

The Role of the Social Media in Empowering Saudi Women's Expression

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By

Hend T. Alsudairy

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For my father, who always loved me and supported me.

May his soul rest in peace.

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INTRODUCTION

Freedom of expression is an essential right for human beings and societies. It promotes the exchange of ideas and brings people to a shared middle ground which helps to minimise gaps and extremism. It helps when discussing public issues and forming healthy public opinions.

Freedom of speech means that people can give their views on things in their societies, and the freedom of the press gives the rights to newspapers to freely express what they feel and want for their communities. However, having freedom of speech does not mean having the right to hurt or discomfort other people or their beliefs. The freedom sought is that beneficial one whose aim is to improve the society that one lives in. This freedom is there to empower people to analyse their institutions and achieve what is best for everybody.

Hence, freedom of expression is very important if people are to participate in decision-making issues. People will not be able to participate freely in what is going on around them if they do not have that freedom. This freedom clearly gives society a voice to air their thoughts on issues without any disturbances. Without a free stream of critique and ideas, society would not function. A closed, censored society will not develop and will live with pools of corruption and isolation.

Why should societies have freedom of speech when it may insult, hurt and stir up groups in a society? This question is particularly important at a time when society is no longer limited by national boundaries but has become global. Hence, information can not only be conveyed to the immediate society but also to the world.

However, there are certain areas where freedom of expression becomes dangerous, an instrument to defame people and society, and sometimes it affects national security. There are many forbidden areas like pornography, violations of one's private life, or trade secrets. In such cases, freedom of speech must stop. Ethics must always be present as the function of freedom of expression is to promote ideas and healthy criticism that will lead to a reformed outcome. Also, cultures on this planet are not identical, so with freedom of expression comes respect for other cultures and beliefs, as the world is no longer limited by national and political borders. Technology has made the world a small village.

Ethically, freedom of speech would lead to both trouble and confusion within society. Hence, utterances must be balanced and considered by the individual's ethics. One's ethical seriousness reflects on oneself and on those who believe that they are offended by what is written, and therefore, one must always consider the dignity of the individual.

This becomes evident in the case of the critique of religion in Saudi society, which is the subject of this book (although what is criticised is customs rather than religion). It is a taboo and was not used to revise tradition, which became almost as strong as religion during the *Alsahwah* period. What is an acceptable criticism of religion? If one is not specialised in religious studies, does one have the right to discuss and argue about certain issues even though they are not mentioned in the Quran? Is it not better to leave those customs and beliefs with taboos to be broken by time?

Criticism of traditional customs should come from intellectuals to get rid of old beliefs unrelated to religion that oppress individuals in the name of religion and culture, such as child marriage for females, female face covers, and many other issues that the articles and screenshots in this book discuss.

Writing about social media and its active female participants is not an easy subject, as I discovered when I embarked on writing on this topic. Digging for the real identity of those participants, I was faced with the problem of documentation. Much information was ready to be given to me, but with no proof I had to trust them and, at the same time, be cautious and use the personal tools available to me for verification. Therefore, I have not included what seems to me to be unlikely to be true. Most of those who even today insist on hiding their identities are still in the middle of wars on social media, while some have abandoned the internet forum and their old identities as well. Others have assumed new identities and completely deny their old activities.

The media is a watchdog for society, and its job is to keep the nation informed, entertained and educated; it must do anything in its power to be there for society and look out for it. Therefore, this book starts with a consideration of freedom of expression in the internet world since its launch in Saudi Arabia, before moving to social media and then hard copy newspapers; although hard copy newspapers started way before social media, my aim is to show that while social media brought with it spaces of freedom of expression, this freedom of expression was there already, as the articles will show.

The ceiling of freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia has been growing fast, helped by new legislation regarding women or social issues. Saudi society is changing, and some old taboos have been broken. For that reason,

I have not added more recent articles as I concentrated on articles that show how these female columnists were keen on revisiting tradition, even though they were confronted by a majority who resisted such revisiting and were attacked for that.

One last word. The Saudi female columnists whom I reached out to while writing this book confirmed that they have never been arrested for what they wrote nor condemned or fired from their jobs, with the exception of Hessah Alshaikh who, for unknown reasons, was stopped by her newspaper itself from writing before receiving the decision of her court case, but there is no written proof even of that. No, they all were free to travel, work and live their life with no detention whatsoever.

