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New media and hate speech: A study of university students in Jordan

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Abstract

Many people are rapidly recognising hate speech as a serious problem, especially via social media sites, resulting in more cyber conflicts between different people. Our study aimed at examining the role of social media in spreading the hate speech among adult university students in Jordan (al Zarqaa University), by determining how social media sites influencing their attitudes, perceptions, feeling safe and how they dealt with information regarding hate speech. Based on a survey data, the study found that most of the respondents were able to identify hate speech in social media sites (77%) and claimed they were exposed to hate speech when using the Internet (83%), especially via Facebook and Twitter.

Keywords: The internet, Social media sites, Hate speech, Exchange information, Young arabs.

Nuevos medios y discurso de odio: un estudio de estudiantes universitarios en Jordania

Resumen

Muchas personas están reconociendo rápidamente el discurso de odio como un problema grave, especialmente a través de los sitios de redes sociales, lo que resulta en más conflictos cibernéticos entre diferentes personas. Nuestro estudio tuvo como objetivo examinar el papel de las redes sociales en la difusión del discurso de odio entre los

estudiantes universitarios adultos en Jordania (Universidad al Zarqaa), al determinar cómo los sitios de redes sociales influyen en sus actitudes, percepciones, sentirse seguros y cómo manejan la información sobre el discurso de odio. Basado en datos de una encuesta, el estudio encontró que la mayoría de los encuestados pudieron identificar el discurso de odio en los sitios de redes sociales (77%) y afirmaron que estaban expuestos al discurso de odio cuando usaban Internet (83%), especialmente a través de Facebook y Twitter.

Palabras clave: Internet, sitios de redes sociales, Discurso de odio, Intercambio de información, Jóvenes árabes.

1. INTRODUCTION

For the last two decades, the Internet has created many positive opportunities for online users to communicate, entertain, search for news and information and engage with others in different manners, especially in the Arab world (GUNTER & ELARESHI, 2016; POUSHTER, BISHOP, & CHWE, 2018; SAUDI GAZETTE, 2014). However, it has also been used by different groups to create or spread words and phrases "hate speech" which appeal some users to supersede and bypass editorial control and regulation (AWAN, 2016; CAMMAERTS, 2009). Hate speech refers to an expression that advocate incitement to harm 'others'. In this context, two views are perceived the Internet: 1) it is seen as a platform provides cyber-bullying or hate as KOWALSKI ET AL. (2012) indicate; and 2) the Internet is seen as platform that provides social mobility outside the limits of space and time. This research attempts to examine how hate speech content via social media sites is perceived by university students, what roles social media have in spreading such content and

how social media influence students' attitudes, perceptions and feeling safe when they were online.

Since early 2000s, new forms of interactivity via the Internet emerged when people were able to express their opinions widely and news and information were very accessible for people as the same time. Such opportunities of interactivity have also increased an online speech content in websites (ERJAVEC & KOVAČIČ, 2012) or now via social media sites (MACHADO ET AL, 2019).

Hate speech has always occurred over the time, but in the real world was limited due to technology barriers or largely unreported to the authorities. It is based on a bias-motivated, hostile, malicious speech towards an individual, or a group(s) because of their actual or perceived innate characteristics (GITARI, ZUPING, DAMIEN, & LONG, 2015). As a result, the hate speech concept is not a new phenomenon (CAMMAERTS, 2009). The only new recently is the platforms users adopt to spread such content. For example, 481 hate crimes with a specific anti-Muslim motive was reported that occurred just following 9/11, with 58% of them committed within two weeks following the event (KING & SUTTON, 2013).

Social media sites have become common phenomenon globally, thanks to the Internet and smart devices. However, online hate speech (cyber hate), bullying and violence have recently become a key issue for social media sites, especially in the Arab world in the last decade.

In Jordon, like many other Arab countries, has adopted quite stringent legislation to counter hate speech. The electronic crimes law (No. 27, 2015) for hate speech in Jordan was published in Official Gazette indicating that it is an illegal to incite hatred through offline/online means on the grounds of race, religion and sexual orientation, as well as showing content in which threatens or harasses a person or a group in any forms (e.g., words, pictures, audio, messages) that asking people to commit violence or discrimination against others. Such material now can be spread easily via online forms at great speed with producers can remain anonymous.

This has led to an extensive public reaction on social media, providing the opportunity to examine the spread of online hate speech (cyber hate) on Facebook. Previous studies have examined cyber hate speech performed by different 'extremist groups (E.G., CAMMAERTS, 2009) highlighting the problems of regulation of cyber hate speech content and the important space for spreading such content (ERJAVEC & KOVAČIČ, 2012).

