



Vol. 14, 2019

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**Breaking Barriers Through Digital Platforms:
Utilizing Social Media to Influence Health Policy in the Saudi Kingdom**

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between social media and Saudi health governance in 2014 and 2015. Using qualitative data, the study demonstrates that the rapid increase in adopting media has enabled this sector to provide a digital voice for its audience. Prior to the advent of digital technology and social media, the Kingdom succeeded in maintaining a high degree of censorship among its population. However, in the past decade the significant growth of digital platforms and social media usage by Saudi public has given rise to a citizen's voice, which proved hard for the KSA government officials to fully regulate or control. The power of this new digital precedent is evidenced by online public criticism that led to the firing of prominent Ministers of Health in 2014 and 2015. A once silenced majority has now gained the ability to express dissension and influence public opinion. This present case study highlights two major challenges facing the Saudi governance with issues related to public health: transparency and accountability. It also demonstrated how the desire for transparency and accountability has found an outlet through social media, thereby enabling the Saudi public to gain access to the ear of its ruling monarch. The aim of this study is to highlight the role that new media plays in influencing the governing process of public health.

**Breaking Barriers Through Digital Platforms:
Utilizing Social Media to Influence Health Policy in the Saudi Kingdom**

As a nation with an absolute power structure and authoritarian media control, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has traditionally been a country where public opinion fails to influence political decision-making (Whitten & James, 2012). However, in recent years, with advancements in media and citizen involvement through social media, ordinary citizens have begun to utilize online platforms in order to voice perspectives and thereby impact the type of political decisions that result in issuing new Royal Decrees. According to CITC, "social media is proven as an effective and easy tool of interaction between the public and the government agencies" (CITC, 2018). The rise in social media in KSA during the last decade has been well documented. The Kingdom has the "highest annual growth rate of social media users anywhere in the world" (CITC, 2018). According to GMI, social media usage has sky-rocketed during this

time period. Of the nation's 33.25 million citizens, 30.25 million or (90.28% of the population) are active Internet users (GMI, 2018). 25M citizens (75.19% of the population) are active social media users. More interestingly, 17.29M (52% of the population) actively engage in Twitter (GMI, 2018).¹

This present study is based on an of a case that documents the impact of digital media on public policy in KSA. In 2014, local dissenters began to use social media as a platform in order to express criticism of certain officials at the Ministry of Health. The online dissemination of these views invariably reached government top officials, who responded definitively by dismissing two ministers and three high-ranking governmental employees at the same Ministry within a year. The case sheds light on KSA's accommodation of public opinion to influence an authoritative government in a third-world, developing nation.

This case is significant because it directly shows the cause-effect relationship that local social media can have on Saudi domestic public policy. It begins with a brief background on the Saudi Ministry of Health, explaining how the Kingdom appoints cabinet ministers (Law of the Council of Minister, 1993). Next, it presents two incidents where social media led to the removal of two Ministers of Health, one after the other. The first incident stems from a public outcry over a Minister of Health's mishandling of an outbreak of the MERS virus (Ajbailli, 2014). The second incident stems from a YouTube video that appeared on Saudi forums social media pages, showing the then new Minister of Health berating the son of an elderly patient (SPA, 2015). An evaluation of the case study highlights how the negative rhetoric presented through social media provoked action within the Saudi government.

¹ According to GMI, 23.61M (71% of Saudi citizens) use YouTube, 21.95M (66%) use Facebook, 17.96M (54%) use Instagram, and 10.64M (32%) use Google+ (GMI, 2018).

In addition to its emphasis on the power of new media, the case highlights the value that healthcare is given by Saudi citizens. As provided in the Saudi Basic Law of Governance, all citizens of KSA are provided free access to public health care services (Basic Law of Governance, 1992). In the Kingdom, the Ministry of Health is the main provider and financier of health care services. The Ministry of Health is also responsible for managing, planning, and formulating health policies and supervising health services in the private sector. Overall, the Ministry of Health provides 60% of all health care services Kingdom-wide (World Health Organization, 2006). An additional 20% is provided by government ministries that, prior to the creation of the Ministry of Health, have traditionally catered to their own employees. The remaining 20% of all health services are provided by the private sector (Naser & Alqahtani, 2015).

Despite Saudi Arabia's health care advances during the past decade, the system faces challenges based on two prominent factors: a growing population and a heightened susceptibility to uncontrollable and difficult to treatment of specific diseases (H1N1 and MERS). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2014) reported that KSA is well below the average prevention costs that other high-income countries spend. Only 4% of Saudi Arabia's GDP was allocated to health care in 2010, while it was only 4.7% in 2014. Due to the importance of healthcare to Saudi citizens, there seems to be a significant misalignment between government actions and public demands. As citizens continue to ratchet up social media protests, major challenges will confront the Ministry of Health. These challenges have been widely reported in the Kingdom's media (Albargawi, 2015). Healthcare issues confronting Saudi citizens have been popularly reported in social media, which provides a basis for the present case study.