CHAPTER ONE

JOURNALISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Media and journalism are not new inventions nor modern occupations; they are considered as part of history and are connected with economic, political, and social news or movements. All the world has known journalism, even in ancient times. The Greek theatre was a kind of media platform where history, religion and rituals were made known to people. Marco Polo's adventures are a great example of the media of advertisement where the reader finds pleasure in and knowledge about the culture, history, beliefs and customs of other nations. Arab poetry was a form of media in ancient times, and their history, wars, satires, and much more was preserved in it. They used it to insult, ridicule or praise. No Arab would forget the poetic lines that were used to sell black head scarfs, which were not popular before, but once these lines were spread, so many were sold that they became out of stock:

Tell the beauty in the black head scarf
what have you done to a pious clerk? He
was on his way to pray till you showed up¹.

Customs and traditions are also contained in poetry, where one can find ethical codes to follow and criticism of those who violate them. The brave Arab warrior Antarah ibn Shaddad, who lived in the 6th century, said:

When my female neighbour passes by me I cast
my looks away till she hides within her abode².

These two lines expose one of the ancient and modern ethics that a man should not stare at his neighbour, as she is considered as a member of the family. Such an ethic is just like writing an ethical column today where the aim is to expose the right way of dealing with the other sex.

In ancient times, kingdoms and empires used to have a web of employees to collect, investigate, and report all news about a certain area or region.

Since the 19th century, news has been spread in a more professional and business-oriented way: in the newspaper. These printed newspapers live on the news and report on the changes and developments of a society at the political, economic, social, or intellectual level. Newspapers thus provide a variety of news besides being witnesses of the age.

Therefore, do people need published media (newspapers, magazines, etc.)? I believe the answer to this question is yes. Newspapers and media in general, whether in hard copy or digital, are important for publicising news, new legislation, postings, governmental plans and also for measuring public opinion on a certain issue. They are also a good and influential medium to spread awareness regarding health, political, and educational aspects of society. On the economic side, they become an advertisement platform for merchandise, universities, workshops, campaigns of civil projects and many other things. In brief, the newspaper is the echo of what happens in the national and international realm.

Newspapers are more or less the same anywhere on the globe, in the sense that they are published by the efforts of a group of people. The establishment consists of different departments that are each assigned a task so that, in the end, the reader has her or his copy of the newspaper in the morning. The employees work dynamically to bring unique news to the reader as soon as possible or come up with arresting headlines. All papers share one aim, which is to spread the news; the experiences of the reporters are shared with the reader³.

Usually, working for a newspaper used to be a man's job as women are not mentioned except as authors of serialised novels in newspapers and magazines; those who did work in newspapers and magazines were involved in certain sections like society and family. Women's serious involvement in the media came during World War II when the need for women to substitute for men arose as men were mostly at the battle-front; this need was also accompanied by other changes in the world. Some of these early female journalists showed skills that proved that they were worthy of continuing. However, women did not receive equal pay and were not treated equally with men until the late 1960s⁴.

The situation in Saudi Arabia is similar, as it is only lately that women started working in journalism as daily or weekly columnists. In order to understand the beginning of journalism in Saudi Arabia or the Arabian Peninsula, most of which is contained within Saudi Arabia, the reader must look back through its history. Saudi newspaper history is divided into four historical eras⁵:

1. First, newspapers that were established by Saudis who immigrated to other Arab countries such as *Aldastour* by Abdullah Alzuhair in 1908 in Albasrah or *Alkuwait* magazine published by Abdulaziz Ahmed Albedah in Kuwait in 1928. Suliman Aldakhail also established three newspapers in Iraq: *Alriyadh* in 1910, *Alhayah* in 1912, and *Jazirat Alarab* in 1931. Some went as far as Indonesia and established newspapers there, like Mohammed Alhijazi's *Alwifaq* that was established in 1923.
2. Next comes Ottoman journalism. The Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid was keen on establishing newspapers in Hijaz (Makkah and Madinah) that advocated the Sultanate's point of view. The first newspaper of this era was *Shams Alhaqeeqah*, set up in Makkah in 1909. It was published by Mohammed Tawfeeq. In the same year, Rajab Tawakel published *Alslah Alhijazi* (the *Hijazi Reform*). In Madinah, Muhammed Almadni and Mohammed Alharznjani established the *Almadinah Almonurah* newspaper in 1909. The reader will notice that the dates of these publications are the same; although there were two newspapers that were published in 1905 and 1916, most were published in one year at a time where the world was in an atmosphere of turbulence. The Ottoman government was keen on publishing these newspapers among the Arabs to the extent that they sent some Arabs from Hijaz to Egypt so that they could be trained at the famous Bulaq Press⁶.
3. In the Hashemite era, there were four new newspapers. The first was *Alqublah*, published in Makkah in 1916 by Muheebaldeen Alkhateeb. In 1920 Omar Shaker published *Alfalah*, also in Makkah. In the same year, Hashem Almaari published *Jeroul Alzyraiah*. In 1924, Mohammed Nasif established *Bareed Alhijaz* in Jeddah.
4. The fourth and final era is the Saudi era, which is distinguished by new legislation. All newspapers owned by individuals were required to become companies: no individual was to own his own newspaper. Before this legislation was enforced, Yousef Yassen published *Um Al-Qura* in 1924, followed by Nasif's *Sout Alhijaz* in 1932. The number of newspapers in the country was above 30 at that time. This era is marked by another feature: newspapers are not limited to the western region, and that is due to the government embarking on an education drive; many educated people who can read and write are now all over the country, unlike previously when schools were very few in number and were mostly in the western region.

