

## **ROLE OF NEW OPINION LEADERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS POLARIZATION (JORDANIAN CASE STUDY)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

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*Social media brings to the fore new opinion leaders. Due to their supposed role in public debate as well as persuasion and promotion of opinions and new behaviours among users of such networks, they are called Influences. In the last few decades, communication research has explored opinion leaders as effective influences on their environments and societies. They present and interpret information, give opinions and adopt innovation before the audience, in addition to mediating between the audience and media in the communication process. More particularly, Facebook represents a new space for discussion in the Arab World. The phenomenon spread during the Arab Spring in 2011 and even expanded later. It took different forms, like the transfer of information, interpretation of incidents, and mobilization for mass events, political and cultural polarization and new critical discourse. However, what is taking place in cyberspace is still debatable. The present study looks into the new opinion leaders' phenomenon in the Arab public sphere and their part in political and religious polarization. The discourse of posts on three Facebook accounts of new opinion leaders (Influences) in Jordan is analysed. As these figures play disparate roles in national political and cultural events and dilemmas, lessons can be derived from such a rising phenomenon. The study aims at exploring the discourse features of the posts addressing public issues which sparked widespread controversies in the period 2017-2018, such as the civil state, theocratic state, school curriculum reform and political reform in Jordan. Study has found that the new opinion leaders' phenomenon on social media in Jordan is on the rise, in terms of political and religious polarization. That would reveal some characteristics and roles of new opinion leaders, in addition to the features of their discourse with reference to major political and religious issues and values as well as political and religious polarization.*

**Keywords:** Social media, new opinion leaders, Arab Spring, political and religious polarization, political reform, Jordan.

## INTRODUCTION

The present study analyses the content of three Jordanian influencers' Facebook pages while addressing three public issues which became public opinion topics in the kingdom in the period 2017-2018. For three Jordanian opinion leaders: Basel Rafayeh, Amjad Qourshah, and Deema Alam Farraj. When the content features and level of interaction are investigated, one can set these influencers' characteristics and whether they represent new opinion leaders, mainly in the aspects which lead to political and religious polarization as the approach gratification & uses theory by Alliehuatz, 1959 is based on, and that was defined by (Guervitch, Blumer, Kats) reproduce from (Klapper, 2001, P: 20-3).

The progress of social media and means of communication, which has accompanied technological boom in the last few decades, is reflected in the nature of social life, especially in interpersonal relations and communication methods. Both significantly lead to influence away from traditional media. Such a phenomenon seems more obvious in the countries which witness a hard-transitional phase, as is the case in the Arab World since 2011. For instance, the Jordanian society has been affected by such developments in different ways, most important of which may be the formation of new social blocs which affect the public through social media, especially Facebook. At given moments and in some cases, these individuals managed to form heterogeneous blocs which may soon agree or disagree on a certain stance, leading to a type of polarization.

These influencers in Jordan's public cyberspace do not make a straightforward model. As noticed the three public issues that have been analysed, School curriculums, Civil state and Fourth Circle. Sometimes, they seem to be social, political and cultural activists defending certain attitudes or adopting given issues. Other times, they have got some influencers' features. They may also act as mediators and promoters for ideas and stands. In other words, they could be close to or remote from the opinion leaders' features according to the type of issue and stand and the audience's general reaction on the web. Thus, the main problem of the study is to identify the new players' properties and whether they make new opinion leaders with distinctive characteristics through studying their content features and the behaviour of their audience.

If the characteristics of such a social segment playing a role in a newly crystallizing public sphere are identified, new knowledge and lessons can be learned to realize the political and cultural context of the shifts witnessed by the Arab World as well as the part of such an interaction between opinion leaders and technology in shaping this new political sphere.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The study adopts the descriptive method in understanding the phenomenon in question by collecting and analysing the quantitative and qualitative content.

In Jordan, the term Influencers often refer to players on the web, especially Facebook and Twitter. Although the phenomenon is essentially associated with paid marketing activities in different fields, most of these people are usually keen on showing political and cultural stands. On the other hand, there are other players who have political and cultural influence but do not practice any marketing activity.

Jordanian players on the web can be divided into three main categories according to the number of followers and type of presence. The first includes those with a large number of followers – i.e., over a million – who are often influencers and are paid for their activities. They could be stars of singing, acting, cooking, etc., but they are not new opinion leaders. The second category is followed by tens or hundreds of thousands and constitute a mix of influencers who are paid and socio-political players, like those activists called new opinion leaders. The third refers to a peer-to-peer category with about five thousand ‘loyal’ followers.