Literature Review

A conceptual Map of Media and Governance in Saudi Arabia

Central to this study is the question: *does mass media have the power to influence policymaking?* Koch-Baumgarten and Voltmer (2010) claim that policymakers have traditionally believed that the media has a strong ability to influence citizens. This belief emanates from the fact that individuals tend to be substantively influenced by what they read, listen to, and watch (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer, 2010). To this end, we may predict that public opinion influences public policy, but it is quite complex to examine how this effect materializes. The existing literature does not provide a definitive explanation for how the media impacts public policy. Thus, rather than seeking to illustrate a singular cause-effect relationship, the author starts by parceling the various effects into focused, empirically manageable sub-questions: *which media, which policy, and with what impact?*

The Ruling Elite theory authored by Wright Mills is a special sub-category within the authoritarian model. It applies to Saudi's historical media and governance dyad (Mills, 2000). According to Mills, "the ruling elite" consists of the members of society that hold dominant positions and have the power to manipulate ordinary citizens by virtue of their lofty positions at the top of society (Mills, 2000). The ruling elite and their decisions heavily impact both the national and international communities. Chomsky (1988) suggests that media is used by the powerful elite to disseminate propaganda that serves the interests of the wealthy class at the expense of the working one. This brand of media influence seems apropos to Saudi Arabia, where hierarchical rule and social order represent the basic realities of everyday life.

The Impact of Social Media on Political Communication in KSA

Although social media access through Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, etc. has provided Saudi citizens with opportunities to express and share their opinions and ideas, there are notable limitations to the discerning tangible effects of those new public outlets (@KingSalman, 2015). Content is still controlled and censored through local policies (Media Policy, 1982). Citizens can speak their mind, but not about everything. A significant query raised by this study seeks to identify how the massive technological changes of recent years have influenced media and policy in the Kingdom.

In KSA, social media has increasingly become the preferred information source for the citizens who are twenty-five or younger (Hubbard, 2015); this segment represents 44.67% of Saudi's population (Index Mundi, 2018). This increase in digital media usage has provided new voice to a significant portion of the population that has historically lacked a forum for public expression. In the process, what was once government-controlled, the long-term agenda of elite media ownership with a single agenda has shifted to open participation and diverse agenda setting among actively engaged social media participants (Petkovic, 2004). American journalist David Hoffman describes social media as "citizens rising" in which "independent journalism and the spread of democracy portrays media's role in breaking the reign of ignorance and fear that are the first lines of defense for despots everywhere" (Hoffman, 2013).

The process progresses as such: social media influences traditional media, which in turn results in a political reform (Grzywinska, 2012). In the Kingdom, social media has provided a direct link between citizens and the government, transforming the once passive role that standard citizens had vis a vis their ruling monarchy. This subversion of traditional power norms stands at the forefront of this research and highlights a major empowerment movement within the

Kingdom. The shift from passive to active participation has been made manifest by three major factors: *citizen journalism*, *citizens acting as watchdogs*, and *medicalization*.

These phenomena are particularly relevant because traditionally Saudi journalists have not been free to act as watchdogs. However, the integration of new technologies and social media gave rise to "citizen journalism", a branch of citizen-generated media that acts as a "fourth state or watchdog" (Riaz, 2011). The KSA of the past half-decade is one country in which citizens are critiquing, monitoring, and making sure that governing bodies perform and act with their people's interests at heart.

David Hoffman identifies this as *citizens rising*, a phenomenon in which independent journalism helps to spread democracy and break free from the reign of ignorance and fear that characterizes despotic rule (Hoffman, 2013). This occurs when the dynamics of media and information sharing shift from control by the "elite" few to media ownership by all citizens. When this shift occurs, the voiceless utilizes the power of digital technology in order to document events that traditional media is not allowed to cover. In this process, media becomes an actor rather than an observer (Saudi Press Agency, 2014).

The Media as a Power Resource

The media has always had the potential to be a tool for empowerment. Scullion, Gerodimos, Jackson, and Lilleker (2013) argue that power in political communication is ideally intended to facilitate the civic voice. When the media is working for the benefit of the people, the interaction between media and politics is a form of political communication, which has a cultural effect on shaping values and norms (Scullion, Gerodimos, Jackson & Lilleker, 2013). This interaction influences political communication and political discussions, thereby positively impacting citizen empowerment.