Newspapers remain one of the important sources of news for many people, even since the digital media revolution. Although social media is competing with it, reports and authenticity are still more on the newspapers' side. The major role of a newspaper is to tell the news and spread awareness. All employees of a newspaper target one object, which is *headlines*. There are many newspapers in Saudi Arabia, and they are all trying to win as much of the readership as they can; the competition becomes harder if a newspaper is competing with another in the same region. Some newspapers have established a good reputation for authenticity and neutrality. They help in bringing the world's events to and analysing them for the common person, and also help in promoting civil projects and giving briefs on any new governmental appointment. They voice the citizens' demands. Most newspapers have a section for health or legal consultations, etc. Usually, the newspapers are daily.

The Saudi press industry has developed due to the nation's need for it and due to the fact that the media is an influential medium. The Saudi Press Agency (SPA) was established in 1971, and all governmental announcements or news are posted through it. In the 1980s, the Saudi press showed progress, more depth and more involvement in the people's concerns, although Saudi Arabia was engulfed in what is called the *Alsawah* (the Awakening), a religious revival. Some newspapers were aware of this movement like the *Alriyadh* newspaper, which was attacked harshly for not adopting the movement's concepts and principles. This newspaper kept a straight line, opening its pages to modern, postmodern, and moderate writers while rejecting any extremist articles. The Saudi press was also encountering the western accusation of Arabs and Islam bringing the political changes in the world to the attention of the Saudi reader⁷.

Many analysts attribute women's strong presence in the media to the events of 9/11 and the strong international pressure on the Saudi government to enhance reforms regarding women's status in the country. The truth is that reforms had started years before 9/11 in the early 1990s, which proves that the connection between the reforms and the 9/11 attacks is false and has no grounds for support. Yet, the reforms were very slow, and many took so long to materialise that one can see a difference, if not a contradiction, between the official attitude and actual announcements and practices.

As I mentioned in my previous book, *Modern Woman in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, Saudi women worked in newspapers from early on, but they remained in marginalised positions as they worked from home and were restricted to women's and family pages about children, the kitchen, décor, etc. Their names were not written down and some preferred to use

their initials⁸. There are some exceptions but these are very rare, like Lutfiah Alkhateeb writing in *Albilad* in 1951, before female education started in Saudi Arabia. Then, in 1959, she became the first woman to oversee the first page about women in Saudi Arabia, which was titled “The woman at her home”. Thuria Gabel, the famous poetess, was the second Saudi woman to write in a newspaper under her real name. There is a funny story about how she started her journalist career; according to Mohammed Alsaif, she read an article in a newspaper, the title of which would have been degrading to any woman: “Nagsat Agel wa Dean” (“Women are far from perfect intellectually and religiously”). She was provoked and replied with a fierce article; replies then were exchanged, and that was her start. Many women came to be writers in newspapers up to 1981 when *Alriyad* took the lead and assigned the post of director to Khereeh Alsagaf, the first time a woman had held the post. She was the first newspaper director in the whole Gulf region and, in the same year, Faten Shaker became the chief editor of *Sidaty* magazine. The difference between *Alriyadh* and *Sidaty* is their target reader, as *Alriyadh* is read by both genders and covers all subjects while *Sidaty* only targets ladies; it was also based in London. Other newspapers followed suit a few years later to give women important posts within their establishments. Their early writings reveal a social concern:

Their [women’s] writings show a social and communal sense of responsibility as the reader can see in one of Al-Khateeb’s essays, where she demands a maternity hospital. Qabel was rejecting the prevailing idea of the inequality of women to men in matters of religion and logic, and she replied to an essay on that subject⁹.