There are different lists of influencers released by research centres and international or regional media outlets, like the prominent one issued by Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute (GDI) (<https://www.gdi.ch/en/about-us>) in cooperation with Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) since 2012 (<https://www.mit.edu/about/>). The Arab World lists have always been dominated by religious preachers, revolutionary activists and artists of several fields.

Three Jordanian players (opinion leaders) were chosen according to the following criteria:

- Are not subject to the traditional marketing conception.
- Enjoy actual presence and interaction with public issues relevant to the study.
- Adopt straightforward political and cultural opinions.
- Have, at least, 15,000 followers.

The criteria applies to the following:

- **Basel Rafayeh:** He is a liberal journalist and writer living in Amman and Dubai. He supports the civil state, political and school curriculum reform, worked as editor-in-chief for “Emirates Today” since 2005. And Since 1990 he has worked in many Arab daily newspapers like: “Al-Hayat” in London, the Lebanese “An-Nahar”, the Jordanian “Alrai” and “Al Ghad”. His Facebook account (<https://web.facebook.com/basel.rafayeh>) has got 18,000 followers.
- **Amjad Qourshah:** He is an academic based in the Faculty of Sharia at the University of Jordan but now moves between Jordan and Canada. He is an Islamic preacher with open religious stands in public affairs, specialized in comparative religion and Western Islamic Relations. He graduated from the University of Birmingham in the

UK. Qourshah became famous for his remedial campaign against corruption in Jordan after the Arab Spring. He also has several TV and radio shows which gained him reputation in Jordan and the Arab World, He raised several issues, one of which led to his arrest (The State Security Court (SSC) prosecutor ordered the detention of Muslim scholar Amjad Qourshah at dawn reportedly over a video in which he criticised Jordan's participation in the war against Daesh. He was placed in custody for 15 days pending further investigation into the case). His Facebook account "Dr. Amjad Qourshah" has got 863,000 followers.

- **Deema Alam Farraj:** Holds a BS degree in business administration from the Jordanian University. She is a socio-political journalist, known for her controversial stands often close to that of the political system. She concentrates on using twitter platform for releasing her ideas globally, especially when talking about the "Arabic Spring". Her Facebook account was closed in 2018 due to the large number of reports against her stance on discharged soldier Ahmed Al-Daqamsa, who completed his jail sentence for killing Israeli students in the Jordanian village of Baqoura in 1998. Her new account (<https://web.facebook.com/Deema22Jordan>) has got 33,000 followers.

The three pages were monitored in three political-cultural issues of widespread debate on social media, namely:

- School curriculums: It took place in the period 2016-2018 and began when limited modifications were introduced to the curriculums. There were objections by the Islamic Movement and public protests. Then, some educators published a series of articles criticizing the curriculums and attacking the domination of Islamist figures, calling for omitting references to extremism. Social media was a major battlefield to spread the new ideas and support the opposition like Sabella, Barbara (2018) Article "Jordan's primary curriculum and its propensity for student-centred teaching and learning", and there is many examples for these kind of articles like the following:

- <https://www.ammonnews.net/article/171457>
- <https://thenewkhalij.news/article/169748/>
- <https://aawsat.com/home/article/746431/>
- <https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/teachers-parents-protest-changes-school-curricula>
- <http://en.ammonnews.net/article.aspx?articleno=32804#.XvyrJm37TIU>

- Civil state: In line with the rising impact of the political groups adopting violent extremism in the region, calls spread for a civil state. A civil state, according to a simple political definition, is a state in which the people are governed in a democratic way, and the people of the people have equal rights, and the government does not have the clergy or the military. This means that the civil state is in reality the form of government in all countries of the world today, and this is what puts Jordan in the ranks of countries that are classified as "civil states". Jordan is essentially a civil state since its inception. The Hashemite constitutional monarchy in Jordan is a civil system in practice, because the authority in it is not for the army, nor for the clergy or religious texts. In the Jordanian constitution, almost all the characteristics associated with the civil state meet. The debate about "converting" Jordan into a civilian state, or rejecting it, is a Byzantine debate that has no meaning. The real debate is about consolidating the values of the civil state in

Jordan, and how to support it to fulfil its conditions in the future. The 2016 general election was a good occasion to raise the debate, which lasted until 2018 mainly on social media (<http://alrai.com/article/10465121>).

- Fourth Circle: This activity, situated close to the Jordanian government's headquarters, began in 2018 to protest against economic policies, a group of political parties, in conjunction with the popular movement, carried out protest protests near the fourth circle in Amman. Implementers said that they are demanding political and economic reforms and avoiding the citizen's pocket in any government action, and they demanded a retreat from taxing citizens, and the region witnessed an intense security presence. The peak was seen on 30 June 2016 against the Income Tax Law. (<https://www.almadenahnews.com/article/714063>) Social media constituted a central medium for discussion and mobilization.