Although there is no yet universally preferred definition of online hate speech, some (sUCH AS ERJAVEC & KOVAČIČ, 2012, p. 900) define it as "an expression that is abusive, insulting, intimidating, harassing and or incites to violence, hatred, or discrimination". Facebook (2019) defines hate speech as any content that 'attacks people based on their actual or perceived race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, disability or disease in not allowed],

however, they allow content that many people may find to be in bad taste (jokes, stand-up comedy, popular song lyrics, etc.)'.

AWAN (2016) indicated that hate speech is any form of language used to depict people in a negative fashion regarding their race, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or physical and mental disability. This form can be directly or indirectly target someone else (individual, group and community) when they go through different experience emotional distress caused by hate speech. Words and phrases related to hate speech have been already conducted by different studies that have intention to annoy (LEE, 2013; NAUGHTON, 2017).

Without a doubt, the Internet now is a powerful enough to influence people to act in a certain way and manner (e.g., aftermath of 9/11 and 2011 Arab uprisings). The Internet was able to lead demonstrations, violence and uprisings in many Arab countries, and that have direct impact on local communities and takes a form of violence in the real world such as in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen and Syria. Such content can also leave people feel a sense of anxiety, depression and isolation as AWAN AND ZEMPI (2017) descripted.

The Internet has been great platform to send hate message at high speed and as a propaganda tool to recruit online users to spread such content with the ability to remain anonymous or unknown. Hate speech, in this context, can be any form of language used to depict

someone else in negative way or intolerance. For example, ISIS groups and Jihadists have used the Internet effectively to target, marginalise and demonise people in different countries in the world, especially in Syria and Iraq (COX, 2014; ROGAN, 2006). For its economical and far-reaching and easy online expression, such extremist groups have successfully been recruiting and getting public presence and support using powerful messages and techniques in social media sites.

The recent widespread adoption of social media offers a new opportunity to address online hate speech. Technologies now enable us to tackle any online content near in a real-time and its responses which allow study to measure the online social mood and emotion following an event such as terrorist attacks or crises such as Westminster Bridge attack on London 2017 and how an image of Muslim woman was circulated based on hate and 'xenophobia' (HUNT & PEGG, 2017).

Several studies have found that social media sites such Twitter and Facebook were being heavily used to facilitate intolerance and hate speech globally and against certain ethnicity such as Arabs and Muslims (ERJAVEC & KOVAČIČ, 2012; KOTTASOVÁ, 2017; POTOK, 2017). For example, HALL (2013) indicated that the Internet has been increasingly used as a vehicle for hate is seemingly undeniable. The number of people logging into social media sites (e.g., Facebook) once a month rose to 2.32 billion monthly active users as of December 2018 with 1.15 billion mobile daily active users as reported by ZEPHORIA INSIGHTS (2019). In fact, in the Arab world, Saudi

Arabians make up 9% of Snapchat's worldwide users, with Facebook activists around 16 million users and one of the most active countries on Instagram within the Arab world (KELL, 2018).

Freedom of expression is an important element for any modern community including freedom of speech from democracy perspective. The founder of liberalism, JOHN MILL (1978) argues that opinions [expression] should lose their intangibility if they are expressed in circumstances that could lead to promoting harmful acts to anyone. In recent years, social media sites have been globally intensively requested to do more about online hate speech, especially when it comes to religious or minorities such as Muslims in the western world.

For example, LITTLER AND FELDMAN (2015) highlighted that out of 548 reported incidents attacked Muslim communities 73% (402) were reported taking place online. They revealed how social media sites were used to contribute to an atmosphere of intolerance to portray others (Muslims). In 2013, Facebook was forced to respond to a letter (published in Huffington Post, 2013) by several prominent female celebrities who had been threatened with online violence and claiming that there had to be a zero-tolerance approach towards any jokes about rape on Facebook (Lee, 2013). Moreover, during the current conflicts and war in the Middle East and refugee crisis, many refugees floated to European countries and made their way to some countries such as Germany who had welcomed them. Refugees started to use social media sites for communication with their relatives and

found a pattern of online racist abuse and hate speech, especially in Facebook (AWAN & ZEMPI, 2017).

