The Emergence of Social Media Networks and Their Impacts on Professional Journalism Practices in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract:

This thesis explores the emergence of social media networks and their impacts on professional journalism practices in Saudi Arabia, using two qualitative methods for its data collection. The methods of interviews and observation obtained from two emergent YouTube channels Sa7i and Telfaz11, and from series of journalists represent six traditional newspapers in Saudi Arabia. The main focus of this study is emergent YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia and how these channels, as new media organisations, or perhaps even new news organisations given the way that they blur politics and entertainment, place pressure on traditional media to create and adapt content that is more relevant to the under 30 generation that is so prominent in Saudi Arabia. This thesis also studies the impact of Twitter, which has given voice to many ordinary people and in turn has exerted pressure on newspapers and journalism practices to create content that bears a greater relation to everyday lived experience. The analysis and discussion of this study has divided into two main parts. First, YouTube channel content that has resulted in three main concerns: the use of satire; censorship and audiences engagement; and the impact on traditional media and professionalism. Second, the impact of Twitter on journalism practices which also resulted in three main concerns: policies and regulations; press freedom; and interaction and accountability. This thesis will argue that a digital public sphere is fractured and comprising of various layers that come together to create an overall dialogue within society. Therefore it argues that we need to think differently about what constitutes a public sphere in the digital age.

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1.1 Introduction

This PhD is a study of the emergence of social media networks and their impacts on professional journalism practices in Saudi Arabia. This subject has been chosen to study because of the social media explosion in Saudi Arabia since 2011, which has influenced in some ways traditional media and empowered ordinary people to be part of public dialogue. Having worked as a journalist at *Aleqtisadiah* newspaper in Saudi Arabia from 2002-2012 I have witnessed how newspapers are struggling to retain the trust of their audience as new forms of news organisations emerge that are transforming the Saudi media landscape. On the micro level this may include the input of citizen journalism in holding individuals accountable or reporting on issues ignored by traditional media. On the macro level this may include emergent digital news and entertainment production organisations that are presenting information in ways that are more appealing to a younger and more digitally literate generation of Arabs. Of particular interest to me is the emergence of YouTube channels that are provoking questions about Saudi identity and culture through satire and entertainment. Channels such as Sa7i and Telfaz11 are hugely popular and generate millions of views within a few days of being uploaded while able to maintain, diversify, and grow their audience base in ways that traditional media are not. Also of interest is the impact of the micro-blogging network Twitter on professional journalism practices in Saudi Arabia, in particular the way it is giving voice to a broad spectrum of people who are able to express ideas, thereby forcing governments, institutions and the traditional media to listen. These emergent media platforms are more inclusive than traditional media and give voice to anyone who has access to an Internet connection. Therefore I will investigate their potential to function as a digital public sphere.

Social media networks function as cultural hubs that enable individuals to debate issues that directly affect their lives. As these gain in popularity they draw more interest from traditional media. This may take the form of embedding opinion, such as tweets or video,

into articles; generating content ideas for articles; or commissioning a new generation of 'microcelebrities' and 'opinion leaders' to share their content with traditional media. This is changing the way in which news and current affairs are reported but may also lead to changes in public policy as the sheer volume of expression online is increasing at such a rate that the opinions of ordinary citizens within Saudi Arabia are starting to have an impact on government policy. Key to arousing public opinions is the use of satire on YouTube issues-based channels. This has invigorated political communication and functions as a blend of entertainment and politics. Satire also has the additional benefit of providing a means of addressing difficult issues and a way of avoiding censorship, something that has previously stopped public participation. Part of the reason for the success of YouTube channels and the development of their unique brand of humour appears to be down to demographics, with 67% of the Saudi population under the age of 30 (Central Department of Statistics, 2016).

When I started my PhD I made a prediction that women would be able to drive in Saudi Arabia by 2020. This prediction was based on the youthful demographics of the country, the appointment of Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, the youngest ever Crown Prince, and the mass adoption of social networks as a form of parliament by Saudi citizens. On 27 September 2017, as I was working on my final revisions, a Royal Decree was issued that removes the legal barrier for women driving. I see this as a direct result of campaigns across social networks, both by female activists and males, demanding greater equality. Although the law comes into effect on 24 June 2018, male guardians still have the right to veto. Progress is a long hard struggle and so when thinking about a public sphere we are talking about evolution rather than revolution. Social media networks are speeding up this process. It is worth noting that the reason the change in law has been set 9 months after the Decree is so that there is time to implement laws that protect women drivers, such as protecting them from harassment and abuse. Therefore, Harassment law passed two days after the decree, was immediately shared on social media.

Research Objectives:

- To understand the dynamics of emerging YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia and the potential influence they may have on public discourse.
- To investigate the impact of Twitter on professional journalism standards within Saudi newspapers.
- To explore the digital public sphere within the context of Saudi society.

1.2 Research Contribution

This research aims to make a significant contribution to the concept of the online public sphere in the context of Saudi society and the role of social networks sites like YouTube and Twitter. Scholars like Christian Fuchs (2013), William Dutton (2009), Manuel Castells (2007, 2008), Henry Jenkins (2006), Yeslam Al-saggaf & Peter Simmons (2015), Peter Lunt & Sonia Livingstone (2016) and Zizi Papacharissi (2002) have outlined and discussed the concept of the public sphere in the digital era. However, these theoretical accounts of the digital public sphere often need to be explored more carefully in relation to empirical analysis of the dynamics of social media. Therefore I will be performing ethnographic studies at two key emerging YouTube channels in order to understand how the producers determine their own role in creating a public sphere. There is a lack of ethnographic studies of Saudi Arabian social networks and so this PhD will hopefully open up this field of research. I will argue that any definition of the public sphere needs to consider the social structure of the host nation. Saudi Arabia is an Islamic country and therefore Islam is central to any public sphere that emerges. This research will also contribute towards a more complex understanding of the public sphere in the digital age. In particular, it will argue that social media networks such as Twitter and YouTube should not be seen, or judged, in isolation in terms of the criteria of a public sphere. Rather, they both function as spaces where conversations are started, or, in some cases, give voice to ideas that would otherwise go unheard. These conversations may then be continued and explored further across other digital spaces and with new audiences. For

this reason my research also includes interviews with journalists and editors from a broad range of newspapers in order to track how these conversations are impacting on newsgathering, reporting and what it means to be a journalist in the 21st century. As conversations grow in momentum across social networks and filter through to traditional media, such as newspapers, issues become more public. This is impacting journalism and public debate in terms of censorship, identity politics, government legislation, and may be helping to create a more open and transparent public space that values a diverse range of opinions.

1.3 Research Motivation

Unlike other countries that have been impacted by the Arab Spring revolution, Saudi Arabia is a special case in that there has been no regime change despite a lot of discontent expressed online. Although this thesis is not the place to address the historical and political connotations of this issue, I am interested in the extent to which dialogue produced online via social media networks is helping to broaden political communications and address societal issues. Fundamental to this broadening of communication is the emergence of satire as the dominant mode of expression on YouTube channels. I want to understand why this has become so popular and why it is better able to articulate ideas than more formal communication deployed by traditional media. My initial suspicion is that satire has helped raise important social issues in a way that is not directly confrontational with power. But I need to understand how the producers of these channels perceive their role and why these channels have emerged at this particular historical moment. The emergence of these channels is having a profound influence on traditional media, and therefore as a journalist myself, I want to see how print journalists are reacting to issues raised independently online. There is also the real risk that failure to acknowledge ideas expressed online may result in a rapid decline of newspaper readers. Therefore I am motivated to find out how traditional media is dealing with the challenges presented by social media.

What these issues raise is the prospect of social media networks having the potential to

act as a public sphere. However it is vital to state that Saudi Arabia is a traditional conservative religious society and this poses problems in applying the concept of the public sphere to it. However, my contention is that the concept can nevertheless be tested and used to understand the vital role that social media play in the country. Adding to this, the concepts of the 'Fifth Estate' raised by Dutton (2007), and of 'Mass Self-Communication' raised by (Castells, 2013) are used in this research to understand the role of individuals using social networking sites, and the impact this can have in pushing the boundaries of press freedom. It is worth briefly stating that the Fourth Estate is a segment of society able to exert indirect but significant influence on society. Traditionally, this role has been attributed to mainstream media such as newspapers and television whose role has been to hold governments and businesses accountable to the public. In a country like Saudi Arabia, where the media face strict government intervention and censorship, a Fourth Estate is not as effective as it might be in Europe. Therefore, it is necessary to think about how social networks are enabling a Fifth Estate to emerge. According to Dutton (2007) this is a space where social media is able to go beyond the boundaries of existing institutions and create a more meaningful and transparent dialogue. In a similar vein, Castells defines Mass-Self Communication in the following way:

> It is mass communication because it can potentially reach a global audience, as in the posting of a video on YouTube, a blog with RSS links to a number of web sources, or a message to a massive e-mail list. At the same time, it is self-communication because the production of the message is self-generated, the definition of the potential receiver(s) is self-directed, and the retrieval of specific messages or content from the World Wide Web and electronic communication networks is self-selected. The three forms of communication (interpersonal, mass communication, and mass self-communication) coexist, interact, and complement each other rather than substituting for one another (Castells, 2013: 55).

Both of these concepts suggest that communicative power is shifting from traditional media organisations to the individual and groups where content is made and shared online. Therefore I am particularly interested in how something as fragmented as social media, whereby there is a plurality of voice and no centre, can come together to potentially create a digital public sphere. My thesis will draw upon Habermas's concept of the public sphere (1962/1991), but will adapt it for the context of Saudi Arabia

whereby pressures exerted on debate are not so much the product of capitalism, but of religious and cultural sensitivities. Traditional media has tended to support the ideology of a conservative culture and has censored any kind of debate regarding politics, religion and the sovereign leaders. However digital media, which exists beyond these parameters, offers new modes of expression and is less easy to control. As these voices grow in popularity and conversations diversify, there is the real potential that they may bring about direct political change in terms of decision making. This, I believe, would evidence a *real* digital political sphere.

The research for this thesis has been conducted via interviews and observations at two highly influential YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia. Given the power and influence of these channels I felt it was not enough to simply perform an online virtual ethnography and therefore have visited Sa7i and Telfaz11 to gain a better understanding of the internal dynamics of these organisations and to understand editorial decisions involved in producing these videos. I am also interested in how these channels source content and ideas for their channels. Do they actively listen to online conversations and create content that addresses these concerns or are they simply motivated to produce highly popular videos as a means of generating income?

1.4 Importance of the study

This research is important for several reasons:

1- There has been a significant growth in the prevalence, and importance of, digital media and social networks in the Middle East, and in Saudi Arabia in particular, but these developments have not yet been sufficiently well researched. This thesis looks to address this situation through direct visits to YouTube channels and interviewing staff at all levels within these organisations.
2- These developments affect the practices of journalism, and what my thesis also does is to produce an analysis of the impact of social media networks on journalism and journalistic practices in the media landscape of Saudi Arabia.

3- This research engages with recent theories of new media and digital communication practices in order to show how effective they might be in analysing the use of social networks sites by individuals and groups in Saudi Arabia.
4- This thesis will argue that a digital public sphere is fractured and comprising of various layers that come together to create an overall dialogue within society. Therefore it argues that we need to think differently about what constitutes a public sphere in the digital age.

1.5 Research Methodology

In order to understand how these new ways of connecting and communicating are bringing about social and cultural transformations it was necessary to visit two influential YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia, Sa7i and Telfaz11. I opted for a qualitative approach using a combination of interviews while also observing working practices so that I could see for myself how these companies operated and decisions were made. This was also a good opportunity to use two main types of qualitative research to compare answers with actual actions (Berger, 2014). This approach was informed by Hemmingway's (2008) ethnographic study of digital production of regional news and Tunstall's (1993) study of BBC television producers that contextualises decision-making processes in light of rapid social and technological change. As I was interested in the impact of these organisations on traditional media I also decided to interview nine journalists, in a variety of roles, from six prominent Saudi newspapers. These newspapers were *Okaz, Alyaum, Aljazeerah, Aleqtisadiah, Alriyadh* and *Alhayat.* The purpose of these interviews was to see how social networks are impacting on traditional journalism practices in terms of press freedom, ethics and accountability. The research design and methodology is explained more fully in chapter five.

1.6 Research Questions

This research is centred around the emergence of social media networks in Saudi Arabia and how these are impacting on professional journalism practices as well as helping to create a digital public sphere. In order to achieve the research aims and objectives I have identified four key questions:

- How do YouTube channels work and operate in Saudi Arabia (for example, in terms of their practices, environment, media economy etc.)?
- What is the creative process in these emerging media organisations?
- What are the impacts of Twitter on the practices of traditional forms of journalism (accountability, policies, freedom etc.)?
- To what extent do social media networks lead to the creation of a digital public sphere in Saudi Arabia?

1.7 Research Organisation

The research contains eight chapters; Introduction, Saudi Arabia in Context, Digital media in Saudi Arabia: A digital public sphere, Journalism in the digital age, research design and methodology, The rise of YouTube channels, Twitter impact on Journalism and Conclusion.

1.8 The Structure of the thesis

Chapter 1: The introductory chapter outlines the research overview, research contribution, research motivation, the importance of the study, research design and methodology, research questions, research organisations and finally the structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2: The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of Saudi Arabian culture in order to understand the emergence of social media networks. This will include the

political, cultural, social and religious contexts in the kingdom, highlighting the factors that are impacting Saudi society. One of the most important of these is the country's youthful demographics. The chapter will provide a brief history of newspapers in Saudi Arabia and media regulation laws so that we can better understand how these laws may impact on developments in technology.

Chapter 3: This chapter will explore the work of Jürgen Habermas and his notion of a public sphere. It will then ask how relevant this theory is in the digital age and whether we need to think differently about what constitutes public space in an era where we live an increasing part of our lives online (Rheingold, 2000). It will place the notion of the public sphere within the context of Saudi culture as well as starting to identify the dynamics of digital and social media and citizen journalism. One of the aims of this chapter is to consider the extent to which popular social network sites, namely Twitter and YouTube, can perform as a digital public sphere in Saudi society

Chapter 4: This chapter will discuss the changing nature of journalism in the digital age. It will look at journalism from several perspectives with a particular emphasis on how social media networks are enabling greater participation in contemporary events through ease of access. This has helped blur the boundaries between producer and consumer (Rosen, 2012) as well as broadening the reach of disparate voices so that any 'voice' can go viral with the potential to have a 'real' impact. This chapter will focus on Twitter and YouTube, as these have had the greatest impact on journalism practices in Saudi Arabia (Jones & Omran. 2014). The chapter will outline the main dilemmas and issues facing journalists in general and particularly in Saudi Arabia and how digital technology may help shape the future journalism.

Chapter 5: This chapter outlines the research methodology, as set out in section 1.5.

Chapter 6: This chapter will explore the potential of the social networking site YouTube to function as part of a digital public sphere within Saudi culture. It will include details from my site visit, and explore the production values within the channel, such as the

blurring of politics and entertainment as a means of engaging with Saudi youth. Three core areas explored are satire; different forms of censorship; and YouTube's impact on traditional media.

Chapter 7: This explores the impact of social networks on traditional journalism, and how this is creating a gradual improvement in standards, such as accountability and potential press freedom, which in turn is opening up rational debate. It is my belief that Saudis have been given the opportunity to speak for the first time about issues that directly affect their lives, and that these voices, across media platforms and networks, are bringing about change. By speaking directly to a broad range of professional journalists at a variety of prominent Saudi newspapers I will be able to better understand how social media networks are impacting on the profession of journalism as a whole. The selected journalists all perform a variety of roles, such as editor-in-chief, general manager, and reporters. From these interviews I was able to determine how media regulation impacts on the production of content and how Twitter is helping to complicate this.

Chapter 8: In this chapter I will argue that we need to think differently about what constitutes a public sphere in the digital age as modern forms of communication have created more fractured conversations that operate across and through different social media layers. It is the combination of these conversations that is forming a new layered public sphere, one which has the potential to bring about direct political change in terms of decision making.

Chapter 2: Saudi Arabia in Context

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of Saudi Arabia in general and its media background in particular. This chapter is important for the research in terms of enabling an understanding of aspects of Saudi culture, such as the political and cultural factors that have shaped Saudi society, and how any transformations in these areas brought about by social media networks will have an impact on media practices in Saudi Arabia. After establishing a profile of the country, these factors need to be understood within the context of the Saudi government's transformation project *'Vision 2030'* that outlines the country's long term goals and expectations for the future (Khan, 2016). Once we fully understand the structure of Saudi society it is then possible to begin to consider how the mass adoption of social media as a means of individual expression has profound implications for Saudi society on a political and cultural level. It is my contention that social media networks are enabling the development of a public sphere that has the potential to bring about change and part of the reason that these networks have been so popular can be explained in terms of demographics.

2.2 Saudi Arabia: A Country Profile

Saudi Arabia is situated in the centre of the Middle East region, a part of the Arabian Peninsula. It is the largest country in the region (2,149,690 km²) and also the largest amongst the Arab Gulf States (Wynbrandt, 2010). As much as 90% of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is covered with desert; the largest sand desert called *Alrub' Alkhali* is also situated there (World Atlas, 2015). The Kingdom shares its borders with multiple countries: its eastern borders with Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and the Arabian Gulf; its western borders are taken over by the Red Sea; it is neighboured in the north by Jordan, Iraq and Kuwait; and in the south by Yemen and Oman. The country sits at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Africa, and it is a member of the Gulf Cooperation

Council (GCC) that consists of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Oman, with its headquarters located in the capital City of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh.

Figure 2.1: Saudi Arabia map

2.2.1 The Demography

The population of Saudi Arabia was recorded at 31,742,308 towards the end of 2016. This represents a yearly growth rate of 2.54%, as reported by the Central Department of Statistics and Information in Saudi Arabia (CDSI). This population is represented by (57.44%) male and female of (42.56%). Saudi nationals make up 20,064,970 people, while non-Saudis make up the remaining third, which is equivalent to 11.6 million people (CDSI. 2017). The number of Saudi citizens below 30 years of age constitutes 67% of the total Saudi population.

Population by Age Groups, Gender and Nationality (Saudis/Non-Saudis), (2016).									
Age type	**Saudi**			**Non-Saudi**			**Total**		
	MALE	**FEMALE**	**Total**	**MALE**	**FEMALE**	**Total**	**MALE**	**FEMALE**	**Total**
4 – 0	1,088,294	1,047,398	2,135,692	275,515	260,851	536,366	1,363,809	1,308,249	2,672,058
9 – 5	1,062,238	1,024,877	2,087,115	348,658	331,935	680,593	1,410,896	1,356,812	2,767,708

14 - 10	947,971	919,891	1,867,862	286,895	270,662	557,557	1,234,866	1,190,553	2,425,419
19 - 15	895,691	863,860	1,759,551	235,442	218,567	454,009	1,131,133	1,082,427	2,213,560
24 - 20	1,036,957	949,752	1,986,709	277,658	204,875	482,533	1,314,615	1,154,627	2,469,242
29 - 25	963,845	942,320	1,906,165	706,028	415,850	1,121,878	1,669,873	1,358,170	3,028,043
34 - 30	867,938	853,785	1,721,723	924,102	412,159	1,336,261	1,792,040	1,265,944	3,057,984
39 - 35	762,425	743,680	1,506,105	1,357,183	530,960	1,888,143	2,119,608	1,274,640	3,394,248
44 - 40	643,653	620,187	1,263,840	1,283,392	485,115	1,768,507	1,927,045	1,105,302	3,032,347
49 - 45	541,375	512,317	1,053,692	943,251	260,089	1,203,340	1,484,626	772,406	2,257,032
54 - 50	431,365	407,210	838,575	642,806	98,260	741,066	1,074,171	505,470	1,579,641
59 - 55	336,096	308,710	644,806	384,846	64,120	448,966	720,942	372,830	1,093,772
64 - 60	243,534	227,683	471,217	206,011	46,320	252,331	449,545	274,003	723,548
69 - 65	167,366	164,141	331,507	81,117	25,267	106,384	248,483	189,408	437,891
74 - 70	111,894	120,097	231,991	27,029	14,879	41,908	138,923	134,976	273,899
79 - 75	68,605	70,596	139,201	11,732	8,560	20,292	80,337	79,156	159,493
+ 80	62,117	73,714	135,831	11,690	9,174	20,864	73,807	82,888	156,695
Total	10231364	9850218	20081582	8003355	3657643	11660998	18234719	13507861	31742580

Figure 2.2: Source: Central Department of Statistics and Information in Saudi Arabia (CDSI, 2017).

The above table gives a detailed breakdown of the 67% of the population aged under 30. There is a significant drop in figures for the age groups of 50+, suggesting a generational shift is upon us, a fact reinforced by the age group 0-4 accounting for the most members of the population. Any impacts discussed here will clearly have more significance in twenty years' time when this age group hits maturity and the older generation of 60+ will mainly be gone. Given the high proportion of the population is under thirty years of age this could be seen as one of the key drivers of consumption of new forms of media in Saudi Arabia. A large percentage of these under 30s are what Prensky (2001) describes as 'digital natives', in that they have grown up only knowing the Internet and therefore digital forms of communication are second nature. These statistics help to explain why Saudi Arabia has been reported as the fastest growing market for social networking sites, such as Twitter and YouTube, in terms of number of users (Gunter & Elareshi, 2016).

There are some quite obvious implications here that are worth briefly stating, mainly that YouTube and Twitter enable users to both receive or produce information. This has implications for traditional media service providers, such as news broadcasters and newspapers, who have until now controlled the flow of information. As Digital Natives adopt smartphones and becomes more used to expressing ideas, our ideas of what constitutes the media, or what is newsworthy, changes. I am interested in the implications of this in terms of the types of conversations such mediums may open up and how wider Saudi society will react.

2.3 Political Environment

The political structure of the country is reliant on the royal government, where the King is Head of State, Prime Minister and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. The current king, Salman Bin Abdul-Aziz (2015- now), is also known as the Custodian of the two Holy Mosques. The King is also aided and advised by his council of ministers, advisors and Consultative Council, also known as 'Majlis Al Shoura'. The country consists of thirteen provinces: Al-Riyadh (which includes the capital city of Riyadh), Al-Qasim, Hail, Makkah (which includes the holy city of Makkah where the Holy Mosque exists), Al Medina, Tabuk, Al-Baha, the Northern Borders, Al-Jawf, Jizan, Asir, Najran, and the Eastern Province (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009).

Since the formation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it has been ruled by the royal family as a monarchy; it was initially established and named by King Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud on 23rd September 1932 (ibid, 2009). The basic laws of Saudi Arabia state that the country is to be ruled and led by the sons and grandsons of Abdul Aziz, thereby creating a closed political society. The Holy Book of Qur'an is considered to be the basis of the constitution of Saudi Arabia; the Sharia principles grounded by the Islamic rules from the book help govern the country (Background Note: Saudi Arabia, 2010). In June 2017, the King of Saudi Arabia issued a royal decree appointing his son, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is 32 years old, as Crown Prince replacing Prince Mohammed bin Naif. This change is an exceptional event in the kingdom as he is the youngest appointment

ever. According to the official statement, Prince Mohammed bin Salman was chosen by 31 out of 34 members of the Succession Committee in the Kingdom, which is represented by members of the royal family. This suggests that the Committee are in agreement that a younger leader is needed to help deal with the issues being raised by a younger more digitally literate population. The importance of this appointment in terms of progressive attitudes towards society and culture cannot be over stated. The new Crown Prince also oversees the roles of Defence Minister and the Head of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs in the country (*Arab News*. 2017).

The king is the central figure in taking major decisions for the country, along with the Council of Ministers, which is appointed by and responsible to the king. The king is the one who may legislate by decree, overturn court decisions, and is the last point of appeal in judicial or civil disputes (Mellahi and Wood, 2001). The king administers the kingdom through royal decrees and also by enacting ministerial decrees. Saudi law disallows political parties as well as national elections. Usually, the king is the person who appoints and removes deputy ministers and judges. Therefore, challenging the king regarding his political power and commitment is not tolerated or allowed. This reinforces the need of social networks to provide Saudis with opportunities to debate private and public issues, as the political system does not enable direct political rule. This is crucial to my overall thesis as without social networks, there would not be any means of engaging in political communication.

2.3.1 Saudi 'Vision 2030'

In 2016, Saudi Arabia embarked on an ambitious project called Saudi 'Vision 2030'. The vision was one of the first and most significant documents created by the new Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman as Deputy Crown. The document outlines clear goals and timelines that must be achieved by different departments within the government. This has created much debate in local and global media, as it is the first time that a model concerning the strategy and decisions of the country have been made public. It represents the first clear attempt at transparency and bodes well for the future in that ordinary citizens now have a better understanding of the rationale behind political decisions that

have a direct impact on their lives. This in turn gives them something solid to debate and to direct conversations. 'Vision 2030' has three main themes that are quantified through sub categories. These are: A vibrant society (with strong roots, fulfilling lives and with strong foundations) a thriving economy (with rewarding opportunities, investing for the long-term, open for business and leveraging its unique position) and an ambitious nation (effectively governed and responsibly enabled) (Vision 2030 book).

In his foreword to the document Prince Mohammed bin Salman emphases that:

> Our ambition is for the long term. It goes beyond replenishing sources of income that have weakened or preserving what we have already achieved. We are determined to build a thriving country in which all citizens can fulfil their dreams, hopes and ambitions. Therefore, we will not rest until our nation is a leader in providing opportunities for all through education and training, and high quality services such as employment initiatives, health, housing, and entertainment (Vision 2030's Book, 2017).

I am interested as to why this 'Vision' has emerged at this particular historical moment. It is no coincidence that Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman is in his early thirties and therefore is part of the younger demographics that predominate in Saudi society today. Transparency is also an integral feature of digital forms of communications by the simple fact that social networks make our personal opinions public. Could it be that these principles of openness have helped influence and shape this prestigious document? There is no way of proving this, other than to state that culture does not exist in a vacuum and clearly changes in communication are slowly filtering through to all areas of life. In terms of my research I will argue that in a closed society such as Saudi Arabia, where there is no means of changing the political structure of the nation, social media is the only means through which large proportions of the population have been able to express how they feel. I see this 'Vision' as emerging at this particular moment as a direct result of these online conversations and as evidence that, even in a closed political system, there is the possibility of a public sphere. However, any public sphere must be judged in terms of the culture in which it is formed. Saudi Arabia is a religious conservative country and therefore these are the parameters which will define any conversations.

The changing media landscape - and the tools used within this landscape - are helping to drive change by giving voice to the masses. I will argue that it is this that is putting pressure on governments to adapt and change, albeit at a relatively slow rate. Conversations which once happened behind closed doors in private space are now happening online in view of everyone. In chapters six and seven I will demonstrate how campaigns expressed on social media have resulted in public and political discussions and have the potential to bring about change. In this respect, new forms of media are not only acting as a source for the powerful to interact with the people, but also vice versa. This is evident in the 2030 Vision, in which the government has identified the changing aspirations of people, which I see as the need to adopt a more liberal approach to individual issues such as the right for women to drive. In terms of this research, I will argue that social media is integral in helping shape the future vision for the nation.

2.4 Saudi National Culture

The reference to religion has intensive and extensive implications on national culture in Saudi Arabia since it is an important aspect of the Saudi national culture. Any religion-based models would very likely have significant influence on any local organisation and its operations. It is worth stating that while working within any value system, particularly one informed by religious principles, a certain degree of individual freedom is lost, which could influence the kind of content produced, by say, a start-up YouTube channel. There are clear implications here in terms of the rational critical conversations that Habermas (1991) deems essential to the public sphere. But as will be emphasised throughout this thesis, the mere act of being able to start a conversation through social media is a dramatic breakthrough in terms of a Saudi public sphere and should be understood within these constraints.

Authors acknowledge culture as the attributes shared with others as one society or group of people (Hofstede, 2016). For example, people in a country speak the same language and have similar social norms, which makes them similar to each other. Besides, people learn about their own culture through their education system, laws, family influence and

religion. Most people will act according to the boundaries of this learned culture. Consequently, culture is interactive in nature and is embedded in people's lives and work. There is, thus, a consensus between scholars that the main factors causing the differences between national cultures usually involve their language, religion, education, social system, stage of development and behaviour (Hall, 1973).

Even though Arab culture is a complex changeable system that is packed with contradictions, it is nevertheless often displayed as having very distinctive workplace attributes like fatalism and gender segregation (Hill et al., 1998). Ali (1990) supports these claims, while also identifying other factors that are known to influence the Saudi business culture. According to Ali (ibid), there are four factors besides Islamic cultural influence: the tradition of obligation in the tribes and families; the continuation of bureaucratic influence inherited by the Ottoman Empire; rules that prevail intervention; and political constraints. A number of studies suggest that with an increase in interaction with Western cultures, pragmatic management would be observed, especially after the Kingdom's accession to WTO (Ali, 1990; Assad, 2002). As Saudis started exploring the outside world and as more and more foreigners started to arrive in the kingdom for business and employment, there was a gradual improvement in knowledge of the outside culture.

According to Kaufman-Scarborough (2003) time-orientation in the Middle East is poly chronic; time is loose with no ends. Punctuality, responsibility for completion - like task deadlines and schedules - are deemed as less valuable qualities. Instead flexibility is expected and more widespread. According to Kaufman-Scarborough this means that people are more casual about work routines and delays are often expected. But I would argue that such cultural traits are changing as a result of digital technology. A key part of my thesis will centre around the role of emerging media organisations, such as YouTube channels. The key to the success of these channels is regularly producing content on time in order to maintain and develop audiences. These channels are also in constant engagement with their audience through other social media networks, such as Twitter. Saudis are increasingly living their lives in the ever present as a result of the immediacy

of digital forms of communication and therefore cultural attitudes relating to time-orientation are having to adapt if these channels are going to remain successful.

2.5 Media History and Regulations:

2.5.1 Background

In 1952, the Egyptian revolution took place, after which the country started an influential radio service by exporting cultural media content and broadcasts, called the Voice of the Arabs. This was the first Arab media service and caused a major stir not just for some of the Arab elites, but for the entire community; a shared feeling of brotherhood was developed and "an imagined community" (Anderson, 1993: 62) led people to realise the idea of a shared language, space, time, and even destiny. Initially in history, the Arab media was regulated very strictly and thus strongly affected by the state authorities. As such, it is difficult to not acknowledge the relationship between the states that consumed media and the authorities that were responsible for controlling media discourses (Yushi, 2012). Saudi Arabia and Egypt created the strongest influence on Pan-Arab media historically as these countries had access to a constant discourse through their radio services. Egypt had impacted the pan-Arab discourse through radio, with Voice of the Arabs during the 1950-60s. Later on, through unbelievable oil revenues, they were able to impact the press and satellite channels post 1970s. Thus, in order to clarify the differences between the state's pan-Arab media strategy, it is wise to contrast Egypt's pan-Arab media strategy with that of Saudi Arabia (Hammond, 2008; Mellor, 2008).

The media of the Arab countries was used as a propaganda tool through which authoritarian regimes maintained power. This did not occur until the 1990s, at which point the development of satellite television had become a game changer, like *Glasnost* in the USSR, with a strong belief that the new media will aid the abolition of state control and become a widespread power for democracy (Yushi, 2012). Indeed, the use of satellite TV which aired content from around the world loosened state control over people and led to more outward oriented societies. This resulted in scholars interpreting the role the media played in the democratisation of the Arab nation and its influence on Arab politics.

The turning point of the Saudi Kingdom's media strategy came in 1991, due to a three day long blockage in Saudi media on coverage of Saddam Hussein's forces invading Kuwait. Later, it became clear that most Saudis were watching CNN to receive news about their Gulf neighbour (Kraidy, 2007). This caused an awakening that was initially just limited to newspaper ownership. The Gulf War in 1991 resulted in members of the royal family, supported by the Saudi King's in-law, Walid Ibrahim, launching a new media presence – the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC) in London, whose aim was to develop an international media presence in the Kingdom (Cochrane, 2007).

In 1993, Saleh Abdullah Kamel founded a Network for entertainment, music and sport, which later came to be known as The Arab Radio and Television Network (ART). This was followed in 1994 by what was previously known as the Orbit Communications Corporation, Initially based in Rome, the Orbit pay-per view network is now based in Bahrain, and is a subsidiary of the Saudi Arabian Mawarid Group, which ran a BBC Arabic Television channel from1994 until 1996, when it was abruptly pulled off air.

The shareholder of the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC) and owner of pan-Arab newspaper *Al Hayat,* Prince Khalid bin Sultan, is a member of the Saudi royal family. He also has the power to induce pressure over LBC to pander to the Saudi establishment due to his shareholding position. Another network which commenced in 2003 in order to counter Qatar's Al Jazeera is MBC. MBC's all-news satellite channel Al-Arabiya was launched as an alternative to newspapers and domestic media outlets. This political outlet is directly at stake with reference to the Saudi government (Yushi, 2012). Despite the high Saudi influence on the region's newspaper business, including pan-Arab publications, the impact of suppressing print press is not as powerful as it used to be. According to Cochrane (2014), the Middle East, like the world, watches television to receive news instead of reading the newspaper.

According to the Managing Editor of Beirut-based *Middle East Broadcasters Journal*, Habib Battah, despite the fact that media ownership revolves around entertainment, he believes "MBC, Orbit and Rotana – all these companies have a big Saudi stake and are

not only about Saudi Arabia, but about appealing to a pan-Arab audience"(Battah, Cited in Cochrane, 2007: 6). Moreover, Marwan Kraidy of the American University noted that "Entertainment television is an active contributor to shaping what Arab publics discuss and do in both the social and political realms" (Cochrane, 2007: 6). The gradual blurring of entertainment and politics as a result of these changes is viewing habits has helped to usher in new forms of expression to Saudi Arabia, the most notable being satire. I identify this as core to enabling political communications to emerge on social media networks, as well as a means of getting around censorships, something I will explore in detail in chapter seven.

As previously discussed, the arrival of new media in the 1990s led scholars to study the problem between new media and its link to democratising Arab countries. However, scholarly opinions were not always able to take an "optimistic view" of this relationship, and tended to conclude instead that media is not enough to initiate democratisation. According to Seib (2008: 72), "Having satellite television and an Internet presence will not in itself open the door to statehood, virtual or otherwise," and "There must also be strong political leadership and widespread resolve among constituent groups if the tools of cohesion are to be effectively used". Moreover, there were alternative incentives like political actors, who became indispensable; new media was to have an adverse effect. In addition, other scholars even considered that the new media had an adverse effect on democratisation or political liberalisation because contemporary Arab media was diverting the Arabs' eyes from Arab politics and moderate Arab dissent by giving them the opportunity to absorb themselves in the television screen or virtual world. Recent studies suggest that authoritarian regimes are known to use influence and to control media discourses. Moreover, a study by Cochrane (2014) revealed that there is still a strong belief that Arab authoritarian regimes still continue to hold a strong control over the media in terms of evidence. Media industry commercialisation has developed a resistance to the control by regimes, thus pressurising them to inculcate new media policies.

Since 2010, a subjective transformation in political movements has caused a mobilisation of people due to the development of new media: the Internet and smartphones. Despite a series of political upheavals in the Arab world, regimes continue to control mass media effectively, which is why it is important to explore the role of independent YouTube channels which allow more issues-based content to emerge as a means of offsetting censorship through traditional media.

A gradual liberalisation of media was observed after the recent development of satellite television and the Internet. However, the government was able to manipulate most of the local channels on television and radio content due to their ownership. Censorship continued with reference to foreign shows, music, political views, religious talk other than Islam, alcohol and sex were all prohibited from being aired. On the other hand, privately owned networks had more freedom in terms of content, although they had their own limitations to sensitive political or cultural subjects, such as discussing sex or criticising the royal authority. Those with headquarters outside the country established self-censorship by local networks and media groups like MBC, Orbit and ART media groups; while a wide range of programmes were offered outside the country by foreign satellites.

In 2004, the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information launched Al-Ikhbariya, a new satellite TV news channel. Since then, satellite television has become a significantly widespread medium for worldwide news. In October 2005, a poll was conducted jointly by the University of Maryland and Zogby International among viewers in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates. The results showed that Al-Jazeera was ahead with 65 percent of viewers, followed by a host of Saudi-owned channels, Al-Arabiya, with 34 percent, and MBC, LBC, Abu Dhabi Television and the Egyptian Satellite Channel (Cochrane, 2014).

