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Social media and the struggle for authority in the GCC

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Abstract

This paper will look at the interplay between public and private socio-political narratives across different social media users in the GCC region and specifically in Kuwait following the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. The early adoption of these platforms and as high speed internet and smart phone usage permeates the region, much of the political dissent, and attempts to control it, have taken place in the virtual space. The struggle to disseminate political views online by protest figures and civil society organizations has been made more opaque by the introduction of a new breed of internet stars that use social media to promote themselves, their particular brand of social commentary, and the incidental lucrative stream of income that this has produced for them. This study will examine the intersection between governmental control of these new communication avenues, and its adoption of these stars as public relations vehicles to increase its popularity, and the simultaneous crackdown on twitter users (tweeps) and critical voices online and off.

Keyword: Social Media, Arab Spring, Gulf Countries, GCC

Introduction

Social networking sites such as blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc. have been a democratizing tool universally, providing affordable and accessible communication avenue for underrepresented groups across the globe. They have become a socio-political game changer in the GCC region, with civil societies, opposition groups and governments trying to use these channels to exert influence and control the dissemination of information. In technical terms, the area has the highest subscription rates of mobile phones in the world, with Kuwait topping the list[1] at almost three subscriptions per person [see Appendix], alongside the latest 4G technologies; which makes the Internet fast, efficient and available to almost all residents. According to the latest statistics, Saudi Arabia, closely followed by Kuwait and the UAE has the highest national usage of Twitter in the Arab world today, with other social media apps showing similar trends[2]. With almost 50 percent of the national population in the 25 and under bracket[3], Gulf citizens are often early adopters of other social media and

networking platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Vine, Kik, Snapchat and others. Sometimes these young adopters devise uses for these apps that were not necessarily part of their inventors original intention, such as turning Instagram into a marketplace, or using WhatsApp for political ends, such as coordinating media smearing campaigns or mass mobilisation similar to Twitter.

The Arab Social Media Report (2015) refers to social media use in the Arab world as a "lifestyle", and this use comes as part of these youngsters "life values", so much so that it has become a "critical part of everyday life-as much a necessity as food or water."[4] Social factors such as segregation, formal hierarchies within families, and the lack of a public space for debate has led to these new technologies being the marketplace for social, political and material wares. The novelty of "having a voice" in deeply repressed and restricted societies is especially important in a GCC context. Social media provides a platform not only for political discussions but also for exploring taboos; a secret life that can be conducted from the privacy of the bedroom, under a pseudonym, without the watchful eye of an oppressive family. Many civil society groups have been increasingly relying on social media for these very reasons, and in

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[1] World Bank Statistics, Mobile Cellular Subscriptions (per 100 people) http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS.P2

[2] Arab Social Media Report 2015 statistics. http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/Twitter/LineChart.aspx?&PriMenuID=18&CatID=25&mnu=Cat

[3] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision.*

[4] Arab Social Media Report 2015 http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/home/index.aspx

many ways, these sites and apps have become both a launch pad and a recruitment asset for these groups, as well as an affordable and effective way to disseminate their agendas. Women groups such as Abolish 153, which deals with honor killing laws, or Kuwaitis without Borders which campaigns for the citizenship rights of children born to Kuwaiti mothers married to non-nationals, and before them, the women's driving campaign of October 2013 in Saudi Arabia[5], may use social media as a testing ground to gauge the levels of acceptability of a certain idea, and find out if it has traction, before venturing into actual action. In this way, social media use has become a political force of vast importance in negotiating change with regional governments, referred to by J. E. Petersen as an informal avenue of engagement of almost equal importance as established civil society organizations, or traditional male gathering "diwaniyas"[6].

With increasing arrests of dissident voices after the Arab Spring, digital media legislation has become tougher in the UAE, followed swiftly by the rest of the GCC to try and limit violations online-especially those of a political nature. Since the beginning of 2015, Kuwait has witnessed deportations of non-nationals over negative tweets regarding King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia's death, and jail time for nationals committing similar offences and new changes introduced to its electronic crime laws in January 2016. This take-over of a once democratic space has become even more insidious and dangerous as governments try to take advantage of the "social" side of these social media stars for propaganda and positive PR. The first Arab Social Media Influencers Summit was held in Dubai in March 2015 followed by a similar one in Kuwait in May, and increasing governmental, political and social credibility is being lent to so-called "social influencers" with a large youth following.

Kuwait has become a natural breeding ground for Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat stars because of the country's comparatively relaxed nature, open public spaces and politicized media structure. There are no restrictions on Kuwaiti's mobility, whether at home, or in travelling abroad, unlike elsewhere in the Gulf. Often called the trendsetters[7] in the region, Kuwaiti culture and society allows even its public figures to take risks with their online personas and show a more "human" and intimate side to

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[5] Sebastian Usher. "Saudi women seek the right to drive", *BBC News*, September 28, 2013 http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24296811

[6] J.E. Peterson, "The GCC states: Participation, opposition, and the fraying of the social contract", 26, December 2012, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, L.S.E.

[7] This was one of the findings of the "Next Big Thing Kuwait", Leo Burnett Conference, March 23, 2014.

themselves[8], unlike the more formal attitudes of public figures in neighboring countries. This study aims to document and analyze the rise of these Insta-celebrities and the growing tension between how GCC governments have been trying to capitalize on their fame, while simultaneously trying to regulate the use of these very same social media platforms by civil societies and oppositional groups, focusing on Kuwait as a case study.

Blogs and Twitter: Ground Zero for the virtual revolution

It started with blogs, an online presence that especially appealed to young people who had something to say but did not have access to, or did not want to commit themselves to, the schedule and the pressure of systematic editorial board and censorship structures of traditional media. Sultan al Qassemi's interactions on digital platforms transformed him from a relatively discreet art collector from Sharjah to an internationally recognized "political commentator" on the Middle East. In Kuwait Mark 248, Al-Sul6ana, and others like were able to morph their social blogs into important commercial sites where direct

marketing turned a side hobby into a lucrative full time ad space.

Social media political activism is not a new phenomenon in Kuwait. Political blogs, such as *Sahat Al-Safat*[9] (now defunct) played a pivotal role in rallying protesters during the first Orange movement in 2006 that was behind the redistricting of Kuwait's electoral votes in the following election. As social media tools progressed, Kuwaiti youth gradually moved from blogging to Twitter, a form of micro-blogging. Creative aliases and fake photos on blogs were replaced with full names and real photos on Twitter. The 'fear factor' among the young diminished as they got used to having a voice, and a following, in the virtual realm. An example of this is "Zaydoun" a blogger who was popular in the first wave of online Kuwaiti contributors. When he opened a Twitter account he retained the blog title @zaydoun, and added his full name, Zyad al Duaij, in Arabic next to it.

What makes the blog-sphere and social media more politically important for young people in the Arabian Gulf than elsewhere? "Beyond clear political motives, some of the reasons behind youth protests in the wealthier Arab states of the Gulf are often driven, exacerbated or compounded by idleness,

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[8] See for example the "One Shot" question and answer videos of Kuwait's Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed al Sabah, Chief of Amiri Protocol and Chamberlains Sheikh Khaled al Sabah and former MP Safaa al Hashem on Kuwaiti fashion website 3oud.com.

