

## Digital Public Sphere within the Jordanian Political Movement: A Case Study for Saving Bergesh Forests through Facebook

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### Abstract

Social networking websites like Facebook offer a platform that facilitates communications among people who, for example, share interests, activities, and discuss various issues across the globe. This research paper discusses if Facebook Presents a digital public sphere similar to the Habermasian's classical concept of the "public sphere"? And the extent to which Facebook networking groups may offer an alternative form of public sphere, especially in non-western contexts like Jordan where Facebook plays a major role in demanding more democracy and reform. Habermasian theoretical public sphere concept will be applied to a Jordanian successful Facebook group formed to challenge a governmental decision that provide for the establishment of a Military Academy in Bergesh Forests without minding environmental, social and political concerns attached to such proposal<sup>1</sup>.

**Key Words:** Public Sphere, Habermas, Bergesh Forests, Facebook, Deliberative Democracy

### Introduction:

For a long time, Arab countries generally lack the existence of public spheres that give its people free, equal opportunities to discuss public issues of mutual concerns. However, most of the available "public spheres" were not effective because of fear of politicization or prosecution. During the past decade the digital means of communication has significantly spread among population, especially the young generation,<sup>2</sup> and became a virtual place where people can meet new friends, discuss different concerns, and address issues not possible to talk about before. In recent years, Facebook has produced a place for rational and moral discussion in the overall public concerns; it transformed the public sphere in different ways that are beneficial for discourse; and provided a great impact on politicians and decision-makers<sup>3</sup>. This paper examines Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere from a non-western point of view<sup>4</sup>; it endeavors to understand how Jordanians used information and communication technology, particularly Facebook as an alternative public sphere, in a twenty first century environment. How they formed Facebook groups to share views, organize, reach to agreements, participate in decision making and face the governmental non-rational plans.

The paper is divided into two parts, the first explain and clarify the circumstances of the establishment different Facebook groups to protect Bergesh forest from execution, and how they did succeed in that. The second section provides a brief overview of the concept of the Hebrmasians' traditional public sphere, and tries to answer the questions raised by the study.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to my husband Abdelnaser Hayajneh whose support always provides me with strength and inspiration

<sup>2</sup> In Jordan, there are nearly two million and a half Facebook users

<sup>3</sup> The number of times the Jordanian people managed to change government decisions are very few, one of them before the advent of the means of modern communication, in 1989 when it was raising the prices of fuels and many commodities, the other two cases after the emergence of modern means of communication, first when the Jordanian teacher put pressure on the government to raise their salaries and establish their own union, second is campaign to prevent cutting down trees to build a military academy in Bergesh.

<sup>4</sup> *Jürgen Habermas* is a contemporary German sociologist and a philosopher in the tradition of critical theory and pragmatism. He is perhaps best known for his theory on the concepts of communicative rationality and the public sphere.

### Facebook Groups for Saving Bergesh Forests

The Jordanian Government announced the intention to establish military academy in “Bergesh” forests, one the most important and charming nature reserve in the Kingdom’s limited green cover land. The initial estimation counted around 2200 rare and endangered forest trees are to be uprooted to prepare the site to construction of the academy compounds and arsenals.

An article published in some of the Jordanians and Arab news and environmental websites criticizing the decision,<sup>5</sup> was the spark that led a group of Nature lovers, environmentalist and locals, to start their activity against it, first by making pressure through the Environmental Commission in the Jordanian Parliament, However the commission failed to convince the government to stop the project. Later on 29 Apr 2011, the activists created a Facebook group called the (National Campaign to save Bergesh Forests from Execution)<sup>6</sup>, till now this Facebook group still the only physical existence for the campaign. This was not the only Facebook group created for this cause, the researcher found tens of other groups with and against the project, but this particular one was the strongest and most effective; mainly because of the significant number of its’ member, the apparent diversity of their disciplines, rational discussions took place over the group page, strong commitment to the cause that has nothing to do with any personal interest, and high levels of freedom in presenting the topics discussed.