The Saudi Press Agency (SPA) is the only news agency in the country that is run by the Ministry of Culture and Information; the state-owned agency's director is also related to the Ministry of Information. The use of the Internet is restricted, with the government

blocking access to any websites that contain sexual, pornographic, politically offensive, "un-Islamic", or any that had controversial context of religion or politics (Awad, 2010). The government-monitored servers are the only ones through which access to the Internet is to be gained. According to Cochrane (2014), there is restricted access to the Internet because the government and all e-mail and Internet chat rooms are constantly monitored by the Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC). In 2007, he also observed that many users were utilising e-mails and blogs to exchange views.

A recent survey conducted by the Communications and Information Technology Commission (2017) revealed that there are 24 million Internet users in Saudi Arabia (CITC, 2017). One can access the Internet through different country servers in order to avoid government controls, though citizens can also request a reconsideration of the blocking process, in response to which the authorities may partially unblock websites depending on whether or not the Commission finds the website in violation of any Saudi laws.

In 1998, the Internet was availed to Saudi citizens for the first time, and since then, it has become available throughout the country; 64.7 per cent of the population of Saudi Arabia today are able to gain access the Internet. The government assigned The Telecommunication and Information Technology Authority to license Internet service providers where they filter and register Saudi domains, after which the law was developed whereby hacking, unauthorised access to government websites, and stealing information related to national security are now criminal acts. The government also publicly announced the role of the Internet Service Unit (ISU), which plays a role in barring particular websites with the aim to protect citizens from content that can be morally or politically inappropriate, including bloggings. This led Saudi bloggers to organise a community action in response to this blocking. An active community of bloggers and social media base activists has thus been formed in Saudi Arabia to discuss matters of society on social media. This has promoted debate over issues, such as the right of women to drive, public services and corruption.

2.5.2 Emergence of newspapers

As part of my methodology involves interviewing experienced journalists and editors of national newspapers in order to understand what kind of impact social media is having on professional journalistic standards, it's necessary to provide a brief overview of the development of newspapers in the Kingdom in order to understand the pressures and influences in their formation and editorial stance. The history of Saudi journalism has tended to identify three key stages of development: individual press ownership, the merging of the press, and organisational press ownership (Alshamik, 1982; Alhabbab, 2001; Alshebaili, 2003). But we also need to consider a fourth stage, represented by online-only journalism.

Individual Press Ownership of the newspaper industry took place between 1924 and 1964 and basically enabled any individual to establish a print publication. The main newspapers published during this period included the weekly publication *Um Al-Qura* (1924). The purpose of this official government publication was to share information about new decrees and royal decisions. *Saout Alhijaz* (1932) is a privately produced, weekly newspaper, and the first, along with *Al-Madina,* to use photographs in Saudi journalism. In 1946, the paper was renamed to *Albilad Alsaudia* newspaper (Alzahrani 2016; Awad, 2010).

The second stage in the evolution of Saudi print journalism is the 'Press merging stage' which saw various publications merge together between 1959 and 1964 and others to cease publication. These changes were brought about directly by the Saudi government who argued there were too many newspapers in circulation in relation to the overall population and general literacy levels. It was suggested that some of the publications had poor production values due to economic constraints (Alshamik, 1982; Al- Hazmi, 2002; Izaat, 2008). Despite the government's intervention, mergers were left directly to the newspaper owners. (Khayat, 1996). An example of one such merger involved *Albilad Newspaper* in Jeddah in 1959. This was founded as a result of merging *Albilad Alsaudia* (previously known as *Saout Alhijaz*) with *Arafat*.

The third stage is Organisational Ownership and emerged after the government withdrew the rights to individual ownership of newspapers in 1964 when the Press Establishments Law was issued. This was an attempt to regulate newspapers and resulted in only ten newspaper organisations being accredited with a license (Alhabbab, 2001). However, there are additional foreign licensed organisations that are printed outside the kingdom and imported in.

According to Alzahrani (2016), the most recent evolution is the Online-only Press Stage whereby traditional newspapers provide online content. In chronological order they are: *Al-Jazerah* newspaper (1997), *Alriyadh* newspaper (1999), *Alwatan* (2000), Okaz (2001), *Alyaum* (2002), *Al-Madina* (2003), Alsharq (2011), Makkah (2014).

However, there are also many online publications emerging that have no affiliation with traditional media organisations. Alzahrani (2016) estimated there are 2000 online-only newspapers operating in Saudi Arabia. Of these, 750 organisations have been licensed (Alkhatrawi, 2015). I see YouTube channels as media organisations for the digital age who are also providing similar services but in a more relevant format to younger audiences. What particularly interests me is how these new media organisations are perceived in terms of regulation and how this in turn influences the type of content they produce.

2.5.3 Saudi media laws

Saudi media is regulated by five media laws: Media Policy, Printed Materials and Publication Law, Executive Regulations of Printed Materials and Publication Law, Press Establishments Law, Executive Regulations of Electronic Publishing, and Copyright Law (Alotaibi, 2016; Alzahrani, 2016).

Media Policy currently contains thirty articles and is formulated according to four perspectives: Islamic values and principles، society and Arabic culture، the Saudi political system and nationalistic philosophy. The overall aim of the policy is to build a healthy society based around Islamic principles.

The Printed Materials and Publications law first issued in 1928, it has been updated 5 times (in 1939, 1958, 1982, 2000, 2009) The 2009 update is formatted into 49 articles

(*Alwatan*, 2011). These new articles are attempts to adapt to changes in communication brought about by the internet and so I would expect these updates to become more frequent as we spend more of our lives online. Part of these changes have also focused on protecting journalists so that they are able to make relevant criticisms of Saudi society in order to help the kingdom develop and adapt to changing technological conditions. This can be seen as a direct attempt to reduce censorship from the Ministry of Culture (Alshebaili, 2002; Alfirm, 2011) with one specific update (2011) protecting freedom of speech in the Kingdom (Saud, 2011). This is of particular interest to my research as it is evidence of a gradual progressive relaxing of laws to embrace the new modes of expression being articulated online, particularly through social media networks. I will explore the changes brought about by the 2011 changes in more detail in chapter seven.

The Law of Press Establishments contains 6 parts and 30 articles. These were agreed by the Bureau of Experts in the Council of Ministers (Bureau of Experts, 2015). These changes are particularly relevant in terms of how digital transformations are impacting on newspapers. Article 3 gives the responsibility of approving publication licences for new newspapers to the President of the Council of Ministers. Article 6 outlines basic conditions required of new press establishments and the roles of Boards of Directors are outlined in Articles 10 and 11. Articles 16 and 18 are an attempt to ensure rigorous journalism standards are set, given that newspapers have a responsibility to report fairly as well as embrace Islamic principles. Key to these articles is the outlining of responsibilities of the General Manger and the Editor-in-Chief. For example, a General Manager is expected to be a Saudi national, working full time and to either have a university degree or five years journalism experience. Their role is primarily to oversee financial objectives whereas the editor-in-chief is responsible for decision-making and to ensure content conforms to regulatory requirements as well as professional standards. This division of power can cause conflicts within the structure of a media organization. But the law also helps to explain why hundreds of thousands of students have been granted state sponsored Western educations so that they can fill such positions.

In the 2011 decree, the Ministry of Information and Culture outlined new regulations called Executive Regulations of Electronic Publishing for electronic and digital

publishing activities that includes 19 articles covering the main aspects of online activities (Alqarni, 2013). One problematic area with online media organisations is that the owners lack journalistic experience and consequently this can have financial ramifications in terms of their sustained success (Alkhatrawi, 2015) This has led to many being closed down. Therefore, one of my motivations for interviewing newspaper professionals is to determine the relationship between the general manager and editor in chief and to determine what standards are put in place to ensure these organisations conform to regulation and are able to continue publishing.

The Copyright Law was introduced on 30th August 2003 and included 7 chapters and 28 articles in order to protect original and derivative works. This law is relatively universal in terms of protecting intellectual rights. However, one strange exclusion from protection is in article 2, which does not protect "What is published in newspapers, magazines and periodicals, or broadcasted in daily news or newslike events" (Alzahrani, 2016).

This is very contentious as it suggests content produced through traditional means are not original, presumably because a newspaper or television channel is reporting on current events. Clearly this has a profound impact on the integrity of individual journalism as it means content produced in a newspaper can be circulated online without citation or reference, thereby creating a culture of plagiarism.

In Saudi Arabia, the role of media is limited to informing and educating the masses and to endorsing national unity. Therefore, it is legally allowed for media outlets to be banned and publications can be held if found to promote any hint of any of the following: mischief and discord; threat to the security of the state and its public image; offending a man's dignity and rights (Duffy, 2004). Cochrane (2014) also found that the government can interrupt the publication and dissemination of news sources that are specific to the royal family or Islam, thus restricting the freedom of press. Moreover, they also are capable of preventing and delaying any foreign print media from being distributed, thus being able to apply censorship to their discretion on foreign media forms.

Article 12 of the Basic Law allows authority to "prevent anything that may lead to disunity, sedition, and separation". This is an article which is still practiced by the government; therefore, public employees are prevented from "participating, directly or indirectly, in the preparation of any document, speech or petition, engaging in dialogue with local and foreign media, or participating in any meetings intended to oppose the state's policies" as it can cause enjoinment.

Another unwritten law is also practiced that does not allow dissemination of criticism of the royal family and the government in the form of a media policy that is religiously followed. This media policy was developed in 1982 in the form of a statement recommending that journalists should uphold Islam, dispute atheism and endorse Arab interests and also play a role in preserving the cultural heritage. The media policy also provides guidelines to handle controversial issues. Moreover, the Ministry of Culture and Information has the authority to approve the appointment of new editors and also to remove senior editors from their posts. They also can dismiss journalists that produce articles that can be deemed morally or politically unsuitable to the needs and rules.

Moreover, newspaper agencies cannot operate without the royal decree. The government licenses the newspapers and also provides any official government news through the government owned 'Press Agency'. A new media law was introduced in 2002 giving newspaper agencies flexibility while still keeping most of the tight restrictions.

A recent incident caused the nationwide confiscation of 250,000 copies of newspapers of *Al-Hayat*; multiple news sources revealed that there was a dissatisfaction of criticism of local issues in a Western style format and perspective of an article that linked a religious scholar to terrorism. The distribution was halted for four days.

The Saudi Investment Authority (SIA) is responsible for granting licenses to investors that wish to initiate new businesses. *Okaz* newspaper reported that SIA received 30 applications in particular to opening new media outlets within the country, though the Ministry of Culture and Information had rejected the license requests (Cochrane, 2014).

The Ministry of Culture and Information generally functions on a case-by-case basis with foreign publications being sold in the country. For example, books, magazines and other media that are sexual or pornographic in nature are banned from being sold in the country. They also strictly ban any government departments and agencies from publishing advertisements on newspapers that may respond to any reports from the local press.

According to Aidha Al-Zahrani, acting assistant deputy minister for internal information at the ministry, it is possible for newspapers and journalists to take legal action against any government department for accusing them of telling lies, by publishing advertisements or any editorial matters.

In Saudi Arabia, legal actions like the above mentioned generally require the ministry to be an authority to discuss matters that associate with newspaper and magazines. This decision was after the publication by The Ministry of Social Affairs of an advertisement to respond to an incident where authorities found the body of an elderly lady in a government elderly care facility in Dammam after the House for Care refused to accommodate her. The law developed a committee in the Ministry that looks into violations that were committed by Saudi newspapers and magazines. The law also provided evidence that the higher authorities allowed the Ministry the right to screen violations and make decisions. The Ministry commented through *Al-Eqtisadiah* Arabic daily: "No government department is allowed to level any accusations against any newspaper or journalist except in accordance with the Press and Publications Law and its executive by law" (World Association of Newspapers, 2008: 2).

In Saudi Arabia, it is very difficult to get access to resources regarding newspapers circulation figures and readerships (Alzahrani, 2016). This is because the papers are mainly or partly controlled by businessmen under the control of the government. Consequently there are no independent regulatory bodies to produce such statistics and this is due to the media being a relatively closed system. The press is subject to close scrutiny by the Director General of Broadcasting, Press and Publications and "can be censored on any significant topic or sensitive issue that does not meet with government

approval. Additionally, a 1982 royal decree requires journalists to adhere to stringent self-censorship specifically dealing with foreign or national heads of state" (Press Reference, Online). The main infrastructure in terms of regulation is The Saudi Press Agency (SPA) which was established in 1971 and is owned by the government. This is solely responsible for the creation of official news which is then forwarded to all national papers for inclusion in their publications. Newspapers may be owned by independent businesses but that independence is limited (ibid, Online).

2.6 The use of social media in Saudi Arabia

Western scholars who investigated the reasons behind the rapid adoption of social media networks found that social media sites provide customers with platforms to engage in more activities and perform a wider range of functions as compared to what they can perform using any other platform. Researchers have also found that the use of social media is influenced by several factors, of which culture is one major factor affecting the media use of individuals (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Westlund, 2008). Culture affects the behaviour of groups of individuals/societies and its impact is seen in the case of social media use as well.

Many Middle Eastern societies prohibit contact between individuals of different genders. This is especially noticeable in Saudi Arabia which is based on strict implementation of Sharia Law calling for restrictions such as gender segregation. Consequently, Saudi youth may have limited options of engaging in offline activities. Social media has stepped in to fill this void and enable new forms of communication to develop. As this is still a relatively new development, there is a scarcity of literature concerning the use of social media among Saudis. Part of the purpose of my research is to address this lack by exploring how social media networks perceive their role and whether these networks are providing opportunities for deeper discussions of identity, while also influence conversations and professional practices in mainstream media.

The Middle East has experienced a surge in the usage of social media within the last few years, most probably due to the high percentage of under 30s in the region. Saudi Arabian people are one of the most active groups on social media. Adams (2006) suggests that in the Middle East focusing on media audiences is the key for survival of mediated forms of communication. With the audience at the centre, the focus is now shifting towards understanding how the users are using media, for what purpose and under what motivations. Media users' behaviour has shifted dramatically within the last decade. Unlike in the past, users are much more active now and play a dual role of audience as well as contributors to media content. This is also shaping the way in which traditional media content providers, such as news service providers, interact with their audience.

Saudi Arabian culture is based on strict Islamic religious principles (Al-Lily, 2011). Being the birthplace of Islam and the location of two of the holiest sites, it attracts millions of Muslim pilgrims from around the world. Being at the heart of the Middle East region also places Saudi Arabia at the centre of Islamic world and consequently its culture is heavily influenced by Arabic and Islamic culture, which are often overlapping (Yamani, 2010). Consequently Saudis' beliefs, attitudes, identities, opinions, and behaviours have all been heavily influenced by Islamic religious principles, as mentioned in Sharia (Madini, 2012). This has influenced the form and shape of political communication. Previously a large section of Internet content was inaccessible as it was considered against the principles of Islam (Kraidy, 2007). However, with time Saudi Arabian society is becoming liberalised due to changes in modes of communication brought about by digital technology, resulting in the Saudi government scaling back restrictions on the Internet. As such, there is very little censorship in comparison on Web 2.0 content, including social networking sites (Al-Ibrahim, 2012).

Saudi Arabia is home to more than half of the active users in the region and Riyadh ranks as the 10th city worldwide in terms of the number of posts per month - 50 million - and reports an annual growth rate of more than 600% (The Social Clinic, 2014). Despite the immense popularity of Twitter among Saudi Arabian Internet users, there has been little research on the factors driving the usage of Twitter among Saudi internet users. This kind

of research is relevant not only for Saudi Arabia, but also for other social networking sites and other Middle East nations because of the similarity in the culture of the Middle Eastern nations.

Little research has been conducted on the use of social networking sites by Saudis. The majority of social network research have mainly focused on the use of Facebook and YouTube. Al-Saggaf (2012) conducted research on the use of Facebook and YouTube by Saudi users. He reviewed the content posted by the users in response to the 2009 Jeddah flood disaster and found that most of the respondents expressed criticism of the individuals responsible for the tragedy. In the posts, the users also demanded an investigation into what had caused the tragedy and measures taken to ensure that any such disasters in the future would not lead to so many casualties. The government took notice of the information posted online and ordered an enquiry into the matter. This showed that the users can actively engage in social media to voice their concerns and opinions, while governments can also use this platform to listen to the complaints of the public.

On one hand, social media platforms allow their users to express themselves with complete independence and in this manner it challenges the traditional media which is heavily regulated and controlled by the government. On the other hand, evidence indicates that the Saudi government is trying to restrict and willing to punish users who cross the line on social media platforms. A case in point is that of a Saudi citizen, Hamza Kashgari, who posted tweets about the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) on his Twitter account in 2012. His Tweet received over thirty thousand negative responses, following which Kashgari was arrested as a result of the public outcry (Al-Ibrahim, 2012; Aljabre, 2011).

Social media platforms have also been used by the Shiite minority to call for protests in Saudi Arabia, and by Saudi female activists to demand the ability to drive cars (Samin, 2012). In the case of Saudi Arabia, users often use social media not only to entertain or

seek information, but many times to also express their opinions on matters on which they cannot publicly speak (ibid, 2012).

Simsim (2011) studied Internet service use among different social categories and found that older Saudi users are more likely to use the Internet for cultural purposes. Simsim does not define exactly what he means by 'culture' but I interpret this as functional information related to identity, such as information on religion. Unsurprisingly he found that youth are more likely to use the Internet for entertainment or chatting. Youth were also happier to pay more for faster connections, with immediacy of communication their priority. Simsin found that males were more likely to use the Internet than females, which also is not surprising in a patriarchal society. When I visited the YouTube channels I spoke to female presenters, as I wanted to hear what they had to say about the way in which females interact with their shows. I see this as more substantial in understanding audiences than Simsim's statistical evidence. I would also like to raise once more my concern about definitions of 'entertainment'. This is to broad a category to understand modern forms of communication and so understanding the purpose of entertainment and how this relates to politics is vital to my research.

In an ethnographic study of the experiences of Saudi women using Facebook, Al-Saggaf (2011) found women aged between 19-24 used Facebook in order to maintain existing friendship ties with new and old peers and to express and share views on topical issues. Although respondents reported an increase in confidence and sociability, they also expressed fears that making private issues public could affect their relationship with their families. My research into the experiences of female YouTube channels will echo some of these sentiments, but I am also interested in what the producers of these channels are doing to support females who face prejudice or social anxiety. If procedures are in place to protect presenters from prejudice then this could be evidenced as creating social conditions that are more inclusive, potentially leading to a digital public sphere.

Al Ruood (2011) cited in Ziani et al. (2015) studied social networks in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring. They found that social networks helped to bring a collective

voice to individual anxieties and therefore exert more pressure on the governments of Middle Eastern states. The social networks offered an alternative means of expression not possible through official media, as well as the potential to generate and incite public protests. The study also found that users, irrespective of gender, age, education or affiliation to a media organisation, believed social networks were fundamental to the subsequent political changes.

Ali and Al Bashir (2008) research into the use of social networking sites by female Saudi university students found that the majority of Saudi female university students (almost 86 percent) had at least one social media profile, with Facebook the most popular. Most of the respondents suggested that they use social media to "pass time". This was followed by "communication with friends and family"; "to make new friendships"; "for study and work reasons" and finally "due to the site fame and for keeping up with the current era". This research indicated that the users are using social media for both personal and professional reasons and social media is playing a wider role in the life of Saudi youth. Facebook is no longer the most popular social media network in Saudi Arabia, this is now Twitter and YouTube (Salem, 2017), and therefore these are the social media networks I will be investigating. The brevity and immediacy of Twitter enables a quicker and more focussed form of dialogue, whereas issues-led programming through YouTube channels offers specific analysis of current events.

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter we see a nation on the cusp of dramatic change. This has largely been brought about by changing demographics which position 67% of the population as being under 30 years of age. This youthful generation has access to smartphones and the ability to upload and share information across a variety of social media networks. So profound is this generational shift that Saudis are currently deemed the most regular users of Twitter and YouTube in the world (Ramsay & Fatani, 2016). I want to understand the potential of a generation reliant on these platforms to communicate and whether this can bring about

change or transformation within Saudi society. Therefore, I undertook site visits to these organisations. I will briefly touch on this in chapter three and in more detail in chapter six.

In the following chapters I will develop my thesis that social media networks are helping to create a form of digital public sphere that is starting to have an impact on direct political rule as well as the practices of traditional media organisations in how they source information and the topics that they cover. I accept that this may be deemed problematic for two reasons. Firstly, culturally Saudi Arabia is not the type of country you would associate with Habermas's concept of a public sphere as it is ruled by a religious conservative monarchy and therefore does not conform to the notion of rational critical debate that underpins democratic societies. It is nevertheless my intention to demonstrate that Habermas has presented a useful model through which we can understand public debate but it is a model that needs to be adapted in order to understand how communication and debate exists in different societal structures. Secondly, it has been argued by Fuchs (2014) that social media is not an appropriate space through which rational conversations are able to develop. Although I agree that social media has its limitations, it has facilitated conversations between government and people that has not existed before and therefore we need to explore the implications of these emergent conversations. I will argue in my concluding chapter that rather than seeing these social media platforms in isolation we need instead to explore how they connect, react and operate within wider networks to create an overall conversation that has the potential to bring about societal change.

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will start by identifying the dynamics of digital and social media and citizen journalism. It will explore the work of Jürgen Habermas and his notion of a public sphere. It will then ask how relevant this theory is in the digital age and whether we need to think differently about what constitutes public space in an era where we live an increasing part of our lives online (Rheingold, 2000). In an era in which multiple media platforms vie for our attention and individuals have greater choice in how they interact, share, and express and access ideas, it may be necessary to think about a multiplicity of publics, meaning we need to think about how these spheres link together or overlap to create a synthesis of ideas with the overall aim of debating issues that affect individuals on an everyday level. The chapter will also focus on the academic literature, which explores Internet culture and its relation to the public sphere in the Middle East in general, and Arab and Saudi Arabia in particular, while also exploring some difficult criticisms put forward by Fuchs (2014) that question the ability of social media to act as a form of political communication. One of the aims of this chapter is to consider the extent to which popular social network sites, namely Twitter and YouTube, can perform as a digital public sphere in Saudi Arabia. Fundamental to this communication is satire, which is becoming the dominant mode of expression across the social media networks I am exploring here, thereby blurring the boundaries between politics and entertainment.

3.2 New, social and digital media

Social Network Sites (SNS) have become a dominant part of people's lives throughout the world. As the name implies, Social Networks contain two important elements, 'social' and 'networks'. Some of the earliest social network sites (SNSs) include MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004) and Bebo (2005). Each has its own grammar and etiquette and performs a distinct function. However their success depends on the historical context in which they were formed as well as the ability to adapt to the changing needs of users. MySpace

epitomises this process. On its inception it was seen as an innovative platform with influences on pop culture and music (Molloy, 2008) and was eventually acquired by News Corporation in July 2005 for $580 million. From 2005 until 2008 it was the largest social networking site in the world. But it soon grew out of favour, suffered numerous redesigns, and was eventually bought out by Specific Media in 2011 for $35million (BBC, 2011).

The dramatic failure of this giant of social media can be explained in many ways but perhaps one dominant reason is that it gave users too much freedom in how they curated information on a page, which simply made the reading experience difficult and unpleasant. Despite the failure of MySpace and the many imitators since, it is clear that social media has become a dominant form of communication.

SNSs bring about certain expectations of sociability and the level of meaningful connections they are able to create and maintain. As they have grown in popularity over the past decade and become more heavily integrated into daily practices, partly brought about by the mass adoption of smart phones technologies, they in turn have come to represent different ideas about 'community' and the specific communities they are trying to build. There is, potentially, an SNS for every type of personality and if one doesn't exist it won't take long for someone to fill the gap.

Although the concept of ''social networks'' is difficult to define (Lange, 2008), Boyd and Ellis attempt to give a comprehensive definition of SNS, by stating that they are:

> Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (2008).

SNS allow users to display their personal profiles publicly or privately to the online community. These profiles should include personal information, such as gender, status, location, job etc. Although this information is not compulsory it is useful in enabling

networks to form and for users to find like-minded people. SNS then take this information and are able to predict patterns of behaviour or make suggestions based upon your profile and tastes, such as 'who' has recently joined your network and suggestions on who to follow. Each site has its own features and bounded system but there is a certain degree of autonomy as to the level in which people use these systems. For example, it is not compulsory to list the school you attended on your Facebook profile page but in doing so Facebook can match you up with former school colleagues who have filled out this information. For this reason we can perhaps agree on the simplest definition of social networks as "websites that allow participants to construct a public or semi-public profile" (Lange, 2008).

Boyd and Ellison argue that "What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks." (2008). This is an interesting point, particularly in terms of Saudi culture, as it means that in making networks visible, as in being able to see who someone follows or is following on Twitter, users can then tap into that network and follow those people as well. This means that both networks and communities can be built at an incredibly fast rate, which offers a myriad of possibilities in terms of creating collective action or raising awareness around certain issues, facts that I will explore in more depth in my case studies chapter. Although this can lead to some progressive debates, and sometimes social change, it is worth noting that there are certain 'red lines' or taboo subjects that will not be debated online in Saudi culture and so in some respects there is a danger that these visible networks simply keep reproducing the same types of people and debates rather than exerting the kind of political change that a healthy public sphere should be able to produce.

There are of course difficulties in defining when actual interaction online reaches the level of a 'virtual community' which "depends on one's perspective and definition, but there can be no question that "community," with all its affective and historical complications, will continue to frame popular understanding of MySpace, Facebook, QQ, and other SNS" (Parks, 2011: 106). But clearly a virtual community has become more

possible online thanks to advancements in digital technology and the tools, which facilitate communication.

3.3 The changing web

The term Web 2.0 was first used in 1999 (Darcy, 1999), but is largely associated with Tim O'Reilly, the self-proclaimed digital 'evangelist' who believes in the creative potential of open source technology. Web 2.0 has come to describe the way in which the World Wide Web has developed from a passive medium through which users consumed static content on websites to a more intuitive and interactive medium, whereby users are actively encouraged to contribute content. This can take many shapes and forms but at its most basic requires some form of account or logging profile to access the digital platform or programme. This enables users to be both consumers and producers, and has given birth to what is commonly called user generated content (UGC). This has been integral in creating virtual communities or SNS or 'social media' (Cormode *&* Krishnamurthy, 2008).

Web 2.0 has helped kick-start a revolution of digital communication and "offered unprecedented tools for empowerment and online self-communication" (Dijck, 2013: 10). It is a term, which has been used to describe:

> A new way in which software developers and end-users started to utilize the World Wide Web; that is, as a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion (Kaplan & Haenlein: 2010, p 60-61).

Therefore, Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundation of Web 2.0" (2010: 60). This, however, refers to the growth of the technology of Web 2.0 as a *mother* to all new forms of media.

Given the creative potential afforded by Web 2.0 and UGC, this in turn has led to the emergence of the term 'new media', with the suggestion that modern forms of media are

somehow different to their predecessors. In their book *New Media: A Critical Introduction,* Lister, et al, provide a comprehensive definition.

> New media actually refers to a wide range of changes in media production, distribution and use. These are more than technological changes, they are also textual, conventional and cultural (Lister et al. 2003: p.13).

Not only is technology the main reason for the creation of new media, but it also has a crucial impact on other elements of media organization. This has had a direct impact on traditional media forms, which now incorporate social media and audience feedback into their respective mediums as a means of maintaining conversations. Therefore, this has led to changes in distribution and production in terms of media texts and also in terms of their relations with the public. However, these kinds of processes could also be referred to as 'digital media' (ibid, p.14). Digital media is in a constant state of evolution because of changes in technology, which is in contrast to analogue media, which "tend towards being fixed, where digital media tend towards a permanent state of flux" (ibid, p.16).

New media, which from this point onwards I will refer to as *digital media*, has had a clear impact on the culture of media practices. Although there are some clear negative effects to digital media, in particular the way in which audiences now expect content for free, the benefits are great. One of the privileges is the diverse interaction with the audience, which digital media allows; "at the ideological level [… this can be] understood as one of the key 'value added' characteristics of new media" (ibid, p.20) or as an "addition to existing media rather than a replacement" (Merrin, 2014: 39).

3.4 Citizen Journalism

One of the most important benefits and "added values" of digital media is the emergence of 'citizen journalism'. Citizen Journalism is a highly contested term but Goode (2010) offers a wide definition as below:

> Citizen journalism' refers to a range of web-based practices whereby 'ordinary' users engage in journalistic practices. Citizen journalism

> includes practices such as current affairs-based blogging, photo and video sharing, and posting eyewitness commentary on current events (Goode*, 2010)*.

In Saudi Arabia citizen journalism has spread rapidly among the younger generation. This generation has found that technology has created expressive platforms to escape the traditional boundaries, such as gender, identity, socio-cultural capital, that surrounded them. Therefore, they are now expressing their views and commenting on the news in the traditional media and even becoming sources of information used by traditional media. Twitter and YouTube are the most popular social networks used in the country; thanks to the new technology, the community has changed from its traditional appearance to what now looks like a 'digital community'.

In the combination of the Internet and new technologies, 'Social Networks' have emerged and created a space for citizen journalism to develop its own practices, places and tools. Smart phones have been vital in nurturing citizen journalism through its facilities and basic services, such as Internet access, the ease of sharing information (text, photos and videos), and the immediacy of communication. YouTube and Twitter are two of the most popular platforms in terms of enabling citizen journalism to flourish and in turn broadening the public sphere.

3.4.1 YouTube:

YouTube is a video-sharing website that was launched in February 2005 by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, three former employees of PayPal (Shifman, 2011). The first video uploaded to the site was on 23 April 2005 by co-founder jawed Karim and is titled 'Me at the zoo'. In November 2006 YouTube was bought by Google for US$1.65 billion and has become the most popular video-sharing website on the Internet. Burgess and Green (2009) have described it as one body with many conflicting souls, referring to the sheer diversity of output. The slogan of the website is self-explanatory, 'Broadcast yourself', which is open to interpretation and suggests there is little restriction on what this may entail. At its most banal are videos of family pets and emotional ranting, leading detractors such as Andrew Keen (2006) to dismiss the medium as fostering a *Cult of the Amateur*. At the opposite end of the spectrum are digital evangelists such as Charles

Leadbetter (2010), who in *We-Think* talks about the ways in which digital technologies are enabling new forms of collaborative creativity and innovation. YouTube and other participatory mediums are making us radically rethink ideas of privacy, community, knowledge and democracy. Leadbetter's main point is that Web.2.0 is built around sharing and that in turn encourages more people to express themselves as well as the ability to self-organise. A medium that gives more people the opportunity to be creative also makes knowledge more democratic which has implications for equality.

YouTube therefore is a symbol of contemporary participatory media culture and central to the concept of Web 2.0. So important has been its impact that *Time* magazine voted 'You' their 'Person of the Year' in 2006 in order to demonstrate the shift of users from consumers to producers and distributors of culture (Baym and Burnett, 2009; Lessig, 2008).

As it has gained in popularity it has evolved as a space in which traditional media are able to distribute content, enabling individuals and organisations to create bespoke channels, share clips, and develop audiences. Films can be watched for free or purchased and even music albums are uploaded, bringing in new revenues via advertising. Rather than being a space for banal videos it is encouraging political debate, with public officials uploading video content, as well as channels sponsoring political debates, such as the 2008 primaries in America, enabling the public to ask direct questions to candidates. As it has evolved and developed it serves a wide variety of functions and can no longer be dismissed as 'amateurish' (Keene, 2006).

YouTube is currently one of the most popular networks used in Saudi Arabia (Jones & Omran. 2014). It is used both for the creation of content and programmes as well as for browsing and dissemination. As a result, "Little wonder that so many Saudis turn to YouTube and other online broadcasters for light relief" (*The Economist.* 2014. n.a). The ease with which citizens in Saudi Arabia are able to upload and comment on YouTube has made it one of the most popular social platforms in the country.

> YouTube functions in relation to a range of other social networks; its content gets spread via blogs and Live-Journal entries, via Facebook and MySpace, where it gets reframed for different publics and becomes the focal point for discussions. YouTube content is described as spreadable media, a term which shares some of the connotations of "memes" or "viral video", both commonly used terms, but which carries with it a greater sense of agency on the part of the user. (Jenkins: 2006, p. 275

Useful functions of YouTube make its content spread very quickly and reach wider audiences. For example, YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia like Sa7i have their own accounts on other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Google plus etc., and therefore post their video links on these accounts. This has helped them to reach more audiences as well as make it easy for them to share links with each other and watch and then comment on each one of the platforms where is not necessarily going to open YouTube pages and search for a specific one.

In Saudi Arabia "Mass media hasn't produced enough content suited to the country's large population of young people" (Jones & Omran. 2014). Therefore, this generation is no longer turning to traditional media for information; social media has become an important source of information, a vector of the event and a witness to the facts and also participants. If they do not find a voice in traditional media, they switch to social media and social networks to participate and comment.

3.4.2 Twitter:

Twitter is an online microblogging service that enables users to send text-based messages of up to 140 characters, which are known as "tweets". Twitter was created in 2006 by Jack Dorsey and instantly gained worldwide popularity (Twitter.2015). Murthy, 2013 offers a specific definition of microblogging as follows:

> An Internet-based service in which: (1) users have public profile where they broadcast short public message/updates […] (2) messages become publicly aggregated together across users; and (3) users can decide whose messages they wish to receive, but not necessarily who can receive their messages (Murthy, 2013: 10)

Twitter has its own democratic mission, "To give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers" (Twitter, 2015). The microblog network has 316 million monthly active users, generating 500 million tweets per day. In addition to this 80 per cent of online interaction comes directly from mobile devices (Twitter, 2015). This strong user base led Twitter to recently float on the stock exchange and it is now "a profit-oriented commercial company" (Fuchs, 2014: 200). Therefore, a potential 'barrier' to share ideas could be the introduction of sponsored adverts or promoted content in timelines as the organisation attempts to monetise its large user base. One argument Habermas made about the failure of the 'media' as a public sphere was the way in which advertising and business pressures helped to shape and influence content. Although there are obvious dangers in Twitter timelines becoming filled with sponsored advertisements, commerce doesn't determine content in the same way. This is largely because Twitter is created by millions of individual users. They are both producers and consumers of culture.

Due to this popularity, Twitter is becoming an indispensable tool in the production and distribution of news. Twitter offers immediate access to world events as they happen by enabling news departments to aggregate content drawn together through hashtags as well as directly from sources. This has dramatically transformed how people now experience world events, by offering consumers a more niche experience of the news across media platforms.

One thing Twitter has enabled is a change from mass media to personal media, as argued by Saffo (2008):

> The Mass Media revolution 50 years ago delivered the world to our TVs, but it was a one-way trip – all we could do was press our nose against the glass and watch. In contrast, Personal Media is a two-way trip and we not only can, but also expect to be able to answer back (Saffo, 2008).

Clay Shirky (2009) has built on this argument and suggested that the internet has enabled 'many to many' conversations rather than the 'one to many' broadcast model. There is clearly a convincing argument that the multiplicity of voices adds texture to arguments,

something I will return to in my concluding chapter when I explore how these multiple voices are creating a layered digital public sphere.

Saudi society is one of the world's most frequent users of the social network Twitter (*BBC News*, 23 January 2014), recording the 'highest Twitter penetration in the world' (BI-ME, 2013). Smartphones helped Saudis to exploit the service, accessing Twitter and other social networks. Saudis have come to live with Twitter on a daily basis, contributing to, and interacting with it, regularly, to express and share individual opinions regarding local and global events. The mass adoption of smartphones facilitates immediate engagement with issues, allowing both the consumption and production of knowledge. Saudi media is also influenced by Twitter, and interacts with its audience through this portal to post news, links and videos to their followers. Digital society in Saudi Arabia has influenced Saudi media, by expanding their level of freedom, and enabling Saudi media to engage with social issues that are discussed on Twitter in order to retain contact with the community. As one Saudi Twitter user explains:

> Twitter for us is like a parliament, but not the kind of parliament that exists in this region," said Faisal Abdullah, a 31-year-old lawyer. "It's a true parliament, where people from all political sides meet and speak freely (Worth, 2012).

Social networks and digital media have radically transformed the public sphere by making access to debate more immediate, and arguably easier, in Saudi Arabia. Saudi society is not an open society and so has a very different public sphere than its European counterparts, therefore the development of a digital public sphere could be seen as the first social arena in which debate is being allowed to take place. Pressures exerted on debate are not so much the product of capitalism, but of religious and cultural sensitivities. Traditional media has tended to support the ideology of a conservative culture and has censored any kind of debate regarding politics, religion and the sovereign leaders. Therefore digital media, which attempts to exist beyond these parameters, is offering new modes of expression to a diverse audience, ones that are forcing newspapers to listen to.

