Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

K n o w l e d g e   f o r   A l l

Workshop 1

Social Media and the Changing Context of Politics in the Gulf

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Abstract

There has been a great deal of discussion and speculation and some research among academics and practitioners alike about what role the new media, especially social media, are currently playing and what impact they will have in future social and political developments in the Arab world. This workshop will concentrate on social media use in the Gulf, but it welcomes contributions regarding more traditional media that may have had an impact on social media developments.

Social media, like other forms of mass communication, originated in the West. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that each new media development was a "communication revolution." However, several noteworthy developments preceded the introduction and use of social media in the Middle East. For example, the introduction of movable Arabic type played a role in the Arab Awakening; point-to-point, two-way radio communication made it possible for Saudi Arabia's founder to stay in touch with leaders in his

increasingly large kingdom; Nasser's Radio Cairo and the Voice of the Arabs helped spark political developments in the Arab world; television brought live pictures, news, and films to the unaware; video cassettes and DVDs essentially removed the control of entertainment from Middle East governments and gave it to individuals; direct-to-home satellite television not only contributed to the loss of government control over most electronic media, but also allowed the creation of new information formats – Al Jazeera is just one example. Finally, the introduction of the Internet and social media helped put individuals in charge of communication, especially in Gulf States where high disposable income among the young and old alike permits the acquisition of modern communication technology and associated essential high-speed broadband connections.

Description and Rationale

The quest to learn how and under what circumstances those in the Gulf use social media is elusive for several reasons. Historically, Gulf governments that controlled traditional print and broadcast media had little interest in learning specifics about their audiences. When Western international radio broadcasts were important, the BBC, Voice of America, and Radio Monte Carlo Middle East, for example, did surveys to help craft programming and to show their sponsoring governments the value of the broadcasts. For the most part, these radio services are a thing of the past, replaced by many of the same radio broadcasters with direct-to-home satellite services. With this there is increased interest in pan-Arab television advertising; audience research is essential to let advertisers know the size and demographics of those receiving paid messages. Thus, commercial research firms are active in determining more audience information.

We believe this proposed workshop will attract research that reveals more about social media and Internet usage in the Gulf States. Students, academics, government media outlets, and commercial research firms will be attracted to present papers to this workshop as a means of disseminating their findings. Some researchers and analysts believe that social media usage has already had an impact on Gulf politics and society. In her 2012 book *On Saudi Arabia* Karen E. House notes that "…thanks to satellite television, the Internet, and social media, young people now are well aware of government ineffectiveness and wealth inequities." She further quotes a young Saudi man in his mid-twenties who said, "Facebook opens the doors of our cages," referring to social media as the primary way women and men meet in the kingdom. A *Financial Times* story about social media use in Saudi Arabia asserts that "Saudis are among the most active social media users in the Middle East."

A groundbreaking eight-country survey in late 2012 and early 2013 (that included Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia) sponsored by Northwestern University's program in Qatar notes that "Facebook is by far the most popular social network in Arab countries surveyed, with 94 percent of social network users active on the network. More than half of social network users in the sample are active on Twitter, 46 percent employ Google+, and around one in seven use Instagram."

Dr. Yousef Al-Failakwi gave a presentation entitled "Are Social Media in Kuwait Really Social?" at the 2012 meeting of the Broadcast Education Association. In his abstract he noted that Forbes magazine offered a list of cities where the most Arab tweets took place; thirty-eight percent of those were from Kuwaitis. Another research center indicated that there are about 900,000 Facebook users in Kuwait, meaning that one-third of all Kuwaitis are using Facebook.

The Dubai School of Government's July 2012 report entitled "Social Media in the Arab World: Influencing Societal and Cultural Change" provides a comprehensive review of social media use in the Middle East. The document includes several charts reflecting survey results. One chart notes that 75 percent of Saudis and 71 percent of Emiratis believe that their contribution to society has increased through using social networking tools.

Anticipated Papers

As noted earlier, we believe that the workshop will attract a wide variety of papers from the Gulf area, the Middle East, and beyond. Papers presented at the workshop will permit discussion of the use and impact of social media and the Internet, an under-researched topic given the present and future social, cultural, political, economic, and religious impact on the Gulf States. Therefore, a variety of perspectives from researchers and practitioners alike are invited:

- Is political discussion encouraged by social media in the Gulf?
- Has social media changed interpersonal communication patterns in the Gulf?
- Is there synergy between social and traditional media in political discussion?
- How does social media promote multi-generational political dialogue?
- Has social media usage had an impact on traditional forms of mass communication?
- Has social media facilitated a political discussion among those in the Gulf and citizens of non-Gulf states?
- Is there evidence that social media has fostered political changes in the Gulf?
- Has Gulf social media changed Gulf journalism coverage?
- Is social media utilization discussed in traditional Gulf media?

Workshop Director Profiles

Dr. Douglas A. Boyd holds an undergraduate degree from the University of Texas at Austin, an M.A. from the University of Maryland, College Park, and a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. He has held academic and administrative positions at the University of Minnesota, the University of Delaware, the University of Maryland, and the University of Kentucky. Earlier, he was a commercial broadcaster and was employed by the US government in the construction of the first TV stations in Saudi Arabia. He was a Fulbright Professor at Cairo University.

Dr. Yousef Al-Failakawi completed his higher education in the United States, including a B.A. degree from the University of Denver, an M.A. from Murray State University, and a Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina. He has held several professional positions at Kuwait Television, and been a consultant to the Minister of Information before moving to Kuwait University where he was the head of the Department of Mass Communication. He is currently is in charge of Kuwait University's US Culture Relationships Department.

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