The Campaign attracted members from different interests, disciplines and intellectual backgrounds, they were: environmental activist, journalists and media specialist, politicians, member of parliament, academics, environmentalists, non-governmental organizations activists, university students, private sector employees, lawyers, some local people from the affected site, nationals from abroad, foreigners, public sector employees, and the former Minister of agriculture (Tayseer Smadi) who was responsible for signing the agreement to the project, he joined the group after one of the members invited him to get involved in the discussions that took place in the group.

A brief random review of group’s member list showed that most of them used their real names instead of using nick names or fake names which show the level of freedom available is remarkable. Members seem to have no fear of being followed by authority, or even harassed by someone with different opinion. There were relatively considerable percentage of female members participating actively in the groups’ action plan and all group members have no personal goals that motivated them to participate actively in its activities; their sole purpose was to serve the common good.

In their struggle against the environmentally misplaced proposed Military Academy; the campaigners, therefore, employed a comprehensive approach with a diverse methods to express their solidarity with the forests and protest against the devastating project, all were organized and/or advertised via the Facebook page, including:

1. **Rational arguments** over Facebook group page and through several arranged meetings with different sides related to the project showed that these conversations were not restricted to the elite; they were done by legal professionals, landscape specialists, environmentalists, activists, and locals who clarified the legal violations attached to the project. These violations included: (1) the project's contradiction with Jordanian Agriculture Law, and Jordan Environmental Protection Law, and Jordan Environmental Impact Assessment Bylaw<sup>7</sup>, (2) the adverse environmental effects of cutting thousands of rare and aging forest trees, and the environmental plight this might cause in an environmentally vulnerable site; (3) the risk that many habitats will lose their natural resort subsequently forcing them to migrate or die. Discussions on

<sup>5</sup> Suhair Jaradat, “Execution the Forests of Jordan by Governmental Decision”, available online at: <http://www.greenline.com.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?tp=796>

<sup>6</sup> The Address of the National Campaign to save Bergesh Forests from Execution in the Facebook is: <https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/Nationalcampaign/>, Campaign Email is [Nationalcampaign@groups.facebook.com](mailto:Nationalcampaign@groups.facebook.com)

<sup>7</sup> These Jordanian legislation are published online at National Information System: [www.lob.gov.jo](http://www.lob.gov.jo)

the projects' alternatives included the relocation of the academy to another site, and doing other projects that corresponds to the special nature of Bergesh forests, to help the locals find jobs linked to the forests as a source of livelihood, which will help them stay in their territory and preserve their nature.

People participated in the discussions were all able to have equal chances to put their view points, and comments with respect to others different opinions. The supporters of the projects were allowed to join the group, "we had a strong debate with them trying to clarify our goals and our reasons for opposing the project, but they were not able to convince us of the reasons for their defense of cutting down trees in order to build a military academy, this way we gain more supporters"<sup>8</sup>. The strongest discussions happened between the previous Minister of agriculture, and the group members who were trying to convince him of his mistaken decision, but he insisted on his opinion, in one case Nida Aburumman, said to him: "Tayseer ... you are stubborn :=) have you ever admitted you made a mistake or your judgment maybe was not right? There are certain absolutes in life and killing 2,200 old trees is not right no matter what the reason is for it in this time and age. Sustainable Economic Development does not call for executing 2,200 trees and you should see wisdom in this point of view with all due respect."<sup>9</sup> He answered her: "Dear Nadia, maybe I am when I feel my decision is justified. By you have to admit that you are stubborn as well!"<sup>10</sup>

New social networking like Facebook helped people to meet with officials without any formal barriers, address them without embarrassment or fear, and face them with their responsibilities, which have not been possible before.

