

Virtual Communities and Their Social and Political Impacts on Youth

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Abstract:

Contemporary society live tremendous shifts in the field of communication and media in recent years have led to significant changes in the production and distribution methods and receive information. Techniques of modern communication methods have emerged, and it spread from the way the properties and functions of communication new, the most important shift from mass communication one-way, and content homogenized, to interactive communication techniques with directions, and multiple implications, and the back of the term (new media) to express these phenomena new, leading to the emergence of many concepts, most notably virtual community, which has become a parallel reality imposes itself simulates the real society, has its effects on young people in all areas of life, including political and social private. This paper is to highlight the default interaction for young people and reflection on the political and social awareness

Keywords: Virtual community, (political, social) influence, youth

Introduction:

The contemporary world is undergoing a major transformation in which time has been condensed, and social networks have become the optimal alternative to traditional activities of the past. The interaction between today's societies with their environment and surroundings is now significantly dominating the communication system, which highlights a profound shift in tools of discourse and expression. Many young people and teenagers spend a significant amount of time interacting with one another through these networks, leading to a true revolution and fundamental changes that have impacted all areas of life. The effects of these changes have begun to appear globally, creating new phenomena and direct influences on various social structures and organizations.

This transformation has been fueled by what is now known as social media networks, which have become a powerful communication tool in daily events. They have provided an opportunity for all young people, including politicians and researchers, to share their ideas and discuss political and social issues, crossing natural boundaries into new spaces without oversight. Major social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, have emerged as highly influential channels, offering the region's people unprecedented opportunities to express their opinions and organize and mobilize around political and social causes, as well as issues that affect various aspects of their lives, such as rising prices and domestic violence. These networks have contributed to addressing and even succeeding in changing such issues. They have also become essential platforms used by non-profit charitable organizations to reach beneficiaries, not to mention their applications across all aspects of life.

Therefore, we will attempt to explore these networks and their impact on young people, particularly regarding their political and social involvement.

1. The concept of virtual communities: A perspective on the definition

Academic interest in issues related to social networks and virtual communities has increased since the internet established its informational space and successfully created virtual communities, drawing the attention of millions. The internet, with its interactions, has become a part of daily life for many people, and the term "virtual community" no longer stands out as a surprising concept when heard. It has become widespread and generalized, not only in scientific analyses but also as a commonly used term among many internet users. The concept can be traced back to Howard Rheingold (1993), who wrote the first pioneering book in this context titled *Virtual Community*. He defined the virtual community as "social gatherings formed from various places around the world, who come together and communicate with each other through computer screens and email, exchanging knowledge and forming friendships. These individuals are connected by a shared interest, and their interactions resemble those in the real world, except not in close physical proximity. These interactions take

place through the communicative mechanism of the internet, which has contributed to the formation of virtual communities.¹

The virtual community constitutes a growth field for social networks, with cyberspace being the domain and framework where the threads of social networks are woven together. Nabil Ali defined cyberspace as "a new space inhabited by communities where transactions take place, institutions, museums, knowledge centers, and retail outlets are established, alliances are formed, conferences are organized, and information is transmitted at lightning speed." Despite its simulation of real-world space, it differs in its topography, nature, laws, and customs from the real-world space. There is no central authority governing it, nor any regulatory body overseeing it, but rather merely non-governmental committees or groups. Ahmed Zayed defined it as "an invisible, non-physical world not bound by place or time, where electronic information is exchanged²."

Therefore, the virtual community is one of the most important phenomena shaped by new media, known as "virtual communities." These are communities formed over the internet around a shared interest and are referred to as micro-communities due to the similarities they share with small real-world communities, even though they lack some of the essential elements of real communities. Hence, they are termed "virtual" rather than "real."