Women columnists were shy in expressing themselves and their demands. Most of the time, they were afraid of being stigmatised or breaking social norms. Many were afraid for their families’ reputation more than for themselves. Since the 1980s, many female journalists have proved themselves and won wide readerships. Many have also been employed with full-time jobs at the newspapers where they worked. Their experiences culminated in 2004 when two ladies were elected as members of the Saudi Journalists Association, and they also became chief editors. These two ladies were Nawal Alrashed and Nahid Bashatah. It was a big step that needed courage from both genders and thanks are due to the male chief editors who made it a reality.

However, female journalists were on many occasions accused of spreading a bad image of Saudi women or demanding rights that were not yet accepted socially. Many women criticised them, not only common women but also some professors. In a paper delivered in 2000 by a Saudi

PhD holder, the title of which is “Alkahleejeeh Alсахafah Alnessayah ela Ayn?” (“Where is Kahleejeeh Female Journalism Heading?”), at a symposium in Doha on the role of the Muslim woman in Gulf journalism, the author states clearly that Gulf women magazines are followers of the western media, even in terms of the subjects discussed, and they also accuse the magazines of enabling only those women writers who have been influenced by the west.

The author also wonders what the results of this painful fact are for women’s journalism in female circles. The results as the researcher sees them are:

- Pressing parties to challenge religion, ethics and principles;
- Succeeding in changing many original concepts that are connected with religion and its instructions;
- Paving the way for unacceptable and deformed ideas and unethical practices;
- Enforcing the western dimension in Arabic, Muslim, and Gulf societies¹⁰.

The paper is clearly against the new intellectual awareness of women, whose writing tone and rights demands excelled in the 1990s.

However, these concerns were overcome by women through modern forms of social media, which are different and more penetrating than the traditional media. These forms of social media are web-based platforms that allow people to construct their own profile, which might be not their true face. Views can be posted with no fear of it being known who wrote them. They also provide the option to send and receive private messages, though this depends on the platform, as features vary greatly between them.

Some parts of the world were introduced to social media years before Saudi Arabia. Six Degrees is considered to have been the first social media platform in the world and was launched in 1997. Some of its features existed before it like profiles, which prevail on dating sites, but it was the first to bring together most of the features that were available on other sites. The next chapter will discuss these sites and their uses in Saudi Arabia.

CHAPTER TWO

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIETY

It is important, before delving into the core of this chapter, to talk about the introduction of the internet to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It was first introduced in 1993¹. In 1997 KACST was the provider for the whole country, but in 1999 the internet became available to all.

Today, Saudi Arabia connects 21 million people or nearly 70 percent of its population to the internet. While other Gulf countries like the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait have higher penetration rates, the Saudi population is embracing the opportunities associated with the internet and setting an example for the rest of the Arab states. In addition, the Saudi people are among the most active social media users in the world².

However, KACST filters internet content by censoring certain words, for example, sex or drugs, no matter the context in which they are used. That makes it impossible for any serious researcher to access any decent article that includes any of the words that are censored, and there are a lot of them.

Then came social media and its fever spread among the Saudis. It opened the door with its many applications for discussions and creating public points of view almost freely. Although it is arresting how passionately Saudis participated in social media platforms, very little attention has been paid to the change in the writing mood and tone of Saudi female writers in a country where some female novelists' novels were removed from bookstores' shelves under pressure from the radicals. Therefore, this book, I believe, will add to the studies on social media's influence on females' writings in modern Saudi Arabia.

This chapter will concentrate on the popular forms of social media among Saudis and try to answer these questions: why are they using it? How does it reflect freedom of speech and some old taboos regarding women? To answer these, we will first take a look at previous phases of social interaction on the internet in Saudi Arabia.

Saudis were active on forums like the Altomar forum, the liberals net forum, and Alsahat Alarabia from Farisnet. The latter forum prevailed among intellectuals, and many current columnists were active on it in the

late 1990s and in 2004. Hence, before stepping deeper into the cyber world, the reader is offered a definition of the forum. It is an arena of discussion, arguments, and exchanges of points of view of political, intellectual, social and many other issues; these issues are discussed by many participants who already have registered on the forum. These forums have a team of monitors to administrate them and apply the forum's rules. Alsahat was not a Saudi platform, but most of its participants were Saudis. Based on the Aljasad forum, operated by Jasad Althaqafah (culture entity), Alsahat secured 286th position internationally based on Alexa site rankings in 2005. It also states that between 50-70% of visitors viewed the political *saha* (arena)³. Moreover, searchforecast.com consider it the second most popular site among 50 Arabic sites. This categorizing is based on the site's archive on international servers and the number of links pointing to it⁴. The importance of this forum is that the political *saha* provides authentic local news that is very important to the community, like the explosion at the Almuhaia compound in Riyadh in 2003; the forum was the first to announce this and much other news before even official newspapers did. The site closed registration for new members for five years for no obvious reason and reopened in 2005 for one week only, but with strict conditions added. The news of registration reopening was published in many newspapers such as *Alriyadh*, which shows its importance.

It is well known that many academics and intellectuals, whether visitors or members of a forum, use anonymous names. More than 7,000 names were rejected when registration opened, which shows the popularity of these forums. The internet introduced a new culture with the use of all these different media, as Ali Alaedy states:

Every new technology changes society to the extent that it imposes new culture and advances knowledge on it. But what kind of culture and knowledge? What we observe nowadays of the "internet culture" and the invention of new media is entirely different from what was before it, either on the positive or negative sides of this medium⁵.

New topics that were not easy to deal with before in the traditional media have been tested, discussed, and analysed, one of which is postmodernity. As an example, a cleric went as far as publishing a book against it, stripping some well-known thinkers of their faith and calling for them to be punished. Of course, this cleric took this stance due to having poor knowledge of its meaning. That was in the 1980s, which marked the beginning of a long thought coma where the conservatives' radical views prevailed.

This passion for social media is due to the fact that in traditional media like newspapers, there is a lack of interaction between the provider of the

information and the receiver with no immediate reaction, as is reflected in the following passage quoted by Alaedy:

In the twentieth century, mass communication is one-sided, and if we delve deeper, we will find that mass communication is simply distributing information from one side only and this is not real communication, as communication is based on reaction⁶.

One may point out that some radio programmes enable such interaction, but then there is a censoring of replies or discussions there, and that makes a big difference compared to the immediate reactions on the internet. It is a benefit of forums that the ability to archive and categorise subjects and discussions is much easier and better for them than for any other net-based medium.

Forums and many other net-based programs like ICQ are places where the two sexes can discuss issues that would otherwise not be possible in their immediate society but are inviting in the virtual space. Of course, not all discussions are serious and fruitful; some log in just to pass the time. The Saudi passion for the new technology is stated here:

Since 2012, the number of active internet users has grown by 300 percent. According to recent studies, one-third of Saudi citizens are today regular users of social networks, and the number of Twitter and YouTube users in the kingdom is the highest per capita in the world⁷.

They found free spaces not in the political sense but in social, traditional, and religious issues and boundaries. Many were thankful to these forums as they gained knowledge for their debates and arguments with other parties as they needed solid proof from history and religious teachings to reply and prove their points of view.

Most activists, as I said earlier, did not use their real names on the net at that time. While I was writing this book, I discovered the hidden world of the internet and I was surprised when I was told by one of those activists that the majority were Islamic extremists. They attack whoever does not share their views. Moreover, I was told that many liberals were hacked and their user names were used to reply and contradict the liberals' views. What is astonishing, at least to me, is that the hacked liberal or activist writer sometimes had to pay to retake control of his/her account. One of these activists is a well-known columnist now; she told me that her account was hacked three times. What made it easy for those hackers to attack others was their ideology and the fact that, at that time, the electronic crime law had not yet been issued so they got away with it.

The real names of those activists remain a mystery till today, even with the moderate freedom of speech and openness of society. There was a strong activist who used to write on the political forum; he chose a name for himself that denoted his strong fighting spirit: “*Nab*” (“Tusk”). This liberal activist attacked the radicals furiously, using their own arguments against them. His writings show knowledge, depth, and intelligence, and even up to today, many people have associated him with my father. The truth is that my father never used the internet except to read the news and he disdained those who write anonymously as he himself was banned from writing twice, as he never wrote about anything except for what he believed in.

However, many participants still deny their participation and one of them told me that she is still afraid of the radicals and that she would never expose her previous username to anyone. The hacking targeted liberals and moderates alike, and they were blackmailed and sometimes forced to pay to restore their accounts. Those liberal activists searched, read, and dug for the truth; they made it their mission to distinguish and make known what is a religious principle and what is a custom. They went into battles with conservatives who refuted critical thinking and revisiting tradition. Most participants were from Saudi Arabia but not all. They all speak and use the Arabic language, but many wrote in classical Arabic while others used dialects. Based on a report done by Arabiat⁸ in 2005, this use of dialect created a problem concerned with language. Many used every day Arabic language or dialects, which vary from one region to another, especially in Saudi Arabia, and that raises an issue as some phrases and words are difficult to understand. That made it difficult to discuss some issues or reply to them. The problem of lobbying is another of the issues raised in this report.

This arena was Saudi women’s second entrance into the media field after journalism, but it was dangerous and very different from the press, where censorship is alert and can protect them. On forums, they were on their own. Many women who were against some customs or wrong understandings of religious instructions that were used by the patriarchy to subordinate them found outlets for their anger and distress in these forums. They shielded their reputation with anonymous names and furiously attacked those soldiers of tradition, using their own arguments against them and drawing examples from religion and history that contradicted the present situation and exposed the real Islamic instructions.

Nevertheless, the functionality of forums was limited on smartphones, and many deserted them and flew to the new apps. Smartphones, with their variety of social media applications, were a better and easier choice for the majority. These applications are defined as follows:

Social networks are defined by the social links between individuals that specify one or more types of relationships. Such links represent pathways through which information, materials, and infections can be transmitted. Social networks can be viewed from the perspective of individuals (egocentric) or as a collection of connected individuals (sociocentric)⁹.

It started with WhatsApp. Saudis used it at the beginning to exchange jokes, pictures, advertisements, and news, and many times it was a medium to share an article that had been denied publication in a hard copy newspaper. So the need for digital, concentrated news is one of the motivations behind the popularity of social media, plus the possibility of expressing an opinion:

...people desire to be supplied with information that gives a clear picture of the developments taking place around them. Everyone wants not only reports about events but also logical analyses that correlate events, enabling them to form an opinion on everything that happens locally and internationally¹⁰.

It has always been true that information is power. Saudis love exchanging information and expressing their opinions even old illiterate people, whom you may find discussing an international political issue with no real awareness of the issue itself.

Social platforms like Facebook, Twitter and many others meet the Saudis' appetite for that. They also help to bridge the gap between different points of view and attract more tolerant attitudes among their users. Of these social media platforms, Twitter is the most favoured platform in the kingdom.

Turning to Twitter, Saudis alone produced 210 million tweets per month from 5.4 million users. In fact, the Twitter penetration in Saudi Arabia is the highest in the world¹¹.

Saudis are heavily involved and very active on Twitter, where interaction goes both ways:

Saudi Arabia has some of the world's highest usage rates for digital media by the Saudi society. According to the web resources, in the month of October 2013 Saudi Arabia got first position in Twitter penetration. The Kingdom tops the list of Middle East countries when it comes to involvement in the social network media in most of the statistical data¹².

This submergence in the cyber world increases with Twitter in particular. This platform attracts different people with different attitudes, education,

backgrounds, and ideologies. Even the most conservative clerics have accounts with millions of followers:

The radical clerics are the largest and most popular group in Saudi Arabia. Each of the three leading preachers, Sheikh Salman al-Ouda, Sheikh Muhammad al-Arifi, and Ahmed al-Shugairi, has between 5-7 million social media followers¹³.

For many years, those clerics were waging wars on social media, masked by religion against liberals or against any sign indicating a hint of women's empowerment. And they use them because social media platforms are very influential in affecting public opinion; they have both positive and negative effects. The use of words in combination with pictures can easily help to shape public opinion about almost everything in life.

Through virtual transmission modern media – especially social media – are able to guide individuals easily to lower cost. In addition, they have become capable of enabling them to express their opinions and criticism directly, not to mention contributing to making dangerous and complex changes in political life. In this context, as of the year 2014, the total number of all kinds of devices which are connected with the mobile has surpassed the world's population. It is expected that the number will reach 1.5 devices per human being by 2019. However, the rapid appearance of new shapes and forms of computerised device has not stopped anywhere, and the same applies to smart/white boards, fablitice, smart TVs and smart watches. This represents a developmental step towards computerisation everywhere. In fact, the spread of smart phones has resulted in the rapid spread of news transmission through social media that can be navigated through mobiles¹⁴.