2. **Public opinions polls:** the campaigners tried to support their rational discussions by doing public opinions polls through Facebook, by asking people to answer the following question: "Do you support the building of a military academy and an area of (981) acres, in the area Bergesh within Ajloun Forest", Results showed a significant number of rejectionists, by submitting different answers that all have the same meaning of "NO".<sup>11</sup> In addition to petitions to the relevant national and international authorities.
3. **Media covered** this hot topic in so many ways: mass media channels i.e. private TV satellite channels, newspapers, radio stations, and most important and heavily browsed internet pages, especially social sites "Facebook YouTube and internet forums". Some new media channels, published a video on YouTube, to explain with one example, how the supporters' logical argument of building College in Bergesh was weak, illogical and irrational; their argument says: "you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs and you can't build a college, without cutting trees. Damn trees!"<sup>12</sup>  
It is to be noted that, the state owned TV station and governmental broadcast radio stations remained silent after they participated in marketing the government view and justifications presented in favor of establishing the military academy. Besides articles written by academics, economists, journalists, although written articles are directed mainly for elites and decision-makers, it play a role in enhancing public awareness among the group's members, and the community as a whole.
4. **Peaceful assembly** to protest against the project in certain hot spots such as the arena in front of the Prime Ministry, Ministry of Agriculture, United Nations Headquarter in Amman, and - far away in the proposed site for the military academy in Bergesh.

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<sup>8</sup> An interview with Feras Smadi, the admin of the Facebook group, on 5 December 2012

<sup>9</sup> October 29, 2011 at 4:45pm

<sup>10</sup> October 29, 2011 at 4:49pm

<sup>11</sup> To reach the opinion poll: <https://www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=question&id=10150586457560506>

<sup>12</sup> To watch the video, go to : <http://www.ikbis.com/shots/287694>

5. **Site Visiting Activities:** The campaign organized many visits to the proposed site; in order to protest against the project, and to listen and communicate with the local people and to support their resistance to the project in the site and nearby areas.
6. **Local Community Support:** while visiting the site in Bergesh Reserve, the campaigners showed their support to local people by purchasing some homemade and handcrafts products from the locals, and gave them advices and legal information about their environmental rights, and their right to development with is environmentally sustainable and economically feasible.
7. **Photograph,** The campaign logo was used as Facebook's profile picture by almost all members of the campaign during and even after the campaign, helped in spreading the awareness of the cause in other pages and friends of the members, by asking about the meaning of the logo and to what it refers.



*The campaign logo: "NO for cutting Bergesh forest"*

The campaign succeeded to mobilize public attention via employing all these methods, the campaign's coordinator argued that the most effective methods in mobilization and planning campaign's activities was the campaign Facebook group which attracts thousands of interested activists who then become a pressing human factor in the decisive stages<sup>13</sup>.

Growth and success of the campaign became prominent when some governmental and non-governmental organizations stood firm against this project, while expressing their deep concerns of the adverse environmental effects of the proposed project, The National Centre for Human Rights, Department of forests in the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Jordanian Environment Society follow with great interest the whole range of the popular activities which have objected to the project of constructing the Royal Military Academy in the area of Bergesh Forest ignoring the 2002 Jordanian agriculture Law (and especially its 28th article) which guaranteed the protection of the forests. Nonetheless, this green cover is being violated through circumventing the Law by the decision of authorization (conferment) that contravenes the provisions of the Law. The Law (in article 35, paragraphs (B) and (C)) forbids arbitrary cutting and prohibits, in an absolute manner, attacks against forest trees.

Moreover, after few months of protesting against the project, the campaign received strong support when members of parliament petitioned the prime minister to reconsider the location of a proposed military academy. The Lower House Water and Agriculture Committee has sent letters to Prime Minister and

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<sup>13</sup> The total number was varying from time to time. Although the mission of the Facebook group accomplished, the number of the its' member now is still 2712, as for 23/11/2012, Please see: <https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/Nationalcampaign/>

Chairman of the Jordan Armed Forces, calling on them to halt the construction of a military academy which will entail uprooting hundreds of rare and ageing trees.

In response to the parliamentary petition, the Jordan Armed Forces defended its decision to build a military academy in the forests of Ajloun, stressing that it has altered blueprints to limit the number of uprooted trees. According to a Jordan Armed Forces statement, blueprints have been drastically altered to limit the uprooting of any trees in the construction of a planned military academy at Bergesh Forest

In response to the campaign, a group of people who support the establishment of the Military Academy in Bergesh Forest attempt to weaken the campaign by organizing some events and writings in the Internet sites and by participating in the campaign Facebook group and even establishing their own Facebook groups. Their basic argument was that the project is essential to the area which –according to them- lacks any developmental project, and therefore, suffers from high rate of poverty and unemployment.

