

Reading Networks on Facebook: the case of Arabesk and Oasis Littéraire

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Abstract

In this article, we will deal with the part played by the "Facebook" social network in the development of reading networks in Algeria. Arabesk and Oasis Littéraire, two networks whose members share a common interest in "reading", have been singled out for this case study. We will also rely on the analysis of discussion threads posted on the wall of the two pages concerned.

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I. Introduction

The role played by reading in society is paramount. Without reading, it is obviously not possible to claim knowledge or to acquire some degree of education, wisdom... or even peace of mind for that matter. This inner peace born out of reason is the highest point we can reach[1] in terms of fulfilment. And if in real life the observation made by the COBIAC points to the lack of both a reading network and a genuine policy of public libraries in Algeria[2], the virtual world seems to be changing things with the coming on Facebook of several networks focusing on books.

[Arabesk\[3\]](#) and [Oasis Littéraire\[4\]](#) whose members share a common interest in "reading" are the sample case study which has aroused our interest for at least the two following reasons:

- 1 / The initiative, among others, to set up a reading network on Facebook challenges the negative image that some people convey concerning this social network by claiming, more often than not, that it basically has a detrimental impact on society.

- 2 / The Algerian reading landscape seems to be in dramatic shape, which leads us to wonder here if the relevant networks harboured on Facebook could be resorted to in order to help contribute to the development and growth of the reading habits and skills that go with it. They might allow for the connecting and interacting of two generations of people: the one which likes to feel the book 'in the stuff', so to say, and remains addicted to the printed material and the one which has been known for some time as the internet generation and feels at home with electronic reading matter.

II. Reading in Algeria: An alarming situation

Following the First National Conference held under the title: "Facts and Prospects Concerning the Reading Situation in Algeria" which took place in 2009, the world economic consulting and forecasting centre published a study according to which "the rate of book reading in Algeria does not exceed 6.8 %." [5]. A survey was conducted among 1000 people in 10 wilayas and yielded disturbing figures of a "widespread lack " of reading in the country, with the exception of utility books: 16% for religious books, 9 % for books dealing with computers, 8% for law books. The rate of subscription to magazines or newspapers is pretty low and does not exceed 14.2%.

There was little, if any, reading concerning literary works or books by authors whose themes are outside the technical or social sphere. Novels and other creative works drawn from the imagination, the sensitivity of their authors who, through a book, tell a story which is likely to appeal to prospective readers and enlighten them about themselves and the world we live in have basically no readership in this country. This is the intellectual dimension that has been set aside in Algeria in favour of books of immediate utilitarian value whose scope is limited to narrow everyday life needs and concerns. Reading habits have first and foremost something to do with "frame of mind". Indeed, no focus on reading can be transmitted to the younger generations in a context in which this is not officially supported and promoted.

III. Reading not part of Algerians' everyday life

Mustapha Madi, the editorial director of the Casbah Edition publishing house, has come forward against what he claims is an "anti-culture and anti-reading" [6] environment: except for some educational books, literary works are not

included in school curricula and most teachers do not read much. Since books are no more part of a child's environment and are not readily available at school or in the family, then reading might never become part of his or her everyday life, neither when young nor after having reached adulthood. The promotion of reading and books among children and young people requires that core elements of mainstream society and officialdom be involved in the process [7]. Mr Azzedine Mihoubi, the Director of the National Library, also stresses the need "to initiate a comprehensive working approach aimed at fitting reading activities into the living environment of Algerians." [8] This implies that Algerians have to start over from scratch as far as reading activities are concerned: they need to integrate or reintegrate the practice which should spread beyond the school or institutional context into homes, living rooms, and even bedrooms and bedside tables and become part of everyone's everyday environment.

Each narrative book opens a window on a new world to be discovered, a world imagined by an author. It is not just some kind of factual piece of writing with limited historical or educational connotations aimed at an elite and limited to its own cultural sphere. A book comes to life through the story it tells, through the words chosen and the images it conveys. It involves an inner journey at the end of which the reader, upon closing the book he has just finished, feels rewarded by a new experience. A book can thus be associated with a pleasurable experience, a relaxing piece of enjoyment, an entertaining journey of the mind. It can also lead one to question things, to think further, to challenge one's deep-seated convictions.

Letting books into everybody's home and making reading a daily practice involves the purchasing of some kind of literary work, the cost of which amounts to about 2 % of the basic family income: that is, 200 to 350 DZD for the average household earning around 15 000 DZD a month. At first look, the amount seems rather small, but considering the fact that books are not a priority under our climes, people may consider the expense as an extra burden. There's another issue involved when it comes to buying books: quality. Indeed, the presentation of the titles published in Algeria and the quality of the paper they are printed on are below average, the layout is basic to rough, and spelling and syntax are, more often than not, of a very low standard. Consequently, the price tag of a book is not justified by the quality of the object as such. Moreover, the whole chain of publication and distribution of books is undermined by the availability of better quality imports, the contents of which is trustable to most readers: this is basically a reflex here in this country, as we usually prefer buying something that we know will benefit the influential import lobby instead of investing in an unknown product of relatively modest social standing. There is therefore, according to Ms. Samar [9] and concerning books, "a problem of marketing, not of price. It is not that expensive", she stated. Charging 1000 DZD for a 500-page book such as the unpublished memoirs of Malek Bennabi should not be considered outrageous. To speak the truth, it must be said that the conditions for reading are not met yet [10].

IV. Historical factors

"The history of the book in Algeria is intrinsic to the history of publishing and book distribution in France, especially in its colonial period. It is a historical factor that has favoured the import of French books in Algeria: any colonized country, before securing its independence, will bear the stigma of colonial culture: either in a positive or in a negative way. We can not possibly condemn or question the quality of the French book or forego the pleasure of reading great French authors of now and yore, but it is just unfortunate that Algerian literary culture was extensively overshadowed by the de facto monopoly of French publishing houses, so much so that the Algerian literary production is having a hard time finding a niche of its own. In the sixties, the government wanted to ensure the promotion and distribution of books in Algeria. But those involved in the production line were soon confronted by material contingencies they could hardly cope with and which officialdom did little to help them weather. So they ended up specializing importing and distributing foreign material in the nineties. Indeed, political and economic priorities were such, over the past few decades, that reading activities never really found their way into schools, homes or libraries.

Books are said to be expensive: this is a universal phenomenon. This is because a fairly great number people are involved in the business of making and printing them. Thus, even beyond the publishing chain topped by the publisher, Algerian literary creation can hardly flourish and prevail in the country. This is compounded by the fact that literary critics are pretty few in Algeria and that any publication, regardless of its quality, is overpraised or sensationalized as Algerian literary production is very low, to say the least.

V. National awareness

Nevertheless, Algeria may have finally emerged from her literary slumber. Recently, reading has become a national issue, tantamount to a 'public health' issue, although things are still changing timidly in this field. Yet, the Algerian people, usually presented as unread and uncultured, are said to be going through a more positive trend in terms of reading. The first targeted area is that of education: the Ministry of Culture plans to integrate the mandatory study of at least four books a year in the curriculum to be implemented in national schools. This is an appropriate and timely awareness-raising step which will also have to take into account the fact that the new generation of students would rather resort to modern communication tools than find their way to knowledge simply through flipping sheets of paper. To this effect, the Centre National du Livre (or National Book Centre) was recently inaugurated in Algeria^[11]. Its goals are claimed to be ambitious. This must begin, of course, by the promoting and developing of book related activities and projects. Now, book fairs are growing in numbers and scope and the Fifteenth International Book Fair was an opportunity to gauge the "reading situation" in the country. A situation which, though not as teeming with action as one should expect, nevertheless sent a

glimmer of hope in the Algerian cultural landscape. A network of libraries is in the process of being developed through a project involving 48 large general libraries and 400 lending libraries for 2014. Moreover, the State intends to exempt printers from VAT to bring down the price of paper and make it easier for the publishing industry to grow. Some authors, whose role was instrumental in helping launch these projects, are prodding the State to take steps in this matter: Mohamed Saidi, for example, spoke out in 2009 against the pattern of consumerism that governs this country at the expense of production and called for the implementation of a "national cultural project." Nouredine Bakira, who is a journalist, argues that the promotion of sound reading habits among the citizenry depends on the political commitments made in this direction. For publishers, the book industry "is changing while still trying to weather its way forward."

These political commitments should be aimed at improving the image of Algeria in terms of reading activities which have always been perceived as reserved for an elite. This is a cultural heritage of some importance as readers and writers have, for centuries, been educated people, scholars and pundits, as well as clerics, whose access to culture was exclusive. Today, the notion of "developed" or "developing" country is irrevocably linked to that of culture for all and the implementation of literacy campaigns in rural areas. For it is the richness of the vocabulary he uses that makes man more intelligent: and it just does not work the other way round. It is said that nowadays vocabulary is acquired through a hundred words. Only a scanty hundred! Whereas every word brings nuance to one's thinking, and thus enriches and develops the mind! By indulging in reading activities, man becomes more intelligent, his sense of judgment grows subtler and more refined through the use of words which are more appropriate to the formulation of his ideas. Thus, in our era of globalization where communication networks between countries have never been so intertwined, the impact of reading and culture is paramount: it is the guarantee of certain intellectual aptitudes, hence of credibility, without which a country cannot make headway and open up to the world. With such projects centred on reading, Algeria is in the process of improving its image in our time and day.

VI. The prevalence of the media: a stain on this picture of hope

One of the most frequently raised concerns about the book crisis is the social role played by television. This has been true in a number of countries. It has been estimated through recent surveys that 80 % of high school students aged 12 to 15 spend about four hours per day watching television, which drastically curtails the span of time which could have been dedicated to reading[\[12\]](#).

People are devoting an ever shrinking chunk of the time available to them to reading because the world is going too fast and also because reading turns out to be, more often than not, a demanding task: taking hold of a book is not another trivial act performed in a perfunctory manner. It assumes that one is psychologically and physically fit or in the mood to read, say, five or one hundred and fifty pages at a stretch. Reading requires a restful atmosphere, peace of mind, a quiet environment, and, above all, sufficient brain power to allow for proper concentration of the mind.

It also demands that one's body be relaxed and not subjected to the discomfort of an inadequate position which could distract the mind and set it on coping with an awkward kind of situation at the expense of the reading experience. Still, it is not uncommon to see, standing in a bus at the rush hour, book lovers ignoring all physical constraints and deriving pleasure from immersing themselves in the universe of a book they will grasp, twist, fold and hold but never let go of, as it belongs as much in their environment as their cellphone. And although the reverse is unlikely to prove true, a person who is in the habit of reading can easily open up to the use of communication tools such as mobile phones or the Internet. Curiosity, induced by the practice of reading, may be the reason why it is so. Going forth from this observation may lead one to learn from a lesson here as a person devoted to the practice of NICTs will seldom display similar interest for a book, probably simply because reading is a more deliberate act which demands a degree of voluntary involvement from the individual. This may account for why it is more difficult to accomplish.

VII. Reading and Facebook not that incompatible

It should first be noted that Algerian facebookers, both male and female, are from various cultural and educational backgrounds and age range. Figures show a predominance of men (68%) using Facebook. But there is no way to assess the reliability of this sort of data, especially since a fair number of persons using facebook pretend they belong to the opposite sex[13]. Facebook, which is considered today to be the king of social networks, is based on the viral marketing pattern, which is quite interesting as it can come in useful in the promotion of reading and books in Algeria, especially since the number of Algerians registered on Facebook is estimated to be 2,244,020, that is some 47.75 % of that country's online population[14].

The age structure and distribution on Facebook definitely favours those individuals who were born and / or grew up in the era of computers and the internet (41% are young people aged between 18 and 24 and those between the ages of 13 and 15 account for 8% of registered users. Statistical values decrease in the case of people who stayed away from this new trend in communication and information exchange: those aged 55 to 65 account for only 3 % of users.

If we assume, in the case of Algeria, the presence of a large non-reading population, along with the difficulty of applying a consistent political will on the field despite the launching of well intentioned initiatives aimed at bringing about change, it seems interesting to state that reading and new communications are not as incompatible as they sometimes appear to be. In fact, they may even prove complementary and interactive in many ways. Reading networks that spin their threads on the social areas of the web are interesting, though fairly unanticipated: think of the myth of the good old dusty book facing the revolutionary modernity of Facebook! This is like having a dinosaur and a human being living in the same world and era! It is a challenge that a number of reading networks on Facebook have successfully

addressed, as we shall see through two Algerian instances of this, namely Arabesk and Oasis Littéraire, whose resourcefulness is worth noting.

VIII. Arabesk, a multilingual book club from Algiers

Arabesk was established in October 2008: the "wall", which stands for some kind of Id for a network or a member on Facebook displays the following commitments:

You love reading, you are into writing: break free from the isolation imposed by either of these activities and come and share your passion for it with us by joining our group.

For those who are passionate about reading and writing, with a strong dedication to languages and cultural diversity, ARABESK, the vintage Algiers Book Club (the multilingual literary circle) is a forum where everyone can express their opinions on a book of their choice in their heartfelt language by writing a first review or critique about it; or propose their own literary work to gauge its impact on readers' minds or to partake in the interactive sharing of creative thinking and fine wit.

ARABESK is the place where all languages have equal status and interact in harmony. The place where cultures are revealed and man's inner self is laid bare for us to behold.

Have a nice read, an enjoyable writing experience and, above all, let the magic of books enthral you! May the spell of language take hold of your soul and never let go!

Incidentally, it could be noted in passing that the appellation of this network, namely "Arabesque", has its origins in classical Islamic decorative art. The finely wrought geometric shapes and their layout set patterns whose repetitive effects extend beyond the visible material world. This is a legitimate representation of the multilingual and multicultural nature of this group.

The *Arabesk* network currently has 536 members^[15] who happen to include both men and women, age groups ranging from young to old, belonging to various socio-professional categories and nationalities. They come together on the network because they harbour a common interest in reading and writing activities. The discussion forum covers all topics, including the assessment of books or the way given members feel about a specific piece of literary work. Some will boldly try their hand at literary criticism and follow the rules required by the task and resort to reviewing techniques aimed at allowing them to come up with a comprehensive and structured approach of a work when summarizing the story into an abstract, providing a small biography of the author, giving an assessment based on personal appreciation through persuasive speech, and eventually reporting on the availability of the book in Algiers. Reactions soon follow, especially when another member replies to this post by saying: "This is the second time someone has suggested this author to me within less than a week! I'm going to get his book as soon as I can." Other members will restrain themselves to recommending books they enjoyed reading without providing any further explanation. Others, still, will quote excerpts

from literary works that appealed to them. In all cases, posts are always very responsive and positive and it is a safe bet to state that such members will actually get the book. However, it is difficult to find out more, because feedback on the quality and enjoyability of the books recommended is scarce.

This is where literary criticism takes on its subjective dimension. In an academic submission, Marion Foresti addresses the topic of reading enjoyment:

What, then, is reading enjoyment? The very notion of "pleasure" imparts a very personal dimension to this activity. Christian Poslaniec, however, gives the following definition: reading enjoyment is "a construction of meaning by the reader which can lead to full appropriation if necessary." Thus, this activity differs from reading aimed at learning through

the reader's involvement, the empathy and identification that develop in the latter's mind and which lead him or her to identify with the characters of the story. Reading then becomes a unique experience which will vary depending on the reader. So this is something very personal indeed.

Through the Arabesk reading network, a book will be praised, put forward in a way or another. First, there will be at least one reader. Then the network will see to it that interest in this particular book becomes contagious and that the reading bug is transmitted to other members. But how is one to coax people into purchasing a book one has appreciated, especially when one has only known them on the Internet, and their culture, language, age, sex, occupation are different? Even a bookseller has, to advise on a book, got to ask prospective readers questions in order to present them with a particular book! Members could, through the "wall" displaying the interests of each member, get some clues about this. Still, it has turned out fairly difficult, with regard to the actual contents of this "wall", to get a clear idea of everyone's reading inclinations and wishes! A literary prize is far more persuasive, and the work that stands a chance to win is guaranteed a certain number of sales over a few years...

Another advantage of the Arabesk reading network is that it holds literary cafes in Algiers, appropriately named "Île Lettrée" as a mild rebellion against the alarming situation of reading in Algeria. These cafés are a monthly opportunity to meet, interact and trigger debates revolving around topical themes, and to listen to writers declaiming poetry. But then again, one has to wonder if the current attendance rate really meets the expectations of the organisers, especially considering the valiant efforts displayed all along and the difficult logistics involved in this type of event, like soliciting speakers, reserving space to meet in, communicating to have a fair number of people turn up and welcoming an audience in a comfortable atmosphere worthy of a literary cafe. Well, it must be admitted here that it does not, especially since those members do not all have their place of abode in Algiers.

But the commitment of the organizers to turn reading activities into a widespread cultural habit is unwavering, even if the impact happens to be of low amplitude at the moment. Besides, there may still be a hitch on the way to encouraging the younger generations to read and love reading, especially for those who think that this can easily be achieved through Facebook. As we mentioned above, there are readers and non readers. Readers will never, if ever, become non readers, they harbour within themselves a deep-seated penchant for reading and their bond to the world of books is very strong: they are the ones who will most likely join a network such as Arabesk. On the other hand, Facebook, through the social network system it encompasses, may lead non readers to develop a sense of awareness to reading, even a taste for it. This may come to some through enjoying a novel which they will, in turn, tout for among their friends and acquaintances, even if they do not actually develop a sudden passion for reading; at least, the notion that this is not an unpleasant experience will make its way into their minds until they may, one day, step into a bookshop or a library and take home their first book which, if enjoyed, will motivate them to discover yet another one, and so on until reading hopefully becomes part of their daily lives, their environment. They might be tempted to goad other people to do likewise through the same social network or otherwise. Now back to the hitch: all this is highly hypothetical and Facebook is still too young for any tangible results to be felt in this matter.

IX. Another reading network: Oasis Littéraire

Let us now switch to the other reading network available in Algeria, namely Oasis Littéraire, established in March 2010. Again, the name choice sounds both modest and ambitious, and conveys the idea that reading can be a safe haven, a sanctuary of peace, and is as essential to our survival as water can be in the desert. The "wall" of the club says:

This club aims to bring together as many people as possible around a shared passion for reading and to allow for the discovery of new works and the mutual exchange of preferences. The club also endeavours to organize literary events centred on books and authors. The group's activities are currently limited to the Algiers area, but everyone is obviously welcome to join in.

PS: Please note that the use of "SMS" text entries is not tolerated here as attention to style allows for clarity and broader understanding. Thank you.

Wanis, a young Algerian who also happens to be the group administrator explains his motivation for setting up this network: "We had to find a way to bring book fans together. This is a difficult undertaking because literary culture is finding it hard to survive in our country, whence the idea of this group."

The post on the "wall" about "SMS" writing sounds somewhat blunt, but it is perfectly legitimate: what is, in fact, expressed in writing when setting aside the rules, codes and uses of the written language? The "SMS" language was originally intended for use in telephone messages issued in a pseudo phonetic form disregarding spelling usage in order to limit their size and help alleviate the financial effects of their phone bills: this is another form of rebellion, an intelligent one, which eventually came in handy in helping outsmart the major telecommunications groups. And when, after a few years, the latter launched large usage packages for a set price to send SMS, the damage had been done and the younger generations soon lost touch with the basic rules of spelling, limiting their writing to short messages bearing letter-starved words drifting along unstructured, awkwardly constructed sentences. It seems everyone implemented their own spelling reform, appropriating written language their way. The vocabulary used is less rich, communication is rather truncated. Possibly, it has become appropriate to ask if the Mind itself has not thus suffered through a constant depletion of our thinking processes? Indeed, daily life is fraught with images of the young and the old, even children, exchanging messages like lol, lol, hi, in 2M1; even religious expression has not been spared 'abbreviations' such as hmd (for elhamdou lillah or Thanks God) and the list of these is so extensive and quirkily idiosyncratic as to reflect a world of its own marked by a fair degree of rejection of a number of socio-linguistic norms.

Moreover, by refusing "SMS" type posts, Oasis Littéraire has clearly taken its stand in the world of reading it intends to defend and promote. A stand which has appealed to many since 1,208 members have joined. They all share a strong interest in all forms of reading. Advice, guidance and opinions are plentiful, posts are brief but lively, and the works mentioned or dealt with are from many countries and various genres, although it is to be noted that there is a predominance of what are known as the great classics of literature which, incidentally, also happen to be part of school or university curricula. Just as is the case on the Arabesk network, critical reviews are available, albeit scantily. The emphasis is more on the reading part than on identification: those who have enjoyed a book will readily say so, but appropriation of a work by the reader remains a mystery. Does the latter fail to reveal anything about his or her impressions out of sheer modesty or is it because he or she cannot find a way to formulate thoughts and feelings? The first assumption may sound legitimate, but the second one seems more disturbing...

X. Can Facebook serve the purpose of promoting reading?

Though Facebook has been criticized by intellectuals for the paucity of its content and the potentially dangerous use that can be made of it, itself and these reading networks pose a challenge. Could writing, the noblest accomplishment that man has ever achieved, be absorbed by and entrusted to that icon of communication of the Internet? Why not, after all? Facebook is now being praised or criticized because it is the forerunner of an irreversible revolution in the way we communicate: and because some find it scary. Well, books were burnt not so long ago in the course of man's history because they were thought to be scary too. Endowed with the power to arouse and awaken consciences, they are tokens of openness of the mind.

But a book can also be dangerous, and so reading is set on the same interaction register with reality as Facebook: a book can lead a reader on a slippery slope, on the fringe of society or send him or her astray legalitywise. A book can be dangerous to society, to the established order or the reader as such. Facebook, too, can be turned into as dangerous a tool if used inappropriately. For, in the end, it is not the tool that can pose a threat but the person who wields it. Reading, depending on how it is directed by the person who instigates it, does not always carry an innocent connotation with it.

Why not, then, consider "undemonizing" Facebook for a moment and see that in this case as in many others, it can be a great tool for communication, knowledge transfer, and herald things to hopefully become automatic for Algeria? Opening a book, running one's fingers along the very paper it is made of, even smelling it, feeling a tickle in the tip of one's nose when some dust flies off the pages being flipped, turning them over while proceeding through a narrative text and getting immersed in the story of a character, discovering a fictional universe created by an author.

The intangible nature of a book, if one goes further, can be compared to that of Facebook: immersing oneself in a book is like making a trip into another world, meeting characters in their fictional environment which in the imagination of the author are palpably real. It is reality in another dimension. Facebook also creates some kind of reality belonging in another dimension. It is this link between two seemingly incompatible spheres that could spur non readers to head further and try their wits at yet another communication tool, just as ambiguously addictive: namely, the book.

Finally, even if Facebook cannot change Algerian society and turn it from a non reading sphere into an intensively reading one, it is our belief that it can contribute to the restructuring of social and cultural links among Algerians, especially since these links were dramatically severed due to violent events having occurred not so long ago and, better still, prove instrumental in helping build a true democracy in which the number of readers is most likely to grow incrementally.

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