Social media has made it possible for all views to be read and heard, as Maryanne Gaiho states:

...each person with marginal views can see that he's not alone. And when these people find one another via social media, they can do things – create memes, publications and entire online worlds that bolster their worldview, and then break into the mainstream¹⁵.

Moreover, it has made it easy to access information quickly and easily, as the *Journal of Mass Communication* remarks: during the last few years, the internet has come to be the main means of communication in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia¹⁶. It also helps in keeping people in touch with each other in this fast-moving world.

Saudis are fans of social media platforms, especially Twitter, and in that aspect, they differ from other Arab nations such as Egypt, where the most

used social media platform is Facebook. Although Facebook was introduced before Twitter in Saudi Arabia and many Saudis have accounts on it, they prefer Twitter for many reasons. One of these reasons is stated by Kalev Leetaru:

Twitter in particular has become one of the primary data sources used for societal study because of its machine-friendly API access that allows users to directly ingest the live Twitter stream for analysis¹⁷.

Twitter also allows its users to indulge themselves anonymously and relieve their frustrations. That is why many female users feel safe in the freedom of the cyber world and express their real opinions without being judged as they hide behind anonymous initials or names. Of course, not everyone does that. Many women are now writing under their own names or just omit their family name. Some observers still argue that those women are actually following what their society and customs dictate. One of these observers is Dr. Abdulrahman Allily, assistant professor at King Faisal University, who believes that women can participate in the public sphere from their houses, theoretically speaking. They can discuss and argue about issues, but that, according to him, does not reflect their real personalities and belief. To him, it is a fake freedom¹⁸. It surprises me how he confidently states that Saudi women do not post messages or articles on social media regarding the essential social changes that they dream about; besides, in his opinion, they repeatedly exchange boring messages. Surprisingly, Dr. Allily's opinion was published as recently as 2017, when Saudi women came forward with their demands and achieved many goals.

Twitter is full of hashtags created by women with their real identities, and in some cases, satisfied with using their first and second names, they actually defend their rights. These hashtags aspire to expand women's rights in the public sphere and also correct misinterpretations of religion and history by integrating women into politics, business and all aspects of life, even the judicial system, which has been a masculine fort for centuries.

These social platforms also prove the loyalty of the nation to the government, even though many outsiders were betting on them to revolt. But the Saudi hashtags formed a cyber army defending the government, exposing lies and fake news and pictures. This attitude contradicts the following statement:

Nevertheless, the royal house and the official religious establishment see social media users as a real threat that requires close monitoring, especially regarding content that is damaging to Islam and the royal house¹⁹.

Twitter, according to *Albilad* (January 20, 2017) and the Center for Government Communication forum, is the fifth most visited site in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The average number of tweets for an active member is five tweets a day. Moreover, 40% of its use in the Middle East is in Saudi Arabia, even among governmental entities; for example, the Ministry of Education has 2 million followers. The number of Saudis using the internet is 23.93 million, 13.8 million of whom are on Twitter, and 52% of them are in the age range 18-34. It is striking that Twitter is so popular in Saudi. One reason for this is because it is distinguished from other social media platforms by being capable of delivering easy, simple, smooth, and clear messages to all kinds of mentalities. As explained on the Center for Government Communication forum, it is fast, premium, personalised and conversational. Based on the survey published by the Center for Government Communication forum on May 13, 2018, 74% of people use Twitter for governmental office purposes and to comment on their performance. 55% believe that Twitter helps to keep them in touch with these offices. Twitter is used, based on the results of the survey, for political, social, educational, sporting, entertainment, news and information purposes, besides answering inquiries. The participants answered *Albilad*'s question "Why do you use Twitter?" as follows:

- As a source of information, either official or secondary
- For digital campaigns, gathering tweets around or about a subject
- Electoral marketing
- E-petitions to support a certain case
- To view Twitter ads that are announced on the accounts of influencers who have millions of followers
- To tweet anonymously so they can express their views without being afraid of being labelled or judged

Also, according to the Center for Government Communication, people log in to Twitter for:

- Breaking news
- More information on breaking news
- Updating oneself with local and international happenings
- A deeper analysis of an issue or news
- Sharing and expressing one's opinions on a wide range of issues
- Staying up to date with current affairs or events

People's uses of Twitter vary, and activists have created communities to overcome the difference from Facebook, where one can create groups. On Twitter, communities are formed by creating accounts for people with common interests like "Saudis in the USA" or "University faculty" ("Aadaaa hayat Altadrees").