The focus of the research will be dedicated to case studies exploring the extent to which an online 'virtual' voice has had a direct impact on the social structure, be it in the organization of local media environments (e.g. in terms of followers, advertising, mainstream media corporations); in direct political change (e.g. in terms of press freedom, social commentary, and changes in government policy); or in the codes and practices of professional journalism (e.g. in terms of social network citizen journalism).

It is also worth bearing in mind the work of (Samin, 2011), who in his study 'Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Social Media Moment' found that "the influence of social media should therefore be considered in terms of the underlying social and political dynamics of a given country, and not as an independent driver of change" (Samin, n.d). But social media *is* changing these dynamics because it is enabling people to express their ideas in ways which weren't possible before. (Al-Saggaf, 2012) argues "social media offers users an attractive alternative to discuss politics with each other and express their opinions about what is happening in their country". A key mode through which these ideas are being expressed is through satire, which I see as integral to debates surrounding the public sphere. Although satire may at first seem to conflict with Habermas's principles of what constitutes rational debate, evidence suggests satire may offer a means of expanding the public sphere by merging politics with everyday culture, thereby creating more informed citizens.

3.5 What is the Public Sphere?

Contemporary conceptualizations of the public sphere as a spatial concept are largely informed by the ideas of the German Philosopher Jurgen Habermas (1991) who in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* 1962/1991 examined the development of the public sphere in the 17th and 18th centuries and its gradual decline in the 20th century. In particular he focused on the role of coffeehouses, where private individuals met to rationally discuss public issues, which affected their everyday lives.

Habermas saw the coffeehouses as a social arena where meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated by 'private' people, often excluded from material resources, in public space. He argued that in the eighteenth century a new civic society emerged which was partly due to growing rates of literacy, accessibility to literature, and a new kind of critical journalism. A new space was required that enabled individuals to discuss economic issues brought about by free market capitalism. This in turn created a new political class, the bourgeoisie, who offered an alternative reason-based public opinion to the traditional authorities of the state and the church (Thijssen, 2013). The bourgeoisie created a network of institutions within civil society which enabled private thoughts to be made public, most notable of which was newspapers, the publishing of pamphlets and the use of libraries and universities as a space for public debate, all of which were geared towards holding governments accountable and widening democratic debate.

One major structural change that helped facilitate public debate in England was the Licensing Act of 1695, which enabled publishers to print newspapers without the consent of the Queen and therefore broaden public debate although strict rules of engagement still applied. Integral to this were Moral Weeklies, periodical publications circulated at the beginning of the 18th century whose main function was to spread ideas about the Enlightenment and arouse debate around ethical considerations rather than simply reproduce news (Ertler, 2012). These included the *Guardian* (1713), a short-lived newspaper published in London that ran from 12 March – 1 October 1713 (not to be confused with the broadsheet newspaper of today) and the *Tatler* (1709) a literary and society journal that ran for two years and which published a series of essays on contemporary manners. The *Tatler* represented a new approach to journalism by adopting a journalistic *persona* that saw four fictional reporters placed in four of the most important coffeehouses where they re-laid overheard gossip (Dobrée, 1959). Both titles were begun by Richard Steele, the latter being liquidated in order for Steele to team up with Joseph Addison to create the *Spectator* (1711), another short-lived daily that ran for one year and with similar principles to the other publications, providing well-reasoned discussion points to provoke social interactions in a polite manner (Bowers, 2005).

Moral Weeklies had a large subscription with coffeehouses providing copies for their customers. This in turn led to the foundation of a "Gentleman's Society" in 1711 where readers would gather to read their chosen paper and 'discuss the moral lessons contained in each issues essay." (Cowan, 2005: 346) and the material for a 'truly democratic, and a truly reasonable, public opinion.' (Cowan, 2005: 346).

However, Habermas argues that the subsequent emergence of the mass media, rather than articulating the principles of rational subsequent debate, attempted to manipulate and create a public where none exists, and to manufacture consensus. Newspapers, rather than offering a balanced insight into key issues affecting individuals and society, were driven by corporate interests and in creating particular types of readerships, largely to generate income from advertisements. These criticisms have most recently found articulation in the 'Propaganda Model', a conceptual model in political economy devised by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) that illustrates how systemic biases function in mass media. The authors demonstrated how the media functions to 'manufacture consent' for economic, social and political policies and that the media is structured around conflicting interests that can influence the production of news. This structural bias stems from five filters: sourcing; advertising; flak; ownership; and anti-communism (or othering). More recently these ideas have been developed by content analysis websites such as Media Lens (www.medialens.org).

In modern politics, rational-critical debate has been manipulated through the emergence of new disciplines such as public relations. Large non-government institutions such as advertising agencies and public relations have slowly replaced and eroded the old institutions of the public sphere. Habermas defines these structural transformations as 'the refeudalization of society' (1962/1990: 292) as politicians and organizations represent themselves before the voters.

> A "refeudalization" of the public sphere must be discussed in another, more exact sense. The integration of mass entertainment and advertising, which in the form of public relations already assumes a "political" character, subjugates namely even the state under its code. Because private companies suggest to their customers in consumer

> decisions the consciousness of citizens, the state has to "appeal to" its citizens like consumers. (Habermas: 1962/1991: 292).

Habermas believed that the strength of the public sphere is through oral bias and is maintained through dialogue, acts of speech, and the types of discussion that were taking place in coffeehouses. He argued that this operates best in an 'ideal speech situation' which happens when participants in a communication situation are free of nonrational 'coercive' influences, such as physical and psychological coercion. Free of all potential bias means individuals rely solely on rational techniques to persuade.

Habermas (1990: 43-115) argued that in order for an 'ideal speech situation' to occur, members of the public sphere must conform to the following rules:

1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.

2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.

2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.

2c. Everyone is allowed to express their attitudes, desires and needs without any hesitation.

3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2)

The function of these public debates helps to invigorate what Habermas (1962/91) termed "opinion-forming associations"– both social and voluntary organisation, such as churches, grassroots movements, trade unions – all of which function to counter messages of authority.

In placing public opinion in the context of structural changes, Habermas has shown how the mass media and non-government organisations have been able to manipulate public opinion for their own gain and that what is presented in the media as rational debate is very rarely critical (Fulya, 2012). Habermas warns that the public sphere is not a "system"

or “framework of norms” but rather a “network” of communications drawn together around a public interest. Habermas does not see the media and public sphere as an integral part of a democratic order. Instead he sees them as a sphere of civil society that functions as “a warning system with sensors that, though unspecialized, are sensitive throughout society” and “can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view” (Habermas, 1996: 359), as a “scattering” of “readers, listeners, or viewers linked by public media.” Therefore he is more interested in exploring the relationship between the public sphere and the political – where official decisions are made, and the political system’s centre, where official laws are made.

3.6 Debates about the ‘digital’ public sphere?

There have been many criticisms of Habermas’s conception of the public sphere. The most obvious criticism is it does not include women or people from lower social classes, a point which the author acknowledged himself (Fuchs, 2014). Although Saudi Arabia is traditionally a patriarchal society and therefore the public sphere has also alienated the female voice, this is starting to change as a result of social media. In chapter six I will demonstrate how YouTube channels are creating a space for female presenters to highlight and question gender struggles. However it is worth noting that these YouTube channels are all owned by men, just as newspapers were in the 17th century, and therefore equality is still some distance off. But the fact that these YouTube channels are enabling an “assembly” of female voices to debate issues that directly affect their lives suggests that a digital public sphere is becoming more inclusive. Lyotard (1984) has highlighted that it is not just rational accord that strengthens democracy but that anarchy, individuality, and disagreement are just as productive. The internet is a form of structured anarchy in that there is no one overriding ‘owner’. Users can access content from various points and dip in and out of conversations as they please, thereby enabling unique individual experiences of digital life. What social media networks allow is an amplifying of these individual expressions, thereby creating and curating conversations via hashtags

or trending topics, allowing a rich variety of voices to merge together that are individualised, anarchic, and through disagreement enable a synthesis of ideas to emerge. We will see this drawing together of disparate voices around an issue in my YouTube video analysis. Now that we have more media platforms and digital devices through which we can express individual opinions, Lyotard's observations have become more pertinent. Drawing on Lyotard's work, Fraser (1992) has suggested Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere benefits only 'privileged' men to practise their skills of governance, and excludes other forms of marginalized co- existing public spheres that form in response to their exclusion from the dominant sphere of debate. Fraser suggests, therefore, that we need to refer to multiple public spheres, which give voice to diverse collective identities and interests, many of which are under represented by governments, problems which Habermas would acknowledge in his later work, in particular that he had neglected proletarian, feminist and other public spheres. (Habermas, 1992:425-430). This seems particularly relevant in terms of my analysis as Saudi Arabia is a conservative monarchy and not a democracy, therefore pluralistic public spheres, as articulated through the social media platforms I will analyse later, are integral in achieving what Habermas deems as the primary function of the public sphere, one that is "engaged in critical debate" (Habermas, 1992: 52).

3.6.1 Digital Public Sphere: Middle East / Saudi Arabia

Given my focus will be on social media platforms as potentially operating as a digital public sphere(s) it is worth exploring in more detail the technological changes that have led to our current situation. These technological changes have brought about new communications realities that are unprecedented in Arab media (Ayish, 2008). Digital technology has opened up opportunities for local and global players to communicate in numerous ways, thereby exposing individuals to unorthodox cultural and political views. This is creating complex tensions between the local and global, the modern and traditional, between men and women, all of which I believe are helping Saudis to reimagine what it is to be a Saudi in the 21st century.

A useful starting point to contextualise these dramatic technological changes comes from

Warf and Vincent (2006) who suggest that one reason there has been a lack of systematic studies of the nature and impact of Internet use in the Arab world was due to "the widespread Orientalist misconceptions about Arabic culture and society found in the West" (p.83). They argue that Arabian countries are comprised of complex communities that are a mixture of the traditional, modern and postmodern and that this explains the diversity in Internet usage across regional and national borders. Their study outlines various factors that have impacted on Internet use and includes educational levels, affordability of Internet services, the number of Internet cafes, and telephone lines. It is worth looking at a few of these factors in detail to help set the context for my own research.

High speed Internet connection via fibre optic lines has been a vital factor in promoting and maintaining Internet usage (Graham, 1999). The Arab world has three distinct but interlinked regional systems: The Fiber-Optic Link Around the Globe (FLAG), Africa ONE and Fiber-Optic Gulf (FOG) project. These regional systems are also supplemented by national ones. In 2001 Saudi Arabia introduced the Assymetric Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) as well as wireless satellite services ARABSAT and INTELSAT. A powerful technological infrastructure was vital in encouraging greater use of the Internet but there are other cultural, economic and political factors that made Internet growth slow between 2000 and 2006. Loch et al (2003) identify language barriers as one potential problem as in some countries, such as Lebanon, no internet portals use Arabic, thereby limiting participation to those who can speak French or English. This is no longer an issue due to software tools such as Google translator or Microsoft's Arabic Office, but it is a reminder that simply providing access to the Internet does not guarantee use. Literacy rates were identified as another potential barrier to use, as were conservative Islamic gender roles that meant young males were the main users in Internet cafes (Warf, 2001) and that women could only enter a café if accompanied by a man. However, those Arabic women who did have access to the Internet found "a new public space for interaction, including anonymous roles in chat rooms, sources of helpful information and forums for discussion, fuelling a silent gender revolution" (p.89).

Warf and Vincent (2006) recognise the potential of cyberspace to provide multicentred, non-authoritarian means of acquiring and dispersing information that has enabled individuals to circumvent tightly controlled traditional media. The authors argue that the internet serves "a variety of counter-hegemonic purposes in civil society", with the potential to create spaces of discussion on human rights, sexual identity, gender politics, as well as potential opposition to government. "There are cautious grounds for hoping that cyberspace offers a Habermasian community of shared discourse that widens the sphere of public debate in this region" (p.83).

It is my belief that social media networks have given voice to the "silent gender revolution" that started off in anonymous chatrooms and has now found expression in BanaTube, a niche YouTube channel owned by Sa7i, which debates gender issues. I believe that this, along with other issues-based channels that are expanding all the time, is helping to create a "community of shared discourse" and that it has the potential to bring about social change, something I will address further on.

Ward and Vincent found that Saudi Arabia was responsible for the most acute censorship in Arab countries and that public access to the Internet was only made possible "when the state deemed that it could effectively control it; the entire Internet backbone is state-owned. The state has erected extensive firewalls to control the flow of digital information. Internet companies in Saudi Arabia are required to record the names of the customers and the times they arrive and depart" (p.90). One way in which this control is implemented is by ensuring that the only portal through which IPS can make international connections is through KACST (King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology), a government owned research centre. An example of this level of censorship is provided by OpenNet Initiative (2004) which found over 400,000 webpages were banned. However, it is possible for users to get around filters of censorship by logging on in other countries through proxy servers (Warf and Grimes, 1997).

Individuals have always found a means of getting around censorship and I will illustrate further on how satire is fundamental to this process. But I am equally interested in how

the actual content of programmes of YouTube channels are pushing the boundaries of censorship, and potentially helping to shape and change the attitudes of government by generating a "community of shared discourses" through their programmes which are then debated through other social media channels and platforms. Habermas (1979) has argued that communications are central to the social process of building consensus as well as truth construction. Clearly social media opens up, and complicates these processes, particularly in terms of presenting ideas relevant to individuals. For this reason I will be exploring the use of hashtags and the content of YouTube videos to determine their exact use and purpose. If they are enabling Saudis to determine their own concepts of truth and fairness, as well as generating consensus around certain ideas, it raises the question of whether these new forms of media have the potential to hold social organisations accountable and if so, whether they act as a Fifth Estate.

3.6.2 Defending the concept of the digital public sphere

One of the most vociferous critics of the potential of social media to act as a public sphere comes from Christian Fuchs who applies critical theory to understand our new media world. He has applied Marxist analysis to understand digital labour (2014) and digital capitalism (2014), and has brought class back as a vital prism through which to understand modern forms of class relations (2016). In terms of my thesis, it is most important to address Fuchs's criticisms of social media (2014/2017) in depth in order to understand his position and how this relates to my own research. Part of this analysis will also consist of exploring Fuchs's criticisms of other research within the field.

Lotan, Graeff, Ananny, Gaffney, Pearce and Boyd (2011) analyzed 168 663 tweets from the Tunisian revolution and 230 270 from the Egyptian revolution and found that bloggers and activists were the most active retweeters. But Fuchs (2014) is sceptical that "the revolutions were, indeed, tweeted" (2011: 1401), claiming that their "analysis says nothing about what role these tweets had in mobilizing activists on the streets and how relevant Twitter was for street activists". To counter this research he cites Murthy (2013: 107) who found that in March 2011, only 0.00158% of the Egyptian population used Twitter. He concedes that those who tweeted may have helped create global awareness of issues but this doesn't equate with meaningful change.

From this, Fuchs goes on to test the validity of claims that a so-called "Twitter revolution" constitutes a new public sphere of political communication with real "emancipatory political potentials." He does this by analysing the approaches of Clay Shirky (2008 & 2011b), Zizi Papacharissi (2010), Jodi Dean (2005), Malcolm Gladwell (2010) and Evgeny Morozov (2009). Underpinning his analysis are two key aspects: political communication and political economy.

Fuchs raises awareness of critiques of Habermas's model, most notably the working class critique put forward by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972) in which a proletarian (counter) public sphere "can be read as both a socialist critique and a radicalization of Habermas's approach". A feminist critique of Habermas points out the privileging of educated, rich men and stresses that "an egalitarian society should be based on a plurality of public arenas in order to be democratic and multicultural." (Eley 1992; Fraser 1992; Roberts and Crossley 2004b).

Although Habermas would go on to address these criticisms when he revisited his ideas (Habermas 1992, 425–430), Fuchs is wary of pluralistic publics without unity, as "they will in social struggle focus on mere reformist identity politics without challenging the whole, which negatively affects the lives of all subordinated groups, and that in an egalitarian society common communication media are needed for guaranteeing cohesion and solidarity and a strong democracy" (2014: 182).

Based on this Fuchs argues that if Internet platforms are to constitute a new form of public sphere then they need to take into account the dynamics of political communication and the dynamics of political economy. In terms of the political economy this would involve exploring issues of ownership so that we can detect any possible censorship or exclusion of perspectives, as well as analysing the political content produced. In terms of political communication, Fuchs argues we have to explore how accessible the content is, such as whether it is independent, which in turn enables us to evaluate the quality of the communication.

Using these criteria Fuchs says we can analyse whether new forms of social media and Internet platforms enable the formation of a public sphere. He concludes that even though social media can be useful, as demonstrated by the freedom to publish online and be heard (Shirky, 2008) and with greater flexibility and means of expression (Papacharissi, 2010) these forms of communication cannot be compared to huge gatherings of people in physical places making their presence visible. Physical demonstrations allows for material effects (like blocking streets) and so Fuchs concludes "I thereby do not say that social media never matter. I rather want to stress that social media cannot replace collective action that involves spatio-temporal presence" (Fuchs, 2014: 186).

To support his claims he cites Gladwell (2010) who states that activists in revolutions and rebellions risk their lives whereas activism online has 'weak ties' (Gladwell 2010, 45). Social media can "make it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact" (Gladwell 2010, 49). Therefore, rather than bringing about change, social media "are well suited to making the existing social order more efficient" (Gladwell, 2010: 49).

In exploring Twitter as a tool for political communication, Fuchs (2014: 190) states that in 2009, only 7% of the top Twitter trend topics were political topics and 38% were entertainment-oriented topics. In 2010, only 3% were about politics, 28% about entertainment and 40% about hashtags (#). Fuchs also argues that those who have a lot of reputation, fame, money or power tend to have more followers than 'ordinary' people, something that is accentuated by Twitter's accumulation model (promoted tweets, promoted trends, promoted accounts) and therefore social media replicates unequal social relations. Twitter is a profit-oriented commercial company and therefore it "stratifies visibility of tweets, profiles and trends in favour of advertising clients and at the expense of everyday users in order to accumulate capital" (2014: 200). For this reason, Fuchs believes that Twitter is not a democratic medium "because the power of amplification is also stratified: highly visible users determine what gets amplified and what does not. Twitter's reality is one of asymmetric visibility; its democratic potentials are limited by

the reality of stratified attention and the visibility characteristic for a capitalist culture" (2014: 192).

According to Habermas (1989b, 1989c), the public sphere is a sphere of political debate. But there is always the danger that those with higher incomes and better education, and therefore a greater interest in politics, are more likely to dominate political communication. The result is "a rather homogenous climate of opinion" (Habermas 1989c, 213). Fuchs argues that in addition to Twitter being "dominated by the young, educated middle class" which therefore "excludes other groups, such as workers, farmers and elderly people", there is the additional problem of politics being a minority topic on Twitter as it is "dominated by entertainment. Twitter is predominantly an information medium, not a communication tool. It is predominantly about entertainment, not about politics" (2014: 199).

It is undeniable that capitalism creates biases in the tools we use to communicate, but to simply dismiss this as evidence of being undemocratic is particularly harsh. On a pragmatic, everyday level, Twitter has given voice to many people and although some accounts have clear advantages over others - be it financial support, institutional support, or reputation - it has also created many opportunities for ordinary citizens to develop their own followings based on the quality of their communications.

In analysing the tweets of two political events (Wikileaks, 2010 and the Egyptian Revolution, 2011), Fuchs concludes that political tweets "tend to be primarily information-based postings, especially re-tweets, and not conversations. The interactive postings are mainly one-way comments and not two-way interactions. There is a limitation of freedom of speech and public opinion on Twitter: individuals do not have the same formal education or material resources for participating in the public sphere" (2014: 199-200). Fuchs raises some very important points about whether Twitter, as a public sphere, is able to facilitate a "society engaged in critical public debate" (Habermas 1989c, 52) about politics. He goes on to question whether 140-character short messages can create meaningful political debate and that these "short texts may invite simplistic

arguments and be an expression of the commodification and speeded-up nature of culture" (2014: 200).

Fuchs concludes that Twitter is a "Pseudo- and Manufactured Public Sphere." The powerful continue to "enjoy an oligopoly of the publicistically effective and politically relevant formation of assemblies and associations" (Habermas 1989c, 228). By this definition, social media limits freedom of association and assembly. It does not enable "criticism of structures that lack public concerns about common goods and limit the availability of the commons for all people" (Fuchs, 2014).

Fuchs raises a lot of important points, some of which are worth briefly summarising here as they will inform my site visits to YouTube channels as well as issues raised in my Sa7i video clip analysis. I will briefly address each one.

1. He argues that online activism "can simply be ignored by the powerful" (2014: 187) and therefore is not deemed as important as physical protest.

It is my belief that social media is acting as a form of parliament in Saudi Arabia that opens up public space for Saudi citizens to engage in political and social discourse that wasn't possible before due to restrictions in political speech, civic engagement, and media freedom. With this in mind I am intrigued as to how social media can facilitate conversations and potential calls for action that might lead to direct social change. In my YouTube video analysis I will demonstrate how the popularity of these videos mean that they cannot be ignored by the "powerful" and has directly led to some ministers losing their jobs in Saudi Arabia as a result of public opinion.

2. He claims that people do not risk their lives online.

This may be the case in Europe but this is not the case in Saudi Arabia. There are numerous individuals who have been arrested for expressing controversial views through blogs, such as Raif Badawi, therefore I completely disagree that social media does not entail a level of risk. Part of the purpose of my visit to YouTube channels is to understand

the extent to which producers are addressing taboo subjects and the processes they are using to communicate these ideas.

3. Fuchs is dismissive of hashtags, arguing in 2009 7% of trending Twitter hashtags were about politics. By 2010 this had dropped to 3%. He dismisses Twitter as an information source, arguing hashtags are dominated by entertainment.

Again, I would argue this is not the case in Saudi Arabia. Recent research by (Noman, Faris and Kelly 2015/6) found religion, football and politics are the most popular topics in the Saudi Twittersphere. It is also becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between politics and entertainment, particularly given the rise of satire in YouTube videos. With this in mind I am interested to talk directly to the producers of these videos to understand how they perceive or categorise their own work.

4. Fuchs argues that Twitter is 'simplistic' due to the 'short texts' that inform communication and is just an information source.

Yet could it not also be the case that the medium forces users to be more articulate within the limited space? A simple example of this is posting photographs to accompany Tweets that provide additional information. Clearly any limitation on content is going to have an effect on communication which is why I am arguing that Twitter forms one part of a broader, more complex, multi-layered conversation that operates across platforms and mediums to help synthesise ideas and develop a deeper conversation.

Fuchs raises a lot of very important points, some of which I have briefly responded to. But for now it is important to move on to an examination of Saudi concepts of citizenship as this will enable us to better understand the motivations or restrictions for engaging in online conversations and how these conversations, taking place in YouTube videos and Tweets, is providing more accessible means through which citizens can engage in issues that directly affect them on a day to day level.

3.7 Saudi and Citizenship

As noted previously, there have been various objections raised in relation to Habermas's notion of a public sphere, in particular the way that it has privileged certain voices to the detriment of others. I think it is vital to acknowledge that Saudi Arabia is a very different public to that of European cultures and therefore if we are going to understand whether social media platforms have the potential to act as a kind of digital public sphere we need to be clear about the general makeup of the country as this in turn will enable us to understand the limitations and challenges faced by Saudis in attempting to create a public sphere.

One of the challenges that have emerged with social networks in Saudi society are issues concerning loyalty and citizenship, especially given the recent Saudi led intervention in Yemen in which Saudi Arabia led a coalition of nine Arab states on 26 March 2015 in a military intervention codenamed Operation Decisive Storm (Al Arabiya. 25 March 2015). The conflict can be traced back to the former President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was deposed in 2011 during the Arab Springs uprising, and has led to tribal conflicts in the region ever since which contest the legitimacy of consequent governments. The current airstrikes are aimed at the Houthi tribes, who forced out President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi who has since sought safety in Saudi Arabia (CBC News. 26 March 2015).

Saudi Arabia has also experienced internal conflicts and acts of terrorism over the past fifteen years, which started out as a series of coordinated attacks by the Al-Qaeda militant group in 2003. More recently, Al-Qaeda attempted to target the Saudi royal family in 2009 when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdulaziz, who at the time was the country's deputy minister of interior, survived a failed assassination attempt. More recent attacks on the country have been claimed by loyalists of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) with the Shiite community targeted at mosques while praying.

A precise historical account of such conflicts is a separate dissertation in its own right, but for my purposes it is safe to say that the country has experienced conflicts both

internally and externally over the past couple of decades, which has raised various concerns regarding citizenship. Social media has become one platform through which Saudi society has turned to express solidarity with the government and to unite community voices. This section briefly looks at the complex citizenship of Saudi society in terms of religion and gender and asks that any definition given must be firmly seen in the context of Middle Eastern society and culture. Imposing Western notions of citizenship simply does not fit due to the complexity of an age-old tribal system in which people have varying allegiances and understandings of identity.

The concept of citizenship has been studied for long periods of history and conflicting definitions have emerged among scholars. (Stevenson, 2003) produced a comprehensive coverage of all issues relating to cultural citizenship. He argues that citizenship "is more often thought to be about membership, belonging, rights and obligations" (2003: 4). However, when it comes to talking about the citizenship in Saudi Arabia we have to consider the huge difference between West and Third nation countries in order to understand the factors that provide the route to citizenship. (Altorki, 2000: 216-217) disagrees with modern concepts of citizenship as being "a homogenous, undifferentiated, universal category" as these conclusions do not apply to Middle Eastern society which is inherently different in structure, practice and principle to the West, particularly a country like Saudi Arabia with a sharply articulated gender divide.

Marshall (1950) defines citizenship as operating through three parts: civil, social and political (Marshall 1950, 10-11, quoted in Walby, 1994, 380). Civil refers to notions of individuality and liberty, such as free speech, and is held up by institutions such as law courts. Political refers to the right to participate in the political process, which is made possible through institutions such as local government or parliament. Social refers to economic welfare and security and the right to embrace the heritage of your culture. Here, the institutions enabling this would be the education sector and social services providing basic provisions. By Marshall's definition, the individual is the basic unit of society through which these values and institutions serve.

Clearly, this definition throws up numerous problems for a closed society such as Saudi Arabia whereby religion is the base unit of society and therefore individual freedom is not recognised as important. Therefore, Saudi Arabia does not have a constitution in the traditional sense. Instead, Shari'a Law is the framework through which justice is understood. Instead, the principal idea underpinning Saudi culture relates to the principle of *Hadith,* which is attributed to the Prophet Mohammed. "You are all shepherds and responsible for your flock. The imam is responsible for his flock. The man is a shepherd responsible for his flock. The woman is a shepherdess in the house of her husband and is answerable to him for her flock." (Huqayl, 1996: 95).

Here, then, the concept of citizenship is from above, with the ruler given privilege. But there is a more important fact in how citizens perceive themselves. Rather than through the state, the three most important areas for the individual to exert their identity are on the micro scale through kinship, friendship or economic networks. Article 9 of the Basic Law on the Political System states: "The family (Usra) is the core of Saudi society. Its members are raised on the basis of Islamic belief, the requirements of goodwill, obedience to Allah, His Prophet, and those in authority, respect for the law and its execution, love of the homeland, and glorying in its majestic history" Article 10 reinforces this by declaring "the state strives to strengthen the bonds of the family" (Altorki, 2000: 219-220). It follows, therefore, that anyone attacking the state of Saudi Arabia is attacking family, friendship and the Prophet.

Given these ingrained and long held beliefs, it is clear that any examination of a public sphere in Saudi Arabia will not conform to Habermas's 'ideal speech situation' (1990), as it is an unrealistic framework in which to judge Saudi culture. Habermas argued that the public sphere developed hand in hand with the social and intellectual changes of the Enlightenment, as a valorisation of rational, critical thought over religious doctrine. Therefore in Saudi Arabia we have a different public space emerging, one where critical thought must accommodate religion. Although "every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse" (1990: 86) they may face consequences if these discourses are deemed to be to the detriment of the prophet

Mohamed. Having said this, clearly people are becoming increasingly more confident to "question" or "introduce" assertions into discourse. They are equally becoming more vocal about "express(ing) their attitudes, desires and needs without any hesitation" (1990: 86). This is evident by the fact that Saudis share more personal data than any other country in the world. This has enabled greater engagement in micropolitics rather than macropolitics, something I will address later. But we need to understand this within the context of rapid change that has recently been brought about by technology, thereby offering means of expression that weren't possible before. For this reason, part of the purpose of my field visit to Saudi YouTube channels is to understand what affect these 'ingrained' attitudes have on production values and the content of programmes. Are we witnessing a broadening of conversations with an attempt to usher in progress or are these simply channels that have capitalised on newly acquired modes of expression as a means of making money? It is with this in mind that we now need to explore whether a digital public sphere, or, perhaps, digital public spheres, are emerging within Saudi Arabia that, like Habermas's coffee houses, enable a social arena where meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated by 'private' people, often excluded from material resources, in public space. I will also return to the concept of citizenship when I explore satire in YouTube videos as I believe that this distinct form of expression is helping to encourage citizenship through what Benacka (2016) calls a "co-construction of rationality and reality".

3.8 A Digital Public Sphere

In order to understand the function and purpose of a digital public sphere as a means of giving voice to progressive ideas it is important to explore Douglas Kellner's concept of the intellectual in an increasingly changing media landscape. Kellner (1997) was writing in the very early days of the Internet and so we have the benefit of measuring the extent to which his ideas have been validated. Kellner's (1997) key thesis is that the concept of the intellectual needs to be rethought in relationship to new technologies and the new global economy and culture. Traditionally the role of the intellectual was to bear witness to social problems and denounce injustice wherever it occurred and fight for the values of

equality and other Enlightenment values. This was done through what Habermas called the public sphere of democratic debate and political dialogue, finding wider expression in articles for newspapers, journals and pamphlets. As modern societies developed, the intellectual played key social functions in articulating ideas.

The role of the modern critical intellectual began to be questioned with the postmodern turn in theory (Best and Kellner 1997). Rather than the intellectual fighting for universal values and truths, Kellner cites Foucault (1977) who argued "for a conception of the 'specific intellectual' who intervened on the side of the oppressed in specific issues, not claiming to speak for the oppressed, but intervening as an intellectual in specific issues and debates" (Kellner, 1997). Instead of concentrating on macropolitics the role of the specific intellectual is on the more achievable micropolitics, intervening in local issues and struggles. For Kellner, a democratic public intellectual "does not speak for others, does not abrogate or monopolize the function of speaking the truth, but simply participates in discussion and debate, defending specific ideas, values, or norms or principle that may be particular or universal." (Kellner, 1997).

The advent of new technologies and new public spheres means that everyone is becoming, or has the potential to become, an intellectual. Kellner suggests that in order to understand the relationship between the intellectual and the public sphere we also need to rethink how this relationship is shaped and influenced by changes in technology. The Internet, along with other electronic modes of communication, are creating "new public spheres of debate, discussion, and information" enabling intellectuals (who want to) to engage the public. I am interested to explore whether social media networks in Saudi Arabia are acting as new public spheres of debate and as to whether the hosts of YouTube channels, as well as the producers, see themselves as public intellectuals with the ability to bring about change or whether this is simply a new breed of entertainment and escapism, geared towards developing audiences as a means of making money. YouTube hosts are increasingly being positioned as 'microcelebrities' for whom ordinary people turn to for information that they feel they perhaps are unable to access through traditional forms of media. These microcelebrities can also be found on Twitter, the blogosphere and

other social media platforms, therefore, perhaps, creating lots of mini public spheres that are helping to generate debates about issues that affect Saudis on an everyday level. There is the potential problem that microcelebrities may dominate discussions, rather than providing us with a discussion of politics, but I believe the most important point here is that a broader range of issues are starting to develop that offer new ways of understanding lived experience.

Kellner argues that there is the potential for a radical democratic techno-politics which might be able to revitalise democracy in capitalist societies. He argues that this is possible by democratising existing media so that they are more responsive to public interest while at the same time developing oppositional or alternative media to the mainstream. Fundamental to Kellner's vision of democratic techno politics is technological literacy as it is this that will enable public intellectuals to intervene in emerging public spheres of the media and information society. "In addition to traditional literacy skills centered upon reading, writing, and speaking, intellectuals need to learn to use the new technologies to engage the public." (ibid, 1997). These points seem to be particularly relevant to Saudi Arabia, especially technological literacy. Firstly, under the scholarship programme introduced by King Abdullah in 2005 hundreds of thousands of Saudis, both male and female, have been funded for higher education at universities throughout the West in order to bring home skilled workers to fill various jobs. Secondly, the internet has become more intuitive and user friendly since Kellner's writing in 1997, meaning we now have a generation of millennials raised on the internet. Digital literacy is becoming second nature, smartphone ownership is becoming younger each year, and therefore the tools are readily available to enable 'intellectuals' to express their ideas across a whole array of media platforms.

I am particularly interested in how emerging technological literacy, particularly in the production and aesthetic values of YouTube videos, is helping to engage Saudis in public debates. I am also interested in whether these videos may help to raise professional journalism standards within traditional media in terms of news reporting and objectivity. One fundamental change brought about by the role of the intellectual in the digital age is

the way in which they communicate with new audiences. Satire has become a dominant means of expressing ideas, something I address in section 3.9 and through an analysis of satire in 3.10. Although I don't believe that these shows will bring about the radical emergence of anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation movements that Khan and Kellner (2006) advocate, I do believe that social media networks are helping oppositional ideas (rather than movements) to emerge within Saudi society. Most important of all, these oppositional ideas are coming from below rather than above, allowing individuals within Saudi society to identify their own needs and find that they are not alone in expressing these concerns.

In the age of information technology the 'coffeehouses' of Habermas's analysis have moved online. In its simplest form, social media is the new meeting place where ideas are shared. However, there are still degrees of exclusion from these technologies, as noted by Warf and Vincent (2006). Papacharissi (2002) warns against Utopian readings of the Internet and new digital technologies as reviving the public sphere, arguing that there are three factors, which may curtail such arguments. Firstly, information access inequalities combined with the need to adapt to forms of new media literacy mean that any virtual space is unrepresentative of society as a whole. Secondly, although the Internet has the potential to link participants across the globe this also has the potential to create "fragmented, nonsensical, and enraged discussion, otherwise known as 'flaming'" of political discourse (ibid: 10). Thirdly, given the nature and history of global capitalism it is quite likely that the Internet will bend to the needs of the dominant or current political culture, rather than create a new democratic space. Papacharissi questions the extent to which new technologies will either extend or limit political democracy and argues that whether this public space will transcend into a public sphere is not up to the technology itself.

> The virtual sphere reflects the dynamics of new social movements that struggle on a cultural, rather than a traditionally political terrain. It is a vision, but not yet a reality. As a vision, it inspires, but has not yet managed to transform political and social structures. (ibid, 2002).

It is worth addressing these concerns briefly in relation to Saudi Arabia, which, as I have already argued, is unique in that social media is enabling critical public debate that has never happened so far. Firstly, Saudi Arabia is adopting digital technology and using social media at a rate higher than any other country.

> Saudi Arabia is said to be home to 40% of all active Twitter users in the Middle East […] But social media is booming as more and more people get smartphones. Saudi Arabia has the highest per-capita YouTube use of any country in the world (BBC, 2015. Online).

Given the demographic of the population of Saudi Arabia being largely under the age of 40 which represents 80 per cent of the population, according to the National Information Centre (*Alhayat Newspaer*, November 5, 2014), there is a generation growing up together who are turning to social media networks as the main means of communication and commentary on public issues. More importantly, this younger generation is developing a more equal form of media and digital literacy. Secondly, although "flaming" and enraged discussion is clearly counter-productive at times, this is an essential component of debate at the moment in the country as users embrace the opportunity to voice opinions in a public space for the first time. Discussions may not always be in the spirit of the rational critical debates that defined the 17th century coffeehouses but they are discussions all the same and conform to a certain logic in that comments are coordinated and categorized to facilitate debate via hashtags and emerging social media channels with respected opinion leaders all of which is helping to create a genuine dialogue among the population that simply didn't exist pre-internet. Thirdly, there is strong evidence that, rather than social media bending to the needs of capitalism, traditional capitalist organizations are turning to social media for support. An example of this at the time of writing is the tragedy at Hajj (Sept 24, 2015) when many people were crushed to death during a religious worship. As the country faced criticisms from abroad in terms of crowd control and health and safety methods that they claimed could have prevented the tragedy, traditional Saudi papers and social network users on Twitter and YouTube turned to digital media and requested they unite together to support the government. However, it is worth stating that one 'call to action' does not equate with institutional change, as traditional newspapers are yet to turn to social media to help resolve issues that are critical of internal affairs.

Nevertheless, we can perhaps be optimistic that this is an acknowledgement of the power and popularity of social media within the country.