However, this supporting group happened to be ill-organized, and presenting the official view without having a convincing argument when it comes to the legal violations and environmental adverse effect attached to the proposed project. One interesting point needs to be stressed here, that the proponents of the proposed Military Academy in Bergesh Forests never tried to organize themselves in a Facebook group or any other similar campaign, but rather, used a very traditional and governmental-oriented way of expression, such as newspaper's article explaining or/and justifying government's point of view, or reaffirming loyalty to the King or support to "good" government, other way the proponents used was the rejection to relocate the proposed Military Academy outside Bergesh Forests based on a very narrow geographical perspective, or by marginalizing environmental concerns of the opponents. This traditional and immature way of expression raised doubts about the real organizers of this proponent's movement to the extent that one may suspect that government itself fabricated this proponent's movement to show that locals are welcoming the proposed project, and that the issue of Military Academy inside Bergesh Forests is debatable to alleviate the pressure of the environmental campaign.

As a result of the growing support to the campaign, an amended proposal has been made by the Armed forces, to reduce the resistance to the Military Academy, this amended proposal was discussed with the representatives of the campaign as well as ministers of environment and agriculture, members of the health and environment committee in the Parliament, representatives from the armed forces and representatives of NGOs, according to the amended proposal:

- 1- 2% of the area will be built in sites covered with trees, and these buildings will cover only 100,000 m<sup>2</sup>.
- 2- 95,000 m<sup>2</sup> will be open space; while 110,000 m<sup>2</sup> will be green space.
- 3- The Academy will establish Water harvesting station, as well as Grey-water treatment unit.
- 4- Some 500 trees will now be cut down, and new trees will be planted to replace the lost trees<sup>14</sup>.

However, the campaign and coalition of environmental supporters rejected the idea of violating the law, by means of compromise, and stand firm against the project making many proposals to relocate the proposed Military Academy outside Bergesh Forests. In the final stage, the growing strength of the campaign forced the government of Jordan, and the Jordanian Armed Forces to withdraw the decision and cancel the project proving the success of –the first ever- civil movement against governmental action. This success also marked unprecedented victory for peaceful environmental activists in the long way to defend citizen's environmental rights endorsed by almost all international human rights and environmental documents<sup>15</sup>, and vast majority of national constitutions and environmental laws<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup>Batir Wardam, Arab Environment Watchdog, available online at: <http://bwardam.wordpress.com/2011/01/23/momentum-increased-in-ajloun-anti-deforestation-campaign/>

<sup>15</sup> Rio Declaration on Environment and Development 1992, Available online at: [http://www.unesco.org/pv\\_obj\\_cache/pv\\_obj\\_id\\_C0911583226602DD3CE315A0216B9385F1050100/filename/RIO\\_E.PDF](http://www.unesco.org/pv_obj_cache/pv_obj_id_C0911583226602DD3CE315A0216B9385F1050100/filename/RIO_E.PDF)

Another significant point is to be made regarding the contentious existence of the Campaign's group, although, group total number remain stable without notable decrease, the Campaign to save Bergesh Forest maintains its' existence even after the project revoked. A very interesting suggestion was made by some groups' member to keep the Facebook group alive in order to monitor the environmental blights and potential crises and encounter any environmentally wrongful decisions or recklessness.

Another suggestion submitted by one member and received wide support from other group members demand a change in the groups' name to be campaign to save Jordan's forest, the more far reaching suggestion is made to upgrade the Facebook activities in a "Green Party" with political ambitions, the last suggestion – if realized- will be a benchmark development in the environmental awareness and action.