[9] *Sahat Al-Safat* Blog
http://kuwaitjunior.blogspot.com/

boredom and the dearth of entertainment infrastructure for younger segments in society"[10]. The isolation and boredom which many of the young people in Kuwait and the GCC suffer from makes social media and social networking sites all the more important because they are used as a substitute for a spontaneous social scene; so digital frontiers become a place to engage and feel empowered. The power of a hashtag to incite real policy change and a global reaction (e.g. #blacklivesmatter) has been proven time and again. In the GCC, one disgruntled ex-Shura council member from Saudi who was fed up with fake qualifications unleashed the hashtag #halakooni (they are killing me), which has exposed fake postgraduate degree holder in leadership positions, universities and hospitals across the GCC. Both governments and young people in the GCC have adopted hashtags in their campaigns as part of this tug of war over the narrative across social media platforms, with Twitter and Instagram getting the lion's share of hashtag wars.

Despite its use as an empowering tool for citizen journalism, engaging online has been dangerous because of the inexperience of many in the Gulf of being on a public platform, where exposure is far greater, and to a vast audience of mixed backgrounds. The

young people who have wholeheartedly embraced new tools of self-expression may not be aware of the magnitude of risks that are involved. At times, it is almost as if they forget that digital footprints are difficult to erase, or that state laws are equally applicable online as they are off-line, in their rush to enjoy this newfound freedom.

With the advent of the Arab Spring, this free space became something of a war zone where opinions on the rapidly changing political dynamics made the period between 2010-2012 a turbulent era in terms of access to information and conflicting opinions. This also led to the introduction of severely limiting measures being placed on social media in the UAE followed by the rest of the GCC. In Kuwait especially where the relative freedom of the press had nurtured a culture of online dissent that was probably more aggressive than in the other parts of the Arabian Gulf, a change in legislation meant that many young people found themselves in hot water over tweets and other online activities. This came with the new breed of social media stars, and the selective governmental embrace of some social networking and media platforms over others.

While several social media platforms and especially Instagram became an unexpected direct market place for many Kuwaiti cottage industries and real businesses, the political

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[10] Adel Hazmia, a researcher at Oxford University, in an email discussion on the findings of recent research conducted in the GCC, January 15, 2016.

shift and legal issues that started to emerge were shocking at times. Snapchat star @Hippostan and the controversial tweeter Meshari Buyabis (@mbuyabis) used their popularity to discredit both religious and political authority, with the latter calling out the Prime Minister's lack of intelligence several times over Snapchat. Young people were at times accidentally airing their forbidden love and homosexual leanings online, with a lesbian couple from the police academy accidentally outing themselves. Others were just behaving in bizarre and attentionn grabbing ways, such as when a troubled young man bit the head off a cat on Instagram. These and other unprecedented online actions were prompting the police force in Kuwait to take action against them, mostly under the offence of "improper use of a communication device." for lack of an electronic crimes law at that point. Simultaneously, these social media channels were used to promote political and civil society campaigns in ways that would have been impossible or prohibitively expensive before and introduced political groups to each other who would otherwise not be so exposed to each other's activities. Through social media, the government's involvement in such initiatives such as the Hijab-graduation ceremonies held by religious groups under the patronage of the Ministry of Public Affairs, celebrated on the Instagram account @noryektemal, was made visible in ways that

were difficult to ignore. Whether Kuwaitis agreed or disagreed with its message, the campaign to get female children to wear the veil, called Nory Ektemal "My Light is Complete", elicits a different reaction as a series of visuals on Instagram that what would pass unnoticed in a press release or a single photo. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Women's Cultural and Social Society's (Kuwait's oldest women's rightts organisation, formed in 1963) social media accounts (@wcss-q8) are used to promote past and current images of uncovered professional Kuwaiti women engaging in cultural and political activities in a counter historical narrative to the one religious groups are promoting. In different ways, most of Kuwait's politicised groups have attempted to control the narrative on identity and tradition, and morally "police" people online, whether through trolling or the more sophisticated use of charming new role models, either by enlisting the help of popular social media stars, or creating their own.

Social Media Stars

Social media stardom is a growing phenomenon in the GCC region. Not only does the region have the highest mobile phone penetration rates in the world; the latest 4G Technology and cheap subscription packages makes access to fast Internet readily available to the majority of the population.

The prevalence of social media adopters and their placement in a somewhat prestigious position as influencers and celebrities means that there is no embarrassment in whipping out phones during social, cultural and political events, and documenting the process to "followers". Social factors such as segregation, formal hierarchies within families, the lack of an indigenous film industry and a seasonal TV production culture (alongside the negative connotations of an acting career) has led to a celebrity vacuum that is being filled by young social media stars in the region. This phenomenon must be contextualized alongside the universal rise of reality TV stars famous for over-sharing such as the Kardashians, and the pervasiveness of high quality mobile phone cameras that can turn everyday people into stars, alongside the addictive quality of this accepted voyeurism in deeply repressed and restricted societies. Social media provides a platform not only for political discussions and calls to arms, such as the 2012 Karamat Watan protests in Kuwait that were organized through an anonymous Twitter account, and Bahrain's anonymous February 14 groups that communicate mostly through social media and social networking sites, it has also made possible the breaking of social taboos. A secret life can be conducted from the privacy of the bedroom and under a pseudonym without family interference. Boundaries are pushed and previous limits of what is "socially acceptable" may be experimented with more safely than in real life.

Recently, social media has been subjected to new regulations within Kuwait's electronic crimes laws of 2016, which has been the subject of discussion and strong emotions for the past two years. Since the beginning of 2015, Kuwait has witnessed deportations of non-nationals over negative tweets regarding King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia's death, and jail time for nationals for committing similar offences[11]. In 2015 an upcoming social media star with the Instagram moniker @Shahadeeeeno, who for a brief period found notoriety as an online sex symbol, was given a six month sentence for inciting indecent behavior, which is problematic because her actions were shared were on her private Snapchat account, which someone had "captured" (meaning recorded) and then posted publicly[12].

The blurring of public and private space has led to other uncomfortable issues that will lead to significant social change if left unchecked; young children imitating the hyper-sexualized and vapid Instagram fashionistas, security breaches from reveals of addresses and home details, possible

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[11] "Kuwait's crackdown on free speech", *Human Rights Watch,* February 3, 2015. https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/03/kuwait-crackdown-free-speech

[12] *Al-Majliss* Twitter Account, April 23, 2015 https://instagram.com/p/10K7lEJhwX/

exploitation of minors as many of these stars use their children as an added factor in their mass appeal. This blurring has become even more insidious and dangerous as governments try to take advantage of the "social" side of these new media stars for propaganda and positive PR, with even Kuwait's Amiri Diwan using social media stars to promote its new construction projects.

Kuwait has become a natural breeding ground for these Instagram and Snapchat stars because of the country's comparatively relaxed nature and open public spaces where nationals and residents from both sexes meet to mingle, shop, have dinner, and document it online; which, in spite of its fairy innocuous nature, is quite risqué in much of the GCC (for example, public fraternisation in this manner is considered illegal for men and women outside of marriage in Saudi Arabia). Many of those who over-share their way to stardom have found a lucrative income stream (some now charge upwards of 7,000 USD per appearance), and fame, as they are flown in First and Business Class to attend openings both for public and private sector events across the GCC.