3.9 Satire and the public sphere

In discussing broadcast media, such as television and radio, Habermas has argued that they enthral the audience but "deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree" (1991: 21). The consequence of this is the public sphere exists in appearance only, resulting in conversations being controlled. The same cannot be said of social media, where it is more difficult to control conversations or content given that social media provides numerous access points and communication does not flow in one direction as it does with traditional media. However, we shouldn't be too quick to dismiss television as denying the opportunity to disagree. *The Colbert Report* is an American late-night talk and news satire television programme that ran from 17 October 2005 to 18 December 2014. It was presented by a fictional anchorman called Stephen Colbert. The character was a caricature of a poorly informed television political pundit who functioned as a high status 'idiot'. The show was a satire of personality-driven political talk programmes such as Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor*. In assessing the use of satire, Don J. Waisanen said: "Colbert would have us be rhetoricians, always on the lookout for language's complexities, the persuasive use of definitions to frame political agendas, and the ways in which high abstractions may be less than accurate in gauging social situations" (in Benacka, 2016 p.35).

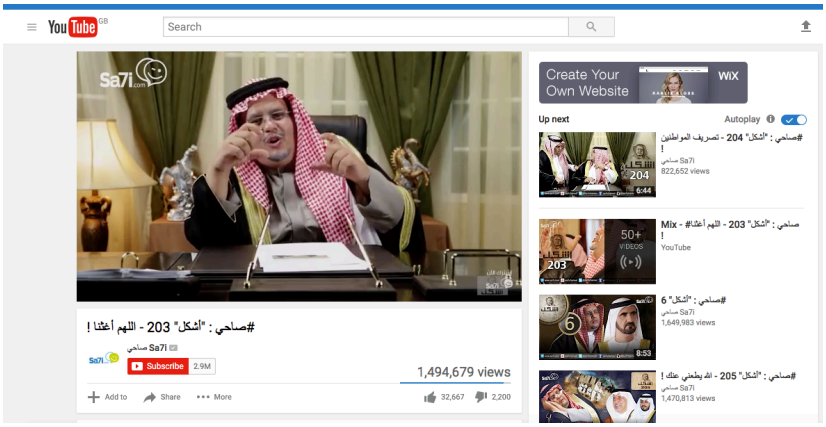
The Colbert Report is a spin-off of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, which was first broadcast on 21 July, 1996 but is perhaps best known when hosted by Jon Stewart from 11 January 1999 – 6 August 2015. The show draws its satire from recent news stories, revealing the absurdities of politicians and their policies. A 2007 study by the Pew Research Centre found that audiences of Colbert and Jon Stewart were better informed about current events than traditional news outlets. This point is raised by Benacka, who goes on to highlight another finding in the Pew Report that "while levels of education have increased in the United States, actual public knowledge has not kept pace. I bring up

this overlooked portion of the study to assert that the basic need of civic education in the United States is not currently being met". Due to this she argues that "satire has the potential to facilitate such rhetorical instruction" (2016: 35). Waisanen argues that satirists such as Colbert and Stewart "teach their viewers about healthy public spheres and civic society" (in Benacka, 2016 p.35) and in doing so "extend the rather exclusionary boundaries of Habermas's public sphere" thereby helping to "explain how satire contributes to a co-construction of rationality and reality" (Benacka, 2016 p.35). From this perspective, satire and other forms of humorous discourse "help to illuminate 'illusory boundaries' between entertainment and politics." This bridges the gap between everyday culture and the public sphere, thereby helping individuals to become more informed and critically aware of issues that directly affect them. The best way to illustrate this is to analyse a YouTube video clip from Sa7i, one of the YouTube channels I will be visiting.

3.10 Sa7i YouTube channel clip analysis:

As satire is becoming the main form through which Saudi's are able to talk about issues that affect their lives it is necessary to undergo an analysis of one of the Sa7i YouTube channel videos called *Ashkal*. There are hundreds to choose from, all of which follow a similar issues-led format, but I have chosen this programme because issues raised have led to two Ministers losing their jobs. For me, this is evidence that emerging 'mircocelebrities' have the potential to directly engage the government about community issues. As Kellner has argued, these new digital intellectuals address micropolitics. It may not lead to the sweeping changes that Fuchs would deem as evidence of a truly democratic public sphere but clearly they represent the beginning of a unique dialogue.

Show name: *'Ashkal'* episode 203
Genre: Satire/entertainment
Show duration: 07:37 minutes
Number of hits: 1.4m (as of 10 July 2017)
Date of broadcast: 01 December 2013
Show link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bK5kd15otE



Picture 3.1: screenshot of *Ashkal* anchor, Ali Al-Humaidi.

The Sa7i channel on YouTube has lots of shows, each presented by a different anchor. The show I am going to analyse is called *Ashkal*. This is a Saudi slang term used in cards when somebody wants to 'buy' a new card. *Ashkal* produces a minimum of one show per month. The anchor in this show is Ali Al-Humaidi who takes on the role of a very important government minister or senior officials. The show is directed by Ahmad Al-Shihri Neither have previous broadcasting experience, both having started their media careers on YouTube. The scripting and production of the show is made internally at Sa7i by small teams as outlined in my site visit.

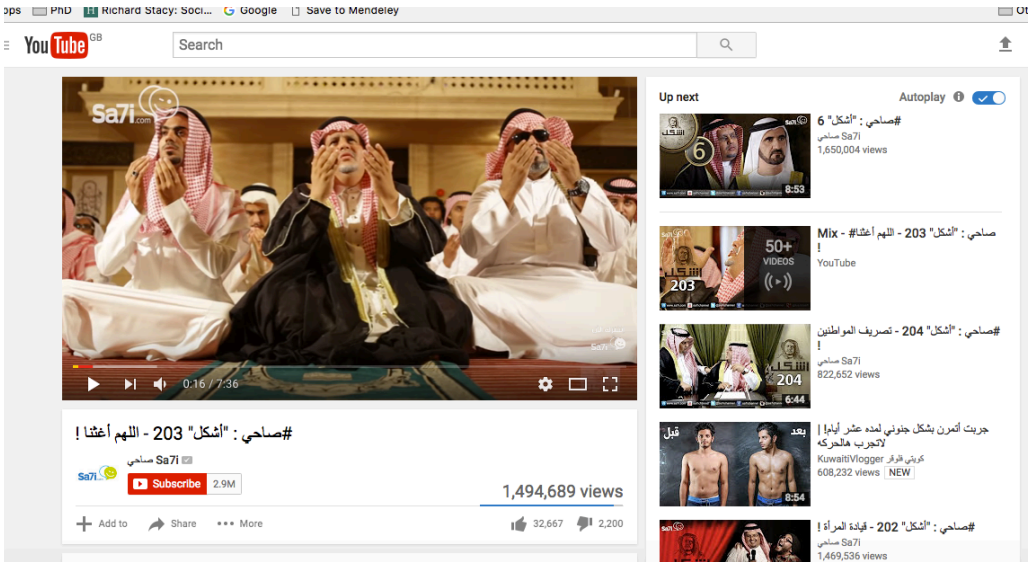
YouTube videos have a small blurb in the side panel outlining the content of the programme. The blurb for episode 203 is very explicit, stating: "Ashkal reflects the views of ministers and officials in Saudi Arabia towards the citizen's sufferings in sarcastic style". The show, like all broadcast by Sa7i, has an individual sponsor. This show is sponsored by a water company called Hana. An advert for their product appears for 3 seconds at the beginning of the show and then is explicitly referred to in the show when the anchor drinks from their product. This is product placement and does not determine the content in any way.

The video I am going to analyse runs for 7.37 minutes. This is a typical length for any video made by Sa7i which tend to average between 7-10 minutes long. The format of the show is also typical of Sa7i house style with a main anchor reading out the main news which is split into 7 segments. Segments are usually between 1 - 2 minutes long. In my

analysis I will be examining 4 segments. These segments do not have titles but I have labelled them to help with referencing.

- Segment 1: Praying for rain (0:04 - 0:40)
- Segment 2: Prince's tweets (1:29 – 2:17)
- Segment 3: Housing problem (3:09 – 4:17)
- Segment 7: Interrogation (5:54 – 7:12)

Praying for rain



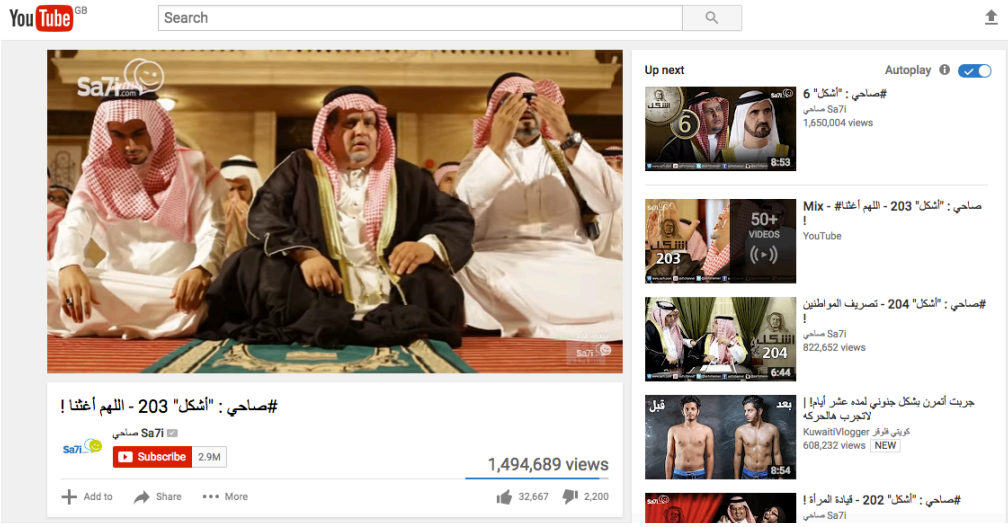
Picture 3.2: Ali Al-Humaidi is dressed in brown responding to prayers.

Before analysing this video it is necessary to provide some context about praying rituals in Islam. When people gather in the mosque to prey the Imam makes a request to Allah in order to bring them good fortune and prosperity. This known as 'Doaa'. Each time the Imam makes a request he raises his hands to the sky. The congregation chant 'Ameen'. This process is then repeated each time a new request is made. The Imam will determine how many Doaas are required during the prayers. Individuals are also able to make their own Doaas when they pray in private. This process is typical of Islamic rituals.

One recurring Doaa for Saudi people is a prayer for rain. This is because Saudi Arabia is a very dry country and water is needed for farming. But rain is also considered very beautiful as it happens so irregularly. It is not uncommon for Saudi Arabia to go 3-4

months without rain. Therefore when it does fall it a cause for celebration as it is such a rare and extraordinary event. However, in recent years when it has rained it has created flooding and damage to urban areas, such as the severe floods in February 2017 which brought about 3 months' rain in 24 hours (The Watchers, 2017).

Ali Al-Humaidi plays the role of an important government minister or top official who has an inflated sense of his own self-importance. In this segment we find the minister sat between two guardians. His status is signified by the wearing of a brown throb which marks him out as different to his guardians and the rest of the congregation who are all dressed in white. He is sat in a religious service listening to the Imam who is asking God to bless the nation. He, along with the rest of the congregation, approve of this Doaa by saying Ameen. This scene establishes the religious rituals, customs and expectations. But then the Imam's next Doaa requests Allah bring rain for the land. The government minister does not agree with this and so he doesn't raise his hands in Ameen. He doesn't want his guardians to approve of this either so he elbows them so that they keep their arms in their laps as in the screenshot below.



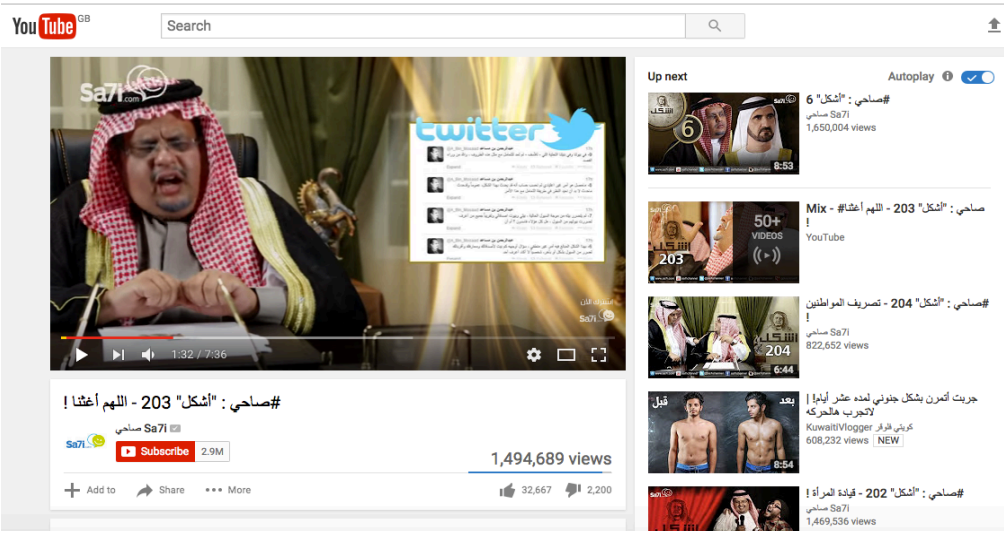
Picture 3.3: The minister elbows his guardian to indicate he should not being showing thanks for this command.

The reason he doesn't want rain to fall is because it will cause flooding to the cities and he will be held accountable on social media for not putting the necessary provisions in

place to deal with such situations. If many people complain on social media then this could lead to him being fired. This was evident in a recent report on the 10 July 2017 in the *Gulf News* (Toumi, 2017) which stated: "The Governor of the Eastern Province in Saudi Arabia has promised to review all the shortcomings of how authorities dealt with the heavy rain that lashed the region for one week and to hold those who failed in their responsibilities accountable".

This scene also brings into question the minister's principles and priorities as he should accept the will of God no matter how it may inconvenience him. Instead he chooses which Doaas he should agree to. This suggests that, in being powerful, he has forgotten the things that really matter. This is a typical opening segment to a Sa7i show, making a topical issue the main theme and then exploring it from different angles and perspectives.

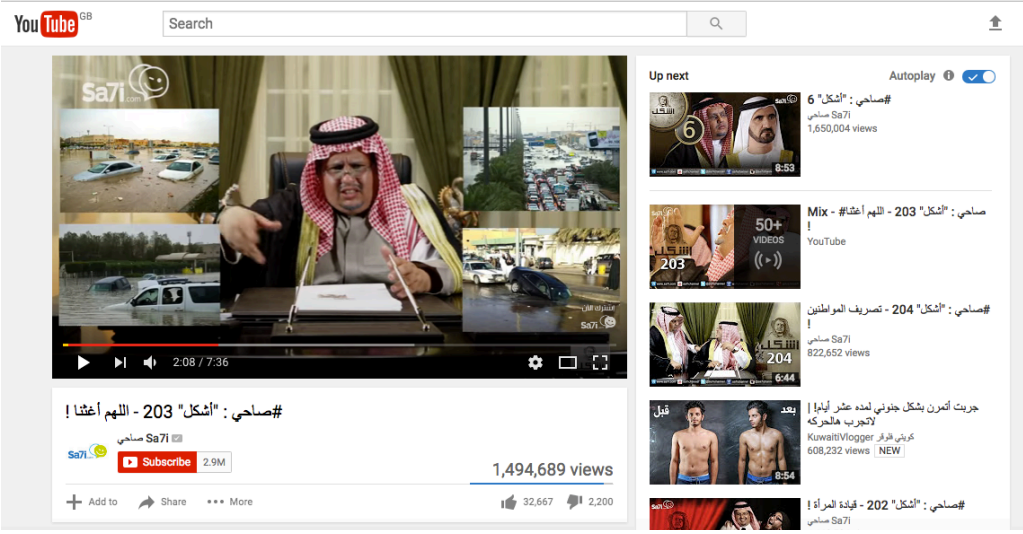
Segment 2: Prince's tweets



Picture 3.4: The minister analyses comments on Twitter.

The previous scene sets up the satire for the second segment which sees the minister sat in a luxury office, commenting on issues raised on social media and the local press. As he works his way through each tweet he dismisses each claim, placing the blame firmly on citizens, never on the authorities and officials. However, one of the tweets that the minister goes on to analyse is from the Saudi prince, Abdulrahamn bin Mosaad who has

7.2 million followers on Twitter. He has to address this because the prince is high up in the Saudi hierarchy. The Prince's tweet suggests that there is corruption in the infrastructure and that this might be the reason the flooding has caused such damage at his house. As he is dealing with a Prince he needs to be careful what he says and so he turns to Allah as he knows this will bring an end to the accusations, stating "there is no corruption, this is Allah's decision of rain, it is mercy from God, it might result in minor damages, the damage to your house and to the citizens houses, but this is justice."



Picture 3.5: The minister dismisses photographs of rain damage

While he dismisses the damage caused by the flooding, four pictures appear around him that show damage to ordinary civilian spaces. The minister responds by showing a picture of the Prince's home, a luxury palace, pointing out there is damages to your house and citizens homes.

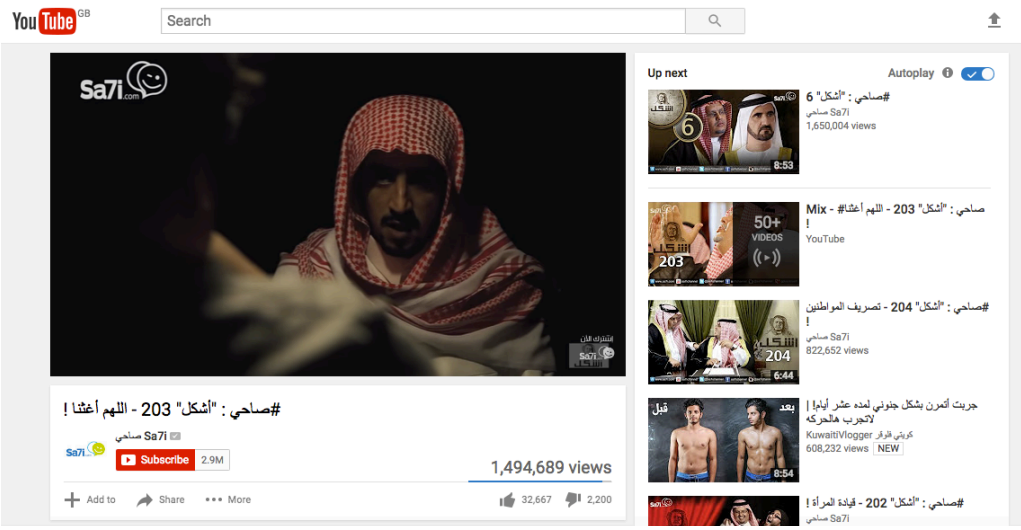
This feeling that officials don't listen is one of the reasons that Twitter has become so popular in the Middle East and we can see examples of this in the Gulf News report of 10 July 2017. After the flooding, lots of citizens posted images and videos of the effects of the downpour, much the same as this video. This created a sense of unity across the Middle East and helped to visualise real problems, forcing authorities to listen. In Bahrain, Abdul Aziz Bu Qais, an office holder, dismissed these criticisms and instead suggested the real problem was the misuse of social media.

> For some people, the rainy season is a great chance to win likes and admirations for the stunts they perform to draw attention. Sometimes, the stunts are fun and enjoyable, but at times, they are risky and we are afraid these people are endangering their lives just for some ephemeral glory on a social media platform (Toumi, 2017).

Segment 3: Housing problems

One of the effects of flooding is damage to homes, which leads up to the next segment which explores broader issue regarding the housing system. The anchor outlines issues raised in an article published from the online news site *Sabq* which states that the Ministry of Housing will provide housing units and land as well as loans to citizens via an electronic system. The purpose of allocating homes according to this system is to be more transparent. Then we cut to a scene in a public hall where a machine generates random mobile phone numbers for people who have been allocated a new luxury apartment. The machine is operated by an ordinary citizen so as to avoid any accusations of impropriety or nepotism. The important ministry official waits at the side to congratulate the winner. But when the 'randomly' generated number is called, the Minister's personal mobile phone starts to ring. He collapses to the floor, feigning shock at miraculously winning the competition created to bring about greater transparency. The implication is that he does not take transparency seriously, the system remains corrupt, and the only important thing to the minister is to create the impression the system is fair.

Segment 4: Interrogations



Picture 3.6: A Saudi citizen under interrogation from the minister.

The final segment in the show is filmed in darkness to create the impression of a suspect being interrogated. The man being interrogated is accused of spreading an epidemic that is dangerous for society. The language and tone suggests that he is a drug dealer, a serious offence in Saudi culture. But the twist is when the interrogator, the official minister, asks the man to define his crime in terms of a category and he replies 'retweet'. At this point, the interrogator becomes very angry and starts shouting at him, demanding to know why he retweets, why he favourites, why he participates in silly hashtags (#) such as #TheSalaryisnotenough – a popular Saudi tweet created to raise awareness of the difficulties faced by many Saudis in lowly paid jobs. Of course, we know the official minister is paid a lot of money as we have seen his home and office in a previous sketch. When the man innocently replies "it is only a retweet" the official becomes more agitated, pointing out that this is a dangerous path and what is a retweet today will transform into an independent tweet the next. Like drug addiction, it is a dangerous path. The sketch ends with the official turning to Allah, requesting that "Thanks to God, you step down from Twitter." Once more we see a minister who uses religion as and when it suits him. This is a form of ultimate power and control.

Although I don't believe the purpose of this sketch is to question religious conviction, it is implicit and could be interpreted this way by some viewers. The real issue it is addressing is the use of social media and how official ministers are becoming increasingly wary of the power of social media to galvanise public opinion and put pressure on those who misuse their authority.

Benacka defines the main purpose of satire as "to inquire into current events and provoke analysis and critique" (2016, p.36). It is clear from my video analysis that satire is fundamental to how politics is being understood in the Middle East. In addition to raising issues that in turn help to critically inform citizens, the issues raised in these videos are then further discussed across other media platforms, thereby enabling the "co-construction of rationality and reality." Satire is absolutely vital in enabling Saudi citizens to push forward debates in the public sphere that simply weren't possible before.

At present, satire is perceived as a non-threatening means of broaching difficult subjects and social taboos, although this attitude could change. As indicated in the video, officials are becoming increasingly more nervous of the power of public opinion and may find ways to contain these voices of dissent in the future. As discussed previously, the mixing of popular everyday concerns and entertainment through satire is helping to expand notions of what constitutes a public sphere, as well as the means by which citizens become more informed. Crittenden, Hopkinson and Simmons (2011) have already argued that a combination of satire and social media has not only changed the nature of critical enquiry but has also positioned the concept of satirists as opinion leaders, thereby providing new modes of expression through which citizens are able to reflect and debate their lives. Clearly the YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia like Sa7i and Telfaz11 are powerful opinion leaders as their videos can reach up to one million hits in a few hours of being produced. The purpose of my visit and interviews with them is to determine what type of opinion leaders they are and how far they are helping to promote a new public sphere. I will explore this in detail in the discussion chapter.

3.11 Conclusion: A digital layered public sphere?

Jurgen Habermas's concept of what constitutes a public sphere has been highly influential in helping us perceive the conditions in which individuals come together to freely discuss societal problems, and how these discussions may then influence political action (Habermas, 1991). This has been very useful in helping scholars understand how the public sphere has developed in European or Western cities whereby capitalism has become the dominant mode of social relations. The concept is based on the idea of a religiously neutral or secular rationality, and therefore is not applicable to a lot of countries, such as Saudi Arabia, that are constructed around religious conservativism. Does this mean, then, that a public sphere does not exist in Saudi Arabia because it does not mimic the characteristics outlined by Habermas? If this is so, then how do we define the millions of social media users who freely share ideas on Twitter or log in to watch the

latest uploaded video to YouTube? Can we really dismiss an entire culture just because it does not follow the pattern and structure of other societies?

I am not the first person to raise these concerns. Salvatore and Eickelman (2004) have argued that there is no universal or standardized single form of public sphere that can be applied to all contexts and times. Recently Jean Burgess argued in a talk in Sheffield "I don't believe there has ever been such a thing as a public sphere. But digital media has certainly helped create more visible publics" (Burgess, 2016). Therefore I propose that instead of focusing upon the parameters that define a public sphere we should instead look at the tools used by that community in order to understand how individuals make sense of their lives. We also need to think about how these tools are creating multiple layers of expression and the ways in which they come together to form an overall conversation. Religion is core to the identity of Saudi people and therefore this has an impact on what and how people communicate with each other. Interpretations of religious texts can, however, lead to internal conflicts within communities, such as the relationship between men and women, as highlighted by the recent campaign to allow women the freedom to drive (BBC News, 2017). Therefore within the public sphere of a religious community there are - as Fraser (1990) has noted - a multiplicity of publics. Within these publics, members invent, promote and circulate counter discourses and practices that broaden, deepen and complicate our perceptions of identity.

Saudi Arabia is a country whereby the government attempt to block content that is contradictory to the society's religious and cultural beliefs through The Internet Services Unit (ISU). For Fuchs (2014) this is evidence that political communication is limited and thereby digital media cannot constitute a public sphere. But as we have seen through satire and a widening of topics covered on YouTube channels, conversations are gradually starting to emerge that question societal issues. It is my belief that social media like YouTube and Twitter are enabling a new wave of 'multiplicity of publics' to flourish, all of which give expression to a diverse range of voices that enable new ideas and conversations to develop. These publics overlap in several ways and at various levels. Therefore we can no longer think of the public sphere as happening in one particular

space with one particular set of rules that apply to all. It is my proposition that we need to think of a digital public sphere in Saudi Arabia as a space inhabited by many 'intellectuals' for the new digital age. Together, they act as layers that are slowly coming together in order to facilitate public communication. Future research may wish to examine in closer detail exactly who these 'intellectuals' are and the extent to which they constitute an audiences, as well as exploring the environments in which they consume digital culture. But this is beyond the scope of this investigation.

In my video analysis we saw how satire contributes to "a co-construction of rationality and reality" (Benacka, 2016 p.35) and how this is creating a blurring of boundaries between entertainment and politics. Satire has also helped bridge the gap between everyday culture and the public sphere. Citizens have become more informed and critically aware of public issues that directly affect them, thereby encouraging greater participation in public life. Online conversations have become cumulative, gaining momentum across networks, expressed in a rich variety of ways depending on the networks and needs of the respective user. But together they form one overall narrative that is enabling the people of Saudi Arabia to speak to each other in a way that has never happened before. To illustrate this, in 2015 the Saudi Housing Minister was sacked by the Saudi Government (Reuters, 2015). I can't conclusively prove that his dismissal was due to the Ashkal YouTube video broadcast in 2013, but what I can conclude is that after the broadcast it led to much discussion online and the creation of hastags on Twitter such as #where_is_housing_projects, this in turn led to coverage in traditional newspapers and television programmes all of which have come together to exert awareness of a problem that was 'resolved' with the minister's dismissal. Elsewhere the Minister of Civil Service Khaled Al-Araj has recently been sacked in April 2017 after several Twitter hashtags against him accusing him of corruption employing his son (*Arab News*, 2017). Previous to this, ministers have been untouchable. It is unheard of them to be sacked and for the reasons for the sacking to be made so public. Such extreme change in attitudes is, for me, conclusive evidence that the digital public sphere is having an impact on social relations and that contrary to Fuch's argument, online protest is leading to change. Indeed, the hashtag that was created that led to his dismissal was not created by a celebrity or a large

organisation, but by an ordinary people.

As we shall see as I develop my analysis in subsequent chapters, there is indeed potential for these layers of communication to have a political effect.

Chapter 4: Journalism in the Digital Age

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the changing nature of journalism in the digital age. In order to understand this it is necessary to have an industry perspective and so I will be examining two influential articles in the *Guardian* and *New York Times* newspapers and the work of Andy Carvin (2011). It will look at journalism from several perspectives with a particular emphasis on how social media networks, 'the latest powerful' tools, are enabling greater participation in contemporary events through ease of access (Bakhurst, 2011). This has helped blur the boundaries between producer and consumer (Rosen, 2012) as well as broadening the reach of disparate voices so that any 'voice' can go viral with the potential of having a 'real' impact. Although there are many types of social network, all with their own grammar and forms of engagement, I will focus on Twitter and YouTube, as these have had the greatest impact on journalism practices in Saudi Arabia (Jones & Omran. 2014). The chapter will begin with a literature review in order to contextualise some of the main arguments surrounding journalism in the digital age, such as those concerning its economics, advertising, production and consumption. As journalism in Saudi Arabia is still a relatively new area of study, the chapter will be framed around individual research obtained from interviews conducted by the researcher with Saudi journalists in 2016. The chapter will conclude by outlining the main dilemmas and issues facing journalists in Saudi Arabia today and how digital technology may help shape the future journalism.

4.2 Review of the academic literature

All technology to some extent and purpose is 'new' (Manovich 2001, Livingstone, 1999) but clearly there has been a digital revolution of late in terms of the ease with which people are able to communicate both with one another, as complete strangers, and with the world beyond their immediate horizon (Gerbaudo, 2012). Journalism therefore is affected by technological developments. As Jones and Salter note, "The practice of

journalism does not exist in isolation. Rather it takes place in symbiotic relation to political, legal, economic, and technological structure" (2012: viii). In terms of social networks, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook have had a direct impact on the media in terms of both the production and consumption of information. New media forms have enabled passive media consumers to create and disseminate their own media (Mandiberg, ed. 2012: 1). Ease of access, the ability to connect with disparate individuals and groups across the globe, and the opportunity to engage audiences on a personal or mass scale, is having an impact on how we experience and participate in the news industry (Leurdijk, Nieuwenhuis & Poel, 2014). The public sphere has become invigorated through the mass adoption of smartphones and tablets that has created the opportunity for individuals to act as citizen journalists (Papacharissi, 2009) who can contribute to the production and consumption of news. They can directly record and share 'newsworthy' events through their portable devices and then disseminate them through their chosen social media platforms (Rheingold, 2007). Therefore, audiences are becoming more *active* in how they engage with the news, which is in stark contrast to the *passive* consuming of information we associate with traditional media. These transformations in audience engagement were described by Jay Rosen (2006) as "the people formerly known as the audience". In this seminal essay he argued that digital technology has enabled people to be producers, consumers and curators of news. Their "eyeballs" can no longer be owned or directed solely to "commercial interests". He argues passionately that the audience is simply "the public made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable" and whether "media people" welcome this change or not "we want you to know we're here." In the article he quotes Tom Glocer, head of Your Reuters, who said: "If you want to attract a community around you, you must offer them something original and of a quality that they can react to and incorporate in their creative work" (Rosen, 2012).

In a recent paper exploring the role of journalism in the digital age, Anja Kroll (2015) puts forward a convincing argument that, in terms of newsgathering stories, fundamentally nothing has changed. 'The role of a good journalist has always been to filter, edit, check, pack, analyze and comment – fundamentals of verification that have existed for decades and won`t become obsolete' (2015: 26). Whether this is interviewing

a source at their home or responding to comments tweeted online, the principles of good journalism remains the same. What has changed is the speed and methods of gathering and disseminating this information.

Slightly adapting a quote from Michael Oreskes, Kroll argues: '"We are the independent observers of the world, who go places WITH our audience, dig WITH our audience, study and interpret what our audiences do not have time to study and interpret, so that our audiences can better understand the world" (2015: 4).

Kroll draws upon the working practices of Associated Press and outlines the importance of verifying first hand statements made by the public through social media to ascertain their validity. She sees the journalist as fundamental in bringing quality control to stories, to edit, curate and shape stories so that when published, the public has a balanced and well-researched articles. Although this process is clearly applicable to Western media, the principles don't quite translate in the same way to Saudi media.

In essence, digital is changing traditional power structures, in particular removing what we would usually call the 'gatekeeper'. This means that journalists are not only being challenged in terms of voice but also in terms of how that message is delivered. This has implications in terms of the journalist's code of ethics, verifications, truth, impartiality, bias, etc.

Ali and Fahmy (2013) argue that, despite the emergence of new media and the presence of citizen journalism, gatekeeping practices are still under the control and 'hegemony' of mainstream media organizations. In their study, 'Gatekeeping and Citizen Journalism: The Use of Social Media During the Recent Uprisings in Iran, Egypt, and Libya', they found that at "the uprisings in Iran, Egypt, and Libya, the work of citizen journalists provided a powerful source of news for the rest of the world; however, it also provided a valuable resource for traditional media that had the ability to pick and choose stories that fitted their organizations' routines" (Ali & Fahmy, 2013).

Almaghlooth (2013) to some extent supports this by arguing that in Saudi Arabia, despite access to a diverse range of stories presented through Twitter's newsfeed, gatekeeping

practices still exist in Saudi press. This he attributes largely to a fear that journalists will be persecuted if they cover taboo subjects in their papers.

However I am critical of Ali and Fahmy and Almaghlooth's findings on the grounds that their study of social media is not comprehensive and it fails to take into account certain economic factors. For example, newspaper figures are declining as more and more advertising goes online (Alzahrani, 2016). In order to remain relevant, newspapers have to embrace online discussions and topics if they are to draw in and retain audiences. Although it is difficult to obtain exact figures about sales and profit of newspapers in the public domain, in December 2016 I had an opportunity to access a shareholder's financial report for a large mainstream Saudi newspaper when I met one of its shareholders. This annual report was sent out to shareholders prior to a general assembly meeting at the newspaper. I was given access to this private information because the shareholder was aware of my research and was keen to support me. The report detailed a huge decrease in advertising revenue for the 2015-2016 period. This, as you would expect, also corresponded with a large decrease in circulation. Although advertising revenues tend to decline at times of economic decline more broadly (Kroll, 2015), the report identified the reason for the decrease in circulation and advertising revenue was due to the emergence and increasing popularity of social media networks and the on-going development of technology. In purely economic terms, mainstream newspapers such as this one have to find ways of adapting in order to remain economically viable. This means finding ways of embracing online social conversations and incorporating them into their news reporting. This widening of participation means new perspectives will start to develop and improve public communication. When I asked if I could keep a copy or take pictures of key data for the purpose of my research he refused on the grounds that it was private information and only available to shareholders. This was a brilliant opportunity for me to get the real evidence, which suggests that the newspaper industry in Saudi Arabia is experiencing a turbulent time economically in the digital era. The case of *this* newspaper losing money could be applied to most of the Saudi newspapers who are facing huge challenges in the face of social media technology, especially Twitter (ibid, 2016). This evidence represents the failure of the newspapers' engagement both with Saudi audiences and with the development of technology.

It is these financial pressures that are slowly forcing newspapers to become more flexible with stories and the type of news they report. This is because I found that Twitter hugely impacted the gatekeepers of traditional newspapers in forcing them to let new topics to be published unlike before, and therefore allowing the standards of press freedom to rise.

As outlined in chapter two, the production of news in Saudi Arabia is governed by strict regulations, many of which are informed by Islamic ideology and principles (Almaghlooth, 2013). This has meant that the government have been able to quickly intervene and, to some extent, influence the types of stories published (Awad, 2010). There are potentially severe punishments for journalists who cross culturally sensitive taboos and who are perceived to challenge State ideology. Therefore, rather than traditional media acting as a fourth estate that holds governments accountable, there is the danger that traditional media has become complicit with the government in presenting news in a particular way, thereby negating the potential of news reporting to provide balanced, well researched articles that help develop a rational and open public sphere. It is my belief that social media networks are filling this gap by fact-checking journalists and holding individuals accountable when they fail to provide fair and balanced content that relates to ordinary citizens everyday lives. It is social media that is forcing journalists to think differently about the perspectives they put forward. It is social media that is holding journalists accountable when issues get ignored or state propaganda comes to dictate the narrative. There have been some in-depth studies of how Twitter is forcing the mainstream media to explore issues that affect individuals more seriously, such as Yuce et al (2014) who tracked the use of the hashtag #Oct26Driving to see how this had led to a large proportion of women defying cultural norms by driving and posting this on YouTube and then showing solidarity through comments posted on the Twitter hashtag. This forced a culturally sensitive issue to be taken seriously by the media. The power of Twitter here was the way the hashtag co-evolved, drawing in comments from transnational organisations, human rights NGOs, as well as ordinary Saudi citizens. This plurality of voices also meant that the discussion could not be dismissed as simply the protest of a few individuals. Consequently, the press was held accountable by the many rather than the few. At the time of writing, the most recent Hashtag to build on these issues is far broader in reach #StopEnslavingSaudiWomen, which deals with a general

feeling of oppression due to male guardianship. Clearly this macro conversation would not have emerged without the micro conversation of driving (Khan, 2016).