In procedural terms, forty posts on the three aforementioned issues still found on each player's page since the above period, making a total of 120, are monitored and analysed.

The aim is to measure the following points:

1. In what way and how much these opinion leaders' posts address public issues.
2. Opinion leaders' perspective of public opinion issues.
3. In what way and how much the audience interact with these posts.
4. Volume of expressions serving religious and political attraction in the audience interaction.
5. To what extent the content and interaction features reflect traditional or new characteristics of opinion leaders.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Progress of the Concept of Opinion Leaders**

The Opinion Leaders concept goes back to the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, traditional political literature connects opinion leaders to the flourish of media and mass communication. On the other hand, the spread of innovations is linked to opinion leaders, who constitute the first supporters of new ideas for being the closest to the media (Walter and Brüggemann, 2018).

According to Kotler and Keller (2011), opinion leaders are defined as individuals who cause an impact on the social group as a result of possessing knowledge, enjoying strong personalities or owning special techniques or features (Wang 2018, p.583).

The two-step communication theory argues that it is necessary that a limited segment of people possesses information to play the role of mediation in the communication process between the audience and media. That requires that this segment of opinion leaders receives, analyzes and spreads the indications of the media message to those who use these means less (Katz, 1957, p61-78).

There are numerous studies which attempt to identify the opinion leaders' characteristics in relation to their role, which is not limited to transferring information to the audience. In other words, opinion leaders are not mere channels, but they also represent a source of social pressure towards a certain option and a source of social support to consolidate that choice after being taken (Corey, 1971, p.48-53).

Katz and Lazarsfeld define opinion leaders as individuals who tend to affect other people within their direct environment, The term opinion leaders, according to Katz and Lazarsfeld, was described in their book "Personal influence" (1955), (<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1502&context=jssw>) as people who play a dual role in the two-stage flow of communication through mediating between mass media and members of groups. Initially, the transfer of information that is a continuous and cumulative activity between persons working at the same time as recipients and sources in the transmission and interpretation of this information. (Neubaum & Winter, 2016, p. 2).

In McLuhan 1964, each technique has its own rules, arguing that influence in the communication process is controlled by the means. That is, the message is actually shaped by what the means provides of change in size, rhythm and pattern, while content may cause misunderstanding of the role of such features in introducing social change (Abbamonte & Petillo 2015).

Katz in Neubaum & Winter (2016), refers to three types of factors setting the opinion leaders' traditional characteristics, namely:

1. Internal personal readiness
2. Field of interaction
3. Network relations

According to Lazarsfeld et al., (1984), the opinion leaders who have obtained education and enjoy a social status show great influence on their followers and encourage them to exchange information within the group (Chen et al., 2018).

For Chen (2018, p.193-199), likewise, opinion leaders enjoy a state of superiority, for they are educated, impact their followers and encourage collective exchange of information. They also tend to adopt innovations (Xiaofei & Dong, 2019) or new ideas (Rogers, 1995).

Many other studies describe opinion leaders to have specialized knowledge and ability for influence, as it is a set of influential persons (or influencers) in a social network (such as an online social network). The influential person set is generated such that by sending a message to the set the message will be propagated through the network at the greatest speed and coverage (Xiaofei & Dong, 2008).

Opinion leaders also show an ability to obtain information through different channels to enhance their knowledge, in addition to their feeling of distinction and desire to be different from others (Chan & Misra, 1990).

In this regard, Katz (Wiemann, 1994) argues that getting information from the media may be a special case of a broader picture of the opinion leaders' advancement as a mediator between their group or network of relations and their environment. They get information from different sources, such as media, professional communications, commercial bodies...etc. and they have got more contacts with experts or other opinion leaders outside the group (Wiemann, 1994). As they have got a network of relations with their small and large communities, opinion leaders can play such a role.

From another perspective, the opinion leaders' role is no longer significant as it used to be. Media outlets can directly address the audience on the web and social media without mediators (Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015, p.960-980). Since the single-step flow mechanism reflects the developments in the communication technology and the individual-society relation, the opinion leaders' role is weakened by their tendency to enhance, rather than frame, potential opinions (Bennett & Manheim, 2006).

Others consider these mediators' role to have grown, as a result of the increasing need to guide the audience within the many media outlets at their disposal. Furthermore, the huge amount of information available on the web pushes users to rely on the opinion leaders' recommendations, as these 'filter' information to choose some for the others (Wang, 2018).

