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To What Extent Is Twitter Changing Gulf Societies?

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The young populations of the Gulf Arab monarchies are some of the most avid users of social media in the world. The region may be better known for setting records for the world's tallest building, largest mall or most expensive cupcake than for the dramatic growth in information and communications technologies that is being witnessed in these six states. But the trends of soaring internet and mobile phone use will have a far deeper effect on Gulf societies. Twitter represents a further challenge to the traditional state control of the media, which have already been profoundly altered by satellite television, though it also offers opportunities for governments to communicate with their citizens or to monitor them. It facilitates networking and connectivity across borders and across social groups. And it has a levelling effect on political, social and religious discourse as the overwhelmingly youthful demographic of Twitter users has a chance to answer back or to argue with elders – such as ministers, clerics, or CEOs – in a way that they would find far harder in person. It is providing a new space for political debate and mobilization, though it is also a new battleground for censorship.

'Twitter' communities

The CEO of Twitter, Dick Costolo, said in July 2012 that Saudi Arabia has the fastest-growing Twitter community in the world, based on the sheer number of tweets from the country, which he said had increased by thirty times (3,000%) in the past month. A study by Semiocast¹ in June of the same year found Riyadh was the tenth most actively tweeting city in the world – particularly remarkable for a country that only began to allow the public to access the internet in 1999. The July 2012 Arab Social Media Survey² (ASMS), prepared by researchers at the Dubai School of Government, found that #Bahrain was the most-tweeted hashtag in the Arab world in February and March 2012, mentioned 2.8 million times in English and 1.5 million times in Arabic.

Twitter usage in the Gulf is thriving on the area's youthful demographics (as it tends to be favoured by under-30s, who make up the majority of the Gulf's population), on relatively high income levels that allow widespread use of smart phones, and on a region-wide boom in broadband internet access in the past few years. As recently as 2006, only 1.5% of the population in Saudi

¹ 'Twitter reaches half a billion accounts', Semiocast, July 30th 2012 http://semiocast.com/publications/2012_07_30_Twitter_reaches_half_a_billion_accounts_140m_in_the_US

² Arab Social Media Report, vol. 2 issue 1, Dubai School of Government. <http://www.dsg.ae/en/Publication/Pdf/En/826201211212209347849.pdf>

Arabia (or 220,000 people, according to the state Communication and Information Technology Commission³) had access to broadband internet. Broadband was provided mainly by the state telecoms monopoly, Saudi Telecom, which used to turn down many households' broadband internet applications because it did not have enough data cables. In the seven years since then, the information and communication technology market has been liberalized, leading prices to tumble and demand to soar. As of June 2012, 43% of the Saudi population had mobile broadband.⁴ Rates in some of the other Gulf countries are even higher. The UAE, according to its Telecoms Regulatory Authority, has the world's highest mobile phone penetration rate, with an average of 1.6 phones per person as of August 2012. While official broadband penetration is just 11.3%, usage of mobile internet will be far higher; in 2011, 44% of mobiles used in the UAE were smartphones, according to the Arab Advisors Group,⁵ a regional business consultancy.

Early adopters

Young people in the Gulf tend to be early adopters of technology and are dominating the Arab Twitter sphere. The top five Twitter-using countries in the Arab world are all from the GCC, and in March 2012, 88% of the tweets in the Arab region came from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain or Egypt, according to the ASMS. Twitter remains a lot smaller than Facebook; for instance, the ASMS found there were 830,291 Twitter accounts based in Saudi Arabia, compared with 5.5 million Facebook accounts, as of March 2012. While the majority of users spend their time socializing rather than necessarily using social media for political purposes, both Twitter and Facebook have become important spaces for political communication, networking and mobilization, sometimes describes as a 'virtual street' in countries where street demonstrations are often banned.