"Facebook alone is not enough without linking it to reality; Facebook helped to increase communication between the members, become a place for serious discussions and helped to gain more supporters from all over the world, who held activities to support the campaign. For example, some members in United States of America who joined us through Facebook organized activities there sent letters to the king, and embassies abroad. We had other members living in the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia who joined us through Facebook and shared us with the discussion and we exchange views and information on the Facebook group. Thus the role Facebook was communicative and provocative for those who joined the group, but alone is not enough without realistic activities on the ground".<sup>17</sup>

Facebook was not the sole reason for the campaign success, but it played a major role in providing many conditions for success, like the ability to gather people from different disciplines, reaching agreements through rational discussions, providing free, equal, and just environment for everyone to participate in the discussions and activities related, and the ability to organize and forcing the logical arguments to drive the change. These conditions have a direct relation with the Habermasian traditional notion of "public sphere".

### What is the Habermasian's' "Public Sphere"?

Habermas introduced the concept of the public sphere in different works, and offer its meaning in different ways, in his book *the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he defined the public sphere as "a place where the private bourgeoisies come together and form a public to discuss, engage in critical-rational-debate and form a public opinion"<sup>18</sup>

While in his article *The Public Sphere: an Encyclopedia Article*, Habermas wrote: By the 'public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed.... Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions— about matters of general interest.... The expression 'public opinion' refers to the tasks of criticism and control which a public body of citizens informally practices... vis-à-vis a ruling class.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the public sphere is a place where a **free, equal, rational** discussion of important issues of **public concern** occurs, which in turn affects the formation of public policy. Habermas mentioned Coffee houses, saloons and community tables in Europe as examples of public places, because of their potential for **equality, critique, easy access**, and giving room to discuss taboo problems. The public sphere returns to these discussions that revolve people in bus stations, elevators, in front of cooler water, and on the Internet and through SMS. Public sphere confirms itself as a bulwark against the influence of systematic organization of the state and the economy. Public sphere exists in civil society where people are able to

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<sup>16</sup> Article 66 of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, Available online at: [http://app.parlamento.pt/site\\_antigo/ingles/cons\\_leg/Constitution\\_VII\\_revisao\\_definitive.pdf](http://app.parlamento.pt/site_antigo/ingles/cons_leg/Constitution_VII_revisao_definitive.pdf), also Article 33 of the Constitution of the State of Qatar, Available on line at: <http://www.diwan.gov.qa/arabic/Qatar/constitution.htm>

<sup>17</sup> An interview with Feras Smadi, the admin of the Facebook group, on 5 December 2012

<sup>18</sup> Habermas, Jürgen (1991), "the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere".

<sup>19</sup> J. Habermas, (1974), *The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)*, *New German Critique*, No. 3, p. 49.

discuss issues of common interest as colleagues, and learn the facts, events, opinions, and perspectives of others, in an atmosphere free of coercion and inequality. Issues discussed in the public sphere in an informal context can be traced to influence debates politicians and legislators, therefore public sphere plays the role of mediator between the political system on the one hand, and private sectors in the "life world" on the other. It's a mediator between two other spheres: the Private Sphere, and the Sphere of Public Authority.

Habermas characterized his ideal type of the public sphere by what he called an "ideal speech situation". Robert Alexy developed rules for the ideal speech discourse based upon Habermas' work, of which the third rule states:

3.1 Every subject capable of speech and action may take part in discourses,

3.2 (a) Everyone may challenge any assertion,

3.2 (b) Everyone may introduce any assertion into the discourse,

3.2 (c) Everyone may express his/her attitudes, wishes and needs,

3.3 No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion; from exercising his/her rights under 3.1 and 3.2.<sup>20</sup>

### **Public sphere and deliberative democracy**

Deliberative democracy highlights the way that democratic legitimacy depends on the ability or opportunity to participate in the effective deliberation on the part of those citizens subject to collective decisions. To participate in deliberation means argument, rhetoric, humor, emotion testimony, storytelling or gossip. It implies an emphasis on a strong critical theory of communication, an oppositional civil society and a public sphere as sources of democratic critique and renewal. Deliberative democracy implies changing views and opinions, reasoned agreement through deliberation and a critical voice.<sup>21</sup>

Here we can see the strong relation between the concept of deliberative democracy and the notion of the public sphere, besides the Habermasian theory of communicative rationality as well.

In Habermas' point of view, deliberative democracy uses the entire public Sphere of a nation state, fosters active citizenship, and does not prevent any citizen from participating in political deliberation. Thus, the public sphere and the ideal speech situation shape the backbone of his deliberative theory. They are the main tools for forming of citizen power as a capability to perform influence on others and to challenge political and economical elites, because they describe how and where political deliberation can occur in a deliberative democracy. In Habermasian deliberative democracy the political deliberation is not restricted to political elites, and both the public and private spheres play a part in the political process.<sup>22</sup>

However, Habermas expect the demise of this public sphere, but wondering if the rise of the internet and social media could change his thinking. Habermas said that the demise of the public sphere is unavoidable because eventually advertising replaces news and media becomes a tool of the state, thus the public sphere discontinues serving in the manner originally intended. However, what we have seen in the recent dramatic events in the Arab world suggests that the public sphere which is social networking may be inherently resistant to any attempt to demolish it.

### **Can social Networks fit into the concept of public sphere?**

According to Habermas theory of public sphere, individuals must communicate in an environment where freedom and equality are guaranteed, respect is maintained, and productive ideas are exchanged. This public sphere is available anytime these requirements are met, in public places, streets, public parks,

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<sup>20</sup>Robert Alexy, an article published online at: <http://jakeg.co.uk/essays/habermas>

<sup>21</sup><http://www.sauer-thompson.com/archives/philosophy/002602.html>

<sup>22</sup>Bantas Hercules (2010), Jürgen Habermas and Deliberative Democracy, Melbourne- the Reluctant Geek, page. 3

coffee shops, but does public sphere apply to the digital age equipments such as the famous social network Facebook?

By opening the space to each and every one to share information, ideas, thoughts, and data including pictures, multimedia products or even actions with others; Facebook simply provides a platform where the "Facebookers" can freely present themselves to other "Facebookers". Although the concept is clear and simple, but, the question remains; to what extent Facebook fulfill the traditional Habermas concept of public sphere?

Although this issue is not well studied in Arabic context, I think it's eligible for further elaboration due to the current hot events in Arab world, the Tunisian, Libyan, Egyptian, and Syrian revolutions are great examples to examine the relation between Arab revolutions and social media like Facebook, that's what Al-Mustafa tried to do in his book released lately in Arabic titled: "the virtual public sphere in the Syrian revolution". Al- Mustafa believed that the Syrian regime had captured the public sphere in Syria for a long time, by its formal associations in order to prevent the exchange of views and attitudes, which was a good reason for the great demand for digital public sphere away from state authority control, that allow Syrians to produce political and social discourse and maturing the new phase in Syria after the series of Arab revolutions. The virtual public sphere became a place where young people meet without license and share different points of views, and became the only place outside the control of the Syrian regime<sup>23</sup>.

In western context we can find tens of papers discussing the relation between the internet and the Habermasian public sphere, in a study trying to answer the question " *Does the Internet provide the basis for a public sphere that approximates to Habermas' vision?* ", Gordon, concluded that: current technology powering the Internet enable it to be fairly decentralized and open, free from censorship and with the ability of anonymity. But new technologies can help create an even more decentralized, cheaper, anonymous and uncensored Internet. It is through these characteristics that the Internet can, indeed, at least provide the basis for a public sphere that approximates to Habermas' vision.<sup>24</sup>

It's important to note that Gordon have conducted his research in 2004, and since that time a massive changes have occurred on the internet, providing all what he asked for to make the internet provide the basis for a digital public sphere.