2. METHODOLOGY

The primary aims of this study were to understand the phenomenon of hate speech content spread via the Internet in the Arab world, especially via social media sites. There was a specific focus on how university students perceive words and phrases content via the Internet and how they deal with such content. A decision was made to collect quantitative data to facilitate systematic analysis of these reported social media users. Survey approach was used here as convenient and cost-effective way of collecting reasonable amounts of data via standardised measures from a large sample. It is acknowledged that there is a risk that standardised questionnaire forms can restrict the diversity of answers from participants, but this issue was reduced via careful designing the questions (GUNTER, 2000).

A self-completion, face-to-face questionnaire survey was carried out with Arabic-speaking university students at al Zarqa University, the largest private university in Jordan (8,000 students). From an initial contact sample of 130 participants, 105 was fully completed questionnaires. In all, 54.3% of the final sample was male and 45.7% was female. Their median age was 22. Data were collected in March-April 2017. A convenient random sampling approach was

used. A self-completion questionnaire was administered in classrooms with either the first author or an assistant as moderator.

A pre-structured questionnaire included questions about participants' personal details, views on how media influence their attitudes, study details, and reported use of different media (new/old) in Jordon. A range of other questions were asked about participants' identifying the concept of hate speech content, subjecting to hate speech content, responding to such content, hate speech targeting, whether they feel safe online and towards the freedom on the Internet, viewing on controlling or monitoring online hate speech and reasons for spreading online hate speech. Data were entered into the SPSS (version 22.0) for analysis.

The hate speech content questions asked about the frequency with which participants viewed on social media sites (Facebook). A frequency scale was supplied for 'once a week' to '4-8 hours a week'. Around half of all participants (52.4%) said they used the Internet 4-8 hours 'weekly'; 20% said 2-3 hours 'weekly', 10.5% twice a 'week', and 8% once a 'week'. This is not a surprise results as several have indicated that using the Internet and social media nowadays are becoming more and more important in learning and teaching processes. For example, ZIANI AND ELARESHI (2018) analysed 374 Facebook respondents in nine Arab countries and found that they spent time in social media (Facebook) and used it for academic and non-academic reasons.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data are reported in turn for claimed use of different media in Jordon. Participants were asked to specify in more precise terms the platforms to which they used on daily basis for news and information. These include reported use of specific news media (TV, newspapers, radio, the Internet). At this level of measurement, the study turns to the reported use by university students of different news media for news and information (JAFARI ET AL, 2017).

The findings confirmed the emergence of the Internet and mobile devices over television and other old media. These two platforms were named most widely as the most frequently consumed sources. The Internet (54%) and mobile devices (19.1%) had superseded TV (18%) for news and information among participants. This is not surprising now as internet users (young people) in the Arab world were quick to embrace the new technology and use all what the internet (especially social media sites) has to offer to connect, communicate and share information with others (POUSHTER ET AL., 2018; SALEM & MOURTADA, 2015; ZIANI & ELARESHI, 2018). Furthermore, the Internet and mobile devices now are an extremely useful companion, whereby users can stay easily connected and keep in touch with friends, colleagues and family's updates and news (POUSHTER ET AL., 2018; ZIANI & ELARESHI, 2018).

Jordanians are became more savvy-technology adapters to the Internet via their mobile devices, especially after the 2011 Arab uprisings (AL-TARAWNEH, 2014; ALSAYYAD & GUVENC, 2013).   When asking about whether participants knew about the concept of online hate speech content, 77.1% indicated they were able to identify the hate concept. This finding shows that participants were aware of hate speech published in online formats. Some participants also indicated that they were subjected to hate speech including words and expressions from others via social media sites (82.8% vs. 17.9% respectively).

Participants were asked to state what are the most social media sites used to spread hate speech. The most used social media sites to spread hate speech on daily basis was 'Facebook' (84.7%) followed by 'Twitter' (4.6%), and 'news sites' (2%). No surprisingly, social media is popular among many internet users, and therefore, there are possibilities to use it for different reasons. For example, OBOLER (2013) found that 191 different examples of hate speech on Facebook that targeted Muslim community, AWAN (2017) also identified several distinct categories related to hate speech Facebook users committed such as Muslims being viewed as terrorists, rapists, security threat because of their cloths (women) and Muslims should be deported.

Participants had different attitudes to respond to hate speech content on social media. 40% of participants said that they either

ignored or did not respond to the content, while 36.2% did directly respond to it, 7.6% forwarded the content to friends, started counter campaign (5.7%), reported to the authorities (4.8%) and requested the content (3.8%). Those who indicated they shared the hate content on social media were further asked to state what technologies they used. 68.6% of participants used mobile devices, followed by PCs (11.4%) and laptops (9.5%).

It is clear that now mobile phones, like the Internet, play a vital role in modern community, especially in poorer nations such as Jordan where fixed internet use might not be accessible and mobile devices can be here extremely useful tools. In Jordan, owning smart phones have been on the rise since 2015,from 51% to 76% in 2017 (+25% points) as reported by POUSHTER ET AL. (2018).

Most participants (40%) followed hate speech content 'everywhere', while some (30.5%) did at 'home', 'university' (20%), 'café' (5%) and 'sports clubs' (3%). Regarding targeting hate speech, participants were asked to categories who were more likely to be targeted by the hate speech content on social media sites. The findings revealed that the hate speech was directed towards the following categories: politicians (24%), refugees (22%), and homeless (20%), religious and ethnic minorities (14% and 4% respectively). Interestingly, it seemed that surveyed-educated participants were not satisfied with their politicians' acts. The politicians were perceived to

tend to use double standards in their practices and power when they optioned abusing their government power.

Regarding refugees, it is worth to know that Jordan has been the second home for the Palestinians for many generations, as a result of the conflict between the Palestine and Israel since Balfour's declaration1917 (statement of British support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."). In additional to hundred thousands of refugees floated from Syria and Iraq since 2003 and current 2011 Arab uprisings. For example, in 2016, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook CEO, admitted that Facebook did not do enough to police hate speech targeting refugees on Facebook in Germany and the message has been heard (Associated Press, 2016). In 2018, Facebook was blamed for fuelling the violence and became a platform for hate and violent speech against a minority Muslim group in Myanmar, Rohingya (KIRBY, 2018).

4. CONCLUSION

A self-completion survey was reported that examined how university students in Jordon perceived hate speech content on social media sites (Facebook). Evidence emerged that the Internet and mobile devices have been widely patronized university student online users. Focusing on the Internet usage (social media sites) the study found that students, not surprisingly, spent 4-8 hours weekly to surf the Internet.

People in the most of the Arab world now spend more time on the Internet, especially social media sites (POUSHTER ET AL., 2018; ZIANI & ELARESHI, 2018). Such platforms enable users to get connected and keep in touch with friends, mates and family's updates (AL-TARAWNEH, 2014; ALSAYYAD & GUVENC, 2013; GUNTER & ELARESHI, 2016).

Although the population of this study reported here was not equipped to recruit statistically representative samples of the university students in Jordan, the robustness of its results is reinforced by their similarity to earlier research evidence in the Arab world (DENNIS, MARTIN, & WOOD, 2017; POUSHTER ET AL., 2018). For example, previous study in the Middle East confirmed that the Internet and mobile devices were widely used, especially among young adults (AHARONY & GAZIT, 2016; DENNIS ET AL., 2017). At the same time, satellite television services still remain somehow popular viewed for news and information (AL-JABER, 2013; ELARESHI & AL-JABER, 2016; ZIANI, FAHMY, AL-JABER, & ELARESHI, 2014). However, the new communication technologies such as smart phones and other portable devices have become increasingly adapted for local people as information-receiving and search platforms (ABU-SHANAB & AL-TARAWNEH, 2013; DENNIS ET AL., 2017; POUSHTER ET AL., 2018).

The current study found that surveyed students were aware of hate speech content on social media, especially those targeting

politicians and refugees (KIRBY, 2018; KOTTASOVÁ, 2017). The hate speech content took different formats and participants experienced such abuse from others via social media (GITARI ET AL., 2015). Research conducted elsewhere confirmed social media sites were among platforms used by others to spread hate speech, especially those lives in the western countries such the UK or US (AWAN, 2016; LEE, 2017).

This study aimed at exploring online hate speech on social media sites (Facebook) in Jordan, thus more research is needed to confirm the study's findings. More in-depth analyze is also needed with a larger sample to test the research instrument reliability. Other types of social media sites (e.g., Twitter, Instagram) are used to spread hate speech and needed to be explored and understand such matter in the online forms. This research attempts to understand how young educated adults in Jordan perceived Facebook, research is needed to compare such media with other social media sites (e.g., Twitter) to understand this domain much better in a developing country.

To sum up, this work attempted to explore how young adults perceive the influence of Facebook on the Jordanian society via an empirical research within a university environment. This study would contribute to the online hate speech discourse in social media sites based on self-completion survey approach, examining students' values, beliefs and perceptions of online hate speech. The data gathered and analysed here via quantitative approach would highlight the need for

an improved dialogue between different stakeholders in Jordan in order to ensure safe environment for everyone.

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