From the discussion, it seems that there is a reshaping of social and political issues in a virtual context. The internet has successfully facilitated social interactions, not only in terms of communication but also in terms of social networks. Boyd and Ellison defined social networks as "sites formed through the internet that allow individuals to present a glimpse of their public lives, provide the opportunity to connect with a list of registered users, and express the views of individuals or groups through the process of communication. The nature of communication varies from one site to another."³

Social networks have been defined as "a group of websites on the internet that emerged with Web 2.0, allowing individuals to communicate within a virtual community structure, connecting them through a shared interest or semi-affiliation (country, school, university, company, etc.). Communication between them occurs through messages, viewing personal profiles, and learning about their news and the information they choose to make public. It is an effective means of social interaction between individuals, whether they are friends from the real world or friends met through virtual contexts." Swite summarized the concept of social networks as "a modern organization that has transformed lifestyle in terms of approach, management, and practice."

The services provided by social networks are numerous, and the evidence of their widespread nature, in terms of the number of networks or users, confirms that they offer services that warrant attention. Among the most prominent services provided by social networks are⁴:

1. **Personal profiles or web pages:** These are profiles where individuals can write basic information about themselves, such as name, age, date of birth, country, interests, and personal photos. The personal profile serves as the gateway to a person's virtual world.
2. **Friends or connections:** This feature allows individuals to connect with friends they know in real life or those who share similar interests in the virtual community. Relationships extend not only to one's friends but also open up opportunities to meet friends of friends, with the approval of both parties.
3. **Sending messages:** This feature enables users to send messages to friends on their contact list, as well as to those who are not in the list.
4. **Photo albums:** Users can create unlimited albums, upload hundreds of photos, and share them with others. These photos can also be shared and commented on by others.
5. **Groups:** Social networks provide opportunities to form interest-based groups, where a group can be created for a specific purpose or set of goals. The platform offers the group founder and its members a space for free discussion, similar to a small forum. It also facilitates coordination between members through features like "Events," where members can be invited to gatherings, and the number of attendees or absentees can be tracked.
6. **Pages:** This idea was pioneered by Facebook and has been used effectively for commercial purposes. This feature allows businesses to create targeted advertising campaigns, giving product owners the opportunity to showcase their goods to specific demographics. Facebook charges a fee for each click made by users on these advertisements.

2. Social Networks:

In recent years, the world has witnessed a new type of social interaction among people within a virtual electronic space, which has brought distant populations closer, removed borders, and merged cultures. This type of interaction among people is called "social networks." These networks have proliferated and attracted a large audience of users. Political and natural events around the world have played a significant role in introducing these networks, while, conversely, these networks have been instrumental in delivering rapid news, text messages, and video clips related to these events. This has contributed to the fame and widespread adoption of social networks, with the most prominent ones being⁵ Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

1. **Facebook:** Facebook is a social network that has garnered widespread acceptance, particularly among young people worldwide. Initially, it was no more than a personal blog when it was first launched in February 2004 at Harvard University in the United States.
2. **Twitter:** Twitter is a social networking site used by millions of people around the world to stay connected with friends and colleagues through their computers and mobile phones.
3. **YouTube:** There has been some debate over whether YouTube is a social network or not. Some opinions lean towards considering it a social video-sharing site, as it shares many characteristics with social networks. However, its classification as a "video-sharing site" makes it one of the most significant platforms due to its vast importance.

3. Social Networks: Virtual Time and Media Spaces⁶

Thanks to the internet, several communicative spaces have emerged, functioning as virtual places. We engage in conversations through chat rooms and messaging without boundaries or a fixed timeline, treating these spaces as places with cultural significance, where dialogue and communication form the foundation. The term *virtual space* has become a contemporary intellectual concept, referring to everything related to an imaginary space. This concept has two aspects: a material one, which involves creating new technologies and structures for the virtual, and a conceptual one, which includes activities from our real world that can be integrated into it, along with new elements.

One of the benefits of virtual space is the end of the "fear of place" (*topophobia*). The fear of real spaces indicates our possession of another space, and when we enter the virtual realm, we stop fearing physical spaces, as the virtual is not something we can own in the same way. Hence, the internet is often described as one of the most liberating spaces, free from any individual or entity's control.

