

ONLINE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN JORDAN

Reem Al Masri

- *How Jordanian opposition movements navigate between the state violating their right to free speech and data-sharing violations of Facebook*

ABSTRACT

In February 2018, Jordanians took to the streets in the cities of Theeban, Assalt and Al Karak following the International Monetary Fund guided government decision to raise taxes on 164 commodities and abolish bread subsidies. Amidst a total absence of local media coverage, these demonstrations evolved into daily livestreamed debates on Facebook. The political and economic realities of Jordan were discussed which resurrected the 2011 and 2012 demands for a constitutional monarchy, as well as accountability for both the existing regime and also the intelligence department. However, while Jordanians were participating in and watching nightly live-streamed debates, in parallel global campaigns were calling on users to delete Facebook in reaction to the latest data breach scandal following Cambridge Analytica's involvement in the Trump campaign, which gained access to the data of millions of Facebook users. This article explores the conflicting relationship that political movements in soft repressive regimes, like Jordan, have with Facebook due to on the one hand the local restrictive media environment and on the other the global criticisms of Facebook's data sharing violations.

KEYWORDS

Jordan | Live-streaming | Media freedoms | Privacy | 2018

1 • Introduction

*Oh god almighty...We want this traitor on trial
What a disgrace, what a disgrace, they sold Jordan for a dinar*

These were the chants of dozens of Jordanian demonstrators in Theeban, a village 70 kilometres east of Amman, four days after the Jordanian government's decision to abolish bread subsidies and to impose taxes on 164 commodities, which took effect in February 2018.¹ What started as a spontaneous protest to the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-guided decision,² developed into daily protests and public discussions that spread to the cities of Assalt and Karak³ (and which were ongoing at the time of writing this article).

The demands of the protesters have changed since they started. The protests now cover a range of topics including calling for the resignation of the Prime Minister, discussing the return to a constitutional monarchy, demanding an elected government, limiting the King's executive authorities, debating Jordan's neoliberal policies, and advocating for the trial of businessmen on allegations of corruption. These are demands that have not been heard in a demonstration since the 2011 and 2012 demonstrations following the Arab Spring.

However, these demonstrations are not televised, nor covered through local news websites. Instead, demonstrators are live-streaming them on Facebook. These Facebook accounts represent an important archive of the protests and public discussions across Theeban, Assalt and Karak that have taken place since February 2018. While in recent months Facebook users worldwide are facing calls to leave the platform over privacy concerns related to the use of their data by the social media giant, Jordanians from these three areas were ensuring, on daily basis, that their phones are sufficiently charged and have enough data credit for a one-hour livestream on Facebook.

This article explores the conflicting relationship that political movements in soft repressive regimes, like Jordan, have with Facebook due to on the one hand the local restrictive media environment and on the other the global criticisms of Facebook's data sharing violations. It first explores how the Jordanian state attempted to repress online mobilisation while simultaneously promoting the "openness" of Jordan's digital content economy to an international audience. Then, by drawing on interviews with live streaming activists, it explores how these activists navigate between the state's restrictive laws on local online media and Facebook's data-sharing violations in order to raise the profile of the demands of the February 2018 demonstrations.

2 • The Internet Paradox in Jordan

The internet penetration rate in Jordan reached 87 per cent and mobile penetration reached 168 per cent in 2016.⁴ By 2017, Jordan ranked fifth in Facebook penetration rates across

the Arab region (after UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait) with 60 per cent of its population having a Facebook account.⁵ These impressive statistics are the result of a decade of neoliberal policies, from which the information communication technology (ICT) sector was the first to benefit. The government, for example, fully liberalised the telecom market,⁶ and promoted Jordan as a regional ICT hub.⁷ Especially after Yahoo's acquisition of Maktoob in 2009⁸ and then Amazon's acquisition of Souq,⁹ the Jordanian government paraded Jordan as a hub for Arabic online content in the MENA region. Such initiatives contributed to Jordan having one of the lowest internet connectivity costs and highest penetration rates in the Arab region.¹⁰

Accompanying this growth of the internet was the decentralisation of information production and opinion sharing. Until the mid-nineties state-owned media¹¹ was the only source of information. However, blogging communities and private news websites exploded in numbers in the decade before the Arab Spring. In 2006, the Jordan Planet blog aggregator was popular for curating entries of local blogs on a wide spectrum of political and social topics,¹² and websites like Ammon News was the first of hundreds of e-news websites to publish original local news. As the penetration rate of social networking sites rose after the Arab Spring, new processes of political engagement and mobilisation were formed. From the debates on social media networks corresponding to the demands of the 2011 and 2012 nationwide demonstrations, discussion groups emerged like the HashtagDebates¹³ and Jordan's Cafe Politique¹⁴ that gathered periodically to talk about topics like the constitutional monarchy and the accountability of the intelligence department. These meetings were tweeted, posted on Facebook and live streamed by volunteer production companies that later archive them on YouTube.