Twitter also offers an alternative source of information, though interestingly its heaviest usage rate is in Kuwait, which already has the freest press of any Gulf country: 12.8% of Kuwait's population of 2.8 million has an account. In the country's February 2012 parliamentary elections, Twitter was widely used

³ Annual Report 2006, Communication and Information Technology Commission, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

http://www.citc.gov.sa/English/MediaCenter/Annualreport/Documents/PR_REP_002E.pdf

⁴ 'ICT Indicators H1 2012', p. 5, Communication and Information Technology Commission, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

<http://www.citc.gov.sa/English/Reportsandstudies/Indicators/Indicators%20of%20Communication%20and%20Information%20Techn/Indicators%20H1%202012.pdf>

⁵ 'Smartphones constitute 43.7% of total cellular handsets in the UAE, 54.6% in Saudi and 41.6% in Jordan.' Arab Advisors Group, 19 October 2011. <http://www.arabadvisors.com/Pressers/presser-191011.htm>

to discuss the policies and voting records of different candidates – and to point out contradictions between candidates' stated policies and actual records. In the December 2012 elections, it was also used to debate a planned election boycott, to organize protests and to criticize protestors. The next highest rate of Twitter usage is in Bahrain, where 5.3% of the population has an account. A study by Portland Communications⁶ in November 2012 found that Bahrain's Twitter users had more connections than those from any other Arab country except for Egypt. This may be helped by the fact that many Bahraini users tweet in both Arabic and English. Twitter has been improving its Arabic interface over the past year, which is likely to help it grow in countries that have less widespread English usage, notably Saudi Arabia.

The single most popular tweep (Twitter user) in the Arab world is @MohamedAlarefe, a Saudi cleric with 3.2 million followers, defying stereotypes that suggest Twitter is largely for Westernized youth. Another of the most popular Gulf tweeps is Sheikh Salman Al Odah (@salman_alodah) – a popular Saudi cleric associated with the *sahwa* (awakening) movement – who has 1.7m followers. The first Gulf ruler to use Twitter is the UAE's prime minister and ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (@HHSkMohd), who has 1.2 million followers and who posts about government policies, national achievements and his visits to different parts of the country. The Bahraini foreign minister, Sheikh Khalid Al Khalifa (@khalidkhalifa) was one of the first ministers to use it, while in the UAE Sheikh Abdulla bin Zayed Al Nahyan (@ABZayed), who, at 40, is the youngest foreign minister in the Gulf, joined Twitter a year ago and has amassed nearly half a million followers since then. Gulf government ministries are increasingly using the service as part of e-government efforts, enabling them to reach people who would not bother checking the ministries' websites but may access Twitter several times per day.

Levelling the playing field

To a large extent, however, these ministers and clerics are following in the footsteps of students, political activists and ordinary young people. And they have to compete with them on what is still a fairly level playing field; Twitter is free to use and a user's number of followers, or volume of retweets, depends mainly on the person having something interesting to say. PR companies may help create tweets, or even 'buy' artificial numbers of followers (using

⁶ 'How The Middle East Tweets', Portland Communications, November 2012. <http://notebook.portland-communications.com/2012/11/how-the-middle-east-tweets-en/>

'spambot' accounts that are generated automatically by software), but such efforts tend to be fairly transparent and fairly dull. The Portland list of the top ten most connected tweeps in the Gulf includes five journalists and three activists – of whom one is in prison,⁷ one has been repeatedly imprisoned⁸ and one is in exile⁹ – alongside a minister¹⁰ and a ruler.¹¹ An anonymous Saudi account, @mujtahid, which has been full of speculation about the royal family succession process, has 811,000 followers, more than most Gulf government ministers.

Twitter – both in the Gulf and globally – is part of a wider redistribution of power over information away from governments and towards individuals, especially the young people who make up the majority of users. Even when it is not used overtly for political purposes, this redistribution of knowledge and information has an impact on state–society relations and on inter-generational relations, with governments no longer able to monopolize the media and with young people having access to a far wider range of sources of information than their grandparents did. Of course, this changing distribution of knowledge is not simply going in one direction. Governments across the world are getting better at using social media both to communicate with younger citizens and to monitor dissent.

The political use of Twitter in the Middle East was pioneered by Iranian Green Movement activists in 2009. Famously, the US State Department even asked for some routine maintenance to be postponed¹² since it would have temporarily disabled the service during the Iranian protests. However, the Iranian authorities also found ways to put out false information on Twitter and to track opposition activists through electronic surveillance. An endless game of catch-up is still being played between activists and states, leading political dissidents to seek out new technologies, moving from Skype to Viber or Blackberry Messenger to WhatsApp, in order to protect their privacy.