In 2006, Bennett and Manheim put forward a hypothesis to reconsider the idea of the single-step information flow, resulting from technological advancement and major developments in interpersonal behaviour as well as the individual's rising control over the information context they are subject to.

The researchers argue that, due to the growing social isolation between individuals, influence in the communication process between the audience and media has become direct and needs no mediators like opinion leaders. (Turcotte et al., 2015).

For others, the above perspective and its theoretical challenges do not address the influence made on Facebook and other widespread social media in a comprehensive manner. In spite of the physical separation between individuals, which has been growing for decades, social media have facilitated interpersonal communication, even among those distant from one another, creating new conditions for interaction between opinion leaders and followers (Turcotte et al., 2015).

### **Social Media: New Public Sphere for Influence**

The influence achieved by opinion leaders on social media is linked to the spread of their messages, assisted by others in their communication circle. Thus, supported by technological development, they can play a role in forming the public opinion (Choi, 2014).

According to studies specialized in public opinion, the term Influencers is given to opinion leaders for being different from the others who only report information without displaying their views, like adoption, rejection or even interpretation (Albashr, 2007).

Another matter that arises here is their contact with media and obtaining information from different sources as a distinctive feature in their network of relations. That would be attributed, in a way or another, to their tendency to connect their small community to the outer environment (Katz, 1957).

In the 1980's, Alvin Toffler coined the producer-consumer term as 'prosumer' for the first time (Dusi, 2018). In his book *The Third Wave*, he predicted that modern societies sometime in the post-industrial age would be characterized by mass production, mass consumption, etc. and the prosumer would arise, as it will be difficult to tell producers from consumers.

The internet users who play the producer-consumer role do not only produce content, but they also act as opinion leaders. They have got good knowledge and they listen to other users.

Through accessible personal data, social media enables users to assess themselves as a social or professional entity, Social networks are increasingly used as a platform for exploring relationships through variables measuring opinion leadership and the theory of planned behaviour. We found that perception of benevolence of the opinion leader, and social norms and intentions of the user have an increasing influence on the odds of enabling users to assess themselves as a social or professional entity, while behaviour control of the user in seeking additional information about other social networks behaviour. And he can use these findings to effectively utilize social networks to motivate and assess himself as a social or professional entity. (Fogel & Raghupathi, 2015).

A number of articles discuss factors related to an individual's emergence as an opinion leader, as well as those related to one's satisfaction with being a follower who is affected by the others' opinion in taking his/her decisions.

Nevertheless, influence does not only depend on factors related to the influencer (opinion leader) and influenced (receiver), but also the communication environment plays a role in the completion, success or failure of the communication targets. Winter and Neubaum (2016) conducted a study titled *Examining Characteristics of Opinion Leaders in Social Media: A Motivational Approach*, aimed at exploring the psychological motives for such influence and the features they employ in this regard, especially on Facebook. The population of the study consisted of 527 users, who were asked whether they believe that they were opinion leaders for their friends on Facebook. It was found that strong personality and interest in politics were among the factors affecting others.

Weeks, Arde`vol-Abreu and de Zuñ`iga (2015) conducted a study titled *Influence on the Internet? Using Social Media, Opinion Leadership and Political Persuasion*. They tested a theoretical model of political persuasion attempts on social media, where active

users who produce content consider themselves opinion leaders on such platforms. The research targeted 2 samples of 1816 and 1024 individuals. The team obtained information on these people related to the study from a two-stage opinion poll held in the US. It was found that the users who made content on social media believe that they had a great influence on their networks, tending directly and indirectly to make persuasion attempts. Light was also shed on theoretical mechanisms which account for the continued personal influence on these pages.

In their turn, Schäfer and Taddicken (2015) launched a research on the types of opinion leadership in modern media environments, where communication channels and growing and interpersonal interaction are facilitated. They concluded that the phenomenon was still there in those contexts, in which opinion leaders held similar characteristics to those referred to in classical studies. In addition, light was shed on their new communicative role as Mediatized Opinion Leaders, that Mediatized Opinion Leaders do not only use media more often to get information about a topic of interest; they also employ different media significantly more often in their intersociurnal interactions that centre on the topic in question. social relations in which people give or receive advice on one of four complex issues ranging from climate change, educational policies, and pensions all the way to fashion and style. Although the findings show that many roles that have been identified previously in opinion leadership research still hold up and that opinion leadership neither disappears nor entirely changes, who most frequently employed different kinds of media and communication channels.