We know, however, that the ideal role of media is not always consistent with its actual role. Research by Scullion, Gerodimos, Jackson, and Lilleker's suggest that the media's role in the Middle East both empowers *and* disempowers citizens (Scullion, Gerodimos, Jackson & Lilleker, 2013). It empowers citizens by providing information on a variety of social issues (civil rights, information sharing, women's empowerment), but disempowers them by selectively editing information, censoring, and deliberately providing a skewed perspective to advance specific media agendas and aims. To complicate the matter further, media in the Middle East provides a minimum number of platforms for motivating individuals to mobilize and effect significant changes. In this sense, media within the Middle East both helps and hinders the common citizen.

Public Opinion

In the Western world, public opinion historically had a strong influence over both the media and policy makers. In Saudi Arabia, however, this has not historically been the case. A notable exception to this were the tribes (Otaiba, Mtair, Qahtan) that served as consultants to the King during Saudi's early history as a nation. Prior to the advent of social media, public opinion had relatively no influence in KSA. However, the recent penetration of digital media is changing the landscape.

A pioneering study conducted by Prince Mohammad Bin Naif of the *Center for Counselling and Care* (CCC) has examined the new role of public opinion in the Kingdom (Sakr, 2014). Specifically, it has examined new media's impact on political reform. This study of 2014 found that religious scholars, in particular, possess a powerful ability to impact both the media and policy makers. Sakr argues that religious scholars can have an impact on both media agenda

and policy makers due to the fact that they are highly respected as protectors and maintainers of social norms (Sakr, 2007).

Social Media: The New Voice

Social media has greatly augmented the influence of public opinion in the Kingdom. This is a reality that even Saudi authorities have accepted. In 2004 Saudi Arabia lifted its ban on camera phones, which have become the primary tool for citizen journalism (Albashir, 2014). In 2014, at his speech at the Asia Media Summit, King Abdullah confirmed the impact that social media has had on shaping public opinion: “Countries around the world are exposed to extraneous cultural influences that shake the foundations of humanitarian and religious values because of the dissemination of irresponsible media content. We request that media experts use their influence constructively” (Papachrissi, 2009). Public opinion is a 21st century reality for the monarchy.

Efforts to Suppress Social Media

Although it is true that social media is influencing public opinion in the Kingdom, there remain significant efforts by authoritarian figures to suppress it. On November 5th of 2014, former Minister of Media, Abdulaziz Khoja, was dismissed from his position after tweeting "I had ordered the shutdown of Wesal channel's bureau in Riyadh and [am] banning it from broadcasting in the Kingdom" (@abdilazizkhoja, 2014). The late King Abdullah reacted to the tweet by canceling the closure order. If a single tweet regarding the closure of a channel resulted in the dismissal of a such a high ranking official, it demonstrates the power the authoritarian government still possesses to suppress unfavorable public views. This incident highlights the dualistic media system in the Kingdom- in some ways citizens are gaining voice; in other ways, they are still marginalized. Accordingly, social media opportunities are opening doors that have long been shut, and this is galvanizing citizen voice.

Methodology

According to Papachriss, the advent of social media permits citizens to voice “dissent with public agenda.... by expressing political opinion on blogs, viewing or posting content on YouTube, or posting comments on an online discussion group” (Papachriss, 2007). In this way, social networking has the potential to change the relationship between citizens and policymakers. This has been true within the Kingdom, where influxes of citizen social media activity have led to Royal Decrees as a direct result of online citizen voice. Benkler stipulates that with the advent of new media, ordinary people “no longer need to be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects” (Benkler, 2006). The current research aims to ascertain the degree to which this public discourse through media is occurring within Saudi Arabia, and the effect that it is having on governance.

This qualitative study is grounded in social constructivism, a framework which “emphasizes the role of humans in actively using symbolic resources to objectify, circulate, and interpret the meaningfulness of their environments and their existence” (Boyd, 2001). These shared understandings and interactions will include political dialogues and the development of public policy as influenced by media channels. A key foundational principal of constructionism is that meaning is a socially-derived concept that emerges from interpersonal interactions within the human community (Crotty, 1998). Within the field of communication, constructionist theorists “claim that communication is the fundamental activity through which humans constitute their social world as a ‘real’ phenomenon—that is, one conducive to shared understanding and coordinated interaction” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011). This framework has been used by a plethora of media scholars (Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Robert Graig) to: a) analyze news stories manufactured through institutionalized journalism, b) identify how controversial issues may be

framed by the media, and c) detect how media content may be given local interpretations based upon the “shared knowledge and customs” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011) of a given culture.