Other activists are public figures or social media stars known as influencers. They have huge numbers of followers going into the millions, and include people like Ragad Alabdulaziz (@Haunted2012) and Bent Afdina (@Youasa1), who chose a sarcastic name under which she harshly criticises different aspects of life she believes must be corrected.

Moreover, Saudis make use of Twitter's hashtags to protest against or criticise some decisions or official appointments. It has become a tool for keen observers that helps in shedding light on some violations. Others use it to market their goods or new branches of their business. Governmental entities and officials also have accounts where they post news and reply to inquiries.

Hence, with the increasing popularity of Twitter, many users came forward with their real names and identities, but there are still some who tweet anonymously for different reasons, ranging from social to political issues, or to defame and insult others.

Therefore, these social platforms have enabled many to cross barriers at many levels, either to highlight the misdeeds of officials or to empower female entrepreneurs. Instagram in particular has helped women a lot, and Snapchat helped in this sense too.

The next chapter will introduce some accounts of female Saudi Twitter activists and analyse samples of their tweets in Arabic. As I said before, I will concentrate on Twitter as the most influential platform in Saudi Arabia because it is open to all and interaction is immediate.

CHAPTER THREE

SAUDI WOMEN ACTIVISTS ON TWITTER

3.1. Twitter in Saudi Arabia

The first public tweet was sent in July 2006. However, Twitter was used for the staff of Odeo before it was opened to the public. By 2007 many had started to use it, and the service expanded every year.

Twitter functions in all languages except Chinese, Japanese and Korean, maybe more by the time this book is published. Its use has boomed all over the world, but what concerns this chapter is the use of Twitter in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, there are hundreds of thousands of women on every social media platform who use them in a variety of ways and for various ends. Women spend a long time on social media networks on the mobile web or apps every day.

As this chapter's focus is on Twitter, it is necessary to give a brief definition of this platform: Twitter is a social media platform used by hundreds of millions of people around the globe who use it daily for different reasons. This use becomes excessive to the extent of becoming a source of information for all kinds of things in Saudi Arabia, even for restaurants. It has also become a channel to express one's views and demands, especially for women, who participate vigorously on Twitter, as stated here:

Hashtags for women driving are often the most prominent on Twitter, but more recently, a shift calling for abolishing guardianship has become the focus throughout social media¹.

In addition, as stated by Amnesty:

Twitter has become a place that people use in both a professional and personal capacity. From human rights activists coordinating protests on Twitter to people from marginalized communities creating solidarity networks or politicians engaging with constituents outside of traditional office hours – Twitter offers its users around the world an opportunity to make connections across industries and regions at a speed that was almost unthinkable only a decade ago².

Its users are capable of modifying their profiles as it suits them and even of hiding their geographical location. The user can also protect his/her tweets from the public and can make lists of the people they follow based on interests or profession.

Many confessional issues have been subjects of debate among women as well as men. It is comprehensible that some men advocate against some of the women's demands as they will definitely lose some of their authority due to their being in a patriarchal society. The irony is that a segment of females, some of whom are professors at universities, were against most of the women's empowerments proposed by the government and resisted any endeavour to enlighten women about the difference between religion and customs, using historical examples where women were active and participated in most aspects of life that were considered normal at that time.

Twitter was one of the major mediums that helped in exposing the shallow conservative argument that resisted women's empowerment. An example is a funny and ridiculous YouTube video of a cleric that was viewed and joked about all over the world. This person, who is striving to keep the ban on women driving, came up with a non-grounded medical reason for women not to drive, saying that he believes driving will damage women's ovaries. Saudi Twitter went into a fit of laughter over the reason. This example is one of many that expose those fanatics to the public, who are pious by nature and respect religion. That explanation motivated many medical doctors to reply and correct the information. Of course, the replies coming from professionals helped to convince simple people of the false information and shattered the traditional view of some clerics. Many women were agitated and participated in the argument.

As mentioned in a Nielsen study, millions of women have emerged on every social media platform, especially Twitter in Saudi Arabia. The study states that women spend roughly 10 minutes on social networks through the mobile web or apps every day³. However, these female participants, due to the typically negative patriarchal society's point of view, tend to use pen names or metaphorical images. Even now, many vigorous and public female figures who do not hesitate to uncover their faces in the public sphere still hide on social media behind an image that gives an impression of their belief or ideology. For example, Raghad Alfaisal (@alfaisalrgad), a feminist and a critical observer of society who was an early user of Twitter, used an image of a woman clad in black in the traditional Saudi hijab with her hand placed over her covered mouth.