Dodds and Watts (2007) explored the communication theory in two phases, or what the team called the Influencers Theory. The study, which adopted the quantitative method, was titled Influencers, Networks and Forming Public Opinion. It analysed a series of mathematical models using computer simulation programmes based on a set of hypotheses on the features of personal influence and influence networks. It was found that the spread of influence on social media was driven by what the researchers called Critical Bloc, it shows how network analysis has its roots in mathematics, statistics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, biology, physics, and computer science. In public health, network analysis has been used to study primarily disease transmission, especially for HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases; information transmission, particularly for diffusion of innovations; the role of social support and social capital; the influence of personal and social networks on health behaviour; and the interorganizational structure of health systems made up of people easy to be influenced, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.28.021406.144132> but not by the influencers themselves.

As for Habermas (2006), the internet struck a balance between the apparent inability of classical broadcasting means by activating public bases of writers and readers, where members enjoy equality, in contrast with the mass media environment.

In Choi's The Two Step Flow of Communication in Twitter-Based Public Forums (2014), the two-step communication model still accounts for the flow on Twitter, but opinion leaders do not appear to be content producers on this website.

For Valtysson (2012), Facebook is a pre-programmed environment, which paves the way for specific discourses and promotes certain communication behaviours and acts. Since it encourages some users but not others, it makes it an exclusive, rather than inclusive, environment.

Fuchus (2017) argues that the capital's interference in media may affect the content introduced to the tool or platform in different ways. For example, a website may encourage entertainment as it attracts more advertisers. In addition, the private website's ownership indicates potential influence on the content by the proprietors.

The characteristics listed by the above two scholars contradict with Habermas' view (1992) of the public sphere. It does not arise consciously before being occupied by players, and it constitutes an independent structure internally reproduced by traditional tools.

In contrast, others remark that the social media's public structure provides users with unlimited information, guaranteeing equally protected participation opportunities. These tools re-activate the public sphere by allowing users to challenge the discourse, join others and share opinions (Loader and Mercea in Krusea, Norrissa and Flinchumb (2018)).

For instance, social media contributed to building an open political space for the opposition to the Arab regimes to discuss political and cultural issues. At the same time, they stripped political and cultural elites of their control over discourse (Qudwar, 2017).

In a study of a Jordanian public campaign page, (Malkawi, 2017) found that the public sphere conditions, according to Habermas, were possible and real on that Facebook page.

In another study of a campaign against cutting down Berghash Forest for the purpose of building a military college, the page in question hosted sensible and moral dialogues between supporters and opponents, allowing the participants to express free opinions. (Malkawi. (2012)

The change in the media environment has highlighted disparity between the roles played by opinion leaders on the web. On the one hand, some cling to the opinion leaders' traditional role of giving advice in their fields of interest, attempting to boost their knowledge on different issues through subjecting themselves to mass media.

On the other hand, social media brings to the fore a new type. These mediator opinion leaders seem to be more able to control the communication channels and various media to obtain information on certain topics, whether through mass media or the internet. They can also employ prestigious and personal communication through technological means (SMS, e-mail, etc.) (Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015).

The completion of the influence process is based on factors combining both the influencers and influenced, most important of which are joint interests and relations, whether deep or superficial, within any social, professional or other groups.

For some researchers, the desire to present oneself constitutes a specific major motive of the opinion leader's activity on social media, as is the case in content production and Update Status (Neubaum & Winter, 2016).

Presenting information on political topics in private but not public posts is aimed at raising relevant awareness by opinion leaders who enjoy strong personality (Neubaum & Winter, 2016). When technology is viewed to be neutral, it would be difficult to realize its truth as associated with the social context Heidegger 1977 in (Murthy, 2013). In other words, technology is an expression of people's activity. (Murthy, 2013).

However, Berry (2014 in Gary 2015) argues that the Heidegger's perspective of technology as tamable objects may apply to modern society's technology like electricity. However, it does not provide a good understanding of post-technology societies, as is the case in data flow in the real-time system. As for Gary (2015), the critical analysis of the impact of social media should not ignore their contribution to the restructuring of the society in political and cultural terms. (Gary, 2015).