This surge of online dissent put the Jordanian state in a dilemma. On the one hand, it needed to promote the narrative of Jordan's open neoliberal ICT environment for international investors, yet on the other, it wanted to control the rapidly decentralising media that these very policies were creating. In order to achieve this dual narrative, the government intensified its demonisation of local media websites describing them as, for example, "damaging the reputation of the citizen."¹⁵ This narrative paved the way for the Press and Publication amendments in September 2012¹⁶ that require local websites to obtain a license to publish, or else, face a blocking order from the Media Commission. The following year, the Media Commission blocked hundreds of local websites. In parallel, the narrative promoting Jordan's liberal communication sector also intensified. The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MoICT) launched its Jordan ICT Strategy 2013-2017 promoting Jordan's digital content sector and for foreign direct investment.¹⁷

To its international audience, the state continued raving about the potential for entrepreneurship in the digital content scene through international conferences.¹⁸ Internally however, it increasingly took advantage of security incidents to further criminalise online spaces, especially when they mediated nationwide criticism on its failure to handle security events. In 2016, for example, after the state charged the well-known writer Nahed Hattar with blasphemy, he received online death threats that

eventually led to his assassination.¹⁹ Public reactions on social media networks ranged from rage against the police department's inaction towards Nahed's death threats reports to incidents of religious hate speech. Several months later, a terrorist attack took place in Karak that resulted in a 14-hour security operation with 10 casualties with no official public statement. Social media however was awash with videos broadcast from the site, demonstrating the ill-preparedness of the police. After these two incidents, official calls for the need to monitor social media escalated.²⁰ State-media presented social media as a "chaotic [and] unruly²¹ place" and "a weapon against internal security."²²

In May this year, the government crowned these narratives by proposing amendments to the Cyber Crimes Law which would make "the posting or reposting of hate crimes" on the internet a criminal offence, carrying a prison sentence of between one to three years, and a fine of between JOD 5,000 - 10,000 (\$7,000 - \$14,000).²³ These amendments are still waiting to be reviewed by the Parliament. Disproportionate and vaguely defined, the proposed penalties for online "hate crimes", rather than pursue any legitimate aim, will in fact reduce public engagement with social media, the only outlet for documenting national debates given the stifling environment on political parties, the administrative banning of public meetings,²⁴ and the crack down on demonstrations.²⁵ One can easily predict the likely trajectory of these proposed amendments by looking at the state's history of using cyber-crime laws and anti-terrorism laws to persecute political opposition. In 2016 and 2017 alone, dozens of citizens and journalists were prosecuted for crimes including "undermining the regime" and "changing the governance of the country or "disrupting relations with a neighbouring country" for posts they had made on social media.²⁶ For example, in October 2017, an activist was prosecuted by the state security court for critiquing the regime's position of allowing an Israeli killer of two Jordanians in the Israeli Embassy to return to his country without a trial.²⁷ And in July 2017, the State Security Court held a poet under investigation for publishing a poem on his Facebook page condemning Jordan's position of boycotting Qatar, along with the other Gulf States.²⁸

These realities are clearly detached from the "open access society" aspiration that the government envisioned in its strategy, Reach 2025, launched in the 2016 MENA ICT Forum with the aim to "make Jordan relevant in the global digital economy". Such a narrative discards the reality of local controls on the internet. At the beginning of 2018, the Media Commission announced it had issued 175 licences to local news websites since the passing of the Press and Publications Law in 2012.²⁹ Meanwhile however, the Media Commission sends weekly internal blocking requests to internet service providers.

