connell's study in 2022. The research shows that authoritarian regimes employ manipulative tactics to sway public opinion overseas. This approach, termed "sharp power" by Christopher Walker, deviates from conventional hard or soft influence.

The legacy of colonialism continues to have a profound impact on post-colonial societies, often fostering deep-seated mistrust in institutions. This skepticism often divides the populace and authorities, impeding access to influence and decision-making processes (Mamdani, 1996). Such a culture of distrust can fuel resistance to compromise, erecting barriers to societal progress. As this sentiment endures, it deepens its cultural and psychological imprint, cultivating patterns of dysfunction, fear of failure, and a propensity for stagnation (Fanon, 1961).

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

In Algeria, the researchers found that government controls and diverse yet uneven levels of internet accessibility

significantly shape the impact of digital influence on public opinion. These factors and 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.

According to a survey conducted by Pew Research Center, 46% of respondents across multiple countries believe that the internet and social media platforms have contributed to less civil political discussions (Pew Research Center, 2022). Only 23% of surveyed thought these platforms fostered more politeness, while 26% did not see a significant impact. A study by UNESCO found that in Algeria, 55% of the population depends on social media for news, with propaganda from Russia and Iran significantly influencing the narratives in circulation (UNESCO, 2023) (Bradshaw, 2020). The global prevalence of online hate speech is also noteworthy, with 67% of internet users reporting encountering such content, primarily on Facebook, TikTok, X, and Instagram. Most respondents (88%) believed that addressing disinformation and hate speech issues should be a joint effort between governments, regulatory bodies, and social media platforms (Pew Research Center, 2022).

The survey further revealed that 89% of internet users believe that during election campaigns, governments and regulators should enforce trust and safety measures on social media platforms (Pew Research Center, 2022). Most respondents (75%) also agreed that international organizations like the UN or UNESCO can be crucial in combating disinformation (UNESCO, 2023). However, only 48% of respondents have reported online content related to disinformation during an election campaign. Young individuals and those highly interested in politics are more inclined to say such content (Pew Research Center, 2022).

The pervasive presence of disinformation in modern society significantly impacts democracy, journalism, and public discourse (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Therefore, it is essential to understand the typical pathways through which disinformation spreads and the cognitive and social factors that make 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 traditional literacy skills (e.g., reading and writing) and 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

The population structure of Algeria reveals a predominantly young demographic. The median age is 28.2 years (Digital 2023: Algeria — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, 2023). A detailed breakdown of the population by age group shows that a significant portion of the population falls within the younger age brackets:

- 10.5% are between the ages of 0 and 4
- 16.5% are between the ages of 5 and 12
- 8.2% are between the ages of 13 and 17
- 9.0% are between the ages of 18 and 24
- 14.9% are between the ages of 25 and 34

This youthful skew in the population indicates high exposure to digital technologies, mainly social media platforms. Coupled with the fact that there were 48.53 million cellular mobile connections in Algeria at the start of 2023 (Digital 2023: Algeria — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, 2023), this suggests considerable potential for the spread of information - and disinformation - via these channels. Data from January 2023 shows that YouTube ads reached 70.7 percent of Algeria's internet user base, regardless of age (Digital 2023: Algeria — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, 2023). This highlights the potential influence of digital media, especially platforms like YouTube, on the Algerian populace. However, professional networking sites such as LinkedIn have considerably fewer users, with only 400 thousand entries, indicating that the primary mode of online interaction is through social media rather than professional networking platforms. Given this context, it's clear that the young Algerian population, with its high internet penetration and usage of social media platforms, could potentially be vulnerable to the spread of disinformation. This vulnerability is further magnified by the influence of "sharp power" - the ability of authoritarian regimes to manipulate information and shape opinion abroad for their benefit - on platforms like YouTube and Facebook. Therefore, it's crucial to develop strategies that promote digital literacy and critical thinking skills, especially among the younger population, to mitigate the potential adverse effects of disinformation and manipulation.

Given this backdrop, the research unraveled the pivotal role of digital influence in shaping public opinion throughout Algeria. With increased 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 directly affect how digital influence takes root as traditional sources of information gradually wane in prominence. Indeed, a propensity towards alternative news sources and collaborative content creation is essential to 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 allows individual Algerians 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 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 private entities. This intricate ecosystem complicates 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

Fake news has become increasingly prevalent in today's digital age. A study by Nassima Mekbel explored the

strategy of confronting fake news in the Algerian media space, focusing on a sample of journalists from the Algeria International Channel (Mekbel, 2023). When asked for their definition of fake news, 33% of the journalists surveyed viewed it as a means of propaganda and misleading public opinion. Meanwhile, 23% perceived it as a method of cold war between rival countries, and another 23% saw it as a means of settling scores between competing individuals, agencies, and institutions. The remaining 20% defined it as false and incorrect news published intentionally or unintentionally (Mekbel, 2023). According to the respondents, the spread of fake news is primarily due to the lack of review and control of publications on social networks (32%). Other contributing factors include the ease of use of social networks and flexibility of data dissemination (26%), non-confirmation of the identities of the publishers of fabricated news (21%), and the increase in the number of users, thereby increasing the rate of quoting and re-sharing the fake news (21%) (Mekbel, 2023). Fake news is disseminated across various areas, with news about resignations and dismissals of famous political and media figures and the death of well-known artistic, sports and political figures being the most common (each accounting for 18% of the total). Other areas include news about political figures' involvement in corruption cases before elections, the spread of diseases and global epidemics, unfounded statements by national figures, university services, wage increases, and unemployment grants (Mekbel, 2023).

The effects of fake news are manifold. It confuses the news and correct information (31%), spreads chaos in Algerian society and disperses public opinion (26%), negatively affects people's psyche (24%), and may deceive novice journalists, leading to a loss of credibility (19%) (Mekbel, 2023). In dealing with fake news published on social networks, the journalists surveyed indicated strategies such as ensuring the authenticity of the news by making contacts with official bodies and the concerned persons, modifying the material before broadcasting, avoiding insulting and slanderous contents, reporting the account of the person who published the fake news, and denying the news with a counter post and counter comments (Mekbel, 2023).

Fake news, defined by many as propaganda or a method for settling scores, is becoming increasingly concerning in Algeria. A lack of control over social networks, ease of use, the unverified identity of publishers, and an increased user base contribute to spreading false information (Mekbel, 2023). The most common areas where fake news circulates involve high-profile figures and events such as political resignations, deaths, corruption cases, and global health crises (Mekbel, 2023). With Algeria's predominantly young population and high mobile connectivity (Digital 2023: Algeria — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, 2023), the

potential for misinformation spread is considerable. YouTube, reaching 70.7% of Algeria's internet users (Digital 2023: Algeria — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights, 2023), highlights the influence of digital media. The vulnerability to disinformation is amplified by authoritarian regimes manipulating information on platforms like YouTube and Facebook. Strategies promoting digital literacy and critical thinking skills among the younger population are crucial to counteract the adverse effects.

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## 6. CONCLUSION

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The study's primary findings 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 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 are integral in forming public opinion, especially among youth. Users are exposed to various content on these platforms, ranging from factual news reports to misleading information, viral conspiracy theories, and even foreign state-sponsored propaganda. Consequently, digital influence has revolutionized how information is disseminated and consumed in Algeria, altering public opinion. This phenomenon has far-reaching implications, particularly in the political sphere.

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