In his paper titled: "*Habermas and Discourse on Facebook Forums* ", Tryon concluded that "The Internet and online virtual spaces may provide the best practical equivalent for the concept of Habermas' public sphere. The Internet removes the ability for social evaluation, so, users are discussing and interacting on an equal level with each other. The members are rational beings, so the discourse and the consensus of the group are based on the strength of argument. I believe Habermas would agree the use of new online media definitely create the Ideal Speech Situation."<sup>25</sup>

When applied to Facebook Social Network, Habermasian concept of public sphere become relevant, since Facebook is a public place falls beyond the control of the state, it also allows individuals to freely exchange opinions and news, links, they can also share and argue over critical points of view, and finally is a space in which public opinion can be made.

As Habermas still alive, what he thinks of Internet as an alternative to public sphere? The researcher have found many arguments criticizing Habermas for ignoring the Net as a communicative space, that's what

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<sup>23</sup>. AlMustafa, Hamza Mustafa, (2012), "Cyber Public Sphere in the Syrian Revolution", Arab Center for Researches and Policies Studies, Al Doha, Qatar

<sup>24</sup> Gordon Jake, (2004) *Does the Internet provide the basis for a public sphere that approximates to Habermas' vision?*:

<http://jakeg.co.uk/essays/habermas>

<sup>25</sup> Tryon, TJ (2009), *Habermas and Discourse on Facebook Forums*: <http://www.tjtryon.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/tryon-habermas-and-discourse-on-facebook-forums.pdf>

one of the Bloggers interested in Habermas's public sphere said after attending a keynote lecture by communication studies warhorse Jürgen Habermas. He said: "Unfortunately, this has only confirmed my suspicion that Habermas is either unwilling or unable to translate his public sphere model of political communication in modern societies from the mass media to the network age. Or, put more bluntly, I don't think he really *gets* the Internet... Web-based communities only contribute to a further fragmentation of the populace into isolated issue publics, and that the only value of such communities can be found when they parasitically attach themselves to "quality" media in other media forms)." <sup>26</sup>

After reviewing the Habermas keynote speech that has now been published, <sup>27</sup> the researcher found that it's true that Habermas didn't give the net a special attention, but he instead mentioned the internet in the footnote by saying: "The Internet has certainly reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers. However, computer-mediated communication in the web can claim unequivocal democratic merits only for a special context: It can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion. In the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tends instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics"<sup>28</sup>. Here, Habermas was clear that the internet effects, in terms of democracy, are different according to the context of the regimes ruling the different states. He considered the Internet influential in the context of authoritarian regimes, while contributing to a further fragmentation of the audience into isolated issue publics in the context of liberal regimes. This opinion is in favor of the goal of this study.

Facebook currently has around one billion "Facebookers" all over the world, and by this huge number of owners of Facebook accounts, it forms a huge platform not only within the local sphere, but also universally.

The features available to the Facebook account holder are wide enough to allow him informing, mobilizing, and organizing supporters to a certain issue<sup>29</sup>.

### Results and Conclusion

- The Habermasian concept of public sphere was - to great extent- applied in the Facebook page of the National Campaign to save Bergesh Forest, the nature of conversation was related to a **public issue**, the **freedom** to express and share view and idea was fairly exercised, the **equality** and **respect** among the Facebookers within the group was embodied by the acceptance of opponents' membership. No personal or **private interest** was the motivation of the campaigners.
- The National Campaign to save Bergesh Forest from Execution on "Facebook Sphere" set an example on how people can practice their freedom to express in peaceful, **rational and logical** ways to defend their rights to healthy environment, sustainable development, and natural resources. Even in enhancing people environmental awareness. In this regard, Facebook sphere presents an effective platform to practice what may be described as deliberative democracy.
- The positive **communication and productive arguments** based on logic and feasibility with the concerned parties eventually lead to an agreement, or common understanding of different views and trends.