## **Findings**

The 120 posts by the three new opinion leaders represent the liberal approach, which supports a civil state, the (Sunni) Islamic thought and loyalty to the Jordanian regime. The Facebook posts only focus on the three issues in question: school curriculums, civil state and Fourth Circle protests within a specific period. On the other hand, the analysis covers the audience comments, which reflect the size of interaction and, therefore, to what extent the posts lead to political and religious polarization, the relationship between party polarization, media fragmentation, and partisan-ideological sorting? The growth and availability of partisan media—afforded through the expansion of cable, satellite, and Internet penetration—is often linked to the consistency and extremity of individuals' political attitudes and partisan identities. At the same time, the literature on mass audiences and media choice suggests that the effects of choice and partisan media should be differential according to levels of political interest. This debate has yet to fully articulate a role for elite party polarization, which has been identified as a primary cue to facilitate mass partisanship and sorting. Synthesizing these bodies of scholarship, we utilize a variety of data to assess the influence of elite polarization, media fragmentation, and political interest on partisan-ideological sorting.

It is found that the curriculums occupied the lion's share of interest by 55% of the total posts. While the protest came second by 34%, the civil state constituted a temporary public matter.

With regard to the curriculums, there was some kind of similarity in the size of interest by the opinion leaders, making their first or second case. The Islamist was the most interested by 38%, followed by the liberal by 32% and then the loyalist by 29%.

The protests occupied the highest interest by the loyalist by 46%, followed by the Islamist by 29% and then the liberal by 24%. The civil state was the least important for the three figures, although it took 50% of the liberal’s attention, followed by the Islamist by 29% and then the loyalist by 20%.

**Table 1. Volume of Interest in the Public Opinion Issues according to the Three New Opinion Leaders.**

| New Opinion Leader’s Perspective | Curriculums |     | Civil state |     | Protests |     | Total |     |
|----------------------------------|-------------|-----|-------------|-----|----------|-----|-------|-----|
|                                  | No.         | %   | No.         | %   | No.      | %   | No.   | %   |
| Liberal                          | 18          | 33  | 12          | 50  | 10       | 24  | 40    | 33  |
| Islamist                         | 21          | 38  | 7           | 29  | 12       | 29  | 40    | 33  |
| Loyalist                         | 16          | 29  | 5           | 21  | 19       | 46  | 40    | 33  |
| Total                            | 55          | 100 | 24          | 100 | 41       | 100 | 120   | 100 |

With regard to the new opinion leaders’ perspectives of the school curriculum modification, which was the most interesting, Table 2 shows that the liberal approach was the main supporter by 94% in terms of relevant posts. The loyalist came next by 88% while the Islamist came last by 24%.

The gap is obvious in this case between the liberal and loyalist, on the one hand, and the Islamist, on the other. The difference between the average supporting and opposing posts make nearly 68%, while neutral posts make only 13%. That indicates the size and type of polarization expressed by the new opinion leaders on the issue.

**Table 2. New Opinion Leaders’ Perspectives of the School Curriculum Modification.**

| New Opinion Leader’s Perspective | For |    | Neutral |    | Against |    | Total |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|----|---------|----|---------|----|-------|-----|
|                                  | No. | %  | No.     | %  | No.     | %  | No.   | %   |
| Liberal                          | 17  | 94 | 1       | 6  | 0       | 0  | 18    | 33  |
| Islamist                         | 6   | 29 | 5       | 24 | 10      | 48 | 21    | 38  |
| Loyalist                         | 14  | 88 | 1       | 6  | 1       | 6  | 16    | 29  |
| Total                            | 37  | 67 | 7       | 13 | 11      | 20 | 55    | 100 |

Table 3 addresses the new opinion leaders’ perspective of the civil state concept, which drew the least attention. While the liberal was committed to defend it in 100% of her posts, the loyalist followed by 80% and the Islamist came last by 14%.

This represents another huge gap by 74%, while the neutral area also made 13%.

**Table 3. New Opinion Leaders’ Perspectives of the Civil State.**

| New Opinion Leader’s Perspective | For |     | Maintain the Status Quo |    | Against |    | Total |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|-----|-------------------------|----|---------|----|-------|-----|
|                                  | No. | %   | No.                     | %  | No.     | %  | No.   | %   |
| Liberal                          | 12  | 100 | 0                       | 0  | 0       | 0  | 12    | 50  |
| Islamist                         | 1   | 14  | 2                       | 29 | 4       | 57 | 7     | 29  |
| Loyalist                         | 4   | 80  | 1                       | 20 | 0       | 0  | 5     | 21  |
| Total                            | 17  | 71  | 3                       | 13 | 4       | 17 | 24    | 100 |

With reference to the Fourth Circle protests, which took place in Amman in summer 2018, the Islamist’s and Liberal’s perspectives came close by 80% and 75%, respectively, in support to the public demands.