Snapchat as a vehicle to stardom is a particular Generation "S" (for smartphone)

phenomenon, argues Jason Calacanis[13]. He suggests that "Snapchat is wildly addicting and the emerging stars on the platform will become bigger than YouTube's due to the intimacy and ease of production the App provides". In fact an article in *Time Magazine*[14] highlighted the first wave of viral Snap stars who earned over 100,000 USD a week because their posts appealed to the app's key demographic; females under the age of twenty five. Similarly, for the GCC, the new Insta-celebs, emerging mostly from Kuwait, were more real and appealing to young people than those who had achieved fame on traditional media outlets. Although Snapchat has not yet officially shared its subscriber's statistics, an affiliate of the company revealed[15] that the subscription rate in Kuwait is over 60%, and rising at a phenomenal speed [see Appendix for IPSOS demographics for Snapchat usage in Kuwait in 2015]. Many of these stars have segued their position on Instagram to a huge following on Snapchat. Snapchat images and ten second videos, on which text or cute filters can be added, have a short viewing shelf-life of 24 hours, after which it

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[13] Jason Calacanis, "Snapchat is going to reach a billion users, thanks to Gen S-the smartphone generation", *Calacanis.com*, December 29, 2015. http://calacanis.com/2015/12/29/snapchat-is-going-to-reach-a-billion-users-thanks-to-gen-s-the-smartphone-generation/
[14] Laura Stampler, "Meet the first viral Snapchat stars", *Time Magazine*, July 24, 2014. http://time.com/3002803/snapchat-stars/
[15] WhatsApp exchange, February 15, 2016.

disappears from the app[16]. What started out in the US as an app used primarily for flirting, has now become a much more involved information source, mini-documentary/reality TV show that is highly entertaining, individualized and immediate. Nancy Kaklow[17] suggests that visual story telling is so powerful because of the closeness between "the viewer" and the star, who is essentially "the director" of this medium. Snapchat's added appeal is in the viewer is being "shown" a reality, rather than being told about it. With that directing role and mass following, comes an ethical burden that many of these stars may be unaware of; the difference between representation and misrepresentation.

An overview of some of Kuwait's social media stars on Snapchat

Besides actual celebrities on Snapchat, there are those people that have become stars in their own right solely through the amassing of millions of followers on the application. Khaled Mohammed Khaled, better known as @djkhaled, has over 6 million viewers,

making him "a marketing goldmine" [18] , despite having a clearly Muslim name at a time when Muslims are not at their most popular in America. Similarly, in providing entertainment and intimacy local Snap stars have managed to transgress their backgrounds, and certain xenophobic, racist, or sectarian attitudes in their Gulf-based viewers.

Hassan and Yalda (@ygolsharifi), a good looking couple of Kuwaiti-Iranian descent, were touted as the ultimate his and her lifestyle reference of the second wave of social media users in Kuwait. They could be seen as a natural evolution from the original Kuwaiti social media fashionable power couple Ascia and her husband Ahmad, better known as "the Hybrids"[19]. In spite of regional tensions with Iran and the fact that Yalda does not speak Arabic, they are regularly flown to events in Riyadh and elsewhere in the Gulf.

Perhaps the most successful and important of these influencers is Sheikh Majed al Sabah @majedalsabah. Known across Europe in the past decade as the "Sheikh of Chic", Majed

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[16] There are a number of apps and programs that now capture snapchat images and apps and save them for a much longer time period, such as Mojaz (http://mojazapp.com).

[17] Nancy Kaklow, *Visual storytelling: the digital video documentary*, Centre for Documentary Studies, Duke University 2011.

[18] TJ Holmes, Chris James and Lauren Effron, "Riding in Miami with DJ Khaled; the unlikely King of Snapchat", *ABC News*, February 18, 2016 http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/riding-miami-dj-khaled-king-snapchat/story?id=37029745

[19] "Ascia and Ahmad Are Couple Bloggers With Double The Style To Love", *Huffington Post,* September 10, 2013 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/09/ascia-instagram-ahmad-photos_n_4071513.html

transformed the fashion scene in the Arabian Gulf with his Villa Moda concept store. Fashion houses such as Prada and Stella McCartney visited his store and created exclusive Arabesque kaftans just for his Kuwaiti clientele. After the sale of Villa Moda in 2008, Majed reinvented himself as a fragrance king with TFK (The Fragrance Kitchen), and was touted by Instagram itself as a personality to follow in 2013. Snapchat however was the vehicle for Sheikh Majed's mass appeal, as his information/travel snaps (subjects range from travel advice in India and China to introspective analysis on the Jews of Kuwait and why Africans are better dancers) are professionally shot, with a much higher quality production value than the typical Insta-star on Snapchat. Applauded in newspaper articles and by governmental figures, he is often a keynote speaker at regional digital media forums and summits, as his aspirational views have reached millions of followers across the GCC and the Arab world. His influence has grown so much through Snapchat that the company often flies him to its headquarters in California to confer on future developments, and so do regional power players. Majed was invited to cover key operation centers in the war against Yemen by Mohammed bin Salman in 2015, and more recently, to cover the yet to be opened Louvre Abu Dhabi by Mohammed bin Zayid in February 2016, as well as being an official promoter of Qatar Airways. In May

2016, Majed's account hosted the first official Snapchat Middle East "party" in Dubai, attended by the UAE Minister of State for Federal National Council Affairs, a Saudi academic and social media star called Abdullah al Jumah and a famous singer called Balqees, demonstrating the power of popular insta-celebs and the melding of new and old media figures into a government sanctioned promotional vehicle.

Public and private institutions want to interact with "the common people" find the glorification of these social media stars an effective tool for reaching the widest audience. The placement of social media messages by political and economic entities results in a kind of psychological incubation for followers. Yalda and Hassan and others like them move from virtual stardom to real stardom, billboards, ads etc, so the question must be asked: whose values are imbedded in these stars posts and how far can they be seen as being spontaneous or independent? More importantly: who does Majed represent? When he criticized the state of public transport and taxis in Kuwait there was some backlash that as a member of the ruling elite (both the current Amir and Crown Prince are his maternal uncles) he was not in a position to criticize like a normal citizen. Certainly his position as a well-off sheikh makes him exceptional in that he does not need an income stream from social media, though his

online popularity has no doubt boosted TFK perfume sales (especially with hosting launch events in capital cities across the world where his followers attend and sales rocket as a result). It also means that other leaders in the GCC may feel that as a member of the ruling elite, he is naturally aligned with them. His popularity makes him an excellent vehicle for disseminating positive PR without appearing to do so overtly, as he supports young people and local businesses in the region and abroad without having direct benefit, with a separate account called @majedfriends to promote youth in the region. "Should young non-government affiliated members of ruling Gulf families restrain themselves on social media?"[20] This question was posed by Sultan al Qassemi, and though, he like Majed, is a ruling family member who does not hold an official position, the answer may be different because of the audience that each "influences". Sultan's coverage is more textual than visual, and geared towards an elite intellectual and international audience, whereas Majed is seen as a regional powerhouse, a "prince of the people", and a visual storyteller who has eclipsed Snapchat's normal follower limits and earned his own fancy icon on the app.

