Social Media on Jordanian Radio: Facebook Counts and Link-Up Messages

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With the political changes across the Arabic-speaking world from 2011 onward, there have been many discussions about the potential of ‘new media’ to play a role in social and political transformations in the region. Organising protests, sharing pictures, videos, and news updates, and communicating with like-minded citizens through channels beyond the control of authoritarian regimes are all aspects of digital media that have played prominent roles in popular uprisings in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, and ongoing conflicts in Syria and (most recently) [Palestine](#).

But the way social media are used in day-to-day contexts can be quite different from such spectacular headline events. I spent six months in 2014-15 conducting fieldwork in Jordan, where – as in most Arabic-speaking countries – digital social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp are widely popular, and more and more broadly accessible especially through the spread of smartphones and affordable mobile Internet plans.

Live talk radio in Jordan today – the focus of my research – is one site where such media are used prominently on a day-to-day basis. But radio broadcasters tend to use Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp for very particular purposes, such as enumerating their audiences and linking up with larger numbers of people than would be allowed by traditional studio conversations or call-ins alone. This is not fundamentally different from the kinds of interaction and participation that radio broadcasting would allow without such media being available. In this context at least, ‘new media’ do not just automatically live up to their longed-for potential of changing the way people engage with the politics and social issues that preoccupy them.

Until the early 2000s, radio broadcasting in Jordan was monopolised by the state broadcast corporation, JRTV (Jordanian Radio and Television), effectively an extended arm of the Jordanian regime. In 2002/03, however, a new media law was passed that broke this monopoly, and the government began to grant licenses to a number of FM radio stations with different funding models and political orientations. These include stations linked to state agencies, such as the Jordanian army’s [Radio Hala](#); commercial radio stations such as [Mazaj FM](#); community radio stations such as [Radio al-Balad](#); and stations linked to Islamic organisations such as [Hayat FM](#). Live talk and call-in programmes in colloquial Arabic dominate the schedules of most of these stations, though there are also a handful that broadcast in English (such as the army-owned [Bliss](#)).

What is also common to all these stations is that, over the past few years, they have taken to using digital social media very heavily. All have lively Facebook pages; they publish videos with recordings of their programmes on YouTube; they interact with listeners through Twitter and Instagram, and have also taken to using WhatsApp as a alternative to ‘traditional’ mobile phone text messages.

Given the number and diversity of radio stations, use of digital social media at times appears to be the one thing that does unify Jordanian radio absolutely. On the surface at least, this looks like a very different world from traditional ideas of radio, as a medium that can transmit sound alone, from an isolated broadcast studio to a mostly invisible audience of listeners. While there is some truth to that, looking at how social media actually *works* on radio – how broadcasters use it, in their daily monologues and interactions with listeners – reveals its presence is less a revolutionary change than a gradual outgrowth of features and potentials radio already has.

First, broadcasters often talk *about* social media – with this or that host mentioning the number of followers on their Facebook page, or the “activity” they have been seeing that day on Twitter or WhatsApp. This is how the use of such media allows hosts to enumerate their audiences, and also make certain claims on their part – that is, they present themselves as speaking for their publics on the basis of their social media followerships.

One of the best examples of this is Muhammad al-Wakeel, probably Jordan’s most famous radio broadcaster, who hosts a regular weekday morning talk programme on Radio Hala. al-Wakeel’s [Facebook page](#) is immensely popular – with the number of followers hovering around 5.5 million as of mid-November 2015 – and he never tires of mentioning this fact when telling listeners to “get in touch” and ask questions or contribute comments to his programme. But he also uses this number rhetorically – as, for example, in one particular episode of his programme December 2014, when he spoke at length about reactions to increases in petrol prices, with the justification that the programme’s audience includes “the entire Jordanian people.” al-Wakeel’s is still a listening, *radio* audience – though one which Facebook counts make look much more palpable

On another level, broadcasters also interact directly *with* their audiences via social media. This allows them to link up to listeners and respond to a bigger volume of questions and requests, and more swiftly, than more traditional radio interactions via call-ins.

Many morning programmes on Jordanian radio stations – including al-Wakeel’s own “al-Wakeel’s Programme” (*barnāmiḡ al-wakīl*) – are so-called “service programmes,” which allow listeners to get in touch in order to air their grievances and problems which the broadcaster will then try to solve by contacting a relevant government official. Many people do this by calling in to the station directly, but broadcasters also regularly read out messages they had received through Facebook or WhatsApp, asking for a specific service or putting forward a specific comment

which needs to be relayed to the authorities. This, again, is not fundamentally different from what people would ask in a 'classic' call-in – but it does enable broadcasters to respond to messages without going through long introduction and greeting routines, or trying to pinpoint the exact issue a caller is complaining about. And they can provide “service” to more people as a result.

Talking *about* and interacting *through* social media, then, play very particular roles on radio in contemporary Jordan. They strengthen capacities that already exist in traditional radio broadcasting, addressing its audiences and allowing (limited) assistance and advice to be dispensed via social media messages.

But these practice do not automatically ‘open up’ the media space to greater participation from citizens. Broadcasters, or their in-studio teams, are still the ultimate curators of *which* listener contributions will be allowed to enter live on-air talk. Sharing content – pictures, videos, messages, comments – through social media profiles might make audiences more palpable, by enumerating them and giving a “name and a face” to radio listeners; and it also gives the impression that *more* interaction is taking place than there otherwise would if direct call-ins or discussions in the studio were the only ways through which people could participate. But this never disturbs the broadcaster’s oversight of the content. It does not suddenly mean that people are able to air critical viewpoints or debate issues more thoroughly in a public setting – at least, not *more* so than through other kinds of participation (such as ‘traditional’ call-ins).

We should, then, look at particular social situations in detail in order to see what uses digital social media can be put to, and what potential they might have for making a difference. On Jordanian radio today, at least, its functions remain limited, and do not depart much from the classic capacities of radio broadcasting. If a radio revolution is in the works in Jordan, it will not be brought about by social media alone.

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