This is the fundamental reason why I reiterate again that social media is creating layers of conversation and dialogue within the public sphere. Without the pressure and presence of a multitude of online users expressing their views, nothing would change. Social media is forcing journalists to think differently about their practice. It is not a perfect environment and it will take many decades for a major breakthrough in how news is produced to accommodate all perspectives, but it is a start. With this in mind I would like to further adapt Kröll's adapted quote (using his emphasis).

> Social media are the independent observers of the world, who go places WITH our NEWSPAPERS, dig WITH our NEWSPAPERS, study and interpret what our NEWSPAPERS do not WANT to study and interpret, so that our audiences can better understand the world.

It is a clear that the nature of journalism and the role of journalists are being radically transformed in the digital era as these "eyeballs" turn their gaze on all areas of life. These changes are happening on a cultural, social and economic level. Kroll, 2015 paints a depressing picture for traditional media: "Thousands of journalists have lost their jobs, the revenues for newspapers are still declining, the audience is disappearing and new tools and competition are emerging: New media. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp...Tools which enable news consumers to become news contributors" (Kröll, 2015). Newspapers face declining circulation and readership figures, as well as a significant drop in sales and advertising and employment (OECD, 2010; WAN-IFRA, 2012). Industry research shows that globally, growth, in terms of turnover, has slowed down since 2004. The total newspaper revenues globally has declined by 10.3% between 2008 and 2012 (PWC Global Entertainment and Media Outlook: 2013-17). Of course these figures vary on a national level but it does give a good indication of various trends facing the newspaper industries.

4.3 Twitter's impact on journalism practices

In a networked media ecosystem, news flows in all directions and across media platforms. Social media services like Twitter are becoming integral to news storytelling in all of its various shapes and forms. As a distribution network, Twitter allows for first-hand news accounts by eyewitnesses published in real time. One notable example of this was a tweet by Sohaib Athar, a software engineer who unknowingly witnessed the U.S. raid on Osama Bin Laden's compound (Butcher, 2011) and shared it with the rest of the world. He had no way of understanding the significance of his tweet at the time but it would become the first live recording of the event and trigger numerous reactions and debates across the Twittersphere.

Twitter facilitates the dissemination and reception of short fragments of information from multiple sources outside of the formal structures of journalism. This has been described as "ambient journalism" (Hermida, 2010a, 2010b), in that network systems are constantly on, providing outpourings of immediacy and instantaneity on events. Like ambient music, ambient news is always 'on' in the background (Crawford, 2009, p. 528), ready to be used as a source for breaking news events or simply when the user wants to engage in conversations. As Hermida (2014) has noted ambient journalism is a tool used by both professional and citizen journalists to comment, alert, reframe, reinterpret or curate information, depending on the needs of the user and their intended audience, thereby bringing greater hybridity to news production and news values. This interplay between social media networks and emergent paradigms in journalism led Mead (2012) to describe this disruptive process as a "transformation from late-stage industrial society to early-stage information society". The most important impact that Twitter offers is a space for the co-construction of news.

Neuberger, Hofe and Nuernbergk (2014: 345) argue that "Journalism no longer has a centralised and powerful gatekeeping role as a mediator between news sources and the

general public, as was the case during the era of traditional mass media". In the age of Internet-based platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube various challenges have been raised for media industries that are determining new professional journalism practices. Social media networks like Twitter not only help journalists to cover live events and reach wider audiences but also become "part of 'new news ecosystem' in which the media and their audiences are mutually connected" (ibid, 2014: 346). Social media provides media organizations and journalists with immediate access to attitudes as events unfold, with the potential to curate these tweets into the formation of new stories. They enable a quicker dissemination of news, as well as the ability to update this information thanks to push notifications on smart phones, enabling a more personalised news service. (Leurdijk, Nieuwenhuis & Poel, 2014). Even though these changes have created a lot of opportunities in how to engage audiences it has also created ethical issues in terms of how to maintain audiences. The changing digital ecosphere is of particular concern to traditional journalism and was the subject of an influential Long Read by Katherine Viner (2016), editor of the *Guardian* newspaper. In this, she highlighted the role now being played by algorithms in drawing audiences to news.

> Algorithms such as the one that powers Facebook's news feed are designed to give us more of what they think we want – which means that the version of the world we encounter every day in our own personal stream has been invisibly curated to reinforce our pre-existing beliefs (Viner, 2016).

Algorithms function to create what Eli Pariser (2011) has called "filter bubbles" and are indicative of the 'personalised' web. When algorithms create personalized search functions it means "that we are less likely to be exposed to information that challenges us or broadens our worldview, and less likely to encounter facts that disprove false information that others have shared (Pariser, 2011)." This essentially means that news publishers have lost control over the distribution of their journalism and instead, what is deemed newsworthy is dictated by social media companies. Viner outlines the ethical implications of how access to news is changing. It is worth quoting her at length:

> Publications curated by editors have in many cases been replaced by a stream of information chosen by friends, contacts and family, processed by secret algorithms. The old idea of a wide-open web – where hyperlinks from site to site created a non-

> hierarchical and decentralised network of information – has been largely supplanted by platforms designed to maximise your time within their walls, some of which (such as Instagram and Snapchat) do not allow outward links at all. The increasing prevalence of this approach suggests that we are in the midst of a fundamental change in the values of journalism – a consumerist shift. Instead of strengthening social bonds, or creating an informed public, or the idea of news as a civic good, a democratic necessity, it creates gangs, which spread instant falsehoods that fit their views, reinforcing each other's beliefs, driving each other deeper into shared opinions, rather than established facts (Viner, 2016).

Although algorithms present important challenges to how we experience the world, they are the latest attempt to 'gatekeeper' knowledge. But other areas of the digital sphere present differing challenges and opportunities. The mass adoption of smart phones and the ease with which people are able to share ideas also means that new ideas are able to be expressed that otherwise may have been ignored due to agenda setting or gatekeeping from editors and publishers of news. For example, during the Arab Spring in 2011 local and international media were able to sift through uploaded content of videos and photographs to track public opinion and present information that may otherwise have been censored. During the Arab Springs, Andy Carvin went as far as to describe Twitter as a variation on the traditional newswire and was able to track 'a crowdsourced newsroom of public editors' by monitoring several lists of dissident voices (Ingram, 2012).

This represents a significant transformation of journalism, in particular the sourcing of news from non-professional journalists or citizen journalists. However, he still had to fact-check comments and verify tweets, such as checking GPS locations to ensure the live reporting was actually happening from where it claimed to be happening. This validating of sources is why Carvin describes Twitter as a newsroom because 'it's where I'm trying to separate fact from fiction, interacting with people. That's a newsroom' (Ibid: 2012).

Trusting 'ordinary' people is a massive dilemma facing news organisations and journalists as it effectively means handing over control. Neither does having a Twitter account magically transform you into a journalist or editor. Therefore he has argued that if news organisations are to adapt to the needs of social media and modern audiences then there needs to be clear guidelines and training in how to utilise these sources. Carvin

typically describes this as ‘fire drills’ whereby journalists fact-check the validity of photographs or opinions posted rather than simply publish something because it has been retweeted a lot of times. Carvin has also emphasised the importance of integrity and admitting your mistakes online. He believes this is what will build trust between audiences and a key intermediary between traditional and new media.

Twitter has become the major source of information in Saudi Arabia, and moreover it has become a convenient place for political and social debates among Saudis as well as a space for public services criticism in the country (Noman, Faris & Kelly. 2015). As Al-Jenaibi1 (2016) has argued, the use of Twitter in Saudi Arabia is shifting Saudi discourse and opinion because it enables *other* voices to be heard and this is enabling individuals to avoid censorship (Al-Jenaibil, 2016). Twitter is the most heavily traded platform among Saudis. In terms of the Middle East “Saudi Arabia is home to more than 40% of all active Twitter users in the Arab region” (BBC, 2015). Twitter has become the most immediate point of reference for many of these users with ‘trending’ and ‘hashtags’ helping to signpost and expand on conversations. Twitter also functions as an archive, enabling users to quickly search out and gather information, images or videos to build up an impression of contemporary events. Recent research by (Almalki, 2016) investigated perceptions of Twitter as a worthy newsgathering tool. Between December 2015 and January 2016 he collated an online sample survey of 3,003 Saudi Twitter users and found they discovered and read about ‘news’ on Twitter more than from traditional newspapers. Moreover, Saudis positively rated Twitter as a trustworthy and credible source for getting news updates. Their main motivation for preferring Twitter was speed and ease. As discussed earlier with the example of women’s issues being raised through twitter debate, the immediacy of social media has led to individuals questioning traditional sources of knowledge as well as the editorial stance of newspapers and media outlets who fail to embrace concerns raised by women. This kind of dialogue is having an impact on how newspapers gather information, with many actively turning to Twitter for stories, something I will explore more in chapter seven.

A great benefit for most of the traditional newspapers in Saudi Arabia from Twitter is the

rise of press freedom. For example, there are several topics newspapers couldn't publish before, like women driving or ministerial corruption, but after huge social engagement with Twitter it is becoming more easy for them to mention stories like this. In the personal interviews conducted for this research with Saudi senior journalists, they admitted that Twitter has had a great impact on the rise of press freedom in the country. B3 is the Assistant Editor in Chief for *Aleqtisadiah* newspaper. When asked by the researcher to give examples of how Twitter has helped them to raise the freedom of press, he commented:

> For example, in the past the print press dared not discuss or publish some news, but after Twitter this news was put on the table and can be published, whether on the subject of women driving or the subject of theatres, cinema and also economic topics such as the state budget and corporate corruption and corruption in some of the local councils etc. These issues are largely now addressed by newspapers where it was too difficult to deal with them in the past. The emergence of Twitter has made this easier. (Personal Interview, 2016)

Journalists in Saudi newspapers now take advantage of uncensored topics discussed on Twitter and therefore publish them on their medium. B7 from *Okaz* newspaper agreed with this when she stressed "without a doubt Twitter has helped in the rise of freedom of opinion and expression of views in Saudi Arabia [...] It has raised the roof and raised freedom of opinion" (Personal Interview, 2016).

Neuberger, Hofe, and Nuernbergk have identified five dimensions that Twitter has been used by professional journalists. These dimensions are:

1. "Journalists *promote* their own websites. Tweets refer to website content and link to them.
2. Journalists conduct *real-time coverage* from the scene of current news events. They provide live reports via Twitter, directly from where the events are taking place.
3. Journalists *interact* with members of the public on Twitter.
4. They *monitor* audience reactions and follow-up communication to their reports.

5. Finally, they *investigate* stories and conduct research using Twitter" (2014: 347).

These dimensions illustrate the multiple ways in which Twitter is helping to transform journalism practices. Primary to this is the ease with which all users are able to access information, generate stories, and interact with the public. It suggests that Twitter is more than just an information source; it is becoming a new 'newsroom' for media in the digital age (Hermida, 2014). Of course how you choose to use this medium will determine the extent to which it operates as a newsroom. This is why I undertake interviews with journalists and editors in chapter seven as it is important to understand whether Twitter is being actively incorporated into working practices with training where applicable, or whether it is simply changing online communication at such a fast rate that these changes are an inevitable consequence of use.

4.4 Digital and ethical dilemmas

Ethics are most often defined in terms of morals. Morals are by their very nature abstract values that vary from culture to culture. We evaluate the media in abstract moral ways; do they discuss events in terms of justice? Do they hold individuals accountable? Media ethics have a more complex role. For example, is it ethical to trick someone to do something or say something they do not mean to fit your own agenda? Is it right to quote someone out of context? Likewise is it ethical to hold someone accountable without giving that person or organisation the right to respond. Media ethics, then, can simply be understood in terms of common sense, rather than a list of does and don'ts (Markham, 2017.p149). In evaluating the role of the media in creating a public sphere, Western societies evaluate the morals and ethics of news production in terms of supporting democratic values. Therefore if we are talking about Saudi culture we must recognise that religion is the dominant moral value through which morals and ethics are determined, therefore if we are to understand how digital technology is transforming journalism we need to bear in mind that these practices relate directly back to the principles that underpin the culture: Islam.

One of the most important challenges facing reporters and media institutions is the ability of ordinary people using technology like smartphones to produce content and share it online (Dahlgren, 2016). This issue has been an on-going threat to the media in general and in particular to the Saudi press due to the huge engagement between citizens and social media platforms. These practices are referred to as 'citizen journalism' or User Generated Content (UGC) where people are able to utilize the functions of new technology using social media platforms to produce and report (Bradshaw & Rohumaa, 2011). There are a lot of cases that happen regularly in Saudi Arabia which put traditional media under pressure from digital media users.

On 7 January 2017 in Riyadh, two terrorists associated with ISIS opened fire at a police officer. In addition to being armed, the terrorists also had bomb belts and were presumably intending to blow themselves up to cause maximum impact. However, the police officer shot both of the men dead before they were able to let off the bomb belt (Dinham, 2017). The dramatic event was recorded by a woman using her smartphone while she watched from her bedroom. During the recording you can hear her screaming in shock at the events happening right below her window. Moments after the event, the woman uploaded her recording to YouTube. It was immediately shared on Twitter which helped the video go viral in Saudi Arabia and abroad. The police officer instantly became a national hero for the people due to his bravery. An online campaign was started on Twitter using one hashtag with his name in Arabic. Translated into English it reads as: #TheHeroMariOwaji. The hashtag trended in Saudi Arabia for more than a day. The video was widely used across national, regional and global media outlets to refer to the incident and was shown repeatedly. This event highlights many interesting things. Firstly, the mass adoption of smartphones means that individuals have a voice and are able to share their experiences. This is ushering in the era of citizen journalism, whereby everyone has a voice and ease of access means that people are more willing to share information. It is democratic, in that people have a large impact in determining the event as newsworthy and making it a trending topic on social media. Here, it is picked up by traditional media and embedded into topical news shows which debate how and why two men should want to blow themselves up. We also have a human interest story that audiences across the world can relate to through an individual act of bravery. The event

happened so quickly that there is no way that TV crews could have arrived in time to record it.

One thing that lots of media organizations like BBC, CNN are taking care of is their employees' behaviour on social media platforms, like how they engage with audiences and publish their journalism. Therefore, they have established social media guidelines for their staff to follow when journalists appear online (BBC, online). This is because they want to make sure everyone adopts their media ethics and rules when online and don't put the organizations in an embarrassing situation with their audiences. Nowadays journalists are encouraged to use social media like Twitter in order to gather or disseminate news, but many of them do not consider the distinction between personal and professional manners when they go online. For example, if a journalist expressed their personal views about a political or social issue on Twitter, it might be judged to be representative of the organization's view which could then result in their ethics being questioned This raises questions about whether it is possible for media outlets and individual journalists to remain neutral. A more subtle way in which individual behaviour could be deemed to be threatening to a media organization is by retweeting or liking controversial content. This makes an individual complicit to the views espoused in the retweet. But again, there are no guidelines around this provided by newspapers and the general attitude, as we will see in my interviews in chapter seven, is that it is not a problem until it is a problem.

In Saudi print media there is a lack of online and social media policies and regulations. From interviewing journalists, this research has found that most newspapers did not give their employees any online regulations of how to appear on social media. Speaking to me, B1, the Editor-in-Chief for *Alyaum* newspaper, mentioned that there are no social or digital media regulations that have been given to *Alyaum* journalists. B8 and Slaeh B9 told me that they haven't given any online regulations, or guidance on how to behave on social media. Rather, they think it is up to their personal judgment. Therefore, this lack of regulations poses ethical dilemmas for journalists and their media organizations in Saudi Arabia.

In one of the first large scale enquiries into new media and journalism in the UK, Fenton et al (2010) use ethnography, interviews and qualitative content analysis, to explore whether digital communication technologies are revitalizing the public sphere by broadening participation and enabling a more diverse perspective on the reporting of news, or whether changing journalistic practices are damaging the nature of news and with this the very values that enable democracy to thrive. Ultimately the various authors are split as to how and when news media is able to uphold democratic values. Fenton (2010: 10) acknowledges that with digital media "everyone or anyone can be a journalist with the right tools" and that citizen journalism has the potential to invigorate the news. But this comes with problems as well. One of the most vocal critics of widening participation enabled by changes in digital technology is Andrew Keen (2006) who bluntly states that simply having a phone with an Internet connection that enables you to express an opinion does not make you a journalist. Journalism is a profession that requires years of experience. I do not want to dwell on Keen's negative views of 'amateurism' but acknowledge that he does raise some important issues, not least the implications for culture when processes are not in place to check the validity of facts and statements. This is why Fenton raises concerns regarding the lack of accountability online as well as the dangers of anonymously expressing opinions (ibid: 10). These are all very valid points, but there is one important cultural distinction. In Saudi Arabia, anonymity may be the only means of encouraging people to express ideas, given the potential consequences of disobeying authority. Removing anonymity may very well bring an end to a lot of issues generated online. It is for this reason, and this is an issue I will reiterate throughout this thesis, the mere fact of being able to express an idea is a stepping stone to a public sphere.

To conclude, digital and media literacy are the most prevalent dilemmas facing journalists in the digital era. The ability to sift through 'fake news' and identify a credible source, the awareness of the benefits and limitations of anonymous opinions, and to be able to differentiate between poor amateurish content and quality amateurish content are what are really at stake. Citizen journalism holds great potential, not least in the diversity of opinions at your disposal across social media networks, but also the ability of ordinary people to set their own news agendas. Citizen journalists now perform journalistic

practices equipped with the latest technological devices and a broad range of digital skills. This will inevitably raise the overall quality of journalism as the pressure to 'stand out' now is not between journalists on newspapers, it's between an entire population of people expressing ideas online.

4.5 The Future of Press Journalism

In order to understand the implications of digital on press journalism it is important to get an industry perspective. In January 2017, *The New York Times* newspaper released a report conducted by its private team of seven journalists, known as the 2020 group, titled 'Journalism That Stands Apart'. The internal report was conducted inside the organization with a brief to identify the opportunities and challenges facing its future in the light of digital technology and social media and what the emergent new strategies might be for them to keep up with their audiences (Ember, 2017). The report recommended that the newspaper should "expand training for reporters and editors, hire journalists with more varied skills and deepen engagement with readers as a way to build loyalty and attract the subscriptions necessary to survive" (ibid, 2017). It is worth stating the main points of the report's recommendations because it is the first newspaper organization to conduct such a study into the risks and opportunities of the digital age. These recommendations are:

1. The report needs to become more visual: the *New York Times* sees visual journalism as a crucial aspect for the future. The report explains why visual journalism is so important:

> Reporters, editors and critics are eager to make progress here, and we need to train and empower them" … "It's sort of demoralizing to know that your story could be stronger with the help of a graphic," one reporter told the 2020 group, "but to also know that you will probably receive no help with it." To solve the problem, we need to expand the number of visual experts who work at *The Times* and also expand the number who are in leadership roles" … We also need to become more comfortable with our photographers, videographers and graphics editors playing the primary role covering some stories, rather than a secondary role. The excellent journalism already being produced by these desks serves as a model … given our established excellence in this area, creating a more visual daily report is an enormous

opportunity" (ibid, 2017).

2. The written work should also use a more digitally native mix of journalistic forms. This means commissioning a more diverse range of digital output across journalistic formats. For example, advances in audio, video and virtual reality. Moreover, aspiring its journalists to be more involved in the creative process and production in the digital forms.

3. There should be a new approach to features, while respecting and servicing the needs of our traditional readership.

4. *NY Times* readers must become a bigger part of the newspaper's reporting.

The report also contains another recommendations for its *Staff* as below:

The Times needs a major expansion of its training operation, starting as soon as feasible

NY Times need to accelerate the space of hiring top journalists.

Diversity needs to be a top priority for the newsroom.

NY Times should rethink its approach to freelance work, expanding it in some areas and shrinking it in others.

Finally, the report mentioned 'The way *NY Times* work' by stating:

Every department should have a clear vision that is well understood by its staff.

We should set goals and track our progress toward them.

We need to redefine success.

We need a greater focus on conceptual, front-end editing.

The newsroom and our product teams should work together more closely.

We need to reduce the domain role that the print newspaper still plays in our

organization and rhythms, while making the print paper even better (Anon, 2017).

The *New York Times* was formed in 1851 and has become one of the most established newspapers in the world. Recently it has recognized it needs to adapt to the needs of 21st century in how it produces and sources news in order to maintain existing audiences and attract new ones. If a paper of this size and prestige feels the need to set such a firm target for 2020 it is highly likely other newspapers will emulate this too. Newspapers must have more of a digital presence, as this is how reading habits are changing. People are more likely to sift through news on a smartphone, app or tablet than a physical paper, something that is evident by declining newspaper readerships. One issue the report highlights is that Western media are very open about private issues and concerns and things that papers need to do to exist in the digital world. However, in Saudi Arabia these types of reports would not happen. This type of concern would remain behind closed doors. This is why my site visit to YouTube channels and newspaper organisations is vital to this PhD as this is the only way I will be able to determine the types of decisions influencing the production of content. By speaking to journalists involved in all aspects of news production, from the editor in chief to frontline journalists, I hope to cross reference opinions in order to understand what influences are impacting on modern news reporting.

It is obvious that the number of newspapers across the globe has declined due to the emergence of alternative media and new technology (Fenton, 2010). For example, in the UK *The Independent* newspaper closed its print version and switched to a digital-only format (Slawson, 2016). Like the *Independent*, the 80 year-old weekly magazine *Newsweek* in the US went off in December 2012 and switched to an online version only (BBC, 2012). After he bought the social network MySpace in 2005 the news corporate investor Rupert Murdoch admitted that the newspaper industry "had been complacent and warned that established rivers of revenue such as classified ads would dry up" (Bradshaw & Rohumaa, 2011: 8). However, Murdoch bought MySpace at the 'wrong' time and he lost over $500 million when he sold it on. This demonstrates that the digital environment itself can be a tough one. Despite the clear warning from Murdoch for the newspaper industry, most news establishments have turned to attract audiences utilizing social

networks facilities to engage with audiences. The impact of the digital age can not only be seen within the western newspaper industry, but recently one of the best known Arabic-Lebanese newspapers, As-*Safir,* declared its closure after 42 years of print due to financial problems (Anon, 2016). The closure of *As-Safir* newspaper in late December 2016 has brought clear alerts to the rest of the Arab newspaper market not to rely on government funds anymore and to try to find alternative strategies like the *NY Times* has proposed in the face of the emerging digital environment.

4.6 Conclusion:

The challenges faced by journalism in the digital age will continue and will certainly be under the focus of researchers for the next few years as they explore what the impact of the ongoing technological developments on the field of journalism.

This chapter has highlighted how journalism is being transformed in the digital era. It started by reviewing the literature focusing on the impact of new technologies, such as Twitter, both on journalism in general and Saudi Arabian journalism in particular. It also looked at the opportunities and dilemmas that Twitter has brought to mainstream newspapers, while discussing the implications of using social media networks as part of journalism practices in Saudi Arabia, such as the potential rise of press freedom. Social media is offering forms of expression unheard of before, particularly in a country such as Saudi Arabia, and real opportunities to engage with audiences in new, open, diverse, communicative public spaces (Pérez-Latre, Portilla, & Blanco, 2011). Whether you deem citizen journalism as amateurish or a vital building block to democracy, one thing is clear. It is here to stay. This is having an effect on the economics and day-to-day practices in the media, such as ads, ethics, employment, and budgets. Therefore, for newspapers this has had a direct impact on financial resources, circulations and advertising. Professional journalists must adapt not only in how they produce news but where they source this information from. This inevitably means extending their reach beyond print media and across social networks. As Jones and Salter (2012: 152) rightly state: “Facebook and Twitter form a significant part of the modern journalists’ toolkit,

providing enhanced means of distribution and feedback between journalists and audiences"

Twitter has various functions for users and media organisations in general. On the most basic level it enables users to draw attention to already published news. But it also enables follow-up communication that makes it a dynamic, constantly changing space. Twitter, by enabling users to use the medium for multiple purposes – from promoting their own ideas to questioning those published by traditional media organisations - allows real-time coverage, as well as interaction with various publics. This is helping to create a networked public sphere that promotes many actors, from citizen journalists to professional journalists to ordinary citizens, such as Sohaib Athar, the software engineer who unknowingly witnessed the U.S. raid on Osama Bin Laden.

Chapter 5: Research Design: Methodology

5.1 Introduction

This research sets out to explore the impact of social media on the practices of journalism by talking to staff at emerging YouTube channels, and journalists from national newspapers in Saudi Arabia. In this chapter the research plan used in the current study, as well as the procedures and techniques of data collection and analysis, will be outlined. This chapter provides the overview of the methodology adopted for this research. In choosing such methods, the researcher needs to provide the reasons for the choice of such methods by detailing the advantages as well as disadvantages of each method selected (Mouton and Marais, 1993). This chapter provides an overview of the methodological tools as well as justification for the selected tools and methods adopted for this research. The research methods selected are justified on the grounds of the aim and objectives of the research as well on the grounds of the research questions that this research aims to answer. I will begin by contextualising ethnographic research into media organisations and then explain how my work falls into this field. The value of my research is that it offers a unique insight into the workings of emergent YouTube channels.

5.2 Background

Digital media has become an indispensable feature of everyday life, offering unique and varied ways through which individuals can express themselves. Smartphone ownership, social media, and faster and easier access to the Internet have positioned the media at the centre of our lives. In order to understand how these new ways of connecting and communicating are bringing about social and cultural transformations it is important to perform ethnographic research, in particular interpretive ethnography, which has the benefit of observing the world through the experiences of participants but does not disguise the role of the researcher (Algan, 2009). There are two ethnographic studies of the media that I feel are particularly relevant to my own research. These are Jeremy

Tunstall's study of BBC television producers (1993) that contextualises decision-making processes in light of rapid social and technological change and Emma Hemmingway's application of Actor Network Theory to BBC regional news production (2007). Although my area of study is emerging YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia, Tunstall's and Hemmingway's research has been very useful in helping me to think through my own approach. Therefore I will briefly outline their respective studies and then suggest ways in which their work applies to my own research.

Jeremy Tunstall (1993) in his study of *Television Producers* looked at how the TV producers of the BBC were dealing with processes of change. At the time he carried out his research, between 1990-2, British television was undergoing some revolutionary upheavals. Many of the producers he interviewed described this change in terms of 'commercialization', 'casualization', 'deregulation' and 'break-up'. A large majority of people interviewed were critical of the government policies of Margaret Thatcher and the Broadcasting Act of 1990 which some argued was based on "ideology rather than insight". However, a significant minority agreed that some of the changes were necessary and "welcomed the broad thrust of the changes" (Tunstall, p.10).

Tunstall's visits to regional television organisations focussed primarily on 'series producers' or 'series editors' as these roles entailed constant 'hands on' control over content of programmes across departments and genres (ibid, 1993: 1). His work was based on a qualitative method of 254 interviews from 27 regional producers (ibid, 1993). Tunstall observed that the television producer is part of 'management' and therefore has to consider many forms of 'guidance' and advice when putting together a programme. Such considerations created a top-down process which created a conflict between creative autonomy and organisational hierarchy. For example, programmes made at the BBC are very expensive to produce and typically include the "active involvement of thirty or forty other people, expensive equipment, studio space and— not least— a network to transmit the end-product" (ibid: 6). Therefore, any production has to take into consideration that these programmes are made from public money and therefore would be under intense scrutiny.

My analysis of a media organisation will consist of site visits to two emerging YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia called Sa7i and Telfaz11. These organisations typically consist of very small teams and therefore I will not need to conduct as many interviews as Tunstall. However, one benefit I have in working with a small team is that I will have access to everyone involved in the company which will help present a clear understanding of work flow processes. I am particularly interested to discover whether the YouTube channels follow a similar top-down process and chain of command or whether, because of the size of the teams, ideas are generated from below by the hosts and writers. Another important distinction with my media organisations is that they produce programmes more frequently, averaging one new show every two weeks and therefore are not subject to the same level of scrutiny as a BBC programme which can take months to make. Finally, I am intrigued to find out who owns these YouTube channels and how are they funded as this will help give an insight into the types of programmes produced.

One important influence on Tunstall's study of the BBC was deregulation. Although this is not as relevant in Saudi Arabia as there is no equivalent of the BBC, I believe that the principles of deregulation apply in that social media has given ordinary citizens an opportunity to express ideas that weren't possible before and therefore we are experiencing a 'golden age' of self- expression. Part of the purpose of my visits to YouTube channels is to try to ascertain how the owners of these channels are embracing these new modes of expression and to determine what factors they have to take into consideration when producing programmes and what 'lines' they are able to cross.

Another influential study in my field is found in the work of Emma Hemmingway (2007). Hemmingway studies the micro, hybrid and contingent processes of news production in order to explore the socio-technical structuring of media processes and how these impact on the production of BBC regional television news. Her research, which was informed by Actor Network Theory, argues that equal attention needs to be given to the role of media technologies as that of human actors. She concludes that "the newsroom has shown us how technologies do not simply facilitate the production of news, but that they possess

and exhibit a particular agency and that such technological agency is best understood as a multiplicity of connected forces, or actor networks" (Hemmingway, 2007: 205). Actor Network Theory enabled Hemmingway to see media processes as a series of connected stages rather than simple individual acts. This enabled Hemmingway, for example, to recognise that the micropractices of news production have a direct impact on eventual news production and that there is a co-existence and interdependency in the production of meaning in news programmes.

Another important observation Hemmingway makes is that "by entering into this network, our own position becomes altered. We must shrug off the mantle of the detached observer, to become a simple actor within the network, and an actor within whatever text we construct to attempt to narrate that network" (Hemmingway, 2007: 207). Although I am aware that it is not possible to be a "detached observer" I have made various attempts to clarify my position on my site visits to YouTube channels and to ensure a code of practice is in place. These are outlined in section 5.5.

Hemmingway is also keen to observe that the "boundaries between the world 'out there' and the internal world of the newsroom are no longer sustainable as the tendrils of the network permeate everywhere" (2007. p.208). Actors who are absent from one node of the network at a particular time are "still translated by it and even traceable in their absence from the network action visible at that specific point". The implications of this are that the researcher "also becomes destabilised within the network, and close observations soon give way to inclusive performances of all actors, including the researcher" (2007. p.208). Hemmingway's inclusion on the network has enabled her to construct a new vocabulary for examining media processes.

Although I don't intend to use Actor Network Theory in my methodology, I have taken from Hemmingway's research a greater awareness that many factors make up a social situation and that seemingly less important components or 'actors' have a vital role to play in producing meaning. Technology, in the form of social media networks, plays a vital role in my thesis, in particular exploring the possible effects of a video produced on

YouTube and how this in turn leads to an extended conversation on Twitter or across traditional media. Content produced on social media may have further effects, such as improving professional journalism standards. This raises the question of multiple public spheres and how these different spaces overlap and link together to create an overall narrative. However, my research also considers the possible ways in which seemingly benign digital platforms are susceptible to manipulation. The most obvious example of this is 'hyping' of Twitter followers or YouTube video hits in order to create the impression of success. Likewise, the emergence of 'bots' across these digital networks means that the tweets and #hashtags I am claiming have the potential to create a public sphere may very well not be created by humans or be by the people they claim to be.

Tunstall (1993) and Hemmingway (2007) offer important insights into the value of ethnographic study. Although their chosen media organisations are 'traditional' media and therefore vastly different to my own, the principles and objectives of the research remain the same. Therefore, I will also be drawing on their approaches but exploring 'new media' organisations as well as newspapers. I will be using a qualitative research that uses two types of methods, observation and semi-structured interviews.

5.3 Research Questions:

In order to fully comprehend the impact of social media networks in Saudi Arabia on journalism practices I have four key research questions. These questions will enable me to test my thesis that a digital public sphere is emerging in Saudi Arabia and if so, to explore how this is functioning. The research questions also enable me to understand whether any changes are a deliberate attempt to widen public engagement and to improve standards, or simply an attempt to integrate an emergent media form into existing media structures.

- How do YouTube channels work and operate in Saudi Arabia (e.g. practices, environment, media economy etc.)?

- What are the impacts of *Twitter* on the practices of journalism on traditional media (accountability, policies, freedom etc.)?
- What is the creative process in these emerging media organisations?
- To what extent do social media networks lead to the creation of a digital public sphere in Saudi Arabia?

5.4 Case Studies

1. YouTube Channels

For the purpose of the research I made a data collection trip to Saudi Arabia in December 2015 and in June 2016. During this period, I had several visits to two YouTube channels, 'Sa7i' located in Jeddah the second largest city in Saudi Arabia, and 'Telfaz11' located in the capital, Riyadh city. I chose these channels based on data research from www.socialblade.com, a YouTube verified website that produces monthly statistics on YouTube channels. According to Social Blade, Sa7i was created on 12 Jan 2012 and has an estimated monthly earnings of between 1.9k-31.1k. At the time of writing (15 January 2017) it had 689 uploads with a total of 595,369,051 video views. The channel had 2,850,367 subscribers, with 24,688 subscribing in the last 30 days (https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/sa7ichannel). In comparison, Telfaz11 was created on 14 September 2011 and has an estimated monthly earnings of between £462-7.4K. It has 89 uploads with a total of 41,506,709 video views. The channel has 754,504 subscribers, with 20,672 subscribing in the last 30 days (https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/telfaz11). I was also able to speak to two females who work on BanaTube, a show on the female-led channel Qawareer, which is a 'sister' company of Sa7i, both of whom are owned by IRM. Their office is on the same floor as Sa7i. There are no statistics available for Qawareer from Social Blade.

Social Blade provides an independent ranking system that "aims to measure a channel's influence based on a variety of metrics including average view counts and amount of "other channel" widgets listed in" (http://socialblade.com/youtube/help). This ranking system was created to stop inflated figures, whereby 'false' subscribers never actually

view a webpage. The rankings and data are pulled from YouTube's public API. Channels are given a rating. Although the website does not explicitly list the criteria, A+ is the highest and means "you can consider yourself very influential on YouTube". E is the lowest grade. According to this ranking system, Sa7i was given an overall rating of B+ and Telfaz 11 received a B (with A+ the highest rating). We can conclude from this that both websites have a powerful and influential presence on YouTube. The interviews with eight members of YouTube staff were conducted face to face at their headquarters in Riyadh and Jeddah in December 2015. Below is an anonymised list of the people interviewed from the YouTube channels.

List of Interviewees from Sa7i and Telfaz11 YouTube Channels:

A1: The General Manager of Sa7i YouTube channel

A2: Sa7i deputy manager and content manager

A3: (female): Presenter of YouTube show called BanaTube, inside Sa7i

A4: (female): Qawareer YouTube channel General Manager at Sa7i

A5: Presenter of Khaem YouTube show produced by e-newspaper Ain Alyaum

A6: General Manager of Telfaz11 YouTube channel

A7: Presenter, production and creative manager at Telfaz11

A8: Presenter, senior creative manager at Telfaz11

2. Journalists

To understand any possible impacts that social media networks have on the press I interviewed a series of senior journalists from six mainstream Saudi newspapers. In order to construct as vivid a picture as possible of the effects of social media on the profession, I spoke to people at various levels within a newspaper. This included editors-in-chief, content managers and senior journalists. I was concerned that editors may have a very different view of the direction of newspapers to the journalists and so interviewing both enabled me to cross check responses and ascertain whether standards and ethics were adapting to the new media environment. It is also worth noting that Saudi Arabia has no Freedom of Information law. Therefore there is no way of gaining public access to state-held information, particularly in relation to sensitive topics, and so it is difficult to

ascertain exactly what pressures media organisations are under. Hence the need to interview a broad range of media professionals.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face with nine journalists in Saudi Arabia between 19 May 2016 and 21 June 2016. The interviews focus on three key areas: the policies and regulations of newspapers in terms of expectations and behaviour of staff online; the extent to which newspapers feel they have the freedom to express ideas and opinions; and, finally, online interaction with readers. As with the YouTube interviews, the questions were designed and created in order to explore key issues, with a series of pre-planned sub-questions for each. It is important to note that although I had an agenda in terms of wishing to explore certain issues, I did not stick rigidly to a list of pre-set questions and was flexible and responsive where required. The interviews took place in Riyadh and Jeddah. Below is a list of the anonymised interviewees from Saudi newspapers.

List of Interviewees from traditional newspaper:

B1: Editor in Chief*, Alyaum Newspaper*.

B2: Editor in Chief, *Okaz Newspaper.*

B3: Editor in Chief Assistant, *Aleqtisdaiah Newspaper.*

B4: Editor Director for the national news, *Aljazirah Newspaper.*

B5: Electronic Department Manager, *Alriyadh Newspaper.*

B6: Editor in Chief Assistant for Online, *Okaz Newspaper*.

