



Social Media Monitoring in the MENA Region

- Words Matter

Project Title: Countering Disinformation and Hate Speech in the MENA Region, “Words Matter”

Duration: February 2021 – December 2023

Countries covered by the project: Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia

Donor: German Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Objectives and Expected Outcomes:

Within the framework of the “Words Matter” project, DRI and its partners seek to strengthen the safeguarding of democratic processes and societies’ resilience to online disinformation and hate speech in the MENA region. “Words Matter” aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Capacity-building for project partners to acquire institutional skills to design sound social media monitoring methodologies, to effectively monitor disinformation and hate speech online, and to enhance evidence of the impact on civic and political participation and on human rights.
- Enhanced multi-stakeholder and regional engagement to advocate against and combat online disinformation and hate speech, through a civil society network, as well as through continuous exchanges on transparent regulations.
- In the countries of the project partners, improved awareness and resilience of civic target groups, and concrete action by decision-makers to transparently combat online hate speech and disinformation.

Approach:

The project’s approach is based on the principle of local ownership and sustainability. It works with local partner organisations, who lead on the social media monitoring (SMM) after having received capacity-building support and training that enables them to analyze online discourse during key national democratic processes.

The project also focuses on exchanges among partners to share lessons learned and methodologies, and to collaborate on collective advocacy. Additionally, the project acknowledges that tackling disinformation and hate speech requires a joint effort by different stakeholders (civil society, governments, social media, tech companies, etc.). Therefore, dialogue among all relevant actors on key challenges and on identifying recommendations for pro-democratic online regulatory reforms is ongoing. The project’s team supports civil society organisation partners in their advocacy work to include relevant actors, especially from social media and tech companies.

Project Partners and Scope of Work:

Tunisia (Lab'Track Project)

LabTrack is a project jointly implemented by the two Tunisian partners:

MOURAKIBOUN: Mourakiboun is a domestic election observation network that was launched in 2011 and is today a key player in this field, with multiple national and international partners. Since 2014, Mourakiboun has been diversifying its activities, by adding the accountability of public services and support for the Tunisian decentralisation process to its portfolio. Mourakiboun has a network of over 100 volunteers in all regions of Tunisia, and excellent access to local structures and stakeholders. Mourakiboun has adopted an IT approach to its activities, thereby increasingly reaching Tunisian youth. During the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, Mourakiboun conducted social media monitoring activities, focused on the interactions of Facebook users with the statements by candidates during election campaigns.



Institut de Presse et Sciences de l'Information - IPSI: IPSI was established in 1967, and became a non-departmental public institution enjoying financial autonomy and legal personality in 1973. The Institute is known as Tunisia's leading university for the education of journalists and media workers. IPSI's research in the field of information and communication sciences has garnered international acclaim. IPSI has a network of national (INLUCC, HAICA, UFP) and international partners (Deutsche Welle Akademie, UNESCO, the UNDP, and Article 19, among others). Through this cooperation, IPSI provides specialised training sessions and hosts experts and internationally

renowned speakers to introduce students to innovative practices in the field of communications.



Lab'Track aims to counter disinformation and political manipulation on social networks in Tunisia, by studying the political disinformation on Facebook in the country in the aftermath of the coup of 25 July 2021. The project also intends to raise awareness among Facebook users about the risks and threats of disinformation and hate speech.

Lebanon

MAHARAT Foundation: The Foundation is a women-led Beirut based organisation that was formed in 2004 and officially recognised as a non-profit organisation in 2006. Maharat advances the societal and political conditions that enhance freedom of expression and access to information, both online and offline. Maharat engages and equips a progressive community in Lebanon and the MENA region with the skills and knowledge necessary to create change. Focus areas include accountability and media literacy, media development and viability, policy and advocacy, and engagement of communities and partners on free expression issues and human rights. Maharat has recently developed its own social media monitoring tracker (the Maharat Tracker), and published studies on hate speech on social media and an electoral media monitoring report with a gender perspective.

MAHARAT is monitoring online misleading behavior during the election period in Lebanon on Facebook and Twitter.



Jordan

Al-Hayat Center – RASED for Civil Society Development:

Al-Hayat Center – RASED for Civil Society Development is a civil society organisation founded in 2006. The Center has expanded to become one of the leading NGOs in Jordan. Al-Hayat's overall mission is to promote accountability, governance, public participation, and tolerance in Jordan and the region, within the framework of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and gender mainstreaming in public policy and actions.

Al Hayat is monitoring hate speech on Facebook and Twitter during electoral contexts. It also focuses on hate speech targeting women political figures in Jordan.



Jordan Open-Source Association (JOSA):

The Jordan Open-Source Association- JOSA: JOSA is a non-profit organisation based in Amman, Jordan. The association is among the few non-profits registered under the Jordan Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship. The Association's mission is to promote openness in technology and to defend the rights of technology users in Jordan. JOSA believes that information that is non-personal – whether it is software code, hardware design blueprints, data, or network protocols and architecture – should be free for everyone to view, use, share, and modify. JOSA also believes that information that is personal should be protected within legal and technological frameworks. Access to the modern Web should, likewise, remain open.

JOSA is building an Arabic native artificial intelligence solution – “Nuha” to detect and report on gender-based online hate speech on social media platforms in Jordan.



Sudan

In light of the ongoing armed conflict in Sudan, our valued partner in the country, the Sudanese Development Initiative (SUDIA) has, regrettably, been unable to continue their participation in the project. We deeply appreciate the significant contributions they made during their active involvement. While they are no longer able to collaborate with us due to these challenging circumstances, their dedication and expertise have left a lasting impact on the project's progress. As we move forward, we honor their commitment and extend our hopes for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in their country.

Findings from our Regional Social Media Monitoring Reports

Under the “Words Matter” project, DRI and its partners have to date produced three regional social media monitoring reports, covering political and polarising events in four countries –Lebanon, Jordan, Sudan and Tunisia. Unfortunately, due to the political situation in Sudan, our Sudanese partner had to cut all of their activities in the country, limiting their contributions to only the first and second regional reports.

The first regional report includes findings from two major events that were covered in the social media monitoring efforts up until March 2022. These were the municipal elections in Jordan, which took place in March 2022, and the online campaigning for the parliamentary elections in Lebanon, which were held in May 2022. In Lebanon, the Maharat Foundation analysed posts from a sample of political candidates running in the 2022 national elections, and found that most messages played on the emotions of citizens (257 of 522 tweets/posts observed) or were in the form of accusations (173 of 522 tweets/posts). Conspiracy theory posts (34 of 522 tweets/posts) came a distant third. According to Maharat, 94.2 per cent of all

of the tweets and posts analysed could be described as “populist”, aimed at dissuading voters from calling for reforms and responding to societal needs.

In Jordan, after analysing 51 Facebook media pages during the 2022 local elections, the Al Hayat Center – RASED found that 23.4 per cent of the 11,255 comments analysed contained hate speech. Out of these, defamation was the most prevalent form of hate speech identified, accounting for 25.78 per cent of all hateful comments, followed by denigration (25.4 per cent), cyberbullying (18.97 per cent), and insults (10.72 per cent).

The report also included a case study on gender-based violence on Twitter in the MENA region. The study investigates to what extent politically active women in the MENA region face online gender-based violence on the Twitter platform. It covers four highly influential and politically active women on Twitter: Loujain Hathloul, a Saudi women’s rights activist and political prisoner; Dima Sadek, a Lebanese television news anchor; Ghada Oueiss, a principal news presenter for Al Jazeera Television, from Lebanon; and Tawakkol Karman, a Yemeni Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. Our findings reveal that all four women have been targeted by offensive content (text and imagery) due to their public comments on contentious political issues. The offensive content was generated by a few accounts, and then amplified by retweets and replies. Although a counternarrative against online gender-based violence has emerged within this discourse, the offenders used counter hashtags to disseminate more offensive tweets and amplify their reach.

The second regional report, launched in February 2023, investigates online disinformation and hate speech trends during key national democratic processes in three countries in the MENA region (Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia), and includes findings from the constitutional referendum in Tunisia, parliamentary elections in Lebanon, and the online debate that took place in Jordan around the publication of a Children Rights Bill (draft law).

For the monitoring period covered by this report, we detected several regional approaches that were used by different actors to spread hate speech and disinformation to influence the narrative in the digital public sphere.

The first regional trend that emerged during our monitoring was that of online gender-based violence, which is prevalent on social media platforms, especially during times of elections and crises. Our findings focus on Lebanon and Jordan. In Lebanon, research found that 43 per cent of the social media accounts of 100 active women candidates were subjected to various forms of online violence against women. In Jordan, online abuse against those who supported the draft law on Children’s Rights was found to be extremely gendered, with men being attacked for their social status and women being attacked on many levels, including their foreign origins, rights, and place in political life.

The second regional trend is that of religious-based hate speech. In Lebanon, the Maharat Foundation documented the use of shallow or cheap fakes, which are audio-video manipulations to spread hateful content, in this case based on religious grounds. They found that Lebanese MPs who adopted a civil marriage law had been subjected to a religious hate campaign on social media, led by Sunni Muslim Sheikhs. In Jordan, Al-Hayat Center – RASED documented the use of negative religious discourse against women at all levels, regardless of whether they were wearing the Hijab or not.

The third regional trend is the use of emotionally tinged discourse in political manipulation. In Tunisia, coordinated disinformation content on social media that bears a strong emotional charge is used to amplify its dissemination and manipulate public sentiment. Anger is used as a tool for making misinformation go viral. In Lebanon, during the parliamentary elections, 49.5 per cent of online discourse was found to be based on the manipulation of sentiments. Traditional political forces rely increasingly on emotional rhetoric to strengthen partisan and sectarian affiliation and

evoke conspiracy theories to demonise opponents.

The fourth trend involves coordinated disinformation campaigns during major national political events. In Tunisia, political actors used Facebook's live function to broadcast simultaneous streams on several pages to reach as many followers as possible, and to spread hate speech and misleading information. This pattern is also very effective when it comes to establishing direct interaction with specific communities. These coordinated campaigns spread misinformation and manipulate public opinion during critical political events.

The third regional report delves into the intricate web of online manipulation and gendered hate speech prevalent in the MENA region's political discourse. Divided into distinct sections, it casts a probing eye on the evolving landscape of digital dynamics within the context of significant democratic events.

The report opens with an exploration of the Tunisian legislative elections, held between December 2022 and January 2023, following the July 2022 constitutional referendum. Lab Track delves into the online presence and impact of these elections, shedding light on how digital platforms influence political narratives.

Moving forward, the spotlight shifts to Jordan, where the "Jordan Open-Source Association" (JOSA) and Al Hayat Center – RASED share their findings. Unveiling a disconcerting blend of legal and social contexts, the report examines gendered hate speech in Jordan's online sphere. JOSA's groundbreaking machine-learning module, «Nuha,» emerges as a tool designed to detect online violence against women in Arabic within the Jordan context. Simultaneously, Al Hayat Center – RASED delves into gender-based hate speech, as evidenced by comments targeting Wafaa Bani Mustafa, the former Minister of Social Development in Jordan. This dual exploration sheds light on the extent to which gender-based hate speech seeks to undermine women in leadership roles.

The narrative then shifts to Lebanon, where Words Matter partner Maharat undertakes an inclusive literacy awareness campaign to pre-empt false information ahead of

the forthcoming 2024 local elections. Additionally, an illuminating interview with the Institut de Presse et des Sciences de l'Information (IPSI) delves into the intricate mechanics of generating political disinformation in Tunisia.

Within the broader regional context, political instability casts a shadow over social media platforms in the MENA region. The report underscores the risk-laden terrain of political discourse in the digital realm, where misinformation proliferates due to the dearth of independent media, comprehensive fact-checking, and online literacy initiatives. This climate enables extreme viewpoints to flourish, impeding constructive dialogue and fostering polarisation. The dearth of trust in traditional media compounds the misinformation epidemic, making reliable information access a challenge.

The report exposes instances of political disinformation in the MENA region, where actors manipulate public opinion through deceptive tactics. It highlights the shift towards visual content, such as memes and livestreams employed by political entities to propagate harmful narratives organically, amplifying their reach.

The report accentuates key regional trends, **the first** of which is that of persistent disinformation patterns influencing elections. This trend surfaces in Tunisia, where disinformation campaigns target not only candidates, but also the electoral system itself, weaving propaganda and conspiracy theories to cast doubt on credibility and fairness. This erosion of trust and introduction of uncertainty aims to sway public opinion.

The second trend involves the strategic use of online gender-based violence. In Tunisia, the surge in gendered hate speech during electoral campaigns disproportionately targets women candidates, fueling disinformation and derogatory narratives. Jordan mirrors this trend, where JOSA identifies a disheartening volume of online gender-based violence against women activists. These attacks are manifested in insults, threats, and stereotypes, aimed at undermining women's credibility and discouraging political and activist participation.

The third trend consists of coordinated online disinformation campaigns during major political events. In Tunisia, coordinated networks orchestrate content dissemination to influence political behavior, particularly during crucial events, like the constitutional referendum. The exploitation of live videos further accentuates this trend, as political actors exploit Facebook's algorithm to maximise engagement.

Against this backdrop, the report issues recommendations to various stakeholders. It calls on social media companies to intensify content moderation efforts, on governments to invest in social media literacy, on civil society to collaborate in creating checks and balances, and on researchers to focus on further study of the phenomenon of gendered hate speech.

Despite research limitations stemming from regional conflicts, legal changes, and data accessibility, the report paints a vivid picture of MENA's digital landscape. It underscores the pressing need for vigilance, awareness, and collaboration to counter the corrosive effects of online manipulation, hate speech, and disinformation, so as to ensure the integrity of democratic processes in the region.



Contact Us:

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