



## **Social Media Networks and Ideological Polarization: Power Relations and Socio-Cultural Impact**

1-2 March 2023

The modern world suffers from chronic obstacles. At the forefront of these is the disparity in the sources of power in its comprehensive sense – politically, economically and militarily – which is reflected in the growing imbalance between the rich and the poor. This also was evident in numerous crises such as climate change and international conflicts over energy and water resources. Hence, the conference will explore how these shortcomings affect the structure, mechanisms and courses of the production and spread of knowledge, particularly through social media networks.

Studies indicate the ideological use of these networks to serve the objectives of international actors, especially during international conflicts and crises, causing a state of political and ideological polarisation between competitors and parties to conflict both internationally and within a single state. This has caused the spread of vast spaces of extremism, bigotry, violence and different forms of ideologization as well as the decline of tolerance and intellectual and cultural diversity. These manifestations and others have had destructive effects on the state of democracy, social cohesion, political stability, social capital and rationality in decision-making on the individual, group and international levels.

There is no doubt that building a public space, forming a group mind and managing conflicts are subject to the mechanisms of control, monopoly and manipulation practiced by actors in the international system. The experience of the last two decades revealed the violation of social media networks – such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat and so on – of the most basic rules and morals that govern communication and media, as these platforms have expressed their underlying ideological and political leanings as platforms that reflect a political, intellectual and cultural state during different occasions and events. For example, in the Russian-Ukrainian war, Facebook and other platforms allowed – regardless of our positions towards the war – hostile speech against Russian forces, violating the rules that ban calls for hate speech and violence and instilling its political cargo, thus promoting the narrative of “the Russian invasion.” This, in turn, turns social media platforms into tools for political propaganda and military mobilisation that serve the agenda of one of the international parties to a conflict.

However, the same platforms view the media content that exposes the violations of Israeli occupation and its practice of ethnic cleansing against Palestinians – as seen during the Jerusalem uprising, the events of Sheikh Jarrah and the consecutive wars on Gaza – as hostile speech against Israel and an incitement to hatred and violence. This prompted Facebook to create algorithms that delete Palestinian users’ posts and close accounts and pages that contain certain terms such as “Hamass,” “al-Qassam,” “jihad,” “resistance” and “saraya.” Some consider this



“systematic digital discrimination and oppression” against the Palestinians in which algorithmic engineering is used to help Israel blockade the Palestinian narrative of events and prevent its spread and influence on international public opinion. Nonetheless, these platforms allow for the flow and spread of hate speech and racism from Israeli users against the Palestinian people, therefore solidifying the Israeli narrative.

This ideological and political dimension was prominent in other issues as well, as Facebook provided a digital public space for far-right groups whose discourse is based on xenophobia especially in the United States and certain European countries, to spread their ideas and racist and nationalist campaigns without review; participate in news that is produced by anti-immigration websites and present them as top news; discriminate against ethnic and religious minorities particularly Muslims in India, China and Myanmar; and spread fake news that is hostile to Islam and Muslims.

Moreover, the story of the political consulting firm, Cambridge Analytica, and its cooperation with Facebook to spread fake news to engineer and influence the audience in the 2016 US elections is still a prominent dossier. In fact, the firm had worked in more than 200 elections around the world, using personal data from Facebook without the permission of users, in an attempt to influence their opinions, positions and electoral trends through psychographic profiling to create sponsored content and targeted messages that fit the needs of the target user. This policy prioritises the commercial interests of social platforms and maximises their economic influence as well as supports certain political views and trends to reverse or justify reality, or integrate specific ideas, especially in electoral campaigns and areas of tension and conflict, by directing advertising campaigns that enable advertisers to attract the groups concerned with their discourse and political views.

These ideological, political and economic biases pose the question of content management on social media platforms and the limits of social networking interests, which operate under the “interest first” policy to maximise wealth and influence, and the interests and needs of users, and the relationship between the platform’s economy and the communication and media service that is regulated by the rules of integrity, transparency and justice. They also pose the question of the effectiveness of the control and self-regulation bodies and internal content supervision committees, especially as social media records in past years confirm that its communication activity was full of deliberate and organised violations and abuses; and control and self-regulation mechanisms and content supervision committees approved by the platforms were unable to help apply rules and regulations that guarantee integrity.

Here, ruminating and reviewing local and international legislations become necessary to obligate platforms and major technology companies to adhere to the rules of disciplined communication behaviour of ethical standards, especially regarding the principles of committing to accuracy, truth, transparency, integrity, respect for others, and acknowledgment of errors so that these standards become the voluntary behaviour of users. This, however, also requires many educational and cultural factors. Still, all of this is insufficient in the absence of the role



of networks and civil organisations that can contribute to the consolidation of the culture of adherence to the ethical rules of social media. Moreover, it will require Arabic content and platforms to reinforce this culture, and it may constitute alternatives to a social media that bears responsibility in responding to users' informational, communication, intellectual, cultural and civilizational needs.

To explore the issues that make social media networks ideological platforms that are involved in political crises, conflicts and wars and champion certain narratives to influence international public opinion on certain events and issues in light of the double standards of control and self-regulation in content supervision, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies is organising a conference in collaboration with the Mass Communications Department at Qatar University under the title, "Social Media Networks and Ideological Polarization: Power Relations and Socio-Cultural Impact," on 1 and 2 March 2023.

With the participation of a select group of academics and researchers, the conference themes will be distributed among four sessions that will address a number of issues:

### Day One: 1 March 2023

**Session One:** International Balances of Power and their Impact on the Structure and Performance of Social Media Networks

- The ideology of the medium and its normative power in the fabrication of reality and the creation of meanings
- The ideological function of social media networks: A conflict of narratives and hegemony over public discourse
- The interference of social media works in the domestic affairs of states (models and forms)
- Audience engineering in light of algorithmic hegemony and the control of artificial intelligence: What remains of users' freedom and choices?

**Session Two:** The Economic Interests and Cultural Wars of Social Media Network

- The monopoly of information technology companies of social media networks and its impact on the media industry
- The commercial exploitation of big data and users' commodification of companies and states
- Investing in fake news and hate speech
- Ideological polarisation and its political and cultural effects

### Day Two: 2 March 2023

**Session Three:** The Legislations and Ethics of Social Media Networks: Current Problems and Future Aspirations

- Control and content management authority: actors and objectives
- Rules governing the use of social media networks: New visions
- Mechanisms for the protection of users from propaganda and fake news



- Decreased trust in digital content and its impact on social capital

**Session Four:** Social Media Networks in the Arab World: The Globalisation of the Medium and the Distinctiveness of the Context

- The reality of Arabic social media platforms and its challenges
- Other-oriented Arabic digital content: Models and obstacles
- Developing Arabic platforms and ways of competing as an alternative to international platforms
- Mechanisms for the support of freedoms on social networks and the protection of activists