B7: Journalist, *Okaz newspaper*.

B8: Journalist, *Alyaum newspaper.*

B9: Journalist, *Alhayat Newspaper.*

When I come to discuss the interviewees in chapters 6 and 7 I will state their job title and the anonymising code used. When they are referred to again I will only use their code. This is purely to help better direct the reader and to be consistent.

5. 5 Validity and Reliability

The intention of this study is to understand the impact of social network sites, the emergence of YouTube channels, and the impact of Twitter on professional journalistic standards at traditional Saudi newspapers. In order to obtain the most rounded conclusions available, both practical and theoretical research methods were employed. One challenge faced was obtaining sufficient interview participants, as my interviews were largely determined by who was available to speak on the day of my site visits. This led to a mixed qualitative methodology. The dominant method of research was looking at how social media has affected professionals' ideologies on the nature of news, through a series of interviews with Saudi journalists as well as observations and interviews inside YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia. Given the YouTube channels consisted of small teams I split the interview methods between face-to-face interviews, and email interviews with follow up opportunities. This was mainly because they are very busy and so I had to be flexible. A supporting literature review was utilised as an on-going second method.

I wanted to obtain a unique insight into how professional journalistic practices - including the perception and behaviour of journalists - has changed due to increased usage of social media networks. Learning about perception and behaviour of individuals is only possible through direct interaction and conversations. While observations can reveal some insight into perception and behaviour of individuals it does not provide a complete insight. The need to understand both how and why requires us to use more interactive, insightful and exploratory methods of data collection. Interviews fit all these criteria and hence are selected as the primary data collection tools for this research.

5.6 Research Design

The emergence of social network sites and their impacts on professional journalism is a relatively new aspect of inquiry within Saudi Arabia. This research aims to look at the impact of social media on professional journalism in terms of the freedom of the press to

discuss political and cultural issues and this is one subject area which has attracted my attention of researchers after the Arab Springs. Due to the relative newness of the subject this research aims to explore the function and practice of YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia and how therefore social media is influencing the practice of professional journalism. By exploring this, this research sets ground for future research which can look at how social media can help in improving the practice of professional journalism by supporting values such as democracy, freedom, audience engagement, validity and reliability, all of which are critical for the success of professional journalism. Therefore, this research employs an ethnographic research design applying two qualitative approaches of interviews and observation.

5.7 Primary data

My primary data consists of observations and interviews, with the opportunity to follow up with additional questions via email where needed. Hagan (2000) describes an interview as "a face-to-face situation in which the researcher orally solicits responses from subjects" (p. 174) while Berg (1998) defines an interview as "a conversation with a purpose" (p. 57). Seidman (2006) mentions that, as with other techniques of data gathering, the advantages and disadvantages of interviewing, as a means of obtaining information, should be considered. In this regard, Seidman (2006) outlines the following advantages of interviews. First, an interview provides an opportunity for personal contact between the researcher and the respondent and to obtain rich data, which is not always possible in the case of indirect data collection. The second advantage of interviews is that because of the face-to-face relationship, an interviewer can prevent misunderstandings or confusion the research participants could have in interpreting the questions. In addition to this, probing is also possible in order to get research participants to answer in more detail and with greater accuracy.

Interview studies can, however, be costly when complex research requires small bureaucracies with a number of administrators, field supervisors and in some cases even

public relations personnel (Schurink, 2001). However, this is not a barrier in this research because I only needed to obtain permission of the respondent for data collection.

A disadvantage of interviews includes the interview bias that can be introduced to the study when the interviewer misunderstands the research participants' answers, or understands them, but makes an error in recording them or records answers when the respondent failed to reply. The problem of bias may then be introduced not only by the wording, order or format of the questions, but also by the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent (Gubrium *et al.*, 2012). To overcome this, I ensured that accurate notes were scripted during the interview. I recreated the interview verbatim immediately after the interview. Furthermore, I sent the recreated interview transcript to the respondents to ensure that the information presented within was accurate.

According to Babbie (2010) the interviewer sets the agenda for the interview and is guided by the interview schedule. In order to gain a comprehensive view of the participants, I used a semi-structured interview, since it refrains from a structured question and answer approach. Researchers state that semi-structured interviews primarily focus on obtaining a detailed picture of the respondents' beliefs, feelings and perceptions regarding a particular topic (see, for example, Gubrium *et al.* 2012; Babbie, 2010). In addition to this, a semi structured interview is not fixed in its ways and the researcher can follow up particular interesting avenues that may come up during the interview. King and Horrocks (2010) define such interviews as a social interaction between an interviewer and an interviewee with the aim of understanding the interviewees' life experiences or situations as expressed in their own words.

Interviews are the ideal method for understanding a social actor's own outlooks on a subject according to Lindlof (1995). Their major purpose is the understanding of the interviewee's experience and perspective through stories, accounts and explanations. As the questions posed in the data collection for this research were designed to facilitate a detailed enquiry into journalist's opinions and beliefs on certain matters, interviews are the ideal qualitative method to use. The research design took into consideration the main

research questions that required a level of disclosure only capable through in-depth questions about the journalist's role, job style and relationship with their audience. Other methods such as surveys, questionnaires or observations lack the necessary depth and detail to establish what the interview subjects actually think, while interviews also offer the opportunity to follow up on questions should an interesting answer, or need for clarification, arise.

Several interviews were conducted with professionals involved with the Saudi newspapers and two YouTube channels. These will seek to shed light on how experts perceive the influence of social media on their profession, with inductive coding being used to construct the questions for the interview guide. This provided a guide structured around the main aspects of the research questions encompassing traditional definitions of journalism, other aspects of journalism, social media and audience response. Each of these categories is composed of a set of questions pertaining to extract the interviewee's expert opinion. In order to evaluate this research tool it is necessary to take into consideration the fact that a selection of interviews does not promise a full extrapolation of that group's attributes, opinions or beliefs. Every section of the interview guide aims to bring to light information relating to the answering of the research questions. This provided a strong framework to use in order to remain focused on the research intentions, and was able to be refined over the initial interviews to create a stronger guide. The coding of the results allowed for the structuring of both that section and the discussion that followed in line with the research questions.

The applied sampling method has been contacting known acquaintances that are either actively involved within the news industry as journalists, or able to contact a journalist who may be interested in participating in the study. Given the hectic schedule of those working with news, obtaining interviewees through contacting their media organisations was potentially problematic, but as I have 10 years' experience working for national Saudi newspapers I had a good contacts book I was able to draw upon.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face, also being semi-structured in design and audio recorded. A semi-structured approach ensured a probing interview, while also allowing for follow up questions where deemed effective (Olubunmi, 2013). Interviews were a strong means to extract detailed, expressive opinions utilising the experience of the interviewee and how they utilise that experience as an expert (Di Cicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). The results were transcribed and translated from Arabic to English, coded and reviewed after collection of all interview data. These codes were inspired by concepts prominent within previous research, leading to the development of the interview guide and designation of subsequent results sections.

5.7.1 Formulating interview questions

Formulation of interview questions was carried out on the basis of the themes identified during the literature review. One question was designed for each theme identified. The set of questions used in the semi-structured interviews is given in the appendices. The table below gives the interview protocol adopted for this research:

Section	**Aim**	**Protocol question**
General information	To provide information about the organisation	Question 1
Information about Saudi Arabia political norms e.g. taboos	To gather information about how journalists are producing media content including how these are financed and what the sources of information are.	Question 2-3
Information about the growing influence of social networking sites	To gather information about how social networking sites are influencing people's opinions.	Question 4-8
Information about the mpact of social networking sites on professional journalism	To gather information about how social networking sites are influencing the content and practices within the field of professional journalism.	Questions 9-11

Table 5.1: Interview protocol- Questions Addressed by the Empirical study of Interviews.

5.7.2 Setting for the interviews

Given the fact that a qualitative research methodology was chosen, the place where research participants' work was most important to me. In choosing a setting for the interviews, I must consider privacy, comfort, possible threats in the environment, as well as the accessibility of the venue to the participants (Gubrium *et al.*, 2012).

At the beginning of the interview I provided the information sheet detailing the purpose and process of the research to all the participants. A separate consent form was provided that the participants were requested to sign and send back in the self-addressed envelope provided. The consent form explicitly mentioned the rights of the participants and ensured that the participants give consent to conduct the interviews, and to use the interview responses for the purposes of the research.

I tried to minimise interrupting the research participants' professional schedule by conducting interviews during the participants' free time during their workday and at a location within their work building that was convenient to the respondents. I tried to ensure that there was minimum disturbance.

5.7.3 Procedures followed during the interviews

I conducted the interviews personally and face to face. Greeff (2002) refers to this procedure as one-on-one interviews in which the researcher's interest is on "understanding the experiences of other people and the meaning they make out of that experience" (p. 302). According to King and Horrocks (2010) face-to-face interviews provide the researcher with the chance to observe the respondents' behaviour, as well as non-verbal communication. In this way, I could follow-up on certain responses given by the research participants, thereby examining underlying reasons for their responses. However, King and Horrocks (2010) caution that conducting interviews personally could be time consuming. He stated that research participants might be unwilling to provide information on certain issues, while some could divert the interview by providing irrelevant information. This therefore requires me to be patient and professional in undertaking these interviews. In the current study, I overcame this by

guiding the participants, without rushing them, to the aims of the research, as well as the issues under discussion.

At the start of the interview the participants were informed about the nature and aims of the study. It was also indicated, as was described in the informed consent form, that only I will have access to the information and that the research will be used for academic purposes only. After describing the research procedure, I ensured the participants of the confidentiality of their participation in the study. According to Babbie (2010), a promise of confidentiality to research participants is a guarantee that any information the participant provides will not be publicly reported, or made accessible to parties other than those involved in the research. Although the participants in my study were all happy to speak openly during the interviews I decided to anonymise the data. I accept that it may be possible to find out who participants were given the time period the interviews were conducted and because I had to be explicit about the YouTube channels I was investigating. But I still want to anonymise the interviews as much as possible given we would be occasionally broaching sensitive issues. This is explored in more detail in section 5:9.

After the introductory comments about the subject under investigation, I asked for permission from the research participants to record the interviews. A tape recorder is a valuable tool during interviews to improve the researcher's ability to recall the information collected during the interview (Mouton and Marais, 1991). Grinnell and Unrau (2008) state that the use of a tape recorder during an interview aids the researcher to be able to focus on the process of interviewing, thus observing the participants' reactions, as well as their non-verbal communication. Although tape recorders can be "intrusive and barrier to full disclosure" (Grinnell and Unrau, 2008, p. 234) I did not see this as an issue as I was interviewing media professionals and therefore ensured permission to use a tape recorder was granted.

After seeking permission to record the interviews, I tried to establish a relationship (rapport) with the interviewees. This was established by firstly engaging in an informal conversation with the respondents. King and Horrocks (2010) support this by stating that at the start of the interview, the researcher should establish rapport. This is achieved by "listening" attentively as well as "understanding and respecting" the research participants' views. The core set of interview questions were asked when the researcher and the respondent were comfortable and confident in each other's company.

5.7.4 Probing

Probing involves asking follow-up questions to focus, expand, clarify or further explain the responses given by research participants (Schurink, 2001). Grinnell and Unrau (2008) identify two major characteristics and functions of probing or follow-up questions in qualitative research. Firstly, they suggest that the function of probing is to get the respondent to answer in more detail and more accurately or at least provide a minimal acceptable answer. This means that a follow-up question could be used when the respondent hesitates in answering, or gives a vague and /or incomplete answer. This is usually done when the answer to a question does not provide enough information for the purposes of the study. A second function of probing is to structure the respondent's answers and to make sure that all the topics of the research problem are covered, and that irrelevant information is reduced (Grinnell and Unrau, 2008).

In the current study, probing was used primarily to focus and clarify the responses given by the participants. I asked the respondents to elaborate more on their responses when they provided an inadequate level of information.

5.8 Observation:

I decided to address the research questions by adopting the observation method, which involved witnessing the production processes at the two successful YouTube channels on which I was focussing. This decision was partly based on research by Harrison (1995: 180) who outlined that observation is a very useful method for media studies in that it "is

vital to understand the kinds of formal and informal decisions which are made in the newsroom on a day-to-day basis". Another useful source was Kothari (2008:96) who states that there are three main advantages of the observation method. These are:

1. Subjective bias is eliminated, if observation is done accurately.
2. The information obtained under this method relates to what is currently happening; it is not complicated by either the past behaviour or future intentions or attitudes.
3. This method is independent of respondents' willingness to respond and as such is relatively less demanding of active cooperation on the part of respondents as happens to be the case in the interview or the questionnaire method (Kothari, 2008: 96).

I asked the general managers of the YouTube channels for their permission to sit and observe their working practices and a timeframe was agreed. As this would also involve entering some meetings we agreed that I would check first if this was acceptable, rather than simply following people everywhere. It was vital that these boundaries were agreed to ensure that there could be no misinterpretation about my behaviour. The aim of the observation was to watch how the employees interacted with each other. One key dynamic I was keen to explore was the creative process and how videos were produced. This would give me the opportunity to compare formal responses in interviews with lived practice. For example, there was the suggestion that staff had a certain degree of artistic freedom in the content they produced, but this might not be quite as free as they perceived. Making these judgments was only possible by observing the creative process from conception of ideas to production values and how these related to other competing needs, such as satisfying advertisers. The observations were recorded through written notes that were then transcribed to a document.

Berger (2014: 162) has outlined the benefits of the two main types of qualitative research; observation and interviewing as below:

Observation	**Interviewing**

Present	Past and Present
Action	Attitudes
Context	Motivations
Seeing	Hearing and probing

It made logical sense to combine these two processes in order to gain a more complex picture of working relationships within these organisations. This meant that I had to determine when it was best to observe and when to ask questions. This was something that could only be decided in the moment. But as I had been guaranteed substantial interview time with my subjects and I was also given the opportunity to return in the future should my research require more information, I felt that it would not be necessary to ask unscheduled questions during an observation unless it was necessary to clarify something.

5.9 Ethical issues

After conducting the interviews I was faced with a difficult ethical dilemma: should I anonymise the data? This decision was mainly based around the fact that I had to ask some difficult questions regarding cultural taboos and I was concerned that if this data were made accessible, could it lead to repercussions in the future. When conducting the interviews I made each person fully aware of the purpose of the interviews and how this data would be used Moore (2012), Giordano (2007). I explained the purpose of my PhD and emphasised that the subject had become of such personal interest to me that I had left my job as a journalist on a Saudi newspaper to pursue it. I think that this helped reassure interviewees that my incentives were honourable. I also gave each interviewee the opportunity to read the transcript of their interviews as well as the opportunity to end the interview at any point. I felt that agreeing with participants during the consent process what could and couldn't be discussed was the most effective means of creating accurate data that all involved would be happy with.

Given that my research was focussing on the impact of emerging social media networks, I knew that anonymity would be difficult (Hopkins, 1993) as it was integral to the research that these social media networks were named. Therefore I had to be explicit for the purposes of my research. These organisations are also relatively small at present and so it wouldn't be too difficult to find out who any anonymised participants were.

I consulted the UK Data Archive (www.data-archive.ac.uk), which has over 40 years' experience in acquiring, curating and providing access to social science and humanities data, about anonymising qualitative material and was struck by this advice: "identifiers should not be crudely removed or aggregated, as this can distort the data or even make them unusable. Instead pseudonyms, replacement terms or vaguer descriptors should be used. The objective should be to achieve a reasonable level of anonymisation, avoiding unrealistic or overly harsh editing, whilst maintaining maximum content."

Based on these principles I came to the conclusion that there was no need to identify the real names of the people interviewed but it was important to identify their role within the organisation. This was because I wanted to compare attitudes within each organisation to issues such as freedom of speech and how well the values of an organisation translate between departments. As some of the people I was interviewing were presenters of specific shows – shows that it was vital to name - it would be obvious who was speaking. But for the purposes of consistency, I decided to anonymise all interviewees the same. The classification system I have used is very simple. Allocating each person a letter and number. A full list of interviewees can be found in section 5.4 (page114).

According to Strydom (2002) involvement in research requires a general awareness and acknowledgement of appropriate and inappropriate conduct. The ethical principles that should guide research include informed consent, no deception, voluntary participation, non-maleficence (do no harm) and no violation of privacy. I obtained informed consent through an open communication process (by reading and explaining the informed consent forms). Research participation was entirely voluntary and potential participants were fully informed of the aims and processes of the research.

5.10 Techniques for analysing and interpreting qualitative data

Qualitative research involves interpretation, because nothing speaks for itself (Creswell, 2009). Moreover, qualitative interpretations are not inherent in the interview text, but are constructed by the researcher. Thus, the role of the researcher as "interpreter" is significant since it should be done in such a way that the reader is able to understand the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2009).

Bradely et al. (2007) state that the qualitative researcher analyses data by organising it into categories on the basis of themes, concepts or similar features. This is known as thematic analysis (Grinnell and Unrau, 2008). In addition to this, they also mention that the qualitative researcher may develop new concepts, formulate conceptual decisions and examine relationships among concepts. Researchers using qualitative techniques conceptualise, as they code qualitative data into conceptual categories, which in fact is already part of the data analysis process (Bernard and Ryan, 2009).

A fundamental technique used in the analysis and interpretation of data in qualitative research is that of discovering the classes of things, persons and events and the properties that characterise them (King and Horrocks, 2010). During this process, researchers must keep personal biases aside throughout the investigation, especially since qualitative investigation or research is intense and personal in nature. To prevent the development of close relationships between participants and the researcher, these authors suggest the use of a technique called "bracketing". This technique is defined as the process of putting aside one's own beliefs, not making judgements about what one has observed or heard and remaining open to the data as it is revealed (Bernard and Ryan, 2009, p. 259).

For the purpose of this research a content analysis technique was adopted to analyse the collected data. Neuendorf (2002) defined content analysis as a technique which involves

"summarising, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity, inter subjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalisability, replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented" (p. 10).

The qualitative data obtained from the interviews and using secondary analysis were categorised according to the research themes which were determined on the basis of the interview protocol which itself was dependent on the conceptual framework. Then, the findings of the analysis were compared with the findings of the literature review.

One of the key aspects of qualitative content analysis is that it takes into consideration the text as an integration of text and context. Thus, it is not about merely trying to treat subjective data objectively to identify the themes but goes further in allowing the researchers to understand social reality in a subjective but scientific manner (Krippendorff, 2004). The inductive approach means that the researcher analyses the text without any preconceived thoughts and this is used when the respondents experience is in focus. This also means that the approach the qualitative researcher takes is the one that "truth is to be found in the eye of the observer". This approach is a guideline in qualitative research. When analysing a text the author should also see the context surrounding the text and the respondent, which means that the respondent's personal history, life world and culture has to be made clear (Mayring, 2014). This further leads to the idea that a text can have many possible interpretations and all can be reliable. With a narrative interview the respondent is free to tell about the phenomenon the researcher wants to study (ibid, 2014). To keep the interview flowing the researcher stimulates it by asking follow-up questions. This makes the researcher an active part in the creating of the text (Neuendorf, 2002).

The researcher's involvement in the text is hard to avoid in the qualitative data collecting process. To give the study credibility, reflection and discussion between the individuals of the research team is an important aim towards unanimity in the analysis. I

use some terms to describe the analysis process and these are analysis unit, content area, meaning unit, condensation, abstraction, code, sub-category and categories (Mayring, 2014). An analysis unit can be whole interviews. Content areas are parts of the text including a special area and can be different phases of the phenomena studied. A meaning unit is a part of the text, which carries a special meaning; these meaning units are the basis of the analysis. The next step in the process is condensation, abstraction and coding the meaning units. This is done by making the text shorter, lifting it to a higher level and then making codes that describe the content of the meaning units. During this part of the analysis it is of great importance that the substance of the meaning units is not lost. Sub-categories are made by putting codes with similar content together in groups. All data that answers the aim of the study has to be put in a sub-category and no data is allowed to fit in more than one sub-category. Further the authors explain that this can be hard when the study is about people's experience for they are often woven in together and hard to separate from each other. Finally at a more interpretive level categories are being made by finding a meaning that flows through sub-category after sub-category (Krippendorff, 2004).

As we shall see in chapter six, the findings of my interviews and observations with emergent YouTube channels will be themed around three key areas. The first is the use of satire and how this is being used as a means of approaching social issues within the Saudi public sphere. The second key theme is censorship and audience engagement. This theme will be broken down into three sub categories: external censorship, censorship that is used to protect and individual, and, finally, advertising as a form of censorship. The final theme will explore how social media networks are impacting on professional journalism standards within traditional media. In chapter seven I will explore the impact of social media on professional journalism standards at six Saudi newspapers by theming my findings around three key areas. These are policies and regulations and how these impact on news production, whether social media is helping create greater freedom of expression, and whether journalists interaction online with audiences is helping to develop more accountability.

5.11 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the mixed qualitative approach to research and the reasons for using interviews and observation in order to address the research questions. My research builds upon existing ethnographic research into media organisations. However, as where previous research has tended to examine working practices in large media organisations, my research focuses on emergent media organisations popularised on YouTube, such as Sa7i and Telfaz11. I believe that they have the potential to create digital public spheres, acting as a kind of mini-parliament for ordinary citizens to express opinions in a way that has not been possible before.

Chapter 6: The Rise and Impact of YouTube Channels

6.1 Introduction

In the following two chapters I will explore the potential of the social networking sites YouTube and Twitter to function, together, as part of a layered digital public sphere within Saudi culture. In order to evaluate whether digital platforms are able to create a politicised space where meaningful conversations take place that are able to create change I have conducted a series of interviews with leading figures from social media networks. The data obtained from these site visits will help inform my understanding of how people perceive the potential of social media networks to bring about change. This will form the first part of my analysis. I believe that one reason that a digital public sphere has not been deemed possible previously is because research has tended to focus on one social network site, such as Twitter or YouTube, whereas I see these as functioning as part of a wider conversation, that needs to be understood as a fractured whole, rather than judged in isolation. Therefore the second part of this chapter will explore the impact of social networks on traditional journalism, and how this is creating a gradual improvement in standards, such as accountability and potential press freedom, which in turn is opening up possibilities for rational debate. It is my belief that Saudis have been given the opportunity to speak for the first time about issues that directly affect their lives, and that these voices, across media platforms and networks, are bringing about change.

6.2 Initial observations of site visits:

The interviews and observations undertaken in this chapter were vital in helping to understand the dynamics of an emergent media organisation. My primary focus was establishing exactly how, when and why videos were created and produced. I was also keen to understand the dynamics of the companies by identifying the relationship of workers to each other. Witnessing working practices gave me an insight into the editorial

process that I was not fully aware of as a casual consumer of their channels online. It also enabled me to experience working practices and how meaning is produced, this is important as it is difficult to obtain clear guidelines on working practices from Saudi media organisations as this information is often private. I would discover on my visit that these are well-planned videos that pass through various layers of management before being made public. Interestingly both YouTube channels I visited had open plan offices that enabled staff to easily communicate and access each other. This is a working environment structure aimed at encouraging collaboration and popularised through companies such as Apple, Microsoft and more recently Google (Hickey, 2014).

The interviews I conducted were largely down to who was available at the time, which is to be expected of an organisation built around immediacy and running multiple programmes through their channels. I was not concerned by this as I knew that I could go back to conduct future research if needed. It was clear during these visits that although there was a hierarchy of staff, everyone was expected to get involved in all areas of work. It was clear from both organisations that the most valuable area was helping to promote content (both their own and colleagues) through other social media channels and maintain these conversations online for as long as possible in order to develop and maintain an ever-expanding audience base.

6.2.1 Sa7i

Sa7i channel headquarters are located in one of the most luxurious and modern streets in Jeddah, Prince Mohammed Bin Abdulaziz St, (Al-Tahlyah ST). They are located in the Bin Hamran tower building on the sixth floor. The building has fifteen floors and is lavishly decorated with an ornate marble interior. The building has become a hub for the creative industries and includes organisations such as newspaper publishers and corporations. The surrounding area is mainly full of wealthy shops, with leading global brands such as Debenhams. My first visit to Sa7i was just before 5:00 p.m. on Thursday 10 December 2015.

Picture 6.1: Exterior of the building where *Sa7i* is located, Bin Hamran Tower in Jeddah

A typical working day at Sa7i is from 11:00 am to 8:00 pm, although these hours are dictated by deadlines that can change on a daily basis. When I entered their offices on the third floor there was no signage to indicate their premises were here. This isn't necessarily surprising given that their brand identity is cemented through the content produced on their channels. Inside their offices there was a sign above reception with the company logo and various photographs throughout the offices that related to stars of the channel. The layout of the office is of a large open corridor, which contained several offices, all of which are open plan. There are three main offices belonging to Sa7i on the same floor.

Office 1: This is used for management and the editorial team and is where the majority of the decision making is made. It contains the editorial open plan offices, manager's office, deputy manager's office, a meeting room, and a segregated area for female staff. The female staff worked for the Qawareer YouTube channel which is according to its Manager a "sister organisation of Sa7i".

Office 2: Contained the production and design team.
Office 3: Contained the marketing and advertising team.

According to A2 each office is 'rented for one million Saudi riyals' (Interview, 2015) meaning the company pays a total of 3 million riyals a year in rent. This is a high rental

charge for a business but not surprising given the location and surrounding area. I was given a personal guide from the company who escorted me during my visits. He would show me around, answer any questions, and arrange interviews. If I wanted to speak to a specific person or a member of a department I would give the details and the guide would check schedules and fit me in where possible. I was free to attend meetings as and when they emerged. During these impromptu visits nobody asked to see my notes, play/back my recordings, or pre-empt what questions I asked. This filled me with confidence that they were an organisation happy to accommodate my needs and grateful for the potential exposure my findings may bring. My overriding feeling was they simply wanted the minimum of disruption in order to go about their everyday business, hence the need for me to be flexible with whom I spoke to and when.

According to A2, Sa7i runs lots of different shows. Each has a specific theme and target audience in mind. For example, *Ala Alamom* (On General) talks about government services and politics. *Broadcast Show* is a stand-up comedy show aimed at 18-22 year olds. Football programmes are also very popular and include *Taqtaka* and *Darbah Hurrah*. Therefore the majority of meetings tended to relate to issues regarding specific shows, and ensuring everything was going to schedule. These meetings were quickly and simply organised as and when required and reinforced why an open plan office structure is best suited to this type of working environment as it enabled quick and efficient communication.

I immediately got a sense of how popular the channel is by some random people turning up and leaving their CVs at reception while I waited to be shown around. One person began to tell those within his proximity of his personal history working for Egyptian TV and directly asked for a job. These emerging YouTube channels hold great social prestige and status and so I was informed by my guide that such enquiries were commonplace and happened on a daily basis. When I enquired about job selection processes I was informed that they tend to advertise specific roles about twice a year, mainly through social media.

6.2.2 Telfaz11

Telfaz11 YouTube channel headquarters is based in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia. They are located in the ground floor of a commercial building that also has several other business companies housed there. My first visit to Telfaz11 was on 27 December 2015 just before 6:00pm and observed proceedings until 9pm. This was the most convenient time for Telfaz11 due to scheduling concerns. As with Sa7i there was no external signage to indicate where the premises were, but inside there were photographs and logos. Telfaz11's offices consist of two large open halls that contain several offices. As with Sa7i they have 3 main offices:

Office 1: Production office
Office 2: Editorial and creative
Office 3: Management

Most of the walls are filled with photographs, such as pictures of presenters and popular issues related to their shows. I got the approval from the Telfaz11 Manager that I could freely observe the working environment inside the channel during their daily routine. I was lucky because my visit coincided with a video recording that most of Telfaz11's employees attended. I found it interesting that most of the staff attended the filming as it suggested this was a very open and inclusive organisation and that everyone was keen to see the latest content produced. There was a functional element to this, in that marketing were able to live tweet action and other presenters were able to observe what things went well with filming. Each member of staff was also better able to understand the creative process and their role in it, by being together and discussing what unfolded before their eyes. I got a real sense of solidarity, and felt a genuine excitement and enthusiasm that everything went well after all of the hard work and planning. In this sense I would describe the atmosphere as being more like a large family than work colleagues, with everyone supporting each other where needed.

This sense of inclusivity was reinforced by the informal dress code of staff. Nobody was wearing traditional Saudi clothing such as a Thoab (an ankle length garment like a robe)

or a Qutraa (headscarf). Just as I found at Sa7i, staff dressed very casually and Westernised, wearing jeans and t-shirts. It is not compulsory to wear traditional clothing inside a building of your employer but I was surprised at the informality. People talked very loudly to each other across desks so that everyone present could hear into conversations. They were also casual in how they worked, with some people lying down on sofas as they discussed editorial issues.

Picture 6.2: Video recording where two Telfaz11 presenters are talking to the camera while other staff observe and make notes

Staff included two females who worked together with a team of several men. Although both females wore a black Abaya (dress) they didn't have a Burgaa or Niqab concealing their faces. This suggested a large degree of individual freedom, particularly as staff were not segregated according to gender as is common in most Saudi workplaces. Even at Sa7i there was gender segregation. I found this very intriguing and immediately I realised that the effects of a digital public sphere are far reaching and not just confined to life online. An environment that fosters creativity and creates a space for women to express themselves is naturally going to have an impact in the 'real' world in how women expect to be treated as well as the way in which men perceive and treat women. I had not thought about the wider implications of a digital public sphere in terms of lived

experience and reiterated the importance of conducting interviews in their natural working environment. I will return to this impact later on.

6.3 Interview process

During my visit I conducted several interviews with eight people. These lasted between 30-45 minutes each. The interviewees consisted of four staff from Sa7i; three from Telfaz11; and one presenter who freelances for various Arabic newspapers. I used a semi-structured approach to my interviews as this enabled me to address issues that were important to my research while having the freedom to explore other topics should they arise. The main issue I wanted to explore was the extent to which presenters and programmers were able to freely express ideas as these types of conversation were vital in ascertaining whether social networking sites are able to produce an engaging digital public sphere that raises important questions relevant to the public.

I staggered questions that explored editorial decisions informing production values, identifying gatekeepers, and freedom of expression. Freedom of expression means different things to many people, so I was particularly interested in what this meant in terms of gender when the opportunity arose to speak to a general manager and presenter of a new female-led show on the Qawareer channel. Would they simply be grateful for the opportunity to have a visual presence in the entertainment industry or would they see this as a platform to push gender issues? Likewise, I was very conscious of any factors that may place limits on women from talking freely. I made this explicit when conducting the interviews, offering to conduct them in a non-work space or a place of their choosing at their convenience. But all the interviewees said this was not necessary, suggesting they felt as if they already worked in a supportive environment. I found this a very encouraging start.

It is worth stating that when I conducted the interviews, there were no senior managers lurking around or trying to listen in to conversations. I was given private office space to talk so as not to be disrupted. These are fast-paced media organisations whose main

priority is to ensure the next show is produced to schedule. The fact that nobody demonstrated any level of suspicion about my presence, and nobody attempted to vet my questions prior to the interviews, suggests that these two media organisations are confident about the work they produce and the people they employ.

6.4 YouTube channels analysis

In analysing the 20 most popular Saudi channels on YouTube, Mellor and Rinnawi (2016) found that ten of these were Saudi start-up firms who specialise in producing video entertainment, two of these being Sa7i and Telfaz11. It is worth noting that only two of the most popular channels were religious, and both of these were presented by moderate clerics. In some respects I am surprised that religious clerics have not utilised digital spaces as a means of communicating religious ideas and can only presume that this is because religion is such an integral part of everyday life for a Saudi that there is not the need to expand into non sacred spaces. Whatever the reason, religion is surprisingly absent from popular Saudi channels and this has enabled other forms of conversation to develop. Mellor and Rinnawi identify three emerging trends on these popular channels. Firstly, the content that is produced is relatively professionalised. This is certainly something I can testify due to my site visits. Secondly, the most popular form of content is either comedy or content relating to computer games. As Blumer and Katz (1974) have demonstrated, the media can be used in a variety of way to gratify needs. They propose that people use the media to gratify four needs: diversion, personal relationships, personal identity and surveillance. It seems logical to me that Saudis enjoy comedy and computer games on YouTube as a means of 'diversion' (escape from everyday problems). These forms of relaxation offer escapism from the pressures of living in a strict religious society. Thirdly, Mellor and Rinnawi found the channels are producing their 'own' celebrities. Out of the 20 most popular channels on YouTube, only one was presented by an already established celebrity, Ahmad al-Shugairi. This means that the new digital space is to some extent meritocratic, enabling the most talented to rise to the top, with their success determined by popularity. But as we will see through my

interviews, success can be orchestrated and the result of a well-structured professional organisation.

In the following three sections I will explore three key areas that came out of my YouTube interviews and observation that are relevant in terms of understanding social media networks as a digital public sphere. The areas I will address are, firstly the role of satire in comedy and entertainment as I see this as integral to enabling conversations and issues to develop in a non-threatening way. Hosts act as microcelebrities on these shows. They are vital to the brand identity of the channels and the reason that youth tune in (Driessens, 2014; Jerslev, 2016). Secondly, I will look at the possible impact of censorship or gatekeeping that may affect the entertainment values of these organisations and influence the type of programmes made as well as the style of entertainment. Thirdly, from this I will be able to ascertain whether the popularity of social media networks is impacting on professional journalism. I see this as vital to my argument that a real digital public sphere is emerging as the conversations that happen online are creating ripples throughout Saudi society and having a direct impact on social structures, be it in the organization of local media environments imitating YouTube channels; in direct political change, in terms of press freedom, social commentary, and changes in government policy; or in the codes and practices of professional journalism that is enabling or embracing social network citizen journalism.

6.4.1 Satire

Crittenden, Hopkinson and Simmons (2011) have argued that satire has been used throughout history to raise awareness of critical issues before eventually becoming a genre of the masses. We can trace the roots back as far as classical Greek and Roman history (Bremer and Roodenburg, 1997) where it was used to hold decision makers to account. It is 'a discourse on inquiry, a rhetoric of challenge that seeks through the asking of unanswered questions to clarify the underlying morality of a situation' (Baym, 2005: 267). Humour, in this sense, acts as a form of constructive criticism. More recently in the West, satire has been targeted at specific individuals, particularly politicians (Bremmer et al, 2010). Crittenden, Hopkinson and Simmons (2011) have argued that a combination of

satire and social media has not only changed the nature of critical enquiry, enabling new means of expressing ideas and opinions, but has also positioned satirists as opinion leaders. This represents a shift in power in the sense that traditional opinion leaders in Saudi Arabia, such as religious clerics and ministers, are no longer the sole producers of knowledge and culture. It also represents a challenge within the wider media environment. Whereas satire was once limited to professional satirists, such as television hosts, it has been allowed to evolve thanks to changes in technology. Now anyone who has access to a digital device and is able to disseminate content across digital media, social network sites, or video-sharing platforms has the potential to build up their own profile and audience (Jerslev, 2016). The widening of access to culture, as well as an opportunity for more people to express their subjectivities and shape their own political reality is fundamental to the concept of a public sphere. Digital platforms such as YouTube empower amateurs, enabling some to become 'microcelebrities' and to contribute to public discourses. By providing individuals with the opportunity to express themselves publicly, there is the opportunity to gain the same legitimacy as traditional leaders and experts.

However, it is worth noting that this public discourse is being expressed through satire and satire does not really conform to traditional notions of what constitutes critical rational debate. In particular, satire could be seen as being detrimental to Habermas's 'ideal speech situation' in that communication between individuals is not governed by basic, implied rules. Neither Twitter nor YouTube are necessarily mediums you could convincingly argue evaluate assertions on the basis of reason and evidence (Fuchs, 2014). Indeed, satire, by appealing to humour, could be seen as a form of psychological coercion in that it appeals to the heart (pathos) rather than the head (logos). To this extent it may function as a form of escapism (Halliburton, 2005) to viewers and thereby lose any political intent. However the discussions on Twitter suggest this is not the case and that social media, as an active medium, encourages individuals to participate rather than simply escape. For example, the recent Royal Decree that allows women to drive in Saudi Arabia as of June 2018 is a result of endless debates, hastags, and comment across social media networks. The issue of women's rights is a regular feature on the Sa7i channel, and so I believe this has been instrumental in bringing about changes in attitude that have

slowly filtered upwards, resulting in the Royal Decree. But it is worth noting that future research may wish to focus more on the lived experience of viewers and the conditions in which they consume YouTube culture in order to determine its possible impact.