It is not only local governments that have used these platforms to widen their reach and increase their visibility by courting influencers on Instagram and Snapchat. Foreign governments that want to have grass root appeal have embraced the new social media for their GCC Embassies. Embassies such as the US, the UK and France[21] have turned to these young Insta-stars to promote tourism and attend their events to boost their respective countries profiles and connect with a wider audience, more inclusive audience that would be normally denied to them. The Amiri Diwan has used Majed to promote the Shaheed Park project, and Sheikh Mohammed Abdallah al Mubarak, Kuwait's Deputy Prime Minister, held a summit for other young influencers in May 2015, while the Ministry of Youth held the first ever Social Media Conference on December 5-7 2015, called Hashtag Kuwait. The uncomfortable questions that the adoption of key government figures across the Gulf, of these "independent" influencers, and their use in promoting governmental projects, or a specific vision of the future of the country, has been met with some outcry. The vapidness of some of these fashionistas and new media figures, and the lack of political content in their "influence", has been

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[20] Sultan al Qassemi, "Gulf governments take to social media", *Huffington Post*, 31 May, 2011.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sultan-sooud-alqassemi/gulf-governments-take-to-_b_868815.html

[21] In fact the French Embassy in Kuwait is the first in the French Diplomatic Corp to have a Snapchat account.

described by some as a conscious attempt to water down social consciousness, with an article in *AlTalea Newspaper* claiming that the government has spent over three million (11 million USD) in promoting fashionista social media icons[22]. This has come with the increased surveillance of online activity, tighter legislation, and more troublingly, suggested changes to Kuwait's NGO laws that would give the government the right to interfere directly in board appointments and civil society activities. 74 civil society organisations have started a petition against this bill and the increased governmental intervention on civil liberties in Kuwait at a press conference on February 9 2016[23]. When coupled with the newly introduced cyber crimes (or electronic media) law that came into effect in January 12, 2016 this interference by the government could have a crippling effect on Kuwait's social media boom. The cyber law, described by Human Rights Watch as a "blow to free speech"[24], specifically articles 6, 7 and 13, which impose

fines and prison sentences for insults to religious figures, the judiciary and the ruler, as well as on those who disclose classified information, or harm Kuwait's relation with other states. A particularly hefty sentence for using the Internet to incite changes to "the social and economic system that exists in the country" or overthrow the regimes is especially discomfiting, as are similar articles, which extend the conditions of the Printing and Publishing Law of 2006 to cover the use of social media and social networking sites.

That is not to say some legislation was not needed; with the high adoption rates and widespread misuse of social media in Kuwait it had become imperative to introduce some guidelines to regulate the use, and prevent the abuse, of these new communication tools. There were demands by both lawyers and members of the judiciary, alongside civil rights activist, to regulate some elements of online engagement[25], with hate speech[26] becoming a particularly decisive issue with the rise of sectarian rhetoric post-Arab Spring. It is just that the net of the law has perhaps widened too much , and threatens to include too many of the features that made

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[22] Adam Abdulhalim, "The "Fashionista" invades the streets of Kuwait and social media sites", *AlTalea Newspaper*, August 12, 2015
http://altaleea.com/?p=13774

[23] George Attif, "74 civil society organisation reiterates its refusal of the Public Affairs law", 11 Febraury, 2016.

http://www.aljarida.com/articles/14635913111 32846200/

[24] "Kuwait Cybercrime Law a Blow to Free Speech", *Human Rights Watch*, July 22, 2015
https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/22/kuwait-cybercrime-law-blow-free-speech

[25] Nawara Fattahova, "Judges, lawyers demand social media legislations", Kuwait Times, April 14, 2015.
http://news.kuwaittimes.net/judges-lawyers-demand-social-media-legislations/

[26] Alexandria Seigel, *Sectarian Twitter wars:Sunni-Shia Conflict and Cooperation in the Digital Age*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Publications, December, 2015

online discussions a lively space for the exchange of views.

Social Media and Gender; A complicated relationship

Digital media and female emancipation in the Arab worls, and especially the GCC, have a direct correlation. The first female social media stars that decided to go public with their names and images on Instagram such as Ascia AKF (@ascia-akf) and Dalal al Doub (@Dalalid) were Kuwaiti risk-takers. These "hijabistas" became a huge influence on Muslim girls inside and outside Kuwait, and inspired a whole wave of modest but cutting edge fashionable dressing[27]. Soon, they were followed by the next wave of non-hijab wearing Instagram fashionistas, like Fouz Al Fahad (@TheRealFouz), who flaunted their beauty and fashion sense without feeling that they needed to conform to wearing the hijab or attempting to appear modest.

Elzeini suggests that ultimately, social media has "obliterated the current setback of physical mobility, opened up collaborative innovation, international exchange of ideas, advanced businesses, ignited women with curiosity, provided emotional support, and brought new emerging markets into the economy"[28]. Young people of both sexes feel the pressure of familial and societal expectation, but it is an especially heavy burden on young women. However, this freedom to present, and represent, comes at a price. The risks of exposing unpopular opinions and beliefs, whether as a fashionista or as a political activist, means that the judgement moves from the family, and the protection it could provide, to the individual, and so a degree of self-censorship persists for self-preservation.

Social media can be a precarious instrument of expression for Arab women; although it widens their reach outside the confines of a strictly domestic space, and gives them access to public figures that would be nearly impossible for them otherwise, they are still burdened with ambassadorship and the expectation of a conformist representation, and therefore, are more likely to be subjected to online trolling than men. At the Young Arab Women's Leaders Doha conference Maryam al Subaie remarked that Qatari women need to show themselves covered on social media or they will be attacked and socially persecuted[29]. She spoke about the way young women had to present a public

[27] For more on the global impact of these Kuwaiti pioneering Instagram stars, see Kelsey Waninger, "The Veiled Identity: Hijabistas, Instagram and Branding In The Online Islamic Fashion Industry." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2015. http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/wsi_theses/48

[28] Sarah Elzeini, "Social media's fruitful exchange with Gulf women", *Your Middle East*, February 9, 2015 http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/social-medias-fruitful-exchange-with-gulf-women_29777

[29] AIWF Young Arab Women's Leaders event in Doha, October 28th, 2015.

image on social media that was tightly controlled or their reputation would be damaged. She gave an example of a Vodafone campaign where young men and women from Doha were sponsored to go to the Amazon to do some relief work and yet instead of being lauded for their bravery and altruism the girls were criticised severely for not wearing head-covers and for "mis-representing" the country, and led to a PR nightmare for the company with the Arabic hashtag #VodafoneoffendsQatar[30].

On the opposite end of the representation spectrum, the damaging effect of selfies on the self-esteem on young girls psyche has alarmed educators and psychologists all over the world. Undoubtedly, Kuwait's female social media stars have broken many social barriers and rebelled against norms. They have made it acceptable for girls to model and to be celebrated for their style and beauty, which is completely at odds with the chaste and modest Muslim feminine ideal. Many of them wear the hijab and yet they show their bodies on a public platform, promoting designers and brands, thereby confounding most stereotypes. And yet, by remaining in a superficial and sexually objected zone these

girls have also inadvertently contributed to further confining the space for female role models. By oversharing from their bedrooms and in their nightgowns, they invite men into their private space, without taking into consideration the danger from predators that women in the West are now careful to avoid.