On the other hand, the gap between supporters and opponents widened to 70%, while neutral posts made only 17%. The polarization shows that the type of the issue makes a difference. Whereas this case is mainly political, the previous ones are largely ideological. (Table 4)

**Table 4. Opinion Leaders’ Perspectives of the Fourth Circle Protests.**

| New Opinion Leader’s Perspective | For |    | Neutral |    | Against |    | Total |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|----|---------|----|---------|----|-------|-----|
|                                  | No. | %  | No.     | %  | No.     | %  | No.   | %   |
| Liberal                          | 8   | 80 | 1       | 10 | 1       | 10 | 10    | 24  |
| Islamist                         | 9   | 75 | 2       | 17 | 1       | 8  | 12    | 29  |
| Loyalist                         | 2   | 11 | 4       | 21 | 13      | 68 | 19    | 46  |
| Total                            | 19  | 46 | 7       | 17 | 15      | 37 | 41    | 100 |

The next level investigates the size of religious polarization. Table 5 shows the followers’ comments which contain religious expressions. The Islamist came first by 57%, the liberal came second by 39% and the loyalist came third by 4%. Within the above percentages, the supportive comments put the liberal in the lead by 54%, then the Islamist by 49% and then the loyalist by 39%. The gap analysis between the supportive and opponent comments with religious expressions is 5%, while the neutral area is 13%. Thus, the division within the audience is very much similar to that between the new opinion leaders themselves.

**Table 5. Size of Religious Polarization Expressions in the Audience Reaction.**

| Audience Reaction | Liberal |    | Islamist |    | Loyalist |    | Total  |     |
|-------------------|---------|----|----------|----|----------|----|--------|-----|
|                   | No.     | %  | No.      | %  | No.      | %  | No.    | %   |
| For               | 1,688   | 32 | 3,277    | 63 | 269      | 5  | 5,234  | 44  |
| Against           | 499     | 33 | 877      | 59 | 123      | 8  | 1,499  | 13  |
| Neutral           | 2,233   | 49 | 2,333    | 51 | 23       | 1  | 4,589  | 39  |
| Others            | 234     | 42 | 238      | 43 | 83       | 15 | 555    | 5   |
| Total             | 4,654   | 39 | 6,725    | 57 | 498      | 4  | 11,877 | 100 |

The audience reactions having to do with politics, as is shown in Table 6 are mainly less than those which contain religious expressions. The supporting comments made 53%, opponent comments 22% and neutral area 14%. More specifically, the Islamist was the most supported by 68%, then the loyalist by 38%, and then the liberal by 24%.

**Table 6. Size of Political Polarization Expressions in the Audience Reaction.**

| Audience Reaction | Liberal |    | Islamist |    | Loyalist |    | Total  |     |
|-------------------|---------|----|----------|----|----------|----|--------|-----|
|                   | No.     | %  | No.      | %  | No.      | %  | No.    | %   |
| For               | 499     | 7  | 5,002    | 73 | 1,348    | 20 | 6,849  | 53  |
| Against           | 349     | 12 | 1,234    | 43 | 1,299    | 45 | 2,882  | 22  |
| Neutral           | 822     | 46 | 234      | 13 | 733      | 41 | 1,789  | 14  |
| Other             | 433     | 31 | 862      | 61 | 124      | 9  | 1,419  | 11  |
| Total             | 2,103   | 16 | 7,332    | 57 | 3,503    | 27 | 12,938 | 100 |

The results indicate the same low volume of neutral comments by 14%, while political polarization proves less attractive than religion.

## DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Polarization is a significant phenomenon of social, religious and cultural aspects in political history, which kept limited in effect due to its fundamental association with influential elites. As active parties and powers attempt to attract proponents against rivals, polarization constitutes one of the political tools of democratic societies (Jensen, 2012). This is where political propaganda and marketing play a major part to manage competition without getting out of the democratic game. However, when polarization takes place in the two-party system or between two ideologies, moderate voices lose power and influence (DiMaggio et al., 1996). Due to fear, anger, and animosity towards the opposition, Polarization is also associated with dogmatic intolerance, which in turn

increases the propensity to behave antisocially and to deny free speech (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017). Furthermore, polarization erodes central parts of civic society, such as trust in the government and media. (<https://press.uchicago.edu/index.html>) (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015).

The first impression reflects the polarization resulting from the Arab cyberspace in attracting religion and politics. This applies to the Sikhs, Asian rival religious groups, Evangelicals and Jewish religious groups. In contrast, political Islam sees polarization in different forms. Islam depends on preaching, which is a basic media process highly attractive of the mobilization media model. While current political Islam represents an interesting model, its basic influence is massive not in terror and brutality but in the democratic transition and the approach sought by wide segments of the Arab societies to life.