I believe that satire functions as a very important stepping-stone in creating a public sphere in Saudi Arabia. It has enabled conversations to emerge and topics previously deemed taboo to be discussed. According to Jones and Baym, (2010) "laughter performs a very important role in setting a tone through which genuine democratic exchange can occur" (2010: 282). Saudi Arabia is not a democratic country and therefore laughter has been vital in breaking down various boundaries and creating new hierarchies that widen participation. Social media is the tool that allows people to create and exchange these ideas, which, I believe, will eventually lead to more debate within the political structures. We live in a completely different world to that of the 17th century described in Habermas's original analysis of a public sphere and therefore I believe satire is a vital component of an emerging digital public sphere in Saudi Arabia.

Satire allows for criticism to be aired in ways that it simply couldn't in more traditional 'straight' discourse. However, there are still limitations on how these criticisms are expressed. This is mainly because any explicit criticisms of government could lead to severe punishment. For example, insulting the King is deemed a terrorist offence. In 2014 a counter terrorism law considers all actions that "threaten Saudi Arabia's unity, disturb public order, or defame the reputation of the state or the king" as terrorism (Noman, Faris & Kelly. 2016).

Given these risks it is important to identify what type of satire takes place on YouTube channels. Very simply, I would describe it as a gentle approach to difficult subjects. I see the role of satire in Saudi Arabia as exposing social problems and contradictions, though not necessarily being interested in solving them, as outlined in my video analysis in chapter three. This could quite simply be because any resolutions need to come through government, a closed system, and so creating awareness of these issues is the primary goal. Therefore the predominant use of satire in YouTube videos is not subversion of the

elite through semiotics, rather it is issue-led. Issue-led satire depersonalizes situations and instead enables individuals on both sides of a situation to laugh at themselves and at alternative perspectives. This is a vital step in opening up conversations, kickstarting discussions, rather than a direct assault on individual political leaders as is the case in popular satire programmes in the West.

Analysis of modern forms of Western satire suggest that the 1960s was 'a genuinely galvanizing movement, sweeping aside centuries of conservatism and deference,' but that it 'has now become a sort of toothless default setting' (Bremmer et al., 2010). In today's context, this means that not only do professionals and amateurs compete for attention, they are also competing to drive opinion. In some respects, Saudi Arabia is in the early stages of fighting 'conservativism' and only time will tell how far such boundaries can be pushed. For Crittenden, Hopkins and Simmons (2011), satire within social media has created four types of opinion leaders in the world of new media satire. These are: traditionalist, creator, rookie and technologist.

> **Traditionalist** – The professional satirist focuses specifically on the message itself (cartoon, TV show, etc) and expects the audience to deconstruct the message. They are less concerned with the medium and more with the message.
>
> **Creator** – is a professional satirist but also has enough good all round skills to engage the world through social media and embraces digital technology.
>
> **Rookie** – Is a non professional satirist who enjoys the humour of the genre but due to inexperience sometimes creates basic humour which misses the underlying context.
>
> **Technologist** – is a non professional satirist who uses the medium to deliver the message. They may lack the literary skills to produce a powerful message but may still become an opinion leader due to their skills at delivery (2011, p. 177-178).

From my visits to Sa7i and Telfaz11 I would classify the hosts of the channels as Creators. The staff at both organisations have 'good all round skills' and due to the format of their open plan offices, and the expectation that everyone supports each other's

shows and joins in conversations online, they are all able to 'engage and embrace social media and digital technology'. They may not necessarily think of themselves as satirists, but they produce high quality content that pushes key issues that is able to expose the contradictions of important decisions that affect ordinary people every day. As we will see in my interviews there is a great unwillingness to pinpoint exactly what style of humour the shows use, particularly from the General Managers of the show, perhaps because admitting to satire could be seen as a direct challenge to authority.

Social media networks that use a combination of satire and informal means of communication may not conform to Habermas's 'ideal speech situation' but they do help create active citizenship that can be understood in terms of participation and agency. As has been argued by the feminist scholar Chantal Mouffe (1992), active citizenship can lead to a more inclusive form of democracy. "A radical, democratic citizen must be an active citizen, somebody who acts as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking" (1992: 4). By this definition, citizenship is a struggle. It is more than simply being a status conferred at birth. I am not sure whether Saudi society would see themselves as engaging in a 'radical struggle' but clearly there is a change in the level of participation made possible by these new forms of digital engagement. Part of the purpose of my visit was to understand how far this participation goes.

Digital media by its very nature demands active participation. Now it is common for Saudi people to debate and discuss what it means to be a Saudi, from basic etiquette in public to the role of marriage in a modern setting (Telfaz11, 2015). All areas of life are being explored and this is creating an ever increasing set of niche programmes through their YouTube channels. Very simply, where there is an issue, there is a show. I would expect this to continue to diversify further in the future. Here, social media as a form of 'alternative' media acts as "one way in which the public sphere, or spheres, can become more inclusive" (Harcup: 130). Indeed, social media is not the alternative, it is mainstream for Saudis' youthful generation. It is newspapers that are becoming alternative means of communication. Social media, as the name implies, brings people together, enables people to discuss issues that directly affect their lives, allows citizens to

discuss and debate the micropolitics of everyday life. Moreover, this level of participation "can be seen as supportive of active citizenship; and it is by being participatory forms of media that such projects themselves constitute a form of active citizenship" (Harcup, 2011: 18). A healthy public sphere is one in which all people participate. Social media creates the conditions in which these exchanges are able to happen.

These principles were recently expressed by Fahad Albutairi, a comedian at Telfaz11 and former international student who studied in Texas, at a conference at the annual Middle East Institute in Washington, DC 2015 (Middleastinstitute, 2015). In a recording broadcast on YouTube he attributes the rise in Saudi satire to three factors: firstly, the Western education of 100,000 students sent to study in countries like the UK and USA who are bringing back ideas and knowledge and attempting to implement them into their everyday lives; secondly, this in turn has introduced them to new modes of expression such as stand-up comedy which has grown in popularity over the past decade; thirdly, the mass adoption of digital technology by a relatively young population, all of whom are experiencing a broader view of culture which comes from having access to content and ideas from around the world.

The Saudi stand-up comedy scene was more than just a space to vent ideas on the world, it was a space that created creative hubs that brought like-minded people together, which in turn has helped nurture creative relationships. For example, in Jeddah, stand-up comedy shows are one of the few places where both genders are able to mix together in public, albeit for a few hours and at designated times (Zoeff, 2011). This may go some way to explaining why YouTube channels are more open minded about the mixing of genders in the workplace. It appears to be part of the culture of comedy. This creative open space led Albutairi to be involved in the first monologue based satire show on YouTube called Khambalah, which has over one million subscribers and over 90 million views (Khambalah, 2017). That in turn created a network of programmes (now known as Telfaz11) with over one billion views. Saudi Arabia may not have had a political revolution but there is certainly a social revolution underway which is impacting on

traditional structures and recently led to a traditional media outlet channel called Alarabiya commissioning work for Telfaz11.

I believe that satire is a covert means of making critical commentary on Saudi culture without being directly confrontational and was at the forefront of my mind when interviewing people. This was confirmed by A1, the director of Sa7i, who stressed that satire "is more acceptable" but it was also, to some extent, made "more provocative" due to the conservatism of Saudi culture. These sentiments were reinforced by A4, the presenter of Qawareer, a Sa7i spin-off show dealing directly with female issues. She said:

> In this nation, and this part of the world, comedy and satire works. When you laugh at something it really can help change attitudes. If we create a simple stereotype, over simplification, or generalisation, then viewers tend to be more critical of us. People are bored of direct criticism as well. Well-balanced humour is more acceptable and more likely to have an effect (personal interview, 2015)

A6, the General Manager of Telfaz11, simply described the production values of his channel as "comedy", not feeling the need to classify it in terms of a specific genre of comedy. The General Manager is in charge of commissioning programmes and so would have a clear idea about the style and content of programmes and so I rephrased my question in terms of the commissioning process to see if I could get a more specific answer. Again he spoke in general terms but reinforced there were no political motivations behind the commissioning process: "We use specific styles of entertainment because this is the main creative motivation behind our culture at the moment. We have no other agenda. Therefore, we see entertainment as the best platform to deliver information to the people" (Personal interview). This downplaying of intention has been found in similar studies. In their study of new Saudi media (NSM), Ramsey and Fatani (2016: 190) found that "in discussing what they do, creators of NSM content seem to refer simply to 'new media' (al-I'lam al-jadid), or 'social media' (al-I'lam al-ijtima l), as if their own specific forms of content were simply natural outgrowths of the medium, or as if it were simply obvious that the internet is the only appropriate outlet for the 'new' content they are creating".

As A6 had identified his commissions used "specific styles of comedy" I saw this as an opportunity to get a more explicit answer and so asked whether satire enabled his programmes to push boundaries regarding artistic expression, he said, rather coyly, "maybe" and then reiterated that "we don't care about anything other than entertainment style." When I asked whether he felt that the channel was having an impact on public opinion, in terms of generating new conversations and promoting free speech, he again was unwilling to commit and said **"**No", and instead was happier to talk about influence in less politically threatening terms: "we have contributed to popular culture, such as in helping to create new phrases, such as 'Darbawi' [an English equivalent would be a Boy Racer], that has become widely used. Such words were first created in our videos […] I don't think I could claim to create public opinions but we have certainly helped to create a new popular culture."

As a Saudi I understand why A6 is being coy about the role of satire because there are obvious political ramifications if he is perceived to be deliberately undermining authority. Due to Saudi rules and regulations, as the head of an organisation he is ultimately responsible. Therefore it was important that I spoke to one of the presenters of these shows. I asked A3, a female presenter of BanaTube, whether she considered herself to be a satirist. She said:

> Newspapers are serious, TV is serious and Radio is serious. We get enough from serious programmes. With new media such as Snapchat, YouTube and Instagram, we get *new* things and different perspectives. It is not acceptable to talk in an episode of five or ten minutes in YouTube about serious issues. Given the social pressures we live with, both politically and culturally, we need to find new ways to express ourselves. Personally, I am not a satirist, I have a serious personality, but I accept I may be labeled a satirist because my genre is black comedy. My goal is not to make you laugh. It's to have a positive impact and create change (Personal Interview).

In Habermas's analysis of the emergence of the public sphere we see many factors enabling conversations to emerge. One major structural change in Europe that helped facilitate public debate was the Licensing Act of 1695. As stated in a previous chapter

this gave publishers greater freedom of expression as they no longer had to gain consent for publication from the Queen and were able to trust their own judgement in terms of taste and what the public needed. Such structural changes enabled the emergence of publication such as Moral Weeklies, whose primary purpose was to spread ideas about the Enlightenment and arouse debate around ethical considerations rather than simply reproduce news (Ertler, 2012). As we have seen, Moral Weeklies had large subscriptions with Coffeehouses which provided copies for their customers. Digital media sites such as YouTube are a very similar major structural change as that of the Licensing Act of 1695 and are also facilitating public debate, much of which we will discuss in more detail further on in this chapter. In terms of whether they enable the producers to 'trust their own judgement' we will see that this is clearly the case in Saudi Arabia today, though I will demonstrate that strict changes in the law have only enabled this freedom because responsibility falls with the channel owner, thereby ushering in forms of self-censorship. The Moral Weeklies functioned to spread new ideas and not simply 'reproduce news'. This is also something that can be applied to YouTube channels which are issue-based. Finally, Moral Weeklies partly relied on coffeehouses subscribing to issues which were provided to customers in order to attract and keep them in the coffeehouse. Social networking sites offer a similar space for discussions, albeit virtually, and it is the subscription to the channels of Sa7i and Telfaz11 that enables the channels to raise advertising rates and produce more content. In this respect I believe that each new historical epoch creates new conditions and new means of expression to enable public spaces to emerge that facilitate public debates. The popularity of Saudi YouTube channels is no different.

6.4.2 Censorship and audience engagement

Satire has many functions and purposes, but it isn't something that presenters and general managers of organisations are prepared to admit to. At present it functions as a socially acceptable means of opening up otherwise ignored topics. But it is also a means of dealing with censorship. In this section I will look at the impact of censorship on debate and the implications this has for digital media creating a genuine public sphere. From my

interviews I have classified censorship into three sections: external censorship; censorship to protect an individual and advertising as censorship.

A) External censorship

A1, the General Director of Sa7i, claimed that he has never had to reject material due to subject matter that pushes boundaries. "The only time I have rejected something is if the content is bad or the idea is not convincing or the scenario is not well written. So it is technical rejection only." When I asked him whether satire has helped to push press freedom, A1 said:

> I don't think so, there are lines in Saudi Arabia that can't be crossed. There are certain issues in the country that have consensus, such as the political shape. There are no republicans or democrats as in Western democracies. The only disputes are; whether the country should be conservative or not, the level of participation in decision-making, and how to raise awareness of corruption and how to fight it. These are the main disputes in Saudi Arabia (Personal interview).

I found this response interesting as A1 has previously been accused of 'crossing a red line' with a sport television programme. This was broadcast on television which may explain why it courted more controversy. When I asked him whether he possibly 'got away with it' that time because he had powerful people behind him, he said "No, the issue in Saudi Arabia is the way that you approach and talk about an issue. If the government – the real people in charge – suspect that your criticisms are deliberately insulting or that you have an ulterior agenda, then you have a problem. But if these two areas are dealt with professionally, then you are ok."

Earlier in our interview A1 had said that he had not had to reject content due to it being controversial yet here we have a clear admission that the reason programmes have not been rejected is because the facts are presented in a particular style or format. By ensuring programmes are produced 'professionally' and that they use the right 'approach' there are ways that you can get around the censor. This form of subversion is no different to other forms of artistic expression over the centuries which have hidden their true meanings behind seemingly innocent content (Newth, 2010; Freedman, 2009).

One major problem that Saudi Arabia YouTube channels face, as well as all forms of media, is that a lot of the culturally sensitive 'red lines' are not actually firm laws (such as women not being allowed to drive). This creates ambiguity about what is and isn't acceptable behaviour. This means that YouTube Channels are in constant danger of offending someone, although A1 seemed to be relatively pragmatic and unconcerned by this: "The Ministry of Information and Culture don't like 'surprises' and so if a person is offended and they complain to the Ministry, they will probably pursue this further. Ok, no worries. We would then be asked to take the content down".

By 'person' he is referring to an important person. It is, in my opinion, very likely that 'important' people will continue to be offended because there is a cultural clash between the traditional orthodox elders and a younger, more globally connected youth. Earlier in the interview A1 said that he had never had to reject content that crossed a line but he did admit that in the past he had to take down two videos, presumably following a complaint from an important person. He explained that these were taken down because they were published at a very sensitive time and so could have been misinterpreted due to the political circumstances at the time. But what constitutes 'sensitive' is itself open to interpretation. One reason that A1 believes that Sa7i has been able to remain relatively independent and avoid censorship is "Because we have no political agenda". He explains that the channel has no political allegiance, such as to Muslim Brotherhoods, and one reason he sees as enabling this open attitude to culture is down to having a diverse range of staff from different backgrounds and tribes. "It's a very diverse organisation and we're very proud of that". The organisation actively employ a diverse range of staff from across the country in order to create a more balanced perspective and outlook.

Fundamental to retaining their independence and ensuring they avoided becoming partisan was the location of their offices in Jeddah. "This business we are doing can only flourish in a non-conservative society. Creativity can only happen when there are no social restrictions. Therefore, we chose to be in Jeddah because it is the most diverse city in the country and therefore has no restrictions." Diversity is something that came up time and again during our interview, and it is worth noting that Jeddah is one of the few

cities in Saudi Arabia whereby young people of different genders are allowed to mix for a few hours at designated public events (Zoeff, 2011).

However, a more important determinant in being able to express ideas is not so much the physical location, although clearly this is important, but the fact that these conversations take place online rather than in public. As Kraidy (2006) has argued, Saudi authorities are very adept at controlling 'big media' and therefore the success of the YouTube channels, particularly in terms of content, may simply be because they are small scale and therefore 'off the radar'. This may very well change as they grow in popularity and new forms of regulation develop to bring them more in line with big media.

B) Censorship to protect an individual

BanaTube is a show that is broadcast on the Qawareer channel. The blurb on the YouTube channel claims their purpose is "shedding light on the situation of women and their affairs and those things that are relevant to them." A4, the General Manager of the channel, sees the show as targeting three types of audience. These are: students, aged between 15-25 years-old, younger adult women "who have limited traditions and habits as well as confusion about their life and looking for answers everywhere" and the 'Life Starter', such as "a woman who has just started a job, recently become a mother or got married." It quickly becomes clear flicking through the uploaded videos that what is "relevant" to these women is emancipation and equality. Content includes opinions on women having the right to drive, being in public without a headscarf, and workplace discrimination. Ramsey and Fatani in Mellor and Rinnawi (2016: 196) argue that in terms of political opinions, BanaTube:

> Does not develop these into clearly articulated political claims or demands directed at any authority in particular […] material with a clear 'social' agenda appears to function more in the role of offering a public information service than advancing any kind of partisan agenda, well concealed or otherwise. In such material, the aim instead is to encourage and empower citizens to solve problems for themselves, without recourse to making claims on the state.

When I interviewed the presenter of BanaTube about editorial decisions relating to content, she supported Ramsey and Fatani's claims, stating:

> It can be anything as long as I steer clear of what people call the 'forbidden trinity,' by this I mean religion, sex and politics. In our culture, it is tradition and a custom to not discuss such issues before the government has spoken about it. At Sa7i I have a certain degree of freedom in that I am allowed to discuss some issues around these subjects but I choose not to. This is because I am a woman and I don't want to experience harassment on Twitter again (Personal Interview).

This will explain why "so far there have been no comments from the government". She is also aware that presenting a female show is very different to a male hosted show in terms of the level of freedom: "We have to think about every possible scenario and how the most smallest of details may cause offence or outrage on Twitter. These are still early days for female presenters and so pre-empting all possible problems is vital." However, this pragmatism shouldn't be underestimated. It became clear through our interview that this was a woman with a bigger and more patient agenda.

> I have more important priorities that I believe can bring about more meaningful change on a micro level, such as debating issues that affect woman such as persecution, sexual harassment and creating jobs for women that make a difference, or the many problems faced by school teachers. Many female school teachers are given jobs in schools that are very far away, meaning they have a male drive them for up to four hours a day just to get to work. I want women to be given jobs in schools closer to home and their family so that they aren't reliant on a man to drive them to work. These are the battles I choose to face as they are battles I have a chance of winning (Personal interview).

A3 then became very animated, talking about how installing women with confidence is vital if there is going to be change in society. This has become more evident recently with the inclusion of statistics at the end of an issues-led show: "We always put at the end of each show a message that explicitly states the overriding message or theme from each show. For example, when debating women's rights I might include percentages of people who have reported sexual harassment." This has direct implications for a public sphere as facts are vital to rational critical debate and suggest these issues are being taken seriously. YouTube channels are potentially filling gaps that have been ignored by mainstream media by providing information that may otherwise be ignored and giving a visual presence to the issues faced by women.

It is also worth stating that Qawareer is a female channel run by a female and presents female issues. This would have been unthinkable ten years ago. So the mere existence of this show represents a victory over cultural censorship. The mission of the channel, according to the General Manager A4, is threefold:

> To break/down and challenge stereotypes of Saudi females in Saudi Arabia. This stands on three foundations; it could be entertainment, information and empowerment. Entertainment would typically involve making fun of being single instead of being sad; allowing the woman to talk about these issues herself. Information is simple, such as tips and advice on various topics to help women become better informed. Empowerment is simply enabling individuals to think more clearly about how they can improve their life (Personal Interview).

However, let's be under no illusions that the diversification of programmes and presenters on the channel is a means of attracting and developing new audiences while driving traffic to their network. It is a mutually beneficial relationship, offering emancipation and financial remuneration.

A3 became the presenter of BanaTube after visiting a friend at the studio and meeting one of the producers who happened to be looking for a female presenter. At the time A3 was working for a commercial radio station in Jeddah and enjoyed the anonymity of radio. "It was a big step to suddenly be on screen and recognisable by lots of people, so I consulted with my family. My father was very supportive and so I signed the contract."

Coming from a broadcast journalism background A3 was "concerned that YouTube was not as credible or as powerful a medium as TV and radio." She has now been working at the channel for two years. It is testament to her resilience that she has remained on the channel as her initial introduction was challenging. Each new show is promoted by a 15 second trailer that is broadcast in the days leading up to the broadcast.

> When my clip was first broadcast it became a trending hashtag on Twitter for three days. People across Saudi Arabia used the hashtag to curse and insult me. What was really upsetting is they hadn't even

> seen the programme yet and they were judging me because I am a woman who dares to have an opinion on social issues that have traditionally been discussed only by men (Personal Interview).

This was a very difficult time and she felt a mixture of sadness and frustration. There was the added problem of "being publicly humiliated by strangers." She cites two reasons for remaining on the channel: the support of her family and the support of Sa7i. Sa7i did this by not giving in to the online trolls and helping her feel "valued for my opinions and artistic integrity".

> This fills me with confidence that spills out into every area of my life. There is also a social status that comes with being associated with Sa7i which means that people take you more seriously. Since presenting BanaTube I have received several offers from TV and Radio, as well as being regularly invited to events to share my experiences on panel discussions or as a guest speaker. Sharing my experiences with people in public is one way that I can help people gain the confidence to embrace new experiences and make a difference. This is how you slowly make change happen in society (Personal Interview).

I was interested as to how much freedom she would be given to articulate general concerns within an entertainment setting, and how she would be protected once expressing these beliefs. As it turned out, it was she who had to request censorship in the form of turning off the comments section that appeared below her broadcasts as she had received a lot of abuse and found this very stressful.

> When my clip was first broadcast it became a trending hashtag on Twitter for three days. I was frustrated. I cried. I became very sad. I didn't expect it to be so difficult. Nothing can prepare you for being publicly humiliated. But the fact that the show has now existed for two years and is very successful has helped me prove critics wrong [……] when my first show was published and I read all of the horrible comments my hands froze at that time, seriously. I then felt like my heart was about to stop. That's when I rang the channel and asked them to disable the comments or I would quit. (Personal Interview, 2015)

This has obvious implications for conceptions of a public sphere in that the comments fell short of rational critical debate. However, it also shows that internally, organisations are protecting staff and not simply removing them from shows due to social pressures. When

I asked the Qawareer channel manager A4, whether disabling comments was the right thing to do in that it stopped other people from responding and holding other people to account, she said:

> When we enable the comments, there is nothing but hate, just hate, they either talk about how the girl looks or what religion she is from or her morals and reputation, nothing about the show, no constructive criticism, it is just pure hate. I feel it demotivates the team and discourages them. I don't want people demotivated when we are in the early stages of our development as a company. Most of the comments are from men. (Personal Interview, 2015)

Qawareer is a hugely important channel as it is the only YouTube platform available to women to express their ideas. More importantly, all other entertainment shows on YouTube that address female issues are written by men. Therefore, this is the first channel to present issues from a female perspective. This seems to conform to Habermas's "ideal speech situation" (1990: 43-115) in that "every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in discourse." The show has also allowed women to "express their attitudes, desires and needs", albeit with a little caution rather than "hesitation." They can "question assertion" and "introduce assertion" into discourse, as is evident through conversations about issues which directly affect their life. Naturally there are restrictions but it is undeniably progress.

The fact that BanaTube received such an onslaught of offensive comments when it was first broadcast illustrates the difficulties and challenges these courageous women face in making these issues public. Although hatred and prejudice are not qualities associated with rational-critical debate, they can be used to bring about rational dialogue. It is opening up discourse. A4 was insistent throughout our interview that "We have to be strong. We have to keep making episodes about women's issues and show the hatred they experience everyday online, just because they are women. This is ignorance and our mission is to remain focussed on issues for women and to keep making programmes."

Habermas has received criticism from Nancy Fraser (1990) because his public sphere discriminates against marginalised groups and women and therefore is constituted by a "number of significant exclusions." She argues that "this network of clubs and

associations – philanthropic, civic, professional, and cultural – was anything but accessible to everyone. On the contrary, it was the arena, the training ground and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men who were coming to see themselves as a "universal class" and preparing to assert their fitness to govern." I believe that YouTube is bringing a broad range of people together, many of whom have been marginalised. This has the potential to politically mobilise individuals who may otherwise have felt isolated were they not exposed to people with similar ideas. Indeed, Habermas may have been criticised for the exclusive nature of his bourgeois public sphere, something he acknowledged, but this is not something that can be levelled at YouTube whereby it is accessible to all. But in being open to all, this brings problems, not least to a society where men and women are segregated. But, as I would find out in my interview with A4, even negative and derogatory comments represent progress. It is just unfamiliar turf.

> Another important point is that online men and women are interacting for the first time and so they are learning how to do this. This is why I think there are a lot of hateful comments. Even if a woman is talking about a simple issue she gets lots of bullying. Our solution is to make a programme about this. To show how these comments affect women. This is how you change people. I think a lot of people in Saudi Arabia are accepting of women, but online they are learning how to communicate this and this will take time (Personal Interview).

This observation is supported by Kraidy (2006) who has argued that new media has altered the information dynamics that shape public discourse. Kraidy examined public discourse surrounding *Star Academy*, the most popular and most controversial programme in Arab television history, and explored how dynamics of information among different media have shaped the Arab public sphere. This has since been supported by Murphy (2013: 294) who argued that satellite television was instrumental in opening up the "ramparts" of a traditionally closed society. "Now the internet has reduced those ramparts to rubble." For similar intents and purposes as *Star Academy*, BanaTube is challenging principles of Saudi social organisation by enabling the free mixing of sexes, albeit virtually.

A4 suggested that the people responsible for the trolling "know what to say, they know how to be heard, they know how to get noticed". Experience will bring greater confidence to deal with such personal attacks and skills to fight back, but it is encouraging to know she has the full support of the organisation. Perhaps when the comment sections on uploads can be turned back on again we can take this as a form of progress.

C) Advertising as censorship

The biggest benefit of making an observation was being able to witness a brand management meeting with KitKat, whereby staff discussed how and where to include the brand in a video. This is a large brand and so it was useful to be reminded just how big these channels have got and how many people can influence the content of production. It was here that I made a surprising discovery. Sa7i is not an independent channel as I presumed but is instead funded by a Dallah, a huge private company in Saudi Arabia. Given their budget and the money they have invested in Sa7i, it is easy to see why the production values of the videos are so high. But being owned by a large organisation has obvious ramifications for the level of freedom individual presenters can expect as clearly they will want to promote the image and reputation of the organisation.

Habermas (1991) has argued that the emergence of the mass media acting as a public sphere was problematic once advertising and business interests came to slowly replace or influence the content of newspapers or indeed the type of news discussed. When I confronted the General Manager of Sa7i about potential conflicts of interest as a result of having large brands sponsor shows, he was very open, admitting that "international advertisers do not like controversial content that could potentially damage their brand" but also emphasised that large brands, such as Pepsi, Doritos and KitKat offer up annual contracts, thereby giving the organisation security to plan and invest longer term. He was keen to point out that they were being approached by large brands because of their style of production, so this wasn't necessarily an issue. They were chasing him rather than the other way around. I think it is important to be realistic here. Any organisation that is funded through advertising will limit the degree to which ideas can be expressed. But

without this funding the organisation would not be able to develop in the same way. However, there were still reasons to be optimistic. The General Manager later revealed that "the memes that don't have international advertisements might have the stronger views, and we have some programmes that don't have any adverts at all." This suggests that freedom of expression is possible in some programmes and not so much in others. Either way, both programmes are able to coexist, appealing to their respective audiences.

The social media department of Sa7i is relatively small with three people. But these three people, according to A1, have been carefully selected as "they are all diverse, from different cities" and therefore enable a general understanding of the needs of the country. They engage audiences mainly through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Telegram, using official accounts so that the audience are aware of who they are talking to. Their main responsibility is to monitor every uploaded video and read through comments. These are then collated and analysed and written up in a weekly report which is published internally. I wasn't allowed to see it. From this they are able to ascertain general trends. This role is taken very seriously. A1 estimates that audience engagement equates to "30% of our work". This is not surprising given that these are the figures which will draw in the global brands and set advertising rates.

6.4.3 Impact on traditional media and professionalism

Perhaps the single most influential aspect of these YouTube channels on traditional media organisations is their ability to develop and maintain audiences. This is something newspapers will need to emulate if they are to survive in an age when we increasingly turn to digital for information. Presenters of YouTube shows almost immediately become microcelebrities, such as Fahad Albutairi from Telfaz11 and Ibrahim Saleh from Sa7i. This in turns increases viewing figures, which helps raise advertising rates. This money is then ploughed back into new content. These are well-run media organisations, with enormous potential to expand further. It was no surprise, then, to learn that many of the presenters I interviewed have been offered lucrative jobs by high end TV channels in the region. But merely having the right face on television is no indicator of success. Likewise, television does not appear to have the freedom that online content does,

perhaps because television is still viewed by an older audience whereas YouTube is tapping into the values and culture of the under 30 generation.

The initial perception I got from my observations is that there is a vast amount of work within these channels in order to produce one video. Sa7i produce between 16 and 17 videos per month. These are scheduled throughout the month so that there is regular content uploaded. Achieving these deadlines is important as each show has its own sponsor. Therefore most content is created in-house, although it is necessary to film some shots outside, depending on the subject matter. Each show has its own basic studio, making it simple and easy to record content. The studios are well equipped with the latest technology and typically include green screen rooms, the latest software packages and well-trained staff who have a supportive network. A General Manager is on hand to ensure the smooth flow of work from production to marketing, to ensure programmes meet tight schedules. This structure is what you would expect of any professional media organisation. In producing high quality media output, these channels are directly in competition with traditional media outlets. This is inevitably raising production values and audience expectations.

Small dedicated teams work tirelessly on individual shows to ensure a consistency in tone and output. A1, the General Director of Sa7i, describes this structure in terms of four corners of one whole: “The presenter is a corner, the content manager is a corner, the general director is a corner, and the production manager is a corner. These are the four corners who must always agree.” While the team remains relatively small, and everyone knows each other, it is perhaps more realistic to see these four corners meeting together. But this may change if the channel becomes more successful and the team needs to expand. A1 was also keen to emphasise that these “four corners” do not draw inspiration for their shows from topics raised in the newspapers. “The newspapers are dead, they became yesterday’s news” he joked. Their decisions, it would appear, are informed by employing a relatively youthful and digitally literate team who takes inspiration from their own lives while knowing how to tap into the Zeitgeist online.

Telfaz11 make between three and six videos a month. These can cost between 500 riyals to 50, 000 riyals and tend to last between 3 and 11 minutes. Like other YouTube channels they are funded through advertising and so need to work hard in order to increase and maintain viewing figures. They have exceeded one billion views and have over 12 million followers on Twitter. They are a confident organisation, comprised of 50 full-time staff and 50 part-time staff, who provide various placement opportunities to graduate students in order to equip them with the skills and experiences required for this sector. They do not feel the need to turn to newspapers for inspiration or topical stories because they know who their target audience are and what they need. These are 18-35 year-olds, for whom, according to A6, "entertainment is the best platform to deliver information to the people".

Telfaz11 are emblematic of flexible and reactive modern media organisation who have the foresight and confidence to tap into the latest trends in order to attract new audiences. For this reason, they only have loyalty to YouTube as long as it serves a function. A6 explains: "Our ambition is simple. We want to be anywhere where the public is. At the moment that's YouTube but we have no loyalty to YouTube. If youth move to another social media platform we will start there. Our only goal is to be able to share our content". A6 identifies his channel as being most closely related to the film industries and that "We are having an impact on the style of videos made and how these are broadcast and also the way in which videos are able to bring people together".

6.5 Conclusion

Sa7i and Telfaz11 are emergent media organisations that are constantly expanding their channels and presenters as and when the demand is there. I was particularly struck by the working dynamics of both organisations, particularly the way they actively encourage all staff, no matter what their role or position, to participate in the production and promotion of programmes, creating a real sense of unity. I would go as far as to describe them as like families, a supportive network whereby they all share the same goal – the potential to have a direct impact on the lives of ordinary citizens. Unlike ethnographic studies of larger media organisations, such as those performed by Tunstall (1993) and

Hemmingway (2007), the Saudi YouTube channels appear to be less influenced by top down processes. The real driver is the quality of content, and from this other considerations fall into place. This was particularly evident in Sa7i opting to locate their business in Jeddah, a far more diverse and open-minded city than the capital. This ensured Sa7i could employ a diverse range of staff, from a broad range of backgrounds, helping to ensure any content produced would reflect the diversity of their intended audience – engaged Saudi citizens. This is why visiting the channel was so important, as there is no way of understanding how important a diverse range of staff are when you watch a video on these channels.

A diverse range of staff has also been instrumental in enabling the channels to produce the right balance and blend of satire. Satire is absolutely fundamental to the success of the channel. Although my interviews and observation revealed a general cautiousness to be seen to be using this form of humour in a provocative way, clearly it provides a means through which difficult subjects can be broached. Indeed, just as the Pew Report in the United States found that satirical programmes such as the Colbert Report and the Late Show helped to provide civic education that was missing from general education, so too I found that the YouTube channels are helping to "teach their viewers about healthy public spheres and civic society" (Waisanen in Benacka, 2016 p.35). The use of satire in Saudi Arabia has been vital in providing citizens with information about their lives that was simply not being reported in newspapers or other traditional media forms due to strict regulations and cultural taboos. Another important finding from my visit was how the owners do not feel any loyalty towards the social networks that have provided them with their success. If in the future they close down their YouTube channel and move to another platform, it is, as A6 declared, because "we want to be anywhere where the public is". Print media, as a passive medium, does not have this flexibility to simply move elsewhere. Digital media does. And it is this exact flexibility and ability to adapt to the changing needs of audiences that makes it such a vital space for a public sphere. Digital media also provides a space for anyone to contribute to public discourse. Social media networks have the potential to allow individuals to express their subjectivity, to share their identity, to personalise their experiences, to interact with people from different

backgrounds. This marks it out as completely different to Habermas's bourgeois public sphere where access to modes of expression were more limited. However, there are ways in which print media can incorporate digital into the production of news reporting, such as sourcing information and audience opinion from social media networks, thereby deepening public discourse by bringing a diverse range of subjectivities together. Therefore, it is vital that I spoke to journalists to understand how they are adapting to this ever changing media landscape and to see whether social networks, rather than being a threat, can also help to improve professional journalism standards.

Chapter 7: Twitter's Impact on Journalism Practices

7.1 Introduction

Without doubt social media networks have imposed their presence firmly within Saudi Arabia's established media organisations. Social network sites like Twitter are not only changing the means of producing journalism, but also making changes to journalists' practices and behaviour online. This is because Twitter is becoming *the* place where journalism interacts with audiences, importing stories and posting content (Ahmad, 2010). Audiences in Saudi Arabia are increasingly *active* rather than *passive* as a result of embracing social media in Web 2.0. This has created a desire to put forward their views and to engage in debate and discussion online. A generation that has learned the importance of sharing information online, be it retweeting or simply voicing an opinion, has created a bank of online knowledge. Now a strong motivating force is to stand out from the crowd, to attract more followers or likes than your friends and to become the next opinion leader in this more democratic online playing field. Therefore, this has led traditional media platforms in Saudi Arabia to engage significantly with Twitter and other social media platforms by creating their own accounts and interacting with their audiences. Whether Twitter has the potential to act as a form of parliament (Worth, 2012) and bring about significant change to traditional media in Saudi Arabia, or to act simply as an alternative medium for delivering media content, only time will tell.

7.2 Interviews with press journalists

Having seen the structure of YouTube media organisations and exploring the ways in which these social networks are enabling conversations to emerge that are contributing to a digital public sphere I felt it was necessary to talk directly to newspaper journalists to understand the impact of social network sites, such as Twitter, on the traditional media of Saudi Arabia. The interviews explore what possible impacts the mass adoption and expression of social media might have on traditional journalism in terms of raising

professional standards and practices. I see this as integral to discussions surrounding spaces within the public sphere. Habermas has shown how in the eighteenth century a new civic society emerged which was partly due to growing rates of literacy, accessibility to literature, and a new kind of critical journalism (Habermas, 1991). It was through these new spaces that individuals were able to discuss issues that directly affected them, in particular the economics of free market capitalism.

In Saudi Arabia, a traditionally closed society, new spaces of conversation are emerging that are bringing private individuals, with their own subjectivities, together. Ideas expressed on social media are forcing newspapers to take note and listen, thereby widening the dissemination of cultural and political discourses. Economics is still imperative in that newspapers need to adapt to the concerns raised on these platforms or they face the real danger of no longer bearing relevance to the lives they purport to represent. The sheer volume of ideas and opinions being expressed online is creating new forms of dialogue that have the potential to either change the way in which journalists operate or potentially to bring about meaningful change.