The pursuit of perfection has been a concern for those watching the detrimental effect of this constant pressure to conform to an edited life that is upbeat, glamorous, and enforcedly positive on Instagram and other social media applications. In a panel discussion on the impact of social media stars on the psychology of young girls in Kuwait[31], Dr Nick Scull, a practicing psychologist and educator at the American University of Kuwait, spoke about the pressure of conforming to the ideals of physical beauty and expensive fashions that these fashionistas, even the hijab-wearing ones, present to young girls.

On the security front the open exchange of pictures and messages online has created similar problems for young women in the GCC as it has in the West. While un-legislated "revenge porn" issues threaten women in Western communities (where past lovers post explicit images and videos of their

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[30] Elysia Windrum, "Charity endeavor in Brazil sparks cultural debate on Qatari identity", *Doha News*, August 15, 2014 http://dohanews.co/female-qatari-youths-trekking-brazilian-amazon-causes-public-backlash/

[31] Cultural Diwanniya, Nuqat panel discussion, November 15, 2015 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLVT4Yn5-jI

female exes online as a form of revenge), there is a similar fear of blackmail and extortion that young women in the GCC are particularly vulnerable to. The services of special units such as Al-Ameen in the UAE[32], which allows for the discreet reporting of crimes and cyber-security issues, has now found itself an important and safe port of call for terrified young women who do not want to turn to their families and fear being exposed by past intimates.

Though there has been a certain boldness in women's movements online following the Arab spring, such as the Syrian online sexuality forum Estaygazat (She awakens), and the Facebook and Twitter pan-Arab movement featuring women without their hijab, an online "revolution for women", it does not necessarily translate to increased influence on the ground. Unregistered campaigns and female NGOs have found the online space a more cost effective and popular way to introduce new ideas to the public and recruit members. Some, such as BirthKuwait (Instagram @birthkuwait), a natural birth movement, are focused on a specific cause that has been difficult to bring up in public forums. Social media provides an safer litmus test for introducing taboo ideas, and gauging public reaction before taking the leap to real life action. The overwhelmingly

positive online reaction to Instagram's @6abebat (an unregistered female doctor's civil society organisation) end-violence against women walkathon in November 2014 encouraged many other groups interested in this cause to mobilise and join the movement. Many of these political projects have not found a voice to represent them among social media stars, which has caused many women to decry the fashionista phenomenon as a way of relegating the space available to females to non-threatening subjects such as fashion and make up.

Despite the power of the digital marketplace to provide work and engagement opportunities for home-bound women in ways that were not possible before, it is still unclear whether this online empowerment will lead to a real inclusion offline. On the political front, tweeps like Sara Aldrees (@saraaldress) have gotten arrested for controversial tweets[33] (first for a political statement, then a religious one) thereby making it clear that women transgressors will not benefit from social leniency. As other women from more privileged backgrounds such as political commentator Rania al Saad (@walladah) and the human rights activists Rana al Sadoon (@Ranoooya) found out (both relocated out

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[32] Al-Ameen, Dubai government E-portal. http://www.alameen.ae/en/

[33] Habib Toumi, "Kuwaiti summoned over controversial tweet", *Gulf News*, November 19, 2015
http://m.gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwaiti-summoned-over-controversial-tweet-1.1622809

of the country while arrest warrants were out for their political tweets), their social connections will not help them out in this political transgression either. This reaffirms that the gender divide does not affect the pattern of social media control by the government, and any perceived online political dissent will be dealt with forcefully irrespective of sex.

The New Digital Economy

In the discussion of the rise of social media influencers in Kuwait and the Arabian Gulf, and the adoption of "managed" social media accounts by governments and businesses, a company started by a group of young Kuwaitis in their early twenties stands out. Ghalia Tech provides account management on all social media platforms; advice and consultation, graphics and story visuals, ultimately creating content that insures a strong social media presence for its clients. As a company it has seen its importance and valuation (a 40 percent stake in the business was sold for 20 million USD in late 2015[34]) rise with the rise of social media literacy and importance in Kuwait and the GCC region. Whereas online marketing was previously confined to direct placement of banners on blogs, Google ads, Facebook, Twitter etc, Ghalia's stable of social media "influencers"

provides indirect marketing that has proved to be much more effective for local advertisers. This marketing currency is counted in the average number of comments (Facebook, Instagram), likes (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter), retweets (Twitter), and screenshots of views (Snapchat) of a specific influencer. Their worth is based on how engaged and interactive an audience is with their posts. The impact that these influencers have on a particular company or brand is tested after an online endorsement or mention, which according to Abdulwahab al Othman [35], Business Development Manager at Ghalia Tech, causes an average increase of between 20-40% in sales. However, if the influencer is not savvy in the placement of these endorsements, or if they are seen as too pushy, their impact will drop, especially when a new social media technology gets introduced. Each platform has its stars, so a particular sphere of influence is not necessarily transferable across different mediums. Each platform also has its own demographics, for example, Twitter is for an older customer base (30-50) and Snapchat appeals to a mostly younger audience (13-25). According to al Othman Twitter has lost its popularity with the emergence of newer social media platforms, and because it has become a more dangerous space through its hyper-politicisation. Though it is still used for

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[34] Interview with Abdulrazzaq al Mutawa, Ghalia Tech CEO, December 8, 2015.

[35] Interview with Ghalia Tech management November 26, 2015.

commercial purposes, it does not have significant influencers from a sales perspective.

Ghalia Tech started to sign on influential bloggers with an exclusivity management contract in 2011, followed by popular Twitter account holders in 2012. It maintained the brand "character" and controlled advertisement placement on these accounts, advising the stars in its stable on what openings to attend and how to behave at events. The company started with seven stars from different backgrounds on both platforms (one of which was a rising TV personality who would go on to form Ghalia's main rival, O-Media). These stars would visit the company weekly for the close monitoring of their progress. Over the next two years (2013-2014) demand for these influencers grew exponentially as their numbers rose to over 90, and Ghalia lost some of its market share. At one point it had over forty stars signed to non-exclusive contracts, making them that much harder to control, and diluting their impact as a marketing tool. These influencers soon diversified into specific niches; chefs, athletes, make-up artists and diet gurus; many of whom started their own Instagram based businesses. An online economy exploded in Kuwait, with the proliferation of cottage

industries on Instagram [36] causing even international media outlets to take notice of this phenomenon. Almost instantly Instagram became an unregulated marketplace for all kinds of products; from home cooked food catering to the sale of exotic animals and cattle. These unregistered businesses took off because they were not bound by the rules of the heavily regulated private sector, which required even small businesses to rent office space, pay a number of fees, and is restricted to a limited number of sectors.

Ghalia's first experience with an Instagram post causing a sale storm was at the tail end of 2013 with an influencer called Dalal al Doub (@dalalid), who charged 400 KD (1200 USD) to showcase a particular kaftan. That post translated into 13,000 KD (50,000 USD) in kaftan sales for the boutique, and the company, and other influencers, realised that there was an untapped potential for indirect marketing on social media. Today, influencers are a lucrative and competitive market in Kuwait, with an influx of new companies that deal with social media content development and many stars who try to differentiate themselves from the crowd in more creative ways.