A key characteristic of the internet is its unique relationship with time. The internet combines instantaneous speed with global reach, which some refer to as "global time," a kind of borderless time that transcends continents, societies, and languages through the media's ability to transmit images and messages at high speed from any point on Earth to any other. This "global time" is contrasted with what Dr. Abdullah Al-Haidari calls "mediatic time," which reflects how individuals today are continuously connected to electronic media and communication devices, leading to a breakdown of intimate family and social bonds. *Mediatic time* refers to the time we spend constantly engaging with media as social individuals, where our production, thinking, communication, and interactions depend on media technologies.

This mediatic time captures the interests and tendencies of individuals as followers, consumers, and producers of the media's rapidly flowing content, in volumes unprecedented in the history of content creation. Every society produces its representation of time through the activities it undertakes. Conversely, every society that is led by mediatic values constructs its perception of time through the media-driven activities and values that dominate its culture.

The virtual community is characterized by the following features⁷:

1. **Flexibility and the breakdown of the traditional concept of a reference group:** The virtual community is not defined by geography but by shared interests that bring together people who may not have known each other before meeting online.
2. **Geographical boundaries no longer play a role:** Virtual communities are not constrained by time zones, allowing individuals to find someone to communicate with around the clock.
3. **Isolation despite promises of openness and connection:** While virtual communities offer global interaction, they can lead to isolation. This paradox is captured in Sherry Turkle's book *"Alone Together,"* where she explains why we expect more from technology than from each other. Text messages and online interactions have replaced face-to-face visits, leading to a situation where family members in the same house are absorbed in their individual virtual worlds. This is no longer just a caricature but a troubling reality that demands attention.
4. **Voluntary participation:** Virtual communities are largely based on choice rather than obligation or coercion.
5. **Mechanisms for organization and control with privacy safeguards:** Virtual communities have rules and measures to ensure privacy and confidentiality, sometimes enforced by platform administrators, and sometimes through self-regulation by users who can block or report inappropriate content.
6. **Open spaces for rebellion and revolution:** These spaces offer room for personal and social rebellion, from overcoming shyness and introversion to political revolution.
7. **High decentralization and gradual disintegration of traditional identity concepts:** Virtual communities tend to erode the notion of traditional identity. This goes beyond national or cultural identity to affect personal identity, as users often participate under pseudonyms or with multiple accounts, distancing themselves from their real-world identities.

4. Social Networks Between Technological Determinism and Social Determinism⁸

The analysis of social change can be viewed through the lens of "determinism" in three pathways. The first is known as **Technological Determinism**, and the second as **Social Determinism**, with both having their proponents. Some thinkers explain that the different rates of change in material and non-material culture, due to technological influence, form the

basis of social analysis in communication technologies. This can potentially lead to a "collision between technological change and cultural change," resulting in dysfunction that affects the thinking of individuals in society, causing tension in prevailing values and ideologies.

Social Determinism emerges as a counterpoint to Technological Determinism, based on the idea that "social forces of all kinds govern the development of technology, influencing and directing its evolution." An advocate of this view, American anthropologist Leslie White, argued that "the social fabric is culturally advanced by technological progress, and human societies are shaped both culturally by technological materialism and socially through social evolution." This reflects the dialectic of society and technology.

Communication technologies are essential elements of society, but considering them as the foundation of social change places them within the framework of "determinism," which contemporary sociology rejects. Non-material culture, such as political and social ideologies, contributes more significantly to societal change than material culture in its technological dimension. However, these changes (material and non-material) are difficult to measure, leading to the adoption of a more **relativistic perspective**.

In the early 21st century, the concept of **Informational Determinism** emerged, where a country's progress is no longer measured by its national production but by its total national informational output. A key thinker in this field, sociologist **Scott Lash**, focused on contemporary changes in the postmodern era. He highlighted the contradictions of postmodernity, noting that humans find it difficult to live in this era without the communication tools that connect them to society. For instance, "we cannot work without a mobile phone or a computer, or any other technological forms of social life." Lash emphasized that life forms acquire new characteristics through technology, the most important of which is the "flattening of life forms," where everything interacts through communication technologies.