It took major local news websites thirty days to report on the Karak set-in that started in February 2018. None of the participants that livestreamed daily from Karak, Assalt and Theeban can launch a blog or a community website given that the Press and Publications Law requires any "news publishing website" to have at least five full-time employees³⁰ and an editor in chief who has been a member of Press Syndicate for at least four years.³¹ Trying to fill the gap of media coverage, some protestors reached out to international

agencies to transmit the events of these protests to a wider audience. However, to Sabri, the live-streamer from Theeban, their coverage does not reflect the “true” story, as “they want to depict us hungry”. According to Sabri, one agency approached him to create a story on the February demonstrations by only asking to speak to retired and unemployed protestors, ignoring his requests to interview those with political demands. Sabri opposed their coverage because “I did not go on the street because I was hungry, but because the state is subjecting me to injustice. I don’t have a right to choose in this country, election law is unfair and I demand a constitutional monarchy.”

3 • Live-Streaming: “new opportunities for people to come together”

With local media unwilling or unable to broadcast their protests together with the governmental restrictions to start their own online platforms, activists like Rami and Sabri sought an alternative outlet for their protests. This came in the form of Facebook’s low cost livestreaming service when, on 6 April 2016, Mark Zuckerberg announced with pride that its new live-streaming feature will be accessible to all users.³² In a Facebook post, he celebrated that “today anyone with a phone now has the power to broadcast to anyone in the world... it’s [live-streaming] going to create new opportunities for people to come together.” While it was another attempt by Zuckerberg to increase profits by centralising web services, live-streaming was “what prevented the authorities to crack down on us” said Sabri, an activist who took part in the protest in Theeban in 2016. Sabri helped set up “The Tent for the Unemployed Youth of Theeban”, an open sit-in for twenty days after Zuckerberg’s live streaming announcement. For protesters inside the tent, live streaming was an integral tool in the communication strategy “because we were demonised at the beginning” by the government. As well as the media coverage of the tent, “everything was live-streamed” including discussions and talks from visiting supporters from other parts of Jordan as well. Just as the livestreaming kept the tent standing, it was also the reason behind its removal by the police forces on the fifty-seventh day.³³

While the number of participants in such demonstrations or protests do not exceed tens or hundreds, online live-streaming views can reach up to ten thousand, with one video of a protest in Assalt even reaching 140,000 views after police arrested an activist for “undermining the regime” because of his participation in these protests. The setup of sound speakers and microphones evolved as live-streaming became an integral part of these daily protests. In addition to protesting, these demonstrations are becoming “a platform for raising awareness on different societal issues” says Hani, the main organiser from Assalt who keeps his eyes moving between the streaming cameras and the gathering crowds around him. The audience interacts instantly with speakers. Sometimes expressing their support from different areas of Jordan, and other times expressing anger for the decision to cut off live-streaming as “no one has the right to cut us off from what is happening in our country” according to one follower living abroad. When considering why this online support has

not translated into a larger physical presence, one needs to remember the realities of public transportation which “is not available after 6pm in Karak, for exampe” according to Rami. For Hani, however, while live-streaming filled the gap in main stream media coverage, it also discouraged people to join the demonstration as they can access the material from home.

4 • Activists' dilemma:

Facebook, Cambridge Analytica and the Jordanian Streets

Narratives attempting to explain the unpredicted and contagious nature of mobilisation during the Arab Spring and its relation to social media platforms has evolved over time. Reactive discourses that gave agency to social media platforms in “unleashing the revolution in Egypt and Tunisia”³⁴ have been countered by ones that now dismiss the role of social networking platforms in political mobilisation and urge us to look at the offline modes of political organisation.³⁵ These two competing narratives soon receded after the social movements in the Arab region began to fragment and new forms of oppression began to unfold in countries where these revolutions took place. Emerging scholastic calls are now exploring the intersection of social media with pre-existing physical networks of affiliations and solidarity.³⁶ For example, in a review that assessed civic engagement on social media following the 2011 revolution, Egyptian scholars highlighted that “with more people and players coming online, online spheres started mirroring the offline ones, rather than informing and influencing them.”³⁷