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[36] Rebecca Greenfield, "In Kuwait, Instagram accounts are big business", *The Wire,* July 12, 2013
http://www.thewire.com/technology/2013/07/kuwait-instagram-accounts-are-big-business/67127/

On average, social media influencers today charge between 800-1000 KD (2800-3500 USD) per post, with an average monthly income of 12,000 KD (40,000 USD), and demand a retinue of agents, bodyguards and assistants[37]. They are paid to travel across the GCC and attend openings, and are now found on billboards, in print media, TV, radio and have greatly impacted media bookers as they are seen as more value for money in terms of sales revenues than traditional ads in traditional media outlets. Ghalia Tech still controls 50 percent of the social media content and influencer market in Kuwait, and its management say that though there are many benefits to being a social media star, many of these influencers don't consider the downside of loss of privacy, and the burden of being constantly under the spotlight. Any scandal or reports of misbehaviour can cause their sales figures to drop, so they need to be vigilante not to cause offence, while struggling to remain interesting enough to warrant followers.

Abdulwahab al Issa was a presenter on the now defunct *Al-Watan* TV station, and he was taken on by Ghalia Tech as one of the first seven influencers on social media. He spoke at the Qurain Cultural Festival in January 2016 about how the digital marketplace, as an economic alternative with easier entry than the highly monopolised and government-controlled private sector, provided him with a lifeline once he lost his job, and his only real source of income[38]. Not only is his company Ghalia Tech's main rival in managing social media content, he has come up with a new online concept, Boutiquat, that capitalises on the fame and popularity of social media stars by having them create virtual boutiques that plug their favourite beauty products, which often sell out. As O-Media is given more contracts by government and key official figures to manage the social media content, like the @newkuwaitgov account, it seems only natural that there would be a cross-over between the stable of fashionistas and influencers, and the promotion of government projects and causes. In a recent interview with *Sky News*[39] Abdulwahab declared that young Kuwaiti people like him, and presumably the group behind Ghalia Tech, have ended merchant elites monopoly of media in Kuwait- previously controlled by only five families according to Abdulwahab- that had fed into existing powers structures, and that is why they were seen as a threat by the establishment.

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[37] Interview with Ghalia Tech manangement, November 26 2015.

[38] Derwaza TV, coverage of Abdulwahab al Issa's speech at Qurain Cultural Festival, January 26, 2016.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5aZOlKQ5uAY&feature=youtu.be

[39] "Morning Tweet" program, *Sky News,* February 21, 2016
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLdkwYLRLRY

Alanoud AlSharekh

Electronic crimes and Dissenting Voices; Thorny issues in Social Media

The trend of reasserting control over national identity post Arab Spring has meant that the Arabian Gulf state's leadership had a renewed interest in the idea of statehood, with issues of sectarianism and ethnic conciliation resurfacing as integral parts of the national dialogue. In some cases, this was a revival of an existing "reform" strategy, such as in Bahrain, when King Hamad renewed relations with the shiite opposition in 2000, or when the late King Abdallah's reign in Saudi Arabia started with a dialogue on nationalism and the first national day celebrations started soon after. Government officials leaned towards increasing online presence as a bridge-building exercise with nationals, and especially through social media channels. This adoption of the new digital space, the investment in faster broad bands, and increased smart phone penetrations coincided with the eruption of post Arab Spring protest movements in the GCC, and gave these national identity dialogues a charged air.

Twitter in particular was seen as a game changer in the region, embraced by clever leaders with excellent PR, such Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashed, or Prince Talal bin Abdelaziz (who at one point seemed to be positioning himself to become the future ruler of Saudi Arabia). Many public officials, both appointed and elected, religious figures, as well as young people used these online podiums to vent their frustrations and hold local and regional institutions accountable for issues ranging from pot-holes on streets to high level corruption. This official presence within a larger space for freedom of expression, meant that "in the absence of real world direct lines of communications Facebook and Twitter are filling the void between citizens and officials."[40]

Many GCC states had problematic relationships with service providers from the start, such as prohibiting the use of Blackberrys for a while in the UAE, and the use of Viber or Skype in Oman. In fact, despite its official position as a technology hub in the region, the UAE was the first to issue cyber security laws in 2012 that were imitated and adopted by other countries in the GCC.

After the Bahrain protests of February 2011, the use of social media platforms to advocate for or against the government played out in front of a global and regional audience. The struggle over the narrative of the uprising took social media exchanges to a darker space, with several name and shame campaigns on Facebook[41]. Bahraini security

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[40] Sultan al Qassimi, "Gulf governments take to social media", *Gulf News,* May 30, 2011 http://gulfnews.com/opinion/thinkers/gulf-governments-take-to-social-media-1.814508

[41] Alanoud Alsharekh, "Social Media and the Arab Spring", Presentation for World Press Freedom Day, Reuters HQ, Canary Wharf, London, May 3,

forces took to looking through the social media activity on protester's smart phones to determine where their loyalty lied. In February 2014 the King of Bahrain approved a new law imposing a jail sentence of up to seven years and a fine of up to 10,000 BD for anyone who "insulted in any kind of public manner the King of Bahrain, its flag, or its national emblem"[42] with wide implications for free speech online.

In some cases, social media platforms were used to accuse neighbouring countries of inciting civil unrest, especially when there was no sectarian angle to be played, such as the rumoured Qatari support for the 2012 Karamat Watan (Dignity of a Nation) protests in Kuwait. Following this unprecedented public display of disenchantment with the government, the language of dissent in Kuwait, both on and off-line, began to challenge traditional modes of self-censorship. Use of the "Battery" hashtag in tweets (an oblique reference to the ruler's pace-maker)[43] landed its users a landmark criminal sentence that was handed down to the tweeps.

Following the ousting of PM Nasser al Mohammed in 2011, the government response to protests in Kuwait was to not make any more concessions, to protect the country against "anarchy and lawlessness", as the Amir said following the storming of parliament by opposition members and sympathisers in a televised speech on November 17, 2011. This meant that many of the hard-won and taken for granted freedoms that set it apart from other GCC monarchies were reneged on, especially freedom of expression. The government also launched lawsuits against the oppositional leadership figureheads who had "transgressed" such as Musallam al Barak and against several Twitter, Facebook and other social media accounts (according to Human Rights Watch, 29 suits in 2013[44]) for violating article 111 of Kuwait's penal code, concerned with blasphemy, transgressing on "Allah, the prophets and messengers, their honour or their kin", and article 25 "objecting to the rights of the emir or faulting him". This tough approach became especially complicated when an alleged conspiracy was discovered on a protester's group chat on the WhatsApp application in 2015[45]. The so-called "Fintas

2011.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QVtO8hokcE

[42] "Bahrain toughens penalties for insulting King", *The Star*, February 3, 2015
http://www.thestar.com.my/news/world/2014/02/05/bahrain-toughens-penalties-for-insulting-king/

[43] Abdullatif Alomar, "Could a Hashtag Send Twitter Users to Prison?", *Global Voice online*, March 26, 2012
http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/03/26/kuwait-could-a-hash-tag-send-a-twitter-user-to-prison/

[44] *World Report 2014: Kuwait*, Human Rights Watch.
https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/kuwait

[45] Hussain al Abdallah, "Prosecution release 3 from the "Fintass Group" for 10,000 dinars and Buyabis for 500", *Aljarida*, July 17, 2015

group" involved ex-government officials and members of the ruling family, and again blurred the lines of private and public privacy legal matters on social media.