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<sup>26</sup> <http://snurb.info/node/621>

<sup>27</sup> Habermas Jürgen (2006), **Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research**, *Communication Theory*, **Volume 16, Issue 4**, pages 411–426.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, page 432

<sup>29</sup> Mike Westling, "Expanding the Public Sphere: The Impact of Facebook on Political Communication", 2007, Available online at: [http://www.thenewvernacular.com/projects/facebook\\_and\\_political\\_communication.pdf](http://www.thenewvernacular.com/projects/facebook_and_political_communication.pdf)

- The social networking services, i.e. Facebook, Twitter, etc. help people to gather, organize, and coordinate their efforts to support their belief, position, and movements. This was clear in the extraordinary events that took place and still ongoing in the Middle East and some Arab countries in the last few years during Arab spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and other Arab states with different level of public protests. The National Campaign to save Bergesh Forests from execution utilized from the relatively high level of tolerance with protesting movements.
- The effectiveness of communication in the public sphere depends on rational communication, logic, information; respect understanding and appreciation of different views and finally and most importantly on peaceful expression of opinions.
- The Jordanian political movements Facebook or ad hock groups, have some similar feature of Bergesh Facebook group, with some important differences, the pure political or economic demands for these movements, and the division among the members of the groups itself on the nature and the level of slogans raised in the group's activities, and the ultimate goal of the group.
- The limited outcomes –if any- of the various Jordanian political movements on social internet networks - especially on Facebook- is due to the absence of one or more of the above mentioned factors, besides, the political and security dimensions of some movements.
- The importance of public awareness of a certain issue affects the outcome of this issue in the public sphere. Apart from educational and media methods which create and enhance public awareness, Facebook groups can itself play vital role in enhancing public awareness of its' member by publishing and debating information, date, and comments related to the groups' subject matter. This awareness will assist the group to form public opinion and achieve its' goals.
- The **diversity** of group members is crucial factor to have more followers, and supports, which ultimately leads to the success of the group in achieving its' goals. While the single color or ideology-oriented groups limits or even minimizes the participation and support for these group and negatively affects its' efficiency and success. In this regard, one can notice that the well-educated groups members have a significant role to play in marketing the subject matter of the group, its' concerns, and goals. The coordination process is also important to any successful movement.
- The **concentration on one single issue** proved itself to have a vital role in the success of the group networking. Therefore, social networks groups with diverse goals "political, economic and social" have shown limited success and minimal achievements.
- The employment of different equipments in presenting the issue of the group. To effectively present an issue in the digital age, group should use collection of visual products, media, novel ideals and slogans, and should not rely on single method to attract attention and support.
- It was easy to gain overwhelming **consensus** on the issue of deforesting a rare forests .because conserving the nature is a universally undebatable principle.
- The unity among the group members and distribution of tasks will result in involving all members in the subject matter, and that will strengthen members belonging to the group and provide it with devoting and active members rather than just having a registered member.
- The mere involvement of women, children, and youth, and old people provides the group with strength, attraction and ability to justify its' concerns and therefore achieve its' goals; because having all categories of people means that the issue is of widespread effects and consequences. This diversity of the members, although the Facebook group members' were to somehow "elite" in terms education, wealth. However, they manage to organize direct communications with locals.
- The effective and successful network internet group pays attention to logistic support equipments that simplify the gathering and movement for group's members when certain action is required.
- The success of the Bergesh campaign shall be used as a model for any rightful environmental, political, economic reform movements.

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### **Biography**

Mrs. Asma H. Malkawi is Ph.D. candidate at the [University of Jordan](#). She is currently working on her Ph.D. thesis titled “**Communicative ethics in the digital age: Application of Habermas' theory of communicative ethics**”. Mrs. Malkawi graduated with a Master in sociology from the same University 1998, then, Mrs. Malkawi worked at [Aljazeera Satellite Channels Networks](#) based in Doha/Qatar as a website editor, and later at [the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research “ECSSR”](#) based in Abu Dhabi/ United Arab Emirates as a researcher, she also worked as an academic coordinator and lecturer at [School for International Training- \*SIT\*](#) based in Amman/ Jordan. She is also working with [International Institute for Islamic Thought \*IIIT\*](#) as a book reviewer for the IIIT refereed Journal “[islamiyat almaarifah](#)”. Mrs. Malkawi is also an activist in social work, and media sphere. She actively participated in the National Campaign to save Bergesh Forest from Execution. Her research interests cover wide range of topics i.e. sociology, social work, philosophy, media.