Narratives towards the role of social media in social and political mobilisation have also evolved with the business models of social media platforms becoming increasingly visible through the design and features enabled by these platforms. They have introduced new policies and tools to maximise profit opportunities to share the data of online users and communities. For example, in 2014, and in order to improve its ad-targeting, Facebook applied its “real-name policy” asking all users to authenticate their identities. In doing so, it jeopardised politically and socially vulnerable communities. Facebook has constantly modified its algorithms to increase paid content reach, by, for example, prioritising the organic visibility of posts to family and friends only. This has also affected the reach of political mobilisation and created hierarchies dependent on the financial status of users. For fear of governments blocking the platform (like Iran, Syria, and Turkey), Facebook aligned its “content take down policies” and data sharing practices with local restrictions on speech. For example, Facebook constantly blocks the profiles of Palestinian activists who voice anti-Israeli government opinions.³⁸

Consequently, Facebook has built structures and put algorithms in place that can also be used by third parties for political manipulation. While election campaigns have always found Facebook an important platform to gain support, Facebook's data-sharing policy with third party applications allowed the public relations company Cambridge Analytica to illegally collect the data of millions of users in the United States, and use them to benefit

the Trump campaign. The latest scandal, involving Cambridge Analytica,³⁹ ignited a global campaign to delete Facebook and questioned the business models of internet corporations that capitalise on their users' personal data.⁴⁰

Despite these controversies social media penetration rate has reached 90% of internet users in Jordan.⁴¹ Social media platforms, in particular the Facebook live-streaming tool, have become the only public sphere for Jordanians to mobilise and express their opinions online given the limited physical spaces for mobilisation and civic engagement. This leaves activists in the country in a dilemma – to continue to use the service knowing that the business ethics and practices of the company contradicts their own principles, or leave the platform and risk reducing the impact of their protests.

Although Facebook enabled Rami to mediate narratives from Karak that had been ignored by mainstream media he acknowledges that the platform nevertheless “violates my personal life and privacy”. However, activists such as Rami resist the global calls to leave the platform. “It is currently the only available option that delivers my voice” Rami says, despite the fact he was administratively detained a year earlier by the governor of Karak for a Facebook post critiquing the King's authority. “Facebook violates my privacy, but the state is constantly violating my privacy” says Mohammad from Assalt. Being aware of Facebook's data sharing violations, most live-streaming activists minimise sharing personal information about family and friends and realise that even though the live-streaming gave them some control over the narrative, the content is not theirs, “I can easily lose the page, or it can be hacked” according to Sabri, who experienced exactly this when his account and page were hacked by unknown entities.

Despite activists' critiques of the Jordanian state and the regime, which social networking platforms are facilitating, there has not yet been any attempt to restrict access to Facebook, or any international platforms, or require their licensing in the same way that local online media outlets are required. This approach should be understood within the Jordanian state's general approach to cracking down on opposition in the years following the Arab Spring. While the state disperses demonstrations and bans public meetings, it generally resorts to soft-oppressive approaches with minimum cost on its international human rights records and its international narrative promoting Jordan's free and open digital content market. In addition, it must also be noted that the Jordanian state has used Facebook for its own interests. Created following the Arab Spring, the social media accounts of the royal court and the personal accounts of members of the royal family on Facebook and Twitter are promoted as an attempt to demonstrate Jordan's willingness to communicate with their people and the openness of its online digital sphere.

5 • Conclusion

During the wave of protests in 2011 and 2012, social media platforms and blogs provided snippets of decentralised information about demonstrations – both text, photos and

videos. However, time-lagged reporting and documentation allowed the official narrative to demonise protesters. In contrast, live-streaming of discussions and protests now prevent the state from contaminating the message of protests as the demands and calls are clear “in front of God and his creatures”, according to one of the daily speakers in Assalt. In one of the live-streamed videos from Karak, one speaker criticised the Jordanian state’s neoliberal policies that eventually led to the privatisation of its natural resources and properties.⁴² He counts on his fingers, while the public around him repeats “Potash, Phosphate, electricity, water and communications.” Little did the state anticipate that its neoliberal policies, which first benefitted the ICT sector, would result in the decentralisation of narratives and of the online media scene. Today, the Jordanian state attempts to develop a formula through which it promotes its ICT sector and Jordan’s “knowledge economy” as a worthy international investment, while maintaining an internal, repressive narrative of the internet as a space for “fools and innocents”.⁴³ Consequently, Jordanian activists – such as those in Assalt, Karak and Theeban – must navigate a complex path between these policies of a repressive neoliberal state, and the globally controversial policies of a communications giant, Facebook. And until the existence of a real alternative they must, ironically, rely upon the latter to challenge the former.

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