The online space had far reaching effects in informing both local and international audiences of stories that were easier to squash previously; a man described as a Sorbonne Professor was arrested in the UAE with other nationals for signing a petition demanding greater political freedoms in 2011[46], and that story made international headlines after it was leaked online.

The UAE leadership is especially adept on the use online media to promote positive images, such as those of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed at the accident site of his advisor Mazrooi's fatal car crash (November 2014), or waiting with a young girl whose family was late to come pick her up from school (2012). This humane and benign leadership style is style is promoted on both the Twitter account @MBZNews, and more cleverly, through the social media sites of others. The appeal of this type of exposure is that it melds in with the spontaneous style of citizen journalism, and is therefore seen as less of a

propaganda exercise than the placement of the same news item in a traditional publication, especially when doubts surround the independence of even top tier newspapers, such as *The National*, described by an ex-lecturer at a UAE university and former journalist as a "highly controlled" publication[47].

Twitter use in Saudi Arabia reveals a shift in national attitudes towards authority, and the interaction of nationals with its emblems and institutions. Twitter account @mujtahid continues to list a litany of ruling and merchant elite transgressions, and whether or not it belongs to an oppositional figure, it is symptomatic of the popularity of the pushing of thresholds on social media. Where previously criticism of ruling and religious elites were only tolerated in subtle hints and light-hearted parodies, social media accounts meant that the exposure and ridiculing of royal figures that was unthinkable in the past became almost a national past-time, like the barrage of mocking comments on the Twitter account of Abdulaziz Bin Fahad (@afaaa73), the favourite son of the late King Fahad.

The Kingdom had a history of different attempts to ban phones with cameras in them,

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http://m.aljarida.com/pages/news_more/2012760281

[46] "A Professor on Trial in Abu Dhabi: the Sorbonne's Complicity of Silence", *Human Rights Watch*, October 4, 2011.
https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/04/professor-trial-abu-dhabi-sorbonnes-complicity-silence

[47] Joe Pompeo, "We Are Not Here to Fight for Press Freedom", *The New Republic,* February 23, 2013,
https://newrepublic.com/article/112542/national-abu-dhabis-brief-experiment-press-freedom

a move which is unthinkable today, as the new citizen media has changed social values to such an extent that people no longer value discretion over the right to document. Local laws have to catch up with new uses and violations in social media, and citizen journalism has forced accountability on corrupt systems, and the traditional news channels that used to cover them and disseminate their agendas. "If the internet revolution is presenting a challenge to oppressive authority, it is equally challenging to media [in the GCC] as a whole"; Ali Al-Badi argues that intellectuals and government officials who underestimate the power that the new social media platforms have in reaching and persuading the masses of a more "authentic" reporting experience are failing to grasp a seminal historical moment[48].

In the last decade the satellite rivalries, mainly between al-Arabiya and al-Jazeera, were still about state controlled broadcastings, but with the onset of online media the state can no longer control what the public does or the reactions a decision will incite, or even the public's ability to gather at a precise point and time. Protest communication changed as a single hashtag became far more powerful than ten appearances on regional TV and satellite stations. In fact, Nael Halabi, MD of Vivaci, a premier media booking agency in

Kuwait, says that he has witnessed a 30% shift from traditional media advertising spending to digital media advertising, with 20% of that focused on social media promoters[49]. Hind al Nahedh, a social media consultant with Kuwait's Public Authority for Youth and Sport uses al-Rai TV's "Hamad Show", a talk show hosted Instagram celebrity @hamadqalam, as further proof of how social media stars have replaced traditional media as the source of information and entertainment. Yet she still thinks that this new found stardom is a bubble that will burst when "real" influencers start engaging more online[50]. This is already starting to happen with not only the adoption of the a separate Social Media Summit for GCC Governments (now in its fifth year), but also in the move of Saudi news sites to Snapchat, with accounts such as @saudinews50 and @alriyadhnp presenting stories in a format made especially for the app. The show-stealing panel of five GCC foreign and defence ministers at the social media influencers mogharidoon/tweeps conference in April 2016 in Riyadh[51], and the surprise appearance of Saudi's Crown Prince in

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[48] Ali Al-Badi, "The adoption of social media in government agencies: Gulf Cooperation Council case study", *Journal of Technology Research*, 5, October 2014.

[49] Interview with Nael Halabi, December 9, 2015.

[50] Interview with Hind al Nahedh, December 31, 2015.

[51] "Five Gulf Ministers set Saudi Twitter on fire at the Tweeps conference", *Alarabiya Online*, 18 April, 2016. http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/mob/saudi-today/2016/04/18/5-وزراء-خليجيون-يشعلون-تويتر-السعودية-في-مغردون-html.

waiting Mohammed bin Salman, demonstrated how seriously regional powers were taking the new social media platforms.

Harris Breslow, Director of the Emirates Internet Project, said that his own research also points to fewer online conversations about politics. "The research showed a spike in the likelihood of online political participation during the initial years of the Arab Spring, but the levels have reverted back to previous levels." [52] Post-Arab Spring political fatigue and the fear of extreme punishments, like the imprisonment and lashing of Saudi writer Raif Badawi for "insulting Islam on electronic channels"[53], are also cited as reasons for the decrease in political content online. As blogging, Twitter, Facebook and text-based platforms get more dangerous, its only natural that social media apps, with the higher emphasis on visual story-telling, will increase in popularity. And yet this tightening of legislation comes at a time where the GCC is seeking to create knowledge economies, investing in tech based companies such as KSA's recent purchase of

a 5 percent stake in Uber, and hoping to create new avenues of revenue that would rely on tech production and empowering the youth. All of which seems to be in direct conflict with the "the drive for increased control, monitoring and censorship by authorities. The regulatory, legal and judicial systems introduced in response to the growth in use of technologies and social media are creating several barriers [to the growth of this sector]."[54]

Conclusion

Across the globe, new messaging apps are replacing traditional forms of media and older social networking sites. The exchange of pictures and texts on these applications is not only cheaper than on the messaging services that come with most mobile phone subscriptions, they also offer a more intimate experience because they are "smaller and less visible than the public networks and far more engaged and trusted. It often feels like a more controlled, real-time replacement for email."[55] The growing importance of a digital identity in the GCC as a means of self-expression and

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[52] Ben Flanagan, "Tweet nothings: Arabs quieter on politics amid fear, fatigue",*AlArabiya News*, January 22, 2015. http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/digital/2015/01/22/Tweet-nothings-Arabs-quieter-on-politics-amid-fear-fatigue.html

[53] Mathew Hussey, "Saudi blogger Raif Badawi in poor health after hunger strike", *The Next Web*, January 2, 2016. http://thenextweb.com/insider/2016/01/02/saudi-blogger-raif-badawi-in-poor-health-after-hunger-strike/#gref

[54] Sarah Alzeini, "Social media's economic revolution in the Gulf", Foreign Policy, February 9, 2015 http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2015/02/09/social-medias-economic-revolution-in-the-gulf/

[55] Mike Isaac and Michael de la Merced, "Why apps for messaging are trending", *New York Times*, January 25, 2015 http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/01/26/technology/why-apps-for-messaging-are-trending.html?referrer&_r=0

as a form of sociopolitical agency cannot be underestimated. The embracing of these new apps that allow young people, and those who govern them, in an attempt to control the national "narrative", has ushered in new opportunities for direct and indirect communication, and, possibly, ways of intervention and exploitation that we must be wary of. There are dangers for these young people because of the very nature of these visual story-telling platforms that by necessity encourage people to overshare with sometimes damaging consequences. The evolution of the struggle between what people are comfortable sharing, what they are allowed to share, and in which direction, will change as regional and international understanding of the different uses for these platforms evolve. The geopolitical influence of an ongoing war in Yemen, the threat of ISIS and an "expansionist" Iran, will also play a role in the degree of freedom in shaping this narrative, and how much the freedom of expression will be controlled as part of new cyber-security and anti-terrorism measures. The adoption of social influencers as celebrities could still be a short-lived phase, or it could be an organic shift into a new media reality. To a certain extent much of this will be tied to the shelf life of a particular platform and if stars can successfully jump from one platform to another. Snapchat stars like Majed al Sabah are able to promote a specific viewpoint and remain sincere in the

audiences' perception so they become an important conduit for those who need the immediate feedback of their followers. In an area of the world where there is little transparency and growing demand for it using Insta-celebrities as middlemen for the promotion of governmental projects and campaigns may be more useful in terms of controlling the message than engagement on Instagram or Twitter where hashtags can take on a life of their own and translate into offline movements.

Is the sound and fury of social media actually leading to social change or is it a temporary measure that is more venting than empowered expression? By looking closely at incidences of online activism translating into policy changes it can be determined whether these social media movements have a real impact or not, and to an extent they do, at least enough to warrant more monitoring and policing of online activity. For many nationals Twitter is the real "voice of the streets" in the GCC. When new ministers are appointed, their twitter feeds are of equal importance as their formal CVs to public opinion. There has been a positive correlation found between the impact of twitter campaigns on election results [56] in Kuwait, and a 2013 hashtag campaign to stop the building of chemical factories in the district of Jahra forced the

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[56] Salah Alfadhli and Ali A Dashti, "The Impact of Twitter on the Voters of Parliamentary Election in Kuwait", *Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 41 (2), 2013, 11-18.

authorities to change their industrial plans at great cost for fear of mobilisation on the streets[57]. Can social media predict political action? A Hong Kong study[58] has found that social media and social networking sites can positively predict the occurrence of a political action or movements in highly controlled societies like China, where there are not many outlets for political and individual freedom. Similarly, a Stanford University study found that in the 2011-2012 Bahrain protests online activity precede and followed acts of dissent and protest on the ground[59]. Judging by how widely embraced these new social connectivity tools have become, and the investment in social media summits, campaigns, and governmental departments, it seems that the GCC leadership feels that may be the case in the Arabian Gulf as well. Prince Mit'ib bin Abdallah, the head of the Saudi Royal Guard, said in an interview with *MBC* in February 2016, that those who are unable to communicate on social media platforms and embrace new forms of communication are the "new illiterate"[60]. As more and more authority figures feel compelled to create and maintain their own digital identities, and as they share and expose their ideas to a scrutinising and interested public, an important change is taking place in which the de-mystifying of political icons and religious authorities is changing the interaction between rulers and those they rule in a fundamental way. When young royals such as Dubai Crown Prince Hamdan al Maktoum (Snapchat @faz3) and others join the sharing frenzy on social media, and show off grand homes, flashy cars and expensive jewellery on Instagram and Snapchat, they are often caught out by the equal reactions of adulation and spite that they receive. The need for tightly controlled PR not just for government officials but for all those who are affiliated with them (wives, friends, entourage) becomes essential to safeguard secrets and maintain a certain image. Ultimately, the interaction between nationals and the once-removed ruling establishment will inevitably lead to the corrosion of the sense of mystery surrounding them. As these leaders seek out approval online, and Gulf nationals are emboldened to know a humane side to their leaders, a new sense of judgement will emerge, altering the existing social contract between GCC governments and their citizens in ways that are yet to be discovered.

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[58] Xinzhi Zhang and Wan-Ying Lin, "Political participation in an unlikely place: how individuals engage in politics through social networking sites in China" *International Journal of Communication*, 8 (2014), 21–42

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[60] MBC interview with Prince Mit'ib Bin Abdulllah, "MBC in a week", February 11, 2016

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Alanoud AlSharekh

Appendix

Mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people)

	2011	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**
Bahrain	131	161	166	173
Kuwait	158	157	190	218
Qatar	120	127	153	146
Oman	159	159	155	158
Saudi Arabia	195	187	184	180
UAE	131	150	172	178

Source: World Bank

Snapchat Usage in Kuwait in 2015
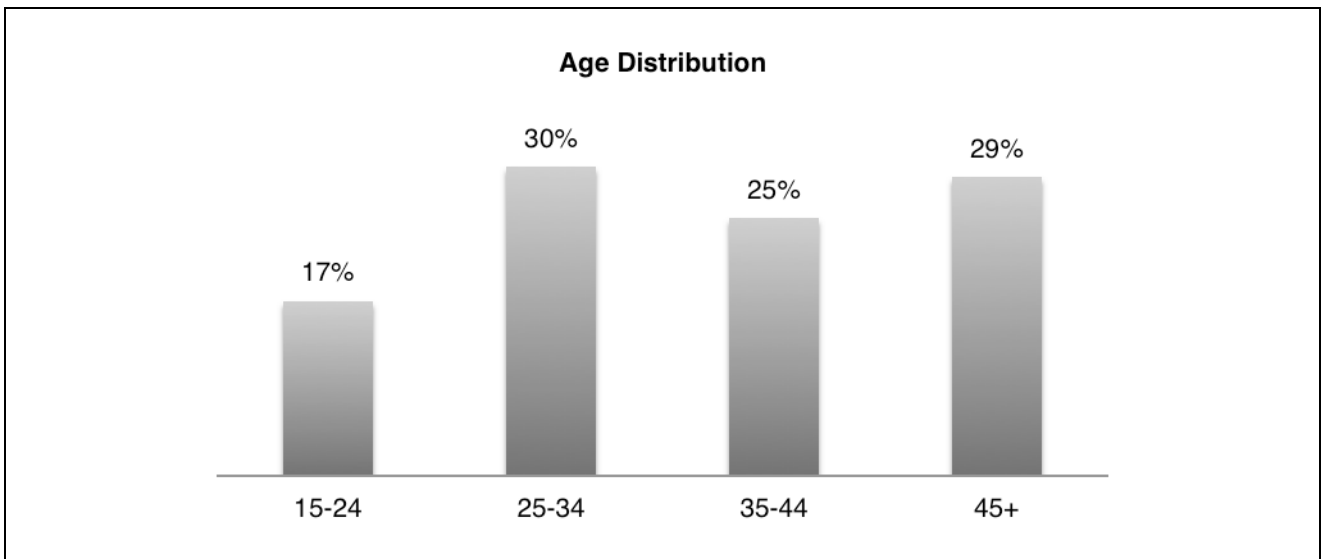
Source: IPSOS

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