

The role of social media in strengthening civic engagement in the Middle East and North Africa

Civic
engagement in
the MENA
region

309

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Abstract

Purpose – This article explores the current trends in civic engagement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region after a decade of social media growth in the region.

Design/methodology/approach – The methodology is based on a case studies approach. In these case studies, the authors use an exploratory approach to case study research. The authors employ a mixed-method approach to exploring the development of civic engagement in the MENA region.

Findings – The study's finding shows that the MENA region's social media growth has enabled digital natives to play a vital role in enriching and empowering their communities and their lives.

Research limitations/implications – The paper could have explored more examples from around the MENA region.

Practical implications – The paper's practical significance is the understanding that the ground is shifting around Internet access and how digital natives in the MENA region are employing it for their civic engagement initiative. It is an important indication that the MENA region's next innovation could be in the civic engagement arena. Unlike their parents, who are digital immigrants, these young and energetic digital natives are out to shape all aspects of their lives. Paving the way for more innovative and creative ways of civic engagement in the MENA region.

Originality/value – The paper explores civic engagement development in the MENA region, shedding light on the issues concerning MENA region youth such as cleaning the environment, waste and food recycling, combating extremism, developing education curricula and even promoting peace. The paper's value is that it gives an update on civic engagement in the MENA region.

Keywords Civic engagement, Youth, Social media, MENA, Sudan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Egypt

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The main objective of this article is to critically assess the role and impact of the new social network systems such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Pinterest have on civic engagement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The growth of the information age has given rise to new and multitudinous tools and techniques by which communities from around the world interact. In this age of information and communication technology, these new social network systems have emerged to facilitate mutual communication. Facebook alone is estimated to have 2.7 bn monthly active users as of the third quarter of 2020 (Statista, 2020). These social networks are growing at an exponential rate and encompassing users from all corners of the globe. Hence, the expansion of these networks has provided a new medium for multitudes worldwide to communicate and interact.

Over the past two decades, the Internet's growth has shaped many of our daily routine and behavior. The development of the internet coupled with the rise of globalization has led to what *The New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman calls the democratization of technology (with the increase in computers per capita), of finance (with the rise of



credit cards and now fintech) and information (with the rise of Internet access and social media) (Friedman, 2000). A recent research article titled “*Social Media Use Continues to Rise in Developing Countries but Plateaus Across Developed Ones*” pointed out that as social media growth plateaus in the developed world, large increases in social media usage and access in emerging markets and the developing world continue (Poushter *et al.*, 2018).

In this study, the following steps are undertaken to investigate the development of civic engagement in the MENA region. First, we explore the current literature review on civic engagement, followed by introducing the MENA region with its current underlying dynamics related to socioeconomic development. Third, we will present our methodology, followed by four case studies from Kuwait, Sudan, Bahrain and Egypt. We conclude our paper with the role of youth in civic engagement, followed by a conclusion.

Literature review

The increase in information access has fueled the rise in Internet-based civic engagement, giving rise to many civic engagement initiatives in many parts of the MENA region. Cnaan and Park (2016) define civic engagement as “*any activity of any individual, alone or with others, that is performed outside the boundaries of the family and household that directly or indirectly attempts to promote the quality of life of others, and that may make the community or society a better place to live.*” Another noteworthy definition that run in parallel with the definition of Cnaan and Park is that of Mirazchiyski *et al.* (2014) in which they state that “*Civic participation refers to activities in the local community, politics or general society within the local country context and includes formal and informal group or organization membership, individual actions, voluntary activities, political activities aimed to bring improvement to the local, societal or country-wide settings*”. On the other hand, civic engagement importance is critical for the growth of communities and their social capital development. Thomas Ehrlich of Stanford university’s pointed out that a “*A morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own; such an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate*” (Ehrlich, 2000). It is important to link civic engagement with social capital, as enriching civic engagement activities increase social capital.

Cnaan and Park (2016) pointed out that civic engagement, also known as civic participation, could be organized around an enlarged list of pro-social behaviors. They divide civic engagement into six key sub-groups: association participation, giving and volunteering, environment-friendly behaviors, political and social behaviors, and supporting individuals (Cnaan and Park, 2016). They pointed out that the overarching civic engagement groups could be divided into three groups: giving and volunteering, political engagement and environment-friendly behaviors (Cnaan and Park, 2016). There are many ways citizens play a vital role in civic life; Bole (2009), in her work titled *How to Be an Everyday Philanthropist* pointed out 330 ways to make a difference in your community or country and at no cost (Boles, 2009).

Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region

Many consider the MENA region as one of the most important emerging parts of the world economy in the 21st century. The MENA region is strategically vital as it produces the majority of the world’s oil. However, despite the region’s oil, most countries score lower on Human Development Index (HDI) world ranking, with gross domestic product (GDP),

productivity and investment rates well below the global average. Despite abundant financial and human capital, most countries still lack adequate scientific and technological infrastructure to absorb, apply and create knowledge and disseminate information. At present, almost all knowledge and technology used in almost all MENA countries is produced outside the region reflecting high dependency of MENA countries on outside knowledge and technology. A widening knowledge gap augurs poorly for future development of Arab societies stymied by an inability to create knowledge economies that gain benefits from the opportunities offered by globalization. It is, therefore, becoming widely accepted that the dominant economic model of the region—based on the public sector, oil incomes and workers' remittances—is not up to the challenges of modern globalization and the needs of advanced knowledge-based societies.

In the MENA region, we have seen tremendous growth in civic engagement initiatives from around the area. Examples could be seen all across the MENA region from Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Kuwait and Sudan. Many of these were developed using internet-enabled tools such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. In the next part of the article, we will explore the growth and development of civic engagement in the MENA region during the last decade and explore lessons learned and propose recommendations to refine current and future initiatives. In doing so, we will briefly discuss the ReFood initiative from Kuwait and the recent social media storm in Sudan as the result of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* painting in primary schools books.

Research methodology

In this research article, we employ an exploratory case study approach as our driving methodology. Case study research could be defined as “a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its context using multiple sources of evidences” (Robson, 1993). We will explore cases from four countries in the MENA region, namely Kuwait, Sudan, Bahrain and Egypt. We will employ a mixed-method approach in our analysis. In terms of case study type, Yin (1993) has identified several case studies: exploratory, explanatory and descriptive. Exploratory research is done when exploring a newly emerging phenomenon that would be studied more rigorously at a later stage. The researcher tries to explore the topic and lay the ground for future in-depth research on the subject. Explanatory case studies are used for investigation and explain the event or case. In contrast, descriptive case studies need a “descriptive theory” to be started and developed when starting a descriptive case study. Following Yin, Stake (1995) proposed 3 more types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental and collective (Stake, 1995). Intrinsic is when a study is conducted, and the researcher has a direct interest in developing and leading the case study. Instrumental case studies are conducted using in-depth analysis of an issue that at first might look ostensible but would unearth more in-depth research if a case study is conducted. And finally, a collective case study, which as the name might imply, is a collection of case studies studying an issue from multi-cases or prescriptive. In our case study, we would be using both Yin's exploratory approach coupled with Stake's collective approach to first explore each case study of Kuwait, Sudan, Bahrain and Egypt, two examples from North Africa and two examples from the Gulf region. We are exploring several case studies as a collective to see similarities in civic engagement across the region and explore their unique insight into how each of these countries is shaping civic engagement in the MENA region. The MENA region is growing at a breakneck speed in terms of information and technology (ICT) development and usage (Gibreel *et al.*, 2013). From Instagram being used as a social commerce platform in Kuwait (Gibreel *et al.*, 2015, 2018) to the Sudanese Revolution's recent development in Sudan. In this collective of case

Case study analysis

Sudan is witnessing social media civic engagement toward the newly developed education curricula in the school system. The issue is related to the inclusion of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*. Its depiction in the school book has taken Sudanese social media by storm. After heated debate around the inclusion of the painting in the education curricula, Sudan's Director of the Educational Curricula Center, Dr. Omer El-Garrai, pointed out during a live broadcast on Sudan News Agency that yes, we included the painting. Nonetheless, we did not name the other entity that is with Adam in the picture. This has exacerbated the debate over his logic and motivation for inserting this painting, and further increased the heated debate that spread throughout social media outlets in Sudan. On the one hand, parents pointed out that the controversial issue is that in Muslim society, the depiction of God or his prophets is prohibited. Dr. El-Garrai might have assumed that people, including young tech-savvy children, cannot access such information from a simple Wikipedia page. What seems to be taking social media by storm is Dr. El-Garrai last comments on not explaining the painting in the school textbook. In this everchanging world of information access, tech-savvy children of today are exposed to digital bits and bytes of information as soon as they are able to hold a mobile phone in their tiny hands. In today's world, young people all across MENA can access information never witnessed in or accessible through the biggest libraries during the renaissance era of Europe or the golden age of Islam. In Sudan, social media outlets debates reach their climax on January 7 when Dr. El-Garrai resigned from his position as Director of the Educational Curricula Center. We analyzed the online Twitter debate around both sides of the story of Dr. El-Garrai using both Twitter data and analytical tools such as SproutSocial and Talktwalk. Those that support his work using the Arabic hashtag *التعليم أمل القرائ* which translate to Dr. El-Garrai the hope of education!, on the other hand, the hashtag *اقالة القرائ* called for his resignation. The trends of both hashtag on the week of Dr. El-Garrai resignation is shown in [Figures 1 and 2](#), respectively, and the combination of both are shown in [Figure 3](#).

The week starting from January 2 to January 8 is the week in which Dr. El-Garrai has resigned from his position as shown in [Figure 1–3](#).

Although the trend of Dr. El-Garrai hope of education has been in used ever since he took office, the movement calling for his resignation has grown fast in the last few weeks, taking over the cloud map of tweets shown in [Figure 4](#). Another interesting factor is the inclusion of the minister of education himself and the call for his resignation. Both the demand for the resignation of Dr. El-Garrai and the minister of education, followed by a request for a national educational conference, dominated the Twittersphere seen.

RESULTS OVER TIME

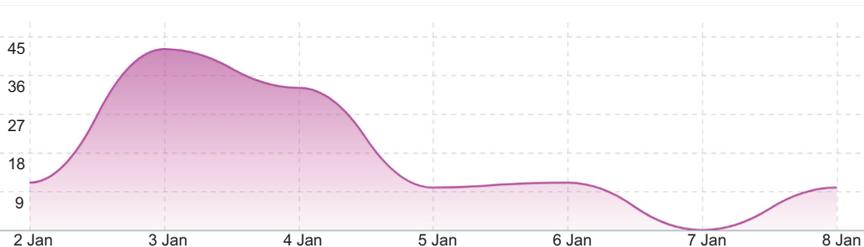


Figure 1.
Elgarri the hope
of education
trend *التعليم أمل القرائ*

Last but not least is the potential reach of the supporter of Dr. El-Garrai vs those that were for demanding his resignation. Potential reach a social media term, is defined as “how many people are in your target audience for you to connect with every time you tweet on Twitter or post a picture on Instagram.” (SproutSocial, 2021). Potential reach is considered one of the most crucial assets a person, institute, or business has on a Twitter platform. It is estimated that Sudanese tweets demanding his resignation have reached over 10 m Twitter users. Dr. El-Garrai resignation supporters shown in red dwarf that of his supporter shown in purple color in Figure 5.

The questions are still rising within social media outlets in Sudan, which raises two questions. On the one hand, could the inclusion of Raphael’s *The School of Athens* help attenuate the current controversy. The painting depicts prominent scholars during the renaissance era such as Plato pointing to the heavens for divine knowledge and his younger

RESULTS OVER TIME

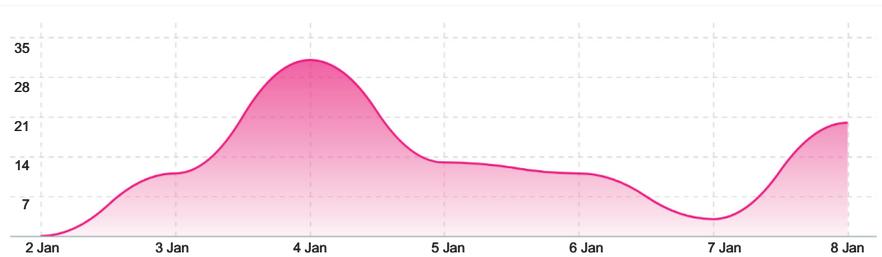


Figure 2.
Calls for Elgarri
resignation Hashtag
for القراي_اقالة

RESULTS OVER TIME

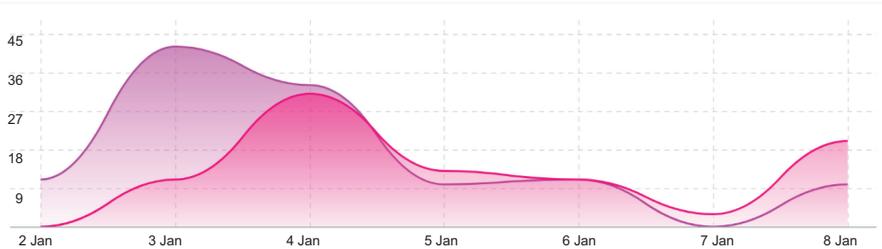


Figure 3.
Showcase both side of
the story



Figure 4.
Showcase a cloud map
of the most popular
hashtag other than the
explored above

student Aristotle pointing to Earth for what we can see and touch and build scientific inquiry upon, not to mention the inclusion of other prominent scholars such as Euclid of Alexandria with his young students surrounding him and listening tentatively. On the other hand, an even more interesting and important question to ask is whether a society's beliefs and values will shift through authoritative educational curricula or challenged utilizing the internet. What we have seen is that the Internet, when it comes to social values, is a double-edged sword capable of equally preserving and challenging existing social norms. Failure to recognize this essential duality will merely exacerbate the debate over imparting values to youth wherever they are.

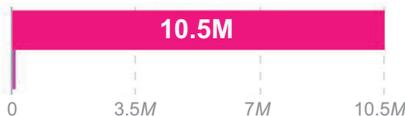
In *Bahrain*, the TogetherSAFE initiative plays a vital role in promoting diversity, social cohesion and understanding among people from various backgrounds. As its title implies, TogetherSAFE is an abbreviation for "Stand Against Fear and Extremism". TogetherSAFE's online and offline initiatives have gain momentums and have greatly encouraged intercultural and intergeneration dialogs. Its main objective is to counter extremism and promote understanding among different groups of people within Bahrain. Their primary mission state that they work "to bring people together to end up the existing fear by highlighting Safety and Standing Against Fear and Extremism (SAFE)." (TogetherSAFE, 2020). They believe that by supporting each other they can guarantee a Safe environment. Their SAFE campaign (Standing Against Fear and Extremism) is a campaign to eradicate fear from local community by promoting peace and understanding. Hence, they say that they will #BeTheBridge to eliminate fear and support peace building and mutual understanding as they say, "Let's all be #TogetherSafe." (TogetherSAFE, 2020). TogetherSAFE, both online and offline initiatives, are designed to encourage social cohesion and counter fear and extremism. On the online side, they use different outlets to reach a diverse age group. For example, on Facebook, TogetherSAFE has over 27,000 followers (TogetherSAFE, 2020). With presence across all social media outlets such as Instagram, Snapchat, Youtube, and their website <https://togetherwesafe.com/>, TogetherSAFE initiative can reach across the age spectrum from young teen to adults.

On the other hand, TogetherSAFE offline campaigns center around organizing events and meeting across Bahrain to increase awareness and exchange ideas and thoughts with different communities across Bahrain. TogetherSAFE is an excellent example of youth-led civic engagement. It promotes understanding and social cohesion among diverse communities within a given country, thereby promoting and encouraging social welfare and community resilience.

In *Egypt* civic engagement initiatives have seen tremendous growth in numbers and reach. For example, one noteworthy initiative called Verynile tries to garner support for youth to clean the Nile from plastic waste. What is even more important is the rising of awareness around recycling initiatives from the gathering of plastic waste along the Nile. Their motto explains it all, "Cleaning the Nile, One Kilo at a Time!". With over 3,400 headstrong volunteers, Verynile was able to remove 35 tons of garbage from the Nile (Verynile, 2020). They engage in cleaning, recycling and plastic waste prevention activities. These initiatives have 34 partners engaged in supporting Verynile vision of a cleaner Nile and an eco-friendly

Figure 5.
Showcase the potential reach of tweets by supporters of Elgarri resignation in crimson red vs his continuation in purple

POTENTIAL REACH



environment. One of their latest Initiatives is an Initiative to ban single-use plastic, especially plastic bags. In 2020 Velynile won the Development Initiative Prize launched by the Ministry of Information in Egypt ([VelynileFacebookPage, 2020](#)).

In *Kuwait*, the Refood initiative helps to manage and save leftover foods from being dumped or thrown away, and it all started through social media and social networks. It is estimated that some 2,080 families have signed up with Refood, and more than 498 tons of food were redistributed. [ArabNews \(2020\)](#) estimates that the Refood social media based initiative saved KWD 1,292,640 (\$4.2m) of food ([ArabNews, 2020](#)). Another example from Kuwait is the development of a social network Instagram page Maeen by Dr. Jasem, which has over 1.4 m followers, that helps parents and educators understand the psychology of their children at different ages of growth from age 2 to 15 and advises on inter-generational communication. In the same vein, as social media allowed Dr. Jasem to help parents communicate effectively with their children, it has also enabled parents, religious leaders and educators to voice their opinion on current and upcoming school books. This is exactly what happened in Sudan on the other side of the MENA region.

The role of youth in civic engagement

From the above various cases from Sudan, Bahrain, Egypt and Kuwait, it clear that, youth are the key users of social media in the entire MENA region. *Youth* population is growing rapidly in all countries in the MENA region and we must understand the children and youth perspectives and expectations for their future to help them be ready to grasp the various opportunities generated in the digital economy. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Facebook remains the most dominant platform in almost all countries in the MENA region with some estimation of more than 200 m users. It is also important to note that the entire concept of sustainable development is about the future and the future is all about the children and youth! We strongly believe our children and youth should be the cornerstone of any strategy by all governments and policy makers in the MENA region. We must therefore listen to our children and youth and more importantly how we can help our youth with their future employment plans and aspirations.

Youth in the MENA region are growing fast and governments in the region expect their universities and research institutes to make a leading contribution by producing graduates ready to grasp the various opportunities generated in the new era of globalization, social medial and digital transformation. It is therefore important that all Higher Education (HE) institutions and societies in the MENA region to consider the youth in all their curriculum design, programs development as well as fulfilling their role as major agents in the realization of the various future strategic visions in most countries in the region. According to recent reports by the World Bank, with a large youth representation and youth unemployment ratio, countries in the MENA region face a potential crisis and the education sector should be reformed to include specific qualifications and specializations in the digital and knowledge economy. The private sector can play a larger role in helping governments and academia focus investments on high-priority and high demand skills, thus young students are ready for employment the moment they graduate. Revolutionary breakthroughs in the digital and knowledge economy are leading to remarkable changes in the way forward-looking nations capacitate their graduates.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the MENA region has witnessed an ICT revolution coupled with civic engagement growth and innovation. We see MENA region youth as young, energetic, innovative, talented and empowered with tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Linked In and

Pinterest and creative initiatives. Next, we would go through the process of exploring the conclusion for each of the case studies.

In the case of Sudan, there seems to be a strong movement toward Sudanese expressing their opinion online, which coincides with the recent Sudanese uprising that overthrew President Omer Al-basher. It should be noted that Twitter is still growing in Sudan. If we had the opportunity to gather data like Twitter data from WhatsApp, we would have better understood the situation due to the high popularity of WhatsApp. Nonetheless, Twitter data dose showcases the importance of understanding the overall trends that government might indicate and their effect on people's perception and reaction. In the case of Sudan Twitter users, there has been a strong outcry and rejection for how the minister of education handled children's books. This case study might help Sudan in future policymaking decisions; for example, the government of Sudan could use sentiment analysis to gauge the development of new policy toward its citizen. As sub-Saharan Africa gain more Internet penetration rate, we are expecting more interaction between citizens and government policies, and social media is the medium of this interaction. It is highly recommended that government become more agile toward this new emerging trend.

In Bahrain's case, Bahrain reemphasized the critical role of education on helping youth understand fully the true meaning of their religions and educating them about the common values of peace and love in all these different religions. Also, the case study shows that educating youth within the university setting and among their activities groups in a more informal styles will produce much better results. Issues like radicalization and community cohesion need specialized coaches and facilitators and also, they need careful supervision and social consideration for the society and all stakeholders.

In the case of Egypt, there seems to be a lot of emerging social media initiatives that have enriched the way and methods by which Egyptian youth enacted social and economic change. What distinguishes VERNILE from other initiatives is the combination of social, economic and environmental factors. VERNILE helps increase awareness about the side effect of plastic waste on Egypt fishing industry from a social perspective. From an economical perspective, VERNILE helps explain how plastic waste could be recycled and used to increase income for a certain segment of society. From an ecological perspective, plastic waste affects the environment of the longest river in the world, the Nile River, which has a lot of living creatures such as plants and fish that could only live-in river water and cannot live or move to the sea. In 2020, VERNILE won the Development Initiative Prize launched by the Ministry of Information in Egypt ([VERNILEFacebookPage, 2020](#)).

In Kuwait, Kuwait has been striving a lot to support projects that increase social awareness and resolve social issues. The case of resolving food waste is seen worldwide, and many countries did start food banks to mitigate this issue. What is different in the case of Kuwait is the usage of social media to resolve this issue. Refood has helped over 2,000 families to sign up for Refood program. It is estimated more than 498 tons of food were redistributed. [ArabNews \(2020\)](#) pointed out that the initiative could have saved KWD 1,292,640 (\$4.2m) of food ([ArabNews, 2020](#)).

It is also important to note that WhatsApp in the MENA region has increasingly become the main point of communication among MENA citizens, particularly the youth. With the limited e-learning resources across most countries in the MENA region, youth use WhatsApp applications for education and learning and to interact with the MENA region and beyond their border. In addition to learning, WhatsApp applications offer youth the space for communicating, expressing ideas and exchanging information anytime and anywhere.

The research explores the importance and urgent need for more critical and analytical research and studies in the entire MENA region with regard to the role of social media in strengthening civic engagement and the role of youth in achieving sustainable development and the United Nations Agenda 2030.

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