Twitter then soared in popularity during the Arab uprisings of early 2011 as one of the fastest ways to obtain breaking news (although there was also a huge amount of unverified rumour) and as a means to organize gatherings, demonstrations or campaigns. It is also used for comedy and light relief, with witty hashtags that allow users to subvert heavy or pretentious statements by officials, clerics or established political leaders. Even countries that have seen

⁷ @NABEELRAJAB, or Nabeel Rajab, president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights

⁸ @angryarabiya, or Zainab Al Khawaja, Bahraini opposition activist

⁹ @MARYAMALKHAWAJA, acting president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights

¹⁰ @khalidalkhalifa, Bahraini Minister of Foreign Affairs

¹¹ HShkMohd, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai and Vice-President of the UAE

no protests have seen an increase in campaigning on Twitter, such as the UAEDressCode campaign, which has brought the views of some conservative Emiratis to the attention of Western expats who live in their country yet might otherwise never cross paths with them – and which again underlines the fact that it is not only Westernized liberals who use social media.

A new battleground for censorship

Twitter has played a major role in allowing like-minded people to network across national borders and may be contributing to the continued formation of a 'Khaleeji' (Gulf) identity. However, it also has a darker side, as this largely unregulated medium can be used as a source of misinformation (which inexperienced users sometimes believe uncritically), propaganda and hate speech. For instance, last year's Bahrain's Independent Commission of Inquiry¹³ criticized a Twitter account for hate speech and incitement to violence against anti-government protestors. The account nonetheless continues to operate and appears to have privileged access to sensitive information held by the security services security information (most recently an official decision to strip citizenship from 31 political activists was leaked by this account before being published by the state news agency).

Twitter has also become a new battleground for censorship over political and religious sensitivities. This is true not just in the Arab world but internationally, as social media tests traditional media laws, raising questions, for instance, about how to deal with libel on a mass scale when millions repeat it, or where to draw the line between threats and jokes (the subject of the recent 'Robin Hood Airport' case¹⁴ in the UK, in which a Twitter user, who had joked that delays at the Nottingham airport had made him want to blow up the whole airport, was initially convicted of 'sending a menacing electronic communication' before the conviction was overturned on appeal two years later). In 2012, in Bahrain, four young men were sentenced for 'insulting the king' on Twitter; in Kuwait,¹⁵ a man was sentenced to ten years in prison for 'insulting' the rulers of neighbouring states (Saudi Arabia and Bahrain) as well as 'insulting the Prophet Mohammed'; in the UAE, a man was arrested for

¹² Sue Pleming, 'U.S. State Department speaks to Twitter over Iran', Reuters 16 June 2009.

¹³ Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 'Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry', p. 401, November 2012. <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf>

¹⁴ Paul Chambers -v- Director of Public Prosecutions, Case No: CO/2350/2011, 27 July 2012 <http://www.judiciary.gov.uk/Resources/JCO/Documents/Judgments/chambers-v-dpp.pdf>

¹⁵ Subsequent to the original publication of this article, in the first five weeks of 2013, three more young Kuwaiti tweeps were sentenced to prison for insulting the ruler of their own country.

tweeting negative comments about the security services; while in Saudi Arabia, a young man, Hamza Kashgari, was imprisoned for blasphemy after tweets about the prophet. In his case, some took to Twitter to call for his execution, indicating that social media – like broader civil society – are not necessarily a force for freedom and pluralism.

Nevertheless, Twitter is forcing people to confront different ideas, whether they like it or not. There is an egalitarian and meritocratic aspect to this technology, compared with the traditional media, where a licence would be needed to open a paper or TV station. It is still not a fully inclusive sphere, tending to be dominated by educated young people with regular internet access, leaving out many voices from the older generation of citizens to the low-paid expatriate workers. But it is having a levelling effect on conversations, as any users can reply publicly to anyone they like, whatever their place in the usual social hierarchy. It is also interesting that while people could choose only to interact with like-minded tweeps, there is a huge amount of argument going on. In the ASMS survey, at least half of those surveyed in most Gulf countries – and 65% in Bahrain, where the Twitter debate has probably been the most heated – said they had become more receptive to new ideas because of their Twitter use.

The economic process of telecoms liberalization has facilitated a surge in social media technologies that are having a profound impact on the distribution of information and of power over communications, with a dramatic impact on political, religious and cultural debate. This is a prime example of the ways in which economic and demographic change can lead to social and political changes in the dynamic and rapidly evolving societies of the Gulf.

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