The case study depicts findings from a compendium of sources, including i) academic literature, ii) news reports, iii) social media posts and YouTube videos, iv) Saudi Royal Decrees, v) official government publications, and vi) publications by non-governmental organizations. These sources have been carefully selected and analyzed to provide a complete and accurate portrait of the interactions between media and public policy in the Kingdom. In order to account for multiple angles and perspectives here (Richardson & Laurel, 2005), the present research relied on both official media sources from Saudi Arabia and unofficial media personalities created through citizens in the form of social media. Traditional media represents the old-world order and consists of public governmental voice used to propagate the conservative, atavistic presence in the Kingdom. New media is the progressive new movement, pioneered predominately by Saudi’s more liberal demographic population. Both forces are operating with strong presence in the Kingdom, and each needs to be considered carefully in order to piece together Saudi’s current trajectory.

Case study: Utilizing Social Media to Influence Health Policy in the Kingdom

Background

The following section of the article will turn its focus to the central case study, involving the impact of social media on the Ministry of Health in KSA between 2014 and 2015. Within the Kingdom, ministers are traditionally appointed for a four-year term. It is also common for officials to have their terms renewed (Law of the Council of Minister, 1993). Although a minister can be terminated at any time, some ministers have served for decades. Prince Saud Al Faisal, the Foreign Minister, served for 40 years. Others, such as Ahmed Al-Khatib, the Health

Minister, have lasted only 10 weeks. The case study highlights a particularly tumultuous epoch from April 2014 to May 2015, during which five *different* Ministers of Health held office. This unprecedented turmoil and change-over occurred as a result of negative public opinion, which compelled the government to fire two Ministers of Health.

Initially, Abdullah Al Rabiah held the position of Minister of Health, but was fired due to public pressure in late April of 2014 (AlShihri, 2014). Then Minister of Labor, Adel Fakhri, was asked to act as Minister of Health until a permanent minister could be appointed. In December 2014, eight months following Abdullah Al Rabiah's firing, Dr. Mohammed Al-Hayaza was appointed. But no sooner had been Al-Hayaza instituted then King Salman ascended to the crown, replacing Al-Hayaza in a cabinet reshuffle. King Salman appointed Ahmed Al-Katib as Minister of Health. Ten weeks later, a social media scandal occurred, resulting in Al-Katib's firing. In late April of 2015, King Salman replaced Al-Katib with Khalid Al-Falih, former CEO of Saudi Aramco. These two incidents make up the body of the case study and illustrate how concerned citizens have effected change in the Ministry of Health through social media.

First Event (April 2014)

The first event involved the sacking of Dr. Abdullah Al Rabiah. The local press claimed that the MERS virus led to Al Rabiah's removal; however, social media activists might have been behind this firing. Over the past ten years, Saudi Arabia has been confronted with deadly diseases, such as the Alkhurma virus, Rift Valley Fever, N1H1 Influenza, Bird Flu, and Ebola (WHO, Disease Outbreak News, 2014). Each disease led to significant casualties in the Kingdom. What differentiated MERS from the other diseases was that Saudi citizens expressed major concerns over how MERS was handled by the Ministry of Health. These criticisms were intensified on social media sites— primarily through Twitter.

Since its formation in 1950, the Ministry of Health had housed 15 Ministers of Health prior to the appointment of Dr. Abdullah Al Rabbiah in 2009 (an average of 3.93 years/appointment). Al Rabbiah was a widely praised member of the Saudi community. In 2010, *Arabian Magazine* recognized him among the one hundred most influential Arabs in the region, saying that as “Minister of Health to the Gulf’s largest economy, Saudi Arabia, he oversees a 16.3-billion-dollar budget and a population that boasts one of the highest rates of obesity and diabetes in the world. As the man holding the reins, Al Rabbiah is powerful indeed” (Arabian Business, 2010).

Yet, this favorable opinion toward Al Rabbiah began to shift just prior to his appointment as Health Minister. It was initiated through a media campaign against Dr. Al Rabbiah, which began in 2013. During a popular television talk show (Al Thaminah) hosted by Daoud Al-Sharian- a well-known television presenter on the Saudi-owned MBC channel- the host condemned Al Rabbiah for allowing a 12-year-old girl to receive a transfusion of HIV-positive blood. On air, Al-Sharian called for Al-Rabbiah to resign. The case sparked outrage throughout Saudi Arabian society. Angry callers dialed in to Al-Sharian’s show, demanding that Al-Rabbiah be fired.

Following the television show, local newspapers reported that the Minister visited the girl in the hospital and presented her with an iPad. This gesture received significant backlash on social media platforms (Ajroudi, 2015). A tweet in Arabic by Saudi preacher Adel Al-Kalbani mocked, "this should go into the Guinness Book [of world records] as the cheapest compensation ever" (Ajroudi, 2015). By February 16, 2013, Al-Kalbani’s remark had been re-tweeted 3,269 times (@abuabdelelah, 2013). Although Al Rabbiah was not immediately fired, the significant

criticism he received highlighted digital media's ability to cast a negative light on the Minister of Health.