It is impossible to attribute social change to a single factor. In reality, multiple factors—economic, educational, labor, geographical, technological, leadership, responsible media, and ideological direction—work together to create change. These factors interact dynamically over time, making it challenging to isolate a single decisive factor in social change. However, it can be argued that culture has lost control over the technological domain and has instead become a tool shaped by the demands of technology. This is evident in the rise of **Technological Determinism**, followed by **Media Determinism**.

5. Social Networks and the Development of Political and Social Awareness Among Youth⁹

Today, modern media, particularly social networks, plays a significant role in shaping the political awareness of youth by providing them with political information. It also contributes to forming, reinforcing, or altering their political culture and readiness for public engagement. Political awareness is described as a mental state where individuals comprehend the world both intellectually and emotionally. Human awareness manifests in various forms depending on the subject of that awareness, including religious, scientific, political, and moral awareness.

Political awareness, therefore, refers to the condition in which individuals or society members understand political issues in all their dimensions and form cognitive and emotional positions on them. Some define political awareness as a set of values, attitudes, and political principles that enable individuals to participate actively in addressing and analyzing the issues of their society, influencing their stance, and motivating them to take action to improve or change these issues.

When discussing the political effects of social networks, the first thing that comes to mind is the role these platforms played during the Arab Spring. Since early 2011, numerous articles, studies, conferences, and events have examined the importance of social networks and their ability to stimulate public participation and influence participatory governance models and new societal mechanisms. The rapid growth and changing usage patterns of social networks have been pivotal in shaping opinions and empowering youth across the Arab region. This period witnessed a clear shift in how social networks were used, transitioning from social and commercial purposes to political engagement.

Some Arab countries are undergoing slow democratic transformations, and the role of youth in promoting and supporting these changes is crucial. It is essential to actively involve and guide youth in this process, as they possess the motivation, desire, and ability to drive change. Youth need to understand the importance of democracy, how it functions, and be aware of their rights, duties, roles, and responsibilities. This understanding will help foster a youth-driven participatory approach to democracy and good governance.

Empowering youth and activating their role also requires their involvement in decision-making processes. Youth participation in these processes is central to social and political discussions. The concept of good governance is based on broad principles that require the participation of all sectors and groups in decision-making. Despite the importance placed on youth by Arab societies and governments, this group is often excluded from decision-making processes and is seen as the "future generation" or "leaders of tomorrow." This situation requires policymakers to rethink how they view youth participation and address the lack of strategic thinking and political awareness that hinders their involvement.

Social awareness, as defined by *Shalem Al-Hamzani*, is the result of individuals' interaction within a specific social reality, blending their perceptions, beliefs, and feelings into collective knowledge, beliefs, and behavioral patterns that reflect that

social reality with all its dimensions and variables, including demographics, environment, economy, culture, and history. Social awareness evolves and changes in response to these factors.

In addition to their political and commercial influence, social networks have demonstrated great potential in other areas, such as education, healthcare, coordinating volunteer efforts, and combating inflation and fraud. Non-profit charitable organizations have effectively used these networks to reach donors and beneficiaries, raise awareness of their activities, and further their missions. Social networks have also been used positively to foster social connections within countries, cities, families, and tribes, promoting community strength amidst the overwhelming influence of media. These platforms provide a space for constructive social interaction without partisanship, extremism, or demeaning others.

Thus, modern media, especially social networks, plays a vital role in the advancement of nations and the achievement of societal goals. It has become one of the most powerful and influential factors in shaping social, economic, and human relations in today's world.