(<https://prd-idrc.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/openebooks/491-8/index.html>) Here, cyberspace constitutes a golden chance to present such a model. Likewise, other segments believe that developing the Arab societies requires a secular perspective, separating politics from religion as the latter belongs to the sphere of the individuals.

The phenomenon of political players exercising the new opinion leaders' role in the new political cyberspace of the Arab World boomed during and after the Arab Spring in an unprecedented manner, taking different forms and expressions in each community. It is true that Jordan managed to contain the wave of Arab uprisings and made reformative initiatives, like the National Dialogue Commission, the Constitutional Amendment Commission, leading to amending the constitution and founding the Independent Election Commission and the Constitutional Court. Nevertheless, the kingdom witnessed public protests for political, economic and service demands. Since 2015, indicators have been found of a growing hate speech as well as harsh expressions showing political and, sometimes, religious polarization (Jordan Media Credibility Monitor Akeed [JMCMA], 2017).

The findings show a significant similarity between the characteristics of the Jordanian new opinion leaders and classical opinion leaders in the cyberspace, mainly:

1. The new opinion leaders enjoy communication abilities and follow current issues. They do not create a new agenda but they take a stand through the topics debated by the public. Here, they can initiate polarization within their followers.
2. The approaches which take shape could be momentary and continuously changing. According to Tarde this Social Opinion refers to a set of momentary judgements rising in response to current problems, which are reproduced several times in the same country, period and society. (Barry & Thrift, 2007).
3. This category of players has managed to cope with change in a bid to access the audience in a direct manner, without the need for mediators. In other words, any flow of information and messages moves in a circular, collective way in one but not two steps (Turcotte et al., 2015).

4. Upon the analysis of the behaviour of the opinion leaders and their followers, the audience often proves to be diverse. The percentages of supporters and opponents vary from one issue to another, even within the audience of the same opinion leader. As a result, the idea of the cocoon (closed audience) on social media needs to be reconsidered, especially with regard to the public issues attracting people from different backgrounds.

As the (Pew Research Centre) PEW's surveys (2006) on the common traditional political culture in Jordan show, 67% of Jordanians consider religion (Muslim/Christian) to constitute the major identification element, whereas 21% choose their belonging to the Jordanian state. That indicates a great cultural and political imbalance in the performance of upbringing and education agencies. The identity dilemma exceeds the belonging circles back to original backgrounds at the expense of belonging to the country, like how the youth view themselves and the other. According to the same source, 50% of the Jordanian youth believe that the Europeans are hostile to Muslims, and one in four Jordanians considers religious scholars as their basic reference. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/>)

It seems that the study of the new opinion leaders concludes that the pattern of the traditional political culture is moving to a clash of cultures. The findings of the study indicate that the polarization established by the new opinion leaders can be easily transferred to the audience. The Jordanian society has not yet decided on the fundamental political and cultural values, especially with regard to the relation between religion and the state as well as the devolution of power under the royal system. It can also be concluded that such polarization in the cyberspace implies a state of societal division, seen in the political culture forms and features of the Jordanian public and elites. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis of the debates between the new opinion leaders and followers has found a number of political values, mainly:

4. Combination of modernity and traditionalism, and openness to diversity and plurality
5. Continuous progress of the Jordanian society's political culture
6. Significant contradiction between national belonging, territorial loyalty and traditional references
7. Lack of awareness about the values of citizenship and problems of political participation
8. Growing emotions of uselessness, inability to achieve, estrangement and isolation
9. Youth's search for a new identity, which they find in original references, whether tribal, territorial, regional or religious.

## CONCLUSION

The present study has found that the new opinion leaders' phenomenon on social media in Jordan is on the rise, in terms of political and religious polarization. The analysis covered 120 posts and reactions addressing three public issues in the period 2016-2018 on the pages of three Facebook opinion leaders. The issues are the school curriculum modification, concept of civil state and public protests in summer 2018.

It has been found that the new opinion leaders who are active on social media enjoy most of the traditional opinion leaders' characteristics, in addition to other qualities like the ability to meet the digital media requirements. They can also deal with their audience without mediators.

Moreover, the new opinion leaders practice polarization, which reflects a state of societal division regarding the stands on the three issues, which they even aggravated. The volume of comments and their split between support and opposition weakened the neutral or middle space in stances or opinions.

The discussions led by the new Jordanian opinion leaders in this confused stage of political culture in the Arab World show that the current political culture in Jordan is moving step by step from a traditional to an advanced one. In other words, it is going through a transition, which contains elements of clash leading to major polarization.

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