When the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) began to spread, fingers were once again pointed at Minister Al Rabiah (Al Shoaiby, 2013). According to the World Health Organization, the first proven case occurred in Saudi Arabia in 2012 (WHO, Disease Outbreak News, 2014). Following that initial case, there have been 1,413 confirmed cases of MERS in the Kingdom, at least 502 of which have resulted in deaths. Concerned that the minister was covering up information, public citizens became outraged, calling for special procedures to be implemented so that the bodies of MERS victims did not further spread the disease. Citizens aggressively turned to social media, requesting the Ministry of Health to control the spread of MERS (Rasooldeen & Mohammed, 2014).

In addition to public social media outrage, world health experts blamed the Saudi government for lacking transparency about the spread of MERS. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Diseases Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, stated:

European countries have largely done an exemplary job of investigating and following up on the cases [that have been exported there]. Now, either the Middle Eastern countries, particularly KSA, have not, or they're just withholding information, for whatever reason. And in a situation where this represents a potential global pandemic, that is inexcusable (Osterholm as cited in Branswell, 2013).

The MERS outbreak continued to pose problems within KSA. In June 2013, an international team of experts organized by the WHO gathered in Saudi to collect data and better understand the outbreak. According to Global Health Middle East, however, the “closed society” (GHME, 2014) and lack of press freedom resulted in a deliberate effort to conceal information related to the virus. This effort to suppress data was reinforced by the Saudi Council of Ministers who, on April 14, 2014, stated: “the Council stresses on the media to adhere to all of the issued instructions not to publish any news concerning this virus or any epidemic disease except through the approved official department at the Ministry of Health” (Saudi Press Agency, 2014).

To make matters worse, the Saudi Ministry of Health shortly thereafter issued a notice threatening prison sentences for health workers who disclosed any health ministry information (Levy & Binshtok, 2014). Despite the threat, Saudi doctors continued to post on social media. Following is a series of tweets written by them on April 18th, 2014. The first was by Dr. Saud Almaslmani, an orthopedic surgeon at King Abdulaziz Hospital in Jeddah. The second was by Dr. Rahaf Al-Harbi, a heart surgeon at. The third was by Dr. Ahmad Azhar, a pediatric cardiologist at King Abdulaziz Hospital in Jeddah.

It has been forbidden to write on coronavirus as the cause of death. (@Almaslmani, 2014)

The numbers that the ministry of health provided are significantly lower than the real number of cases. How long will you continue to lie under the pretext of not scaring the people? (@Al-Harbi, 2014)

The local situation in Jeddah already has negative consequences, and a proof for that is the state of my brother Dr. Ismail. There is a lot of cover-up around the subject. (@Azhar, 2014)

Those three physicians were just the beginning. As mentioned earlier, Twitter and WhatsApp are the most widely used social media outlets in the country (MCIT, 2016). Each was populated with extensive postings about the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) or “Corona”, as it is commonly called in Saudi Arabia (@adelmfakeih, 2014). The worry throughout Saudi society was evident among three basic types of Twitter users:

- i) Users sharing prayers and expressing sympathy for families with infected members.
- ii) Users criticizing and attacking the current system, blaming the ministry for lack of transparency.
- iii) Awareness groups spreading information and methods of protection.

In a televised news conference on April 20, 2014, Dr. Al Rabiah reported that there has been no medical reason to impose tighter precautionary measures to contain the spread of MERS. This statement was made although, as of the day of the press conference, 231 of the 243 confirmed cases of MERS worldwide had originated in Saudi Arabia. A day later, a Royal Decree removed Dr. Al Rabiah as the Minister of Health (SPA, 2014), even though he likely handled the MERS catastrophe analogous to how previous government officials have historically dealt with similar issues. The key difference was that social media gave Saudi citizens a voice to air grievances against government cover-ups and inaction. Angry anti-Al Rabiah tweets

demanded greater transparency and stricter prevention of the MERS virus, and blamed the Minister of Health for keeping the public in the dark (Reuters, 2014).

In a defensive response, the Ministry of Health blamed social media for spreading rumors and creating anxiety within society. Abdullah Al-Aseeri, an Undersecretary in the Ministry of Health, told *Arab News* that social media outlets were spreading misleading rumors (MD Rasooldeen, 2014). The same Royal Decree that removed Dr. Al-Rabiah as a Minister of Health, proceeded to appoint him advisor to the Royal Court. This was done to whitewash the incident and minimize the fact that pressure from social media was the reason for Al Rabiah's removal. Public social media dissension seems to have made an impact. The new Ministry of Health began his campaign by claiming that he was "committed to transparency on this issue" (MD Rasooldeen, 2014). On April 22, 2014 he wrote: "the Ministry of Health will update you with all the information and reply to all your concerns through this portal."

Although the Ministry of Health warned its employees not to share any information regarding MERS, the warning did not stop doctors within the public domain (Almaslmani, Alharbi, Azhar) from documenting lack of transparency concerns and calling for heightened precautions to slow the outbreak of the disease. Saudi citizens used social media in order to hold the Ministry of Health accountable and to challenge government control of information they considered vital to their well-being. Social media may not be solely responsible for changes in the Ministry of Health; however, it likely served to catalyze changes that may not have been possible otherwise. Citizen social media usage is transforming the way that power is distributed in what was once an absolute monarchy.

Second Event

A second prominent incident highlighting the transformative impact of citizen social media usage occurred in the wake of Al Rabiah's removal. Beginning in January 2015, Ahmed Al-Katib served as Health Minister, following temporary stints by Adel Fakeih (2014) and Dr. Mohammed Al-Hayaza (2014 - January 2015). During Al-Katib's short term in office, a YouTube video surfaced featuring Al-Katib demonstrating an arrogant attitude toward the son of a patient (Youtube, 2015). The video went viral. Although it was not the first instance where a high-ranking official mistreated a Saudi citizen, it was unique in that it was the first such incident captured on a cell phone camera. The video was widely shared across social media platforms, sparking a public outcry of anger and leading to measurable political consequences.

In the video, the son of an elderly patient requests that his father be moved to a hospital in Riyadh to receive a better care. Al Khatib responds arrogantly, adopting an irritatingly high voice, and says, "The Minister is not a shining sun, and I will not give you an appointment" (YouTube, 2015). The press shared the story with the following headline: "Al-Khatib squabble has been a hot topic throughout the Kingdom" (Alarabiya, 2015). This video generated so much anger on social media that, within days, King Salman issued a Royal Decree removing the new Minister of Health from office. A hashtag on Twitter stated: "Minister of Health Sacked" (Baghdadi, 2015). Tweets under this hashtag spread to 33,000 users, making it the most tweeted phrase of the day in the Kingdom, and the second most tweeted hashtag in the world. The incident spawned numerous reactions on social media. One Twitter post read, "Health minister sacked after neglecting the health of a citizen. Thank you, King Salman" (Ammonnews, 2015). Al Katib's dismissal was the second time in two years that a Minister of Health was fired due to public social media protests.

Learning from Public Outcry

Within a week of the removal of Al Katib as Health Minister, King Salman named Khalid Al-Falih as new Minister of Health and as the new Chairman of Saudi Aramco, where he has served as President and CEO since 2009. Soon after the appointment of Al-Falih, an incident occurred in which the Director of the King Fahd Hospital in Jeddah was fired after a YouTube video showed the presence of cockroaches in hospital convalescent wards. The video went viral on social media (AlBarqawi, 2015). On June 22, 2015, the very next day, the Ministry of Health issued the following statement:

The Ministry of Health (MOH) has announced that, upon investigating the video clip circulated yesterday on social media websites concerning poor hygiene in the Convalescence Center affiliated with the King Fahad Hospital (KFH) in Jeddah, and the prevalence of insects in one of the patient's rooms, HE the Minister of Health, Eng. Khalid Al-Falih, issued the following decision:

1. Closing the hospital and moving, as quickly as possible, to the new building at Al-Mosadiah.
2. Relieving all relevant officials of their posts, including the director of the hospital, the director of the convalescence center, the nursing director and supervisors of maintenance and cleaning.
3. Applying tough cleaning standards at all MOH medical facilities and developing administrative procedures to avoid the recurrence of such negligence.

‘These actions come as part of the keen interest shown by the Ministry in avoiding such negligence in its facilities in reiterating its commitment to improving services provided for patients as well as providing them with proper healthcare to maintain their health and safety. Meanwhile, the Ministry, hereby, apologizes for the harm done to its patients owing to this negligence by some of its staff. (MOH, 2015)

In this instance, the Ministry of Health acted appropriately. Contrary to Al Rabiah and Al Katib, Al-Falih took the matter seriously and published a statement accepting responsibility and apologizing for negligence. He also outlined specific measures to remedy the situation. It seems likely that Al-Falih’s response was influenced by previous negative public outcry on social media.

Public social media protests accelerated the response of the Health Minister on a subsequent occasion. On June 20th, 2015, a new video surfaced featuring a health official angrily expelling a woman and her mother from his office (Ajel, 2015). This video, too, went viral. On Twitter, the following hashtag spread: “Head of Najran health [department] expels female citizen out of his office” (translated from Arabic). Saudi Twitter users were quick to voice their condemnation of the official’s behavior. They also succeeded in getting the attention of the Minister of Health, who responded: “The circulating video clip upset me and all those involved will be called for investigation and questioning” (Ajroudi, 2015).

These last two events highlight a new phenomenon in Saudi culture. For the first time in the nation’s history, video, tweets, and pictures posted on social media platforms are serving as

watchdogs of the Kingdom. Their prevalence and impact have become difficult for government officials to ignore. When these posts garner tremendous public support, as in the cases of Al Rabiah and Al Katib, they can compel government officials to enact political change (Baghdadi, 2015). As social media continues to serve as a tool to empower the common Saudi citizen, mobile phones are becoming every Saudi citizens' favorite "anti-corruption tool", and "Saudi officials' worst nightmare" (Ibid).

Discussion and Conclusions

An Open-Dialogue

This case study highlights the recent impact of social media on government decisions affecting leadership within the Ministry of Health in the Kingdom. The causality seems clear: public outcry through social media effectively compelled the King to replace two Ministers of Health due to incompetence. In one regard, these cases highlight the growing influence of social media within the Kingdom; they also highlight how strongly Saudi citizens feel about healthcare and the role it should play in their lives.

In the Arab world, family is held in the highest regards. To this end, the health and well-being of loved ones is taken very seriously. As a result, it must be recognized that there is an acute public sensitivity to healthcare in the Kingdom. Corruption and incompetence that might be tolerated in other ministries- such as the Ministry of Transportation or the Ministry of Labor- are not tolerated in the Ministry of Health. We see this clearly in these case studies.

When it comes to Al Katib, two significant features emerge: i) how quickly King Salman acted, and ii) the fact that King Salman is the first Saudi monarch to actively participate on social media (RT News, 2015). His usage has initiated a progressive, open-door policy through Twitter within the Kingdom. The fact that KSA has the highest number of active Twitter users in the

Arab world (Arab Social Media Report, 2014), the open-door policy constitutes a major policy shift in how the government interacts with its people. By issuing his Royal Decree regarding Twitter, King Salman let his citizens know that their voices are being heard and responded to by the King. Within a month of removing Al-Katib as the Minister of Health, King Salman tweeted “My best wishes to his Highness Crown Prince, to his Highness the Deputy Crown Prince and to all new Ministers as they responsibly serve our citizens whose rights I will protect” (@KingSalman, 2015). The King’s tweet was re-tweeted 160,000 times and liked 62,000 times (Ibid).

State Censorship

In meaningful ways, King Salman’s use of social media avers the impact that new media is having on public policy in the Kingdom. That said, it is important to put all of this in perspective. While social media is opening some doors that were previously closed, many doors remain shut. KSA has a long history of media censorship and control of information (Deutsch & Dunham, 2014). Citizens suffer from the lack of free speech. Perhaps as a result of these realities, Saudis have embraced social media faster and more completely than any other Arab nation (Khazen, 1999). In doing so, they have gained a voice, which they are beginning to leverage for a positive effect. Yet, as the nation moves forward and steps back, skepticism prevails with regards to the Kingdom’s inevitable plan to become an open society. Although Saudi citizens desire accountability, secretly they know that they are dealing with a monarchy and hierarchical bureaucracy that is deeply entrenched in ensuring non-transparency and constrained by generations of nepotism (Marguleas, 2017).

International Pressures

A contributing force motivating political change in the Kingdom can be attributed to external pressures from the international community (United Nations, WHO, and the Olympics Committee). While a clear cause-and-effect relationship may be difficult to quantify, negative reports in international media add weight to internal public pressure for increased government transparency and accountability. The World Health Organization (WHO), for instance, requested that the Ministry of Health in KSA be more transparent about the MERS virus, and released statements in the international media in hopes that pilgrims attending the annual Hajj would not spread MERS worldwide (BBC, 2014). These types of international pressures invariably contributed to the firing of both Ministers of Health, Al Rabiah and Minister of Health, Al Katib. Furthermore, the Kingdom faces increasing international pressures regarding its laws on freedom of speech. The Kingdom claims that citizens have voice and can enact influence, but this seems true only under certain circumstances and within certain limits.

Conclusion

This case study highlights two major challenges facing Saudi governance: *transparency* and *accountability*. It has also demonstrated how the desire of citizens for transparency and accountability has found an outlet through social media, thereby enabling the Saudi public to gain the ear of their ruling monarch. This demonstrates that social media is perhaps changing the face of the Kingdom in dealing with public opinion. Social media also continues to impact public policy formation in the Kingdom. Technological developments have paved a road for citizens within conservative societies to express themselves. We may go so far to suggest that digital technology has provided members of Saudi society an opportunity to redefine what it means to be a citizen. A report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2012) shows that Saudi Arabia has the largest number of mobile phone users per capita in the world

(Riyad Capital, 2015). Average per capita mobile phone ownership in the Kingdom is 1.8 mobile phones per person- 60 million phones for a population of 33 million. The spread of smartphone usage has enabled Saudis to become the most active Internet users globally. Saudi Arabia ranks seventh worldwide in terms of individual social media accounts, and, the Kingdom made headline news when Google reported that it ranked first in the world per capita for YouTube views and Twitter usage (Arab News, 2015). The number of Twitter users in KSA increased 80% from 2013 to mid-2015 (Baghdadi, 2015). Saudi Twitter users tweet at least five times daily, and 87% of these tweets are re-tweets (Dice, 2014). Such high usage rates demonstrate the powerful impact citizens are capable of exerting. Such democratization points to social media's capacity for heightening citizen freedoms.

Increased social media usage in Saudi society has also helped to redefine the role of traditional media. Historically, local media in the Kingdom has been limited to serving as a mouthpiece for government institutions (AlShubaili, 2000). This traditional role has changed with the advent of social media; this includes expanding the role of media to cover issues previously ignored or marginalized in the past. At the same time, traditional media has become a credibility filter for social media, eliminating noise and preventing the spread of rumors.

The egalitarian aspect of social media is diminishing authoritarian control over local media in the Kingdom. Although dissent behind closed doors has always existed in the KSA, nowadays cyberspace has expanded dissent beyond a few close friends or family to a near limitless audience (Do Online Social Media Cut Through The Constraints that Limit the Size of Offline Social Networks?, 2016). Social media has empowered citizens to become more active in their communities and in their field of expertise. As a result, civic awareness and engagement

has increased throughout the Kingdom. Average citizens have become “watchdog journalists” through social media, and Saudis are now actively engaged in protecting their society against the abuse of power or information.

The present case also shows that social media redefining the meaning of political power. Social media’s positive impact on public engagement and awareness has challenged the Saudi government to strive harder to fight against corruption and toward building a society that serves its citizens. This article has focused on the Ministry of Health, but it has also raised the larger question of how social media impacts the entire power structure of the Kingdom. Saudi citizens may have won in this instance, but the larger problem is the conservative laissez-faire culture endemic to the Ministry of Health. This laissez-faire culture is entrenched at all levels of Saudi bureaucracy. As Khalaf Al Harbe stated in the *Okaz* newspaper: “Responding to the wishes of the citizens is a behavior that is worthy of respect, but it does not change anything real on the ground. The performance of the ministry will remain the same even after this ill-fated minister has been sacked” (AlHarbe, 2015).

Although a top-down hierarchy controls both policymaking and the media, the egalitarian nature of social media limits the monopoly on power over media. Cyberspace will not altogether replace geographical space, but in the 21st century both must coexist and work in tandem to redefine the meaning and dynamics within a powerful state. As social media gains more influence and voice in society, the power dynamic is bound to shift from a more top-down hierarchy to one in which the bottom-tiers of society exercise more influence.

Furthermore, the ever-increasing push of technological advance, coupled with the very real influence of new media, will compel Saudi leaders to adapt in order to lead effectively and keep up with modern expectations and pressures. In the early part of the 20th century, King

Abdulaziz' role included introducing modern technology to nomads who believed that technological innovation was the work of the devil (Yergin, 1991). Saudi nomads rejected these advances because they had been invented by non-Muslims. According to Yergin, King Abdulaziz told rejecters to get rid of their guns too, as they were not Muslim made. The argument convinced the Bedouins. Even though he was a desert warrior, King Abdulaziz had a clear vision about the adoption of technology. He did not see modernity and religiosity as two conflicting realities. King Abdulaziz stated: "Never does Shariah ban anything useful to people, nor does it permit anything harmful to them. This truism is understood by sound judgment" (AlJeraisy, 2008).

Abdulaziz succeeded in persuading his people of the benefits of what they feared, which went a long way towards bridging the gap between traditional stagnation and inevitable progress. Ironically, history repeats itself and the Kingdom's ruling class is facing a similar scenario. Ronald Heifetz states that the role of a leader is "to help people face reality and to mobilize them to make change" (Friedman, 2016). One of the main challenges facing Saudi governance is to understand how Saudi political institutions and society work to adapt and evolve within the constructs of a world that is marching forward constantly. During this age of rapid advancements and assimilation, effective leaders will have no choice but to be open up to adaptation and integration. Given Saudi's hyper-orthodox identity, it will be an opportunity for a new vision and the dawning of a new age for the Kingdom and its citizens.

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