6. Social and Political Effects of Social Networks on Youth:

From the previous discussion, it is clear that the second wave of social networks has contributed to attracting many users worldwide. Social networking sites have become a means of connecting and intersecting global and local dynamics. The core idea behind social networks is the global nature of interests and the local impact of their outcomes. Interactions take place within a global context, but their changes and consequences unfold at the local level. This dynamic operates through several variables, which can be observed in the following aspects:

1. Social Variables¹⁰:

The social variables of networks are summarized in two main areas: friendship formation and group membership. These can be discussed as follows:

- **Formation of Friendships:** Social networks have facilitated the process of forming friendships by bridging the gap between real-world and virtual friendships. The key hypothesis that aligns with friendship formation is shared interests. Social networks have succeeded in connecting individuals with similar interests through the informational space, and the potential to turn these friendships into tangible social capital is real. This social capital can create opportunities that exist both in the real world and the virtual space. Furthermore, these networks enable communication not only at a local level but also on a global scale.
- **Group Membership:** Social networks allow for the creation and participation in social groups with homogeneous interests. These groups can be formed within local communities or include participants from around the world. For example, when observing the widespread use of Facebook in Egypt, it becomes clear that various ethnic and social groups have emerged on the platform. These groups often reflect local contexts, such as provincial groups, school-related groups, university, or college-based groups, and interest-based groups. The key takeaway is that while the origins of social networks are global, their social impact is often local, as these groups exist at the intersection of global and local dynamics.

2. Political Variables:

The membership of individuals in groups formed through social networks has opened the door to political engagement within the informational space. Political issues have become a core aspect of social networks, which have played a role in shifting political interactions between two worlds: the real world and the parallel world represented by the social networks spread across the symbolic space. The prominent impact of social networks is evident in the political realm, which can be illustrated through three main axes: the mobilization of public opinion, the practice of citizenship, and the activation of civil society.

- **Mobilization of Public Opinion:** Social network groups play a vital role in mobilizing public opinion on various political issues. For example, in the case of mass protests, social networks have become a platform for organizing and encouraging strikes. One such example is the *April 6 Youth Movement* in Egypt, which used the virtual space to incite real-world strikes, bridging the virtual and the real. Another example is electoral campaigning, where social networks have opened new avenues for promoting election campaigns and political programs. For instance, Facebook groups at the local level have been used to spread electoral programs and gather as many supporters as possible. These platforms are actively used to garner popular support, making social networks a gateway for political engagement, highlighting the intersection of global and local dynamics. Initially, these networks were established for social purposes, such as connecting people with shared interests, but gradually shifted towards political engagement, especially with the rise of the second wave of social networks, which significantly impacted local political practices.
- **The Emergence of Virtual Citizenship:** Social networks have facilitated the practice of citizenship through the internet, giving rise to the concept of *Virtual Citizenship*. Citizenship, which traditionally involves social and political rights and duties, now extends to the virtual realm. While defining a specific cultural framework for virtual citizenship may be challenging, the political dimension is more tangible. In the context of the tensions faced by nation-states, shrinking political rights, and the lack of credibility in real-world scenarios, particularly in Arab societies, social

networks provide a platform for demanding political rights. Virtual spaces serve as a new gateway for practicing citizenship, offering individuals the ability to engage with political issues that are sometimes absent in the real world. Although virtual citizenship is a global phenomenon, its effects are felt locally.

- **Activation of Civil Society:** The growth of social networks on a global scale and their local impact have contributed to increasing the role of civil society. Many civil society organizations, including political parties at the national level, have established virtual bases through social networks, using these platforms to promote their programs and policies. Various unions and NGOs have also utilized social networks to enhance communication among their members, invite beneficiaries to participate in their programs, and promote their projects. Social networks have thus become an essential tool for civil society, enabling broader participation and engagement at both national and local levels.

Conclusion:

The increasing presence of groups on social networks, whether in global contexts or through the exploitation of these networks in local contexts, prompts future-oriented thinking about the potential emergence of social organizations in their institutional form within the informational space. In particular, this applies to civil society organizations. This does not imply the disappearance of these organizations from current social networks, but rather the increased activation of these organizations in a more effective and institutionalized form.

This development does not mean that the virtual society will replace the real one, but it opens a new gateway for interactions that transcend local boundaries. The challenge remains to predict the future of real-world interactions in the face of growing virtual engagement.

A key research question that continues to provoke academic minds is: What is the future of real-world interactions in the context of the expansion of social networks in the informational space? And will these social networks effectively contribute to enhancing social capital in a meaningful way?

Footnotes:

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