The purpose of my conducted interviews was to hear how these changes are affecting journalists, how they have had to adapt the way they report on public affairs or source stories, and how social media is slowly being embedded into traditional print media. I wanted to speak to editors as well as journalists in order to ascertain the different pressures both feel and to see whether this is having a direct effect on their internal structure, as in documentation that outlines ways of engaging with readers online, as well as the external pressures of reporting news in a culture with a religious conservative monarchy at its centre.

It is important to reiterate once more that it is not possible to have a 'public sphere' in Saudi Arabia as detailed by Habermas (1989) because Saudi culture is constructed on a different value system to that of Western capitalism. But a conversation is starting to emerge in the digital sphere that is empowering citizens with the means to debate public matters that previously would have been determined solely by mainstream media.

Newspapers are starting to listen more intently to the population now that they have the means of accessing these opinions. I wanted to hear directly from key people within the newspaper industry who have been affected by these digital transformations in modes of expression. Were they fully aware of the significance of these changes in how people communicate or has it all happened so quickly that nobody has had time to reflect? Likewise, how has social media affected the production of news? Do journalists feel extra pressure now that they are more accountable and their stories can be fact-checked by multitudes of people eager to take the opportunity to express their opinions?

To understand any possible impacts I interviewed a series of senior journalists from six mainstream newspapers. In order to construct as vivid a picture as possible of the effects of social media on the profession, I spoke to people at various levels within a newspaper. This included editors-in-chief, content managers and senior journalists. I was concerned that editors may have a very different view of the direction of newspapers to the journalists and so interviewing both enabled me to cross check responses and ascertain whether standards and ethics were adapting to the new media environment. It is also worth noting that Saudi Arabia has no Freedom of Information law. Therefore there is no way of gaining public access to state-held information, particularly in relation to sensitive topics, and so it is difficult to ascertain exactly what pressures media organisations are under. Hence the need to interview a broad range of media professionals. The interviews focus on three key areas: the policies and regulations of newspapers in terms of expectations and behaviour of staff online; the extent to which newspapers feel they have the freedom to express ideas and opinions; and, finally, online interaction with readers. As with the YouTube interviews, the questions were designed and created in order to explore key issues, with a series of pre-planned sub-questions for each. It is important to note that although I had an agenda in terms of wishing to explore certain issues, I did not stick rigidly to a list of pre-set questions and was flexible and responsive where required. The interviews took place in Riyadh and Jeddah.

Prior to embarking on my doctoral thesis I was a correspondent for the *Aleqtisadiah* newspaper from 2003 until 2012. My main areas of correspondence included

international sport, especially football. As part of this role I have travelled the world covering global sporting events, such as FIFA elections and the World Cup. This has given me a solid understanding of varying approaches to news coverage from Western and Saudi journalists. Given my background experience working for a Saudi newspaper I was genuinely fascinated to understand exactly how Twitter might have transformed journalism practices and what kind of impact social media has had on the production of news. Clearly it brings both challenges and problems. I will now explore these issues in relation to three categories: policies and regulations; press freedom; online interaction and accountability.

7.2.1 Policies and regulations

From the interviews I found that five of the six newspapers have no official regulations or general guidelines for their staff to follow when using social media networks. Likewise none provide, or have been given, a specific policy or training from senior management with regards to expected online behaviour. This is absolutely vital in managing expectations and ensuring staff are protected when disputes arise. It was also apparent that newspaper publishers do not see a distinction between a journalist – a paid employee representing an organisation – and their personal use of social media platforms. The general attitude in all of my conducted interviews was that social media is something that everybody does in their spare time and it is unfair to tell someone how they ought to use it. A personal Twitter account is a personal account: it has nothing to do with your employer or your place of business. Clearly there are lots of potential problems here, not least that individuals are under the impression that they can say what they like online but they may be punished for this retrospectively if their comments offend the wrong people. It's interesting to compare this relaxed attitude towards social media to a study by Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton (2011) who analysed the content of 22,000 tweets by journalists and found that the journalists more freely express opinions which contests the journalistic norm of objectivity (impartiality and nonpartisanship). The study also concluded that tweeting had two additional features: it provided accountability and transparency regarding how they conduct their work, and enabled them to share more user-generated content with their followers. The study also found that journalists who

worked for more established 'big' media, such as national newspapers, national television news divisions or cable news networks were less likely to share personal information or provide information about their jobs, or to engaging in discussions with other tweeters than those journalists who worked for less 'elite' news organisations.

My findings contradict those of Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton (2011). Twitter use in Saudi Arabia encompasses all facets of life and there doesn't seem to be any boundaries, at least according to my interviews. This open attitude towards self-expression echoes sentiments raised by A1 of Sa7i when he said that "The Ministry of Information and Culture don't like 'surprises' and so if a person is offended and they complain to the Ministry, they will probably pursue this further". Perhaps one reason why journalists are free to do as they choose with their personal Twitter accounts is because self-censorship is the norm. If you decide to push boundaries it is your business. If you get into trouble it is your business.

The journalists I spoke to confirmed this when they stated they "might face punishment" from their organisation if they write an article that brings disrepute to the reputation of the publication. "Punishment" translates as being sacked. The journalists were very matter-of-fact about this and didn't seem to expect their mangers or editors to support them with necessary training or advice regarding content and tone of stories. It was very much deemed an individual's responsibility to regulate themselves.

B3 is the Assistant Editor-in-Chief for *Aleqtisadiah* newspaper. When asked to comment on journalists' online behaviour he had a very relaxed approach and did not seem to feel that an employee's personal behaviour and opinions have anything to do with their professional conduct. "We primarily consider social networking accounts for any journalist working on our newspaper to be their own personal account. Of course we would like them to conduct themselves in a professional manner online in line with the newspaper policy". When I mentioned that there is not a document clearly outlining what the 'newspaper's policy' is, and that journalists therefore do not have guidance on acceptable behaviour, B3 dismissed this. The rule that appears to govern online behaviour is simple: do what you like but if it creates a media storm, prepare to face the

consequences. Clearly this approach needs to change if the Saudi media is to raise professional standards. It needs to be a top-down process rather than being left to the discretion of employees. It will be interesting to see whether this changes over the next ten years as social media becomes more embedded in everyday life and therefore becomes beholden to more stringent regulation from the Ministry of Information and Culture.

B3 is more than aware that behaviour online can be controversial and cause great dishonour to family, friends and employers. Twitter, in particular, can lead to some heated exchanges online and has the potential to inadvertently drag organisations into the discussion, such as #hashtag debates around fair pay. But he appears to accept, rather casually, that this is a consequence of use. When asked to expand on this he said: "There are some colleagues who enter into altercations online and tweet comments that are clearly partisan. But we do not consider what is being said on a colleague's personal social networking account to be damaging to the newspaper. It is their opinion" (Personal Interview, 2016).

On one level this attitude appears to be incredibly liberal, suggesting a degree of personal freedom of expression. But the fact that somebody can be punished retrospectively for their behaviour after being given no guidance on expected behaviour is unfair. A simple solution to this problem would be a disclaimer on personal Twitter accounts, as is the norm with BBC journalists. This would simply state: 'The views expressed on this account are mine and not that of my company', or 'retweets are not endorsements'. There are tools available to do this for you, such as 'disclaimify' and so putting in place simple structural guidance would enable better journalistic standards (Sonderman, 2012) but most importantly help protect journalists. However, there is research that suggests a more relaxed attitude towards social media presence can help build up audiences. Holton and Lewis (2011) performed content analysis of 22,000 tweets and examined the use of humour by 430 of the most followed journalists. Their findings indicate that in informal social spaces like Twitter humour is closely associated to sharing personal life details which in turn enables more interpersonal discussion. If casual everyday observations help

to create better bonds with followers then there is a greater chance these followers may engage with their articles.

When I asked two senior journalists – B8 from *Alyaum* newspaper and B9 from *Alhayat* newspaper – whether they had ever received any guidance regarding conduct for online behaviour they both said *'No'*. When I asked them whether they thought they should have guidance in case there was ever a problem they both said that they had never been in trouble before and so seemed unconcerned about it. B8 did mention that he identified himself as a journalist on his Twitter bio which suggests an awareness of professionalism. But this wasn't because he wanted to identify with a specific publication, rather so that people he communicated with online would know that they could give him information that could develop into a story. This is important in terms of transparency, a vital standard in professional journalism.

Overall the interviews with journalists confirmed that there are no social media regulations or guidelines for traditional newspaper journalists that explicitly explain expected online behaviour, and therefore, controls and sanctions are dealt with as and when they arise. The only exception I found to this prevailing casual attitude was from *Okaz* newspaper. When I raised the question of regulation with B2, the Editor in Chief, he stopped me in the middle of the interview and had his secretary fetch two books. He appeared to be very proud when these documents were brought over and said:

> We have made two documents that we see as important for the press in *Okaz*, a Style Guide for our digital content and newspaper and also a code of honour document. Every journalist I employ must be committed to the code of honour as a term of employment. In addition to this there is a clause in the contract of employment in how to use social networking sites. If anyone fails to comply with these rules then we have several options, including a quick exit out of this institution (Personal Interview, 2016).

Both books were A5 in size and were just under 30 pages in length each. The style guide is the kind of documentation you would expect with any publication and outlined the in-house style enabling the publication to develop a brand identity. The code of honour is an explicit document regarding employee expectations. This

included very general details about social media behaviour. It is important to mention that when I asked B2 to elaborate on the clause in the contract, he said he didn't want this on record. He did clarify that the clause had resulted in greater respect for the organisation in the sense that people's behaviour online and in private was less critical of the organisation that they represented which he felt was a reasonable request given that *Okaz* paid their wages. Presumably the code of conduct was directly related to the reputation of the organisation and broadly falls in line with social media policy at British institutions such as universities, rather than a more general breakdown of expectations with regards to freedom of expression. Future research may like to pursue this further by analysing a range of tweets from journalists at this newspaper to try to determine exactly what boundaries the code of honour produces.

In chapter four I explored how the *New York Times* and *Guardian* newspaper are adapting to a changing digital landscape and encouraging staff to engage with audiences through social media. Out of the representatives of the six Saudi newspaper staff I interviewed, only *Okaz* provided social media guidelines for journalists. The interviewees suggest the reason other organisations haven't done this is simply because Twitter is the main space through which Saudis communicate with one another and therefore there is not the need to encourage journalists to use this medium. It is a part of everyday life. However, this may very well change, particularly if and when new laws are brought in that impact on online behaviour. As discussed in chapter four, Kroll (2015) argued that in terms of newsgathering, journalism in the digital age still requires the same set of skills it always has. Content needs to be filtered, verified, edited and analysed. The role of the journalist remains fundamental to quality control. But I would argue in Saudi Arabia these principles work in reverse. Journalists have not been as vigorous with sources and content because they have been the dominant producers of news. But this is changing due to social media which is holding journalists accountable for not filtering stories, for not verifying or diversifying sources. It is the presence of

masses of opinions which is having a transformative effect on the production of news.

7.2.2 Press Freedom:

Saudi Arabia is not a democratic country and therefore the level of press freedom is low compared to Western societies as is evident by Press Freedom ranking (Freedom House 2016). But there have been some changes in the law that have enabled slow progressive change such as the Fourth Printing Law in 1982 which contained 46 articles. Awad (2010) sees three of these articles as being particularly important. The 'Confirmation of freedom of expression within Islamic law and the State constitution' is suggestive of a certain degree of expression, albeit within very narrow parameters. The 'Elimination of the prior restraints and censorship imposed on newspapers before printing' alludes to more freedom in that previously newspapers had to send a draft copy of the paper to the General Directorate for Broadcasting, Press and Publication for approval before publication. However, a third clause explains why this restraint has been removed: 'Attribution of prime responsibility for any material published in each newspaper to the respective Editor-in-Chief.' This is worth bearing in mind when I discuss my interviews further on.

The most recent report from Freedom House (2016) ranks Saudi Arabia as 29/30 for the legal environment (with 30 the worst), 32/40 for political environment (40 being the worst) and 86/100 for press freedom (with 100 the worst). It is worth stating the report's account of Saudi Arabia's legal environment at length:

> Article 39 of the 1992 Basic Law, which covers mass media, does not guarantee freedom of the press, and the authorities are given broad powers to prevent any act that may lead to disunity or sedition. The Basic Law also prohibits publishing materials that harm national security or that "detract from a man's dignity." Defamation is a criminal offense, and truth is not a recognized defense in such cases. The 2009 cybercrimes law criminalizes defamation on the internet. Any form of expression that insults Islam is potentially punishable by death, as is the crime of apostasy. The 2003 Printing and Publication Law governs the establishment of media outlets and stipulates penalties for press violations, such as fines and imprisonment. A 2005 royal decree transferred jurisdiction over the media from the court system to the Ministry of Culture and Information, which is

> authorized to shut down any outlet that it finds to have violated the press law. In addition, since 2011, all online newspapers and bloggers have been required to obtain a special license from the ministry. In practice, a variety of courts hear cases against traditional and online media outlets.

In 2011 a decree amended several articles of the 2003 media law. These amendments should be seen within the context of the Arab Springs and the fear of uprisings gaining momentum across the Middle East (Katz, 2014). The amendments included: banning the reporting of news that contradicts Sharia (Islamic Law); anything that undermines national security or promotes foreign interests; and, as is expected of a religious monarchy, the prohibiting of slander against religious leaders, which basically means not being critical of their work. Consequences for violating these articles are severe. It includes: imposing lifetime professional bans on journalists and levying fines of up to 500,000 riyals ($133,000) for violations. In terms of censorship, publications are barred from publishing anything harmful to the state and the coverage of trials without prior authorization from judicial officials. Needless to say, it is highly unlikely a judicial official will allow open expression of certain topics. Due to self-censorship, many publications will not even raise the issue for fear of how it will personally reflect on them. Indeed, Alabtah (2002) goes as far as to suggest that direct censorship has changed into self-censorship, arguing that the government gatekeepers have successfully made a gatekeeper of every citizen.

In February 2014 a new law was introduced called 'The Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and Its Financing'. This law defines terrorism as any action intended to "insult the reputation of the state," "harm public order," or "shake the security of society." These are vague descriptions and open to interpretation. The main fear is that it may lead to violation of human rights under the pretext of combating terrorism (ESOHR, 2015). But for the purposes of this research my emphasis is on how this is leading to the criminalization of ordinary journalistic activity. There have been numerous examples of this already as a result of the law. In December 2015, Zuhair al-Kutbi was sentenced to four years in prison after he called for political reforms, such as a constitutional monarchy, on the satellite TV channel *Rotana Khaleejia* on 22 June 2015. When asked

on the show "How successful was the National Dialogue in reforming Saudi society form within?" he replied "Frankly speaking, it was about zero percent [….] It was nothing but hot air". His sentence also banned him from travelling abroad for 5 years or any 'writing' for 15 years, which included reference to comments on social media. Given he was 62 at the time the punishment has more or less silenced him (BBC, 2015). Zuhair al-Kutbi had previously been placed in an asylum due to his outspoken political beliefs. The host of the show, as well as another guest, were banned from making media appearances for an unspecified amount of time, presumably to bring these conversations to a close. To compound matters, and to reinforce this new legislation, further regulations were issued in March 2014 that allow the police to make arrests for virtually any criticism of the government. This includes the banning of articles that "promote" protests, meetings, or group statements, as well as anything that "harms the unity or stability of the kingdom by any means." Underpinning all of this legislation is the overarching targeting of "sowing discord in society." Given the severity of these changes it would seem that there is a greater need of guidance than ever before to protect journalists and staff to ensure they do not fall foul of the law.

Social media networks such as Twitter complicate these problems, not least in that it enables ordinary people to voice discontent. It is becoming a valued space that's enabling conversations to emerge that simply weren't possible before as well as an invaluable tool for journalists to import and export their stories. Therefore, one of the aims of my interviews was to explore whether Twitter has the potential to push the boundaries of press freedom in Saudi newspapers, given the backdrop of severe legislation outlined in the 2016 Freedom House Report. I was particularly interested to see how aware journalists were of these issues and whether it affected news-gathering techniques that are increasingly turning to Twitter for inspiration.

Despite the legislation previously outlined, all interviewed journalists agreed that, to varying degrees, Twitter has helped open up press freedom in Saudi Arabia. The sheer volume of ideas being shared online has inevitably meant that Saudi newspapers are more willing to discuss 'sensitive' topics that they could not discuss before. By before, they are

referring to the Internet before Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, so pre 2005. For example, B4 and B5 cited stories that were published about women driving as examples of newspapers being more reactive to issues raised on social media. Although there is no official law that bans women from driving, deeply held religious beliefs prohibit it, with Saudi clerics arguing that female drivers "undermine social values" (The Week, 2016). Publishing this could be seen as an example of "sowing discord in society" and also goes against the 2011 decree of "slander against religious leaders". Similarly, it could be perceived as promoting 'protests', which the 2011 legislation was created for in light of the Arab Springs. There is a complete contradiction between the law and working practices and perhaps highlights the state of transition the country is in.

Whatever the harsh realities of the law may be, the perception is that things are changing as a result of social media. B5, the electronic media director at *Alriyadh Newspaper,* believes that Twitter is creating a more diverse and transparent relationship with citizens.

> Yes the effect exists, Twitter has made the media and newspapers move more towards the people. I mean, taking their views into consideration. Previously the newspapers were written with officials in mind; for example, do not write this so as not to offend a particular party. Do not write this so as not to make an official angry, and so on. Now the goal has become more to gain the readers' trust, this is the area where Twitter has impacted (Personal Interview. 2016).

From this we can hear the genuine concerns of a media manager eager to develop audiences in a pragmatic fashion. The implication is simple: if we don't give the people what they want, why would they engage with the publication? These sentiments were reinforced by B3, the editor in chief assistant at *Aleqtisadiah* newspaper. When asked whether social media had genuinely impacted on press freedom he was unequivocal:

> Yes, absolutely yes, and every other social networking platform has, especially Twitter in Saudi Arabia. Many printed newspapers would not have dared to put forward certain topics, but after Twitter came to the table we find ourselves discussing whether women should be allowed to drive or the subject of the movie theatre, etc. We can also now talk about economic issues, such as the state budget and corporate corruption and corruption in some of

> the local councils. Newspapers now address these issues largely where it was difficult to deal with them in the past. And because of the emergence of Twitter it has made them easy.

Again, this contradicts legislation. It may very well be that newspapers are acting as a kind of safety valve in the sense that they are able to take 'open' topics online that have the potential to be emotive and sanitise them in print. There is no way of knowing what pressure is being exerted by the government, especially given the newly created role of the Ministry of Culture and Information. I think it is fair to assume that some discussions have gone ahead between publishers and government. As we have seen with the Fourth Printing Law (1982) the Editor-in-Chief is now held responsible for publishing offensive content. Therefore Editors are under enormous pressure, both from their readers who demand certain topics to be discussed, and the government who will penalize them for taking issues too far. In some respects informal conversations on Twitter help to bridge this gap. Newspapers are trying to create a happy medium whereby they can argue that they have the ability to diffuse potentially explosive topics by directing the way in which it is discussed. This level of complexity is simply not possible in a medium such as Twitter whereby opinions are constrained to 140 characters. This may also explain why journalists have not experienced regulation of their Twitter accounts as it is deemed more of a personal tool than a vehicle for serious dialogue. However I will argue in chapter eight that to believe this is to misunderstand the fragmentary nature of the public sphere in the digital age. And, most important of all, does it really matter what the incentives are for covering controversial issues in print? The mere fact that they are being discussed is suggestive of a gradual eroding of social norms and expectations.

B8 of *Alyaum* sees ordinary people voicing discontent on Twitter as vital to transforming press freedom. He argues that it has "enabled all sections of society and cultures to play the 'role' of the media, offering criticisms, solutions and reasons for societal problems. The average citizen can speak up and convey an event, to share public information, such as an accident or a fire somewhere." By all

intents and purposes this sounds like the essence of a public sphere, a layered public sphere, whereby different people come together to create a collective conversation that will have varying impacts and consequences for the rest of society. In terms of objectively determining whether this increased dialogue has led to political change, a future study way wish to compare how many hashtags led to direct changes in the law, or conversely, whether they led to arrests.

B7, of *Okaz* newspaper, was more cautious in her response, arguing that "without a doubt, this (Twitter) has helped in the rise of freedom of opinion and expression of views, although some of the views are offensive and include bickering tongues that impose opinion by force." This sounds similar to what the General Manager of BanaTube said in terms of certain people knowing how to arouse emotions and opinions online and why she decided to remove the comments section on videos by her female presenters. B7 went on to say that just because an opinion is expressed on Twitter it does not mean that it helps enhance a debate. When I pushed her further on this she seemed to suggest that the motive for expressing ideas online was for individuals to raise their own profile and increase their own followings. There is no doubt some truth to this and to some extent must be expected of a medium whereby everyone is fighting to be heard and appreciated. But I think the same could be said of newspaper journalists and political commentators in traditional media who have built up reputations through their contrarian persona. However, B7 did concede that vanity aside, "overall we can say that (Twitter) is creating a climate that is raising the 'ceiling' and raising freedom of opinion."
B6, who also works for *Okaz* newspaper, sees these mini celebrities on Twitter as useful in helping to determine trends and mood. People who are able to generate large followings are then able to trigger debates and discussions which her organization is then able to pick up on. Twitter, then, is vital in not only starting conversations but providing sources for newspapers to then give these conversations more depth and analysis.

> Yes, definitely, Twitter has increased press freedom as there are huge discussions on Twitter between key figures, such as celebrities and key

> people in the society […] That kind of discussion, you know, pushed newspapers to make stories through Twitter and through this kind of discussion between these famous figures […] Actually, we also have to understand that open discussion and the level of freedom when discussing such a subject in Twitter goes beyond the scope of our newspaper because digital conversations are so wide open and don't have the restrictions and boundaries of the printed page […] So for example, every time an issue is raised on Twitter, we are then able to report on it in a way that we wouldn't have been able to do before because of restrictions. This also allows us to bring Twitter users to our paper to continue the conversation at length. This means that we (newspaper) change our style to be close to what's happening inside social media and the level of freedom users experience (Personal interview, 2016).

According to Almaghlooth (2013) Saudi Arabia has a shortage of research centres which means that the country lacks quantifiable data. In particular, there is no obvious mechanism to measure the popularity of a person, policy or organization. Almaghlooth argues that "Twitter has served to fill this gap in knowledge. A person's number of Twitter followers indicates how popular he or she is and increasing this number has become a priority for users in the country." Therefore Twitter enables a form of quantitative analysis and an incentive for individuals to push debates in order to build their following. Almaghlooth goes as far as to suggest that "Twitter users…are willing to cross red lines and to provoke their own arrest by angering the authorities, just to gain more followers". This in turn has helped newspapers identify key influencers who have the potential to generate popular topics for their publications. Simply being provocative for the sake of gaining popularity is not an ideal ingredient of a rational public sphere, but it is the ripples that these opinions create that has the potential to lead, at some point, and on some medium, to meaningful conversations and discussions that may very well bring about gradual change.

In addition to this 'celebrification' of individuals, B2 of *Okaz* newspaper identified two key events that have led to a gradual widening of freedom of expression online. The first he sees as 9/11, as newspapers "provided a space for opinion" with regards to global politics that simply would not have been discussed before. The second major change he identifies is the emergence of social networking sites that he identifies as having two functions. Firstly, they "give you the margin of freedom"

in that they enable papers to discuss topical issues, "sometimes issues even the government does not look at". Following that, "when it is published in an official newspaper it has a greater impact" in terms of getting officials to listen. It is clear to me from these observations and others that each medium has an important role to play in helping a public sphere to develop. Social media is very good at provoking conversations around topics that newspapers are cautious of publishing as they are deemed too controversial. This enables readers to carry on certain conversations as and when needed. Therefore when we talk about press freedom we need to think about this in terms of complex, interrelated layers: social media that facilitates spaces for expression, raises awareness of issues, gives voice to the many and newspapers that are able to react and feed off of these issues. Both are reliant on each other. I will explore this idea further in my concluding chapter.

7.2.3 Online Interaction and accountability

Twitter has put a lot of pressure on traditional newspapers to interact with their audiences in order to create a more dialogic relationship. Twitter offers a new space of expression for the public that has led to Faisal Abdullah telling the *New York Times* in 2012 it was a new form of 'parliament'. In Saudi Arabia, the public is gradually moving away from traditional media platforms as their first point of reference and instead embracing Twitter as the primary source for obtaining information. They now have the highest proportion of active Twitter users online (Mari, 2013) Twitter gives users a voice as they are able to criticise, complain, and comment via their social media platforms. This change in modes of expression has meant that newspapers have had to dramatically adapt the ways through which they articulate information in order to engage a more digitally literate and active audience. This section will explore the techniques and tools now being deployed by newspapers in order to maintain audiences. The following extracts from interviews refer to the changing role of journalism with a particular focus on how journalists interact and engage with spheres of conversation generated on Twitter via hashtags and trending news topics.

B2, the Editor in Chief, *Okaz* newspaper, explained that a hashtag or #hashtag in itself is not enough reason to generate an article in his newspaper. He was after specific types of stories:

> We always interact with any topics that discuss public services. To give you a simple example, there was a Hashtag some time ago on the subject of cutting down old trees in Jeddah city by the local municipality. It was clear that this incensed many people though the comments being posted and so we began interacting with users and asking questions. This triggered a kind of investigative journalism and we discovered that many people simply did not want ancient trees of more than 30 to 40 years old being cut down because they represented an important part of the city's identity (Personal Inteview, 2016).

Hashtags are a simple means of curating comments and directing users to specific topics. But there is still a "taboo" (a red line) about what can be discussed. B2 explained that the taboo subjects are sex, religion, and politics. Despite stating this, he believes that these taboos are becoming more porous. The sheer volume of outpouring online is slowly blurring the boundaries of what constitutes acceptable conversation. When I raised this contradiction he said "I think that in politics anything can be discussed except rare topics". He also believes that Twitter has enabled deeper conversations around religion and that this too is acceptable "within constants". By constraints he means that you cannot question the word of Allah. But it has become more acceptable to debate certain issues, resulting in greater dialogue between religious leaders. In terms of sex, he believes it is "everywhere on Twitter". The only thing he is not prepared to engage with is discussions "that may lead to hatred or sectarianism or division and fragmentation of the community".

Although it is clear that attitudes are changing and people are being more open than before, it does raise the need for clearer guidelines regarding online behaviour. For example, how can you determine what type of discussion may "lead to hatred or sectarianism"? What I believe he is referring to is the level of engagement he is prepared to go into on a topic. The implication is to retreat when a topic becomes too emotive or could potentially lead to punishment. This only draws an end to the conversation in terms of the newspapers engagement.

For B3 the assistant editor in Chief for *Aleqtisadiah* newspaper, online interaction on Twitter has changed journalism in two respects. Firstly, it has a pragmatic function in terms of being "utilized as a news source" which in turn affects "the way in which we write stories". But the major change is in terms of immediacy. It is no longer good enough to simply publish a story in a newspaper for it to be read the next day. Now, the story needs to be constantly updated online, adding additional information missed in print media. This has a function in terms of generating new content for an online audience. B3 estimates that "today I consider our online news can be read by a minimum 100,000 Twitter users. This is a conservative estimate as we have two million followers." Twitter, then, fuels the insatiable appetite for information being generated online and allows 24/7 engagement with audiences.

B1, the Editor in Chief of *Alyaum* newspaper, reiterates a recurring sentiment from all of the interviews in that "Twitter is important to read public opinion, trends, and topics that are of importance to people. It is good for our journalists in terms of them being able to pick up possible stories, push these conversations, and to investigate them further where needed." His only reservation in pursuing a trending topic is when "the credibility of the user is in question or information posted is from an unknown source".

What he is referring to is the basic ethics of professional journalism: fact-checking and ensuring your sources are credible. To do this they have some simple processes that they follow. This includes checking other Tweets to ascertain whether this is someone being provocative for the sake of it (such as to gain followers), and their background (as in their motive for taking a particular stance). So for example, is the person complaining about health somebody who works at a hospital, such as a doctor, and do they therefore have direct knowledge and access to working conditions? If they are able to locate the Tweeter through their digital profile then the newspaper tries to contact them directly for further comment, thereby giving them the opportunity to expand on what may otherwise be emotive Tweets. This conversation will also enable the editor or journalist to pursue other lines of enquiry in order to develop a more complex newsworthy story. These processes

may not be outlined in a formal document, such as a code of conduct, but they are processes that suggest a rigorous commitment to professional journalistic standards.

Another issue regarding hashtags is determining which ones are worth pursuing. B1 will only do this based on "the seriousness of the subject" and this is also determined by whether "it relates to the concerns of the newspaper and our readers' interests." The reason for this is because of the popularity of hashtags. There are so many generated that it would be impossible to follow them all. Therefore journalists need to evaluate what is newsworthy, just as they always have done.

From all of my interviews it was easy to conclude that an online presence is absolutely invaluable for journalists in terms of generating stories, cross checking stories, and engaging with their audience, be that formally or informally. As B6 states: "The current generation is more adapted to using social media. This is how they really interact in society right now. I know it is a 'virtual' society but it's a real society as well." Given the changing dynamics in how people communicate and obtain information, journalists now need to ensure their message is heard across a diverse range of mediums. B6 is very explicit about this. "I think the majority of this generation are using social media and they exist mainly in social media. So when a journalist wants to present his work, it is not enough to present it in the newspaper only. You have to be very active online, especially in social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and other channels."

7.3 Conclusion

In their study of the use of Saudi Twitter hashtags, Winder (2014) has argued that just as Twitter is giving voice to the masses to criticize Saudi political culture, so too Saudis are also using it to defend conservative values and to support the preservation of traditions. Therefore Twitter is providing a forum whereby Saudis can access lively and engaging debates in a way that wasn't possible before. Opposing viewpoints are fundamental to a healthy public sphere. The fact that the government and key decision makers of Saudi society are turning to this medium and responding to criticism is a positive sign as it

means that these ideas are being taken seriously. People are starting to listen. Indeed, the highest-profile businessman in the Kingdom, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Al-Saud, was an early investor in Twitter, purchasing a $300 million stake in the firm in 2011. In 2013, he was adamant that Twitter "has to remain an open forum for everyone…I'm totally against anybody who tries to control or censor Twitter or any other social media, even if it is governments. It's a losing war" (Sleiman, 2013). Stephen Lacroix (2012, 2967) has previously argued that Internet forums constitute a "veritable Saudi Parliament" whereby individuals have been able to "freely discuss the country's political, religious and economic affairs." Clearly, Saudis need a space in which to speak and at the moment, the most viable option is online.

Winder has suggested one of the possible reasons for Twitter's popularity is that Twitter connects with Saudi cultural traditions. He puts forward the argument that Twitter lends itself perfectly to the oral communication and casual conversation in the majlis. "The short bursts on Twitter, where each post is limited to 140 characters, are perhaps more relevant to Saudi societal norms than writing a long-form essay. This may explain why blogging has not reached the same level of popularity as Twitter and other social media such as WhatsApp that focus on brief snippets of dialogue" (2014: 4). This seems to touch on Castells' observation that social movements are a permanent feature of any society, and as such "they adopt values and take up organizational forms that are specific to the kind of society where they take place" (Castells, 2007).

I find this idea of Twitter somehow mirroring the culture of the *majils* very interesting as a constant criticism of Twitter is that it does not facilitate complex social dialogue (Keen, 2011) and therefore it can't be considered as a part of the public sphere (Fuchs, 2014). But when seen from this perspective, as somehow tapping into the specific traditions of a specific culture, as drawing upon centuries of culture and communication, I think Twitter becomes an even more viable means of a public sphere. It may also explain why I found such a relaxed attitude towards using Twitter by the newspaper journalists I interviewed, as it is deemed no different to conversation in the majils. It is a personal opinion. Therefore it is not something that needs to be regulated.

But there are clearly issues in any form of online conversation, particularly in determining who is speaking. Anonymity may give people the courage to speak up and express ideas but anonymity also brings with it other problems, most notably computer generated responses in the form of bots. Dunham & Melnick (2008) Marc Owen Jones (2016).

Social media networking sites like Twitter and YouTube have had a profound impact on the mechanisms and methods of communication throughout societies across the world. In terms of communication this has had profound ramifications, not least in shifting power from powerful bodies (Governments, traditional media organisation) to the individual. The traditional one way flow of communication that epitomised industrial societies centred around the mass media has now diversified in multiple directions. Castells (2007, 2009, 2013) has demonstrated that communication within the network society is comprised of a global web of horizontal networks that "include the multimodal exchange of interactive messages from many to many both synchronous and asynchronous" (Castells, 2007: 246). This has complicated modes of expression, whereby three forms of communication (interpersonal, mass communication, and mass self-communication) are able to "coexist, interact, and complement each other rather than substituting for one another" (Castells, 2013: 55).

As my research has shown, ordinary Saudi civilians are empowered by these new networks that enable them to both consume and produce messages that directly resonate with their lived experiences. Saudis are not so much experiencing a power shift but an absolute revolution in communication. What is said and done online may not directly lead to change, it may not overthrow a government as it has done elsewhere in the world with the Arab Springs, and crossing red lines and taboos may be a very slow process given that crossing these lines could ultimately lead to death, hence the need to subvert ideas through satire and humour. But it has, undeniably, got people talking, be it directly or indirectly to those in power or simply to one another. It is uniquely transformative by the simple fact of enabling forms of expression that simply weren't possible before. Indeed,

(Al-saggaf & Simmons 2015) argue that "social media may be the only way to communicate to the government." There is no 'may' about it. Social media is the 'only' way to communicate with government and therefore is enabling a form of public sphere to develop. A public sphere initiated through social media creates what Fraser (1990) describes as "a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk." In this theatre emotions run high, as should be expected of people given voice for the first time. It is vital that we bear this in mind when analyzing Saudi culture rather than fixating on whether every comment, hashtag or word leads directly to rational debate.

Traditional media has failed to raise issues regarding governance due to regulation and censorship by the Ministry of Information. Therefore, it is no wonder that so many people have turned to social media for information. As we see more and more people adopt and embrace these networks I believe that we will see more lines crossed and more ideas expressed. Newspapers, as my interviews suggest, have perhaps been too slow to adapt. They are in danger of no longer having relevance to younger audiences. A lot of them now may be playing catch up and ensuring their articles have a digital presence, but I can't see how they will compete with the likes of Sa7i in ten years' time when these networks have become more established into everyday life and become the traditional media of younger generations.

There are three main factors that I identify as having contributed to the spread and mass adoption of social network sites in Saudi Arabia:

1. *Changing Demographics:* 70% of the population are now classified as 'young people', meaning they are under thirty years old. (National statement, 2015). This generation has spent most if not all of their lives post-internet and own smartphones that give them immediate access online.

2. *Digital literacy:* Growing up with technology means this younger generation is more digitally literate and aware of how to: participate, share, produce, consume

and interact online. They are more aware of the processes of communication and therefore naturally more sceptical of the techniques used by traditional media to influence and coerce ideas.

3. *Active Participation:* Audiences in Saudi Arabia are now *active* rather than *passive* as a result of embracing social media in Web 2.0. This has created a desire to put forward their views and to engage in debate and discussion online, and in some instances created microcelebrities. A generation that has learned the importance of sharing information online, be it retweeting or simply voicing an opinion, has created a bank of online knowledge. Now a strong motivating force is to stand out from the crowd, to attract more followers or likes than your friends and to become the next opinion leader in this more democratic online playing field.

Cooper (2006) has argued that social structures which are allowed to evolve naturally through voluntary interactions and exchanges among people, such as the blogosphere, have greater potential to unite people and bring about change than structures created through the deliberate exercise of power. The same could be said of Twitter and YouTube. As my research has shown, social networking sites are creating a space for individuals to hold governments, media and businesses accountable for their actions, thereby potentially acting as what Dutton (2009) calls a "Fifth Estate". In my opinion it is irrelevant how far this accountability goes. It is a process that has started and it is a process that will continue to grow in directions it is impossible to predict. Who would have thought thirty years ago that a culture whereby a woman is deemed the 'property' of a male would give a space for women, such as BanaTube, to ridicule tradition and demand better rights and greater respect? That is a public sphere, a space where all types of people can speak and be heard. It is a space that has never existed before in Saudi Arabia and it is a space that is inhabited in numerous fractured ways.

In conclusion, the benefit of conducting these interviews is that I have been able to build a complex understanding of the processes involved in newspaper journalism by speaking

to a broad range of journalists in varying positions from six newspapers. This has enabled me to cross reference opinions across departments in an attempt to understand the extent to which these organisations are consciously implementing and adhering to professional standards. Saudi Arabia does not have a Freedom of Information Act and organisations are generally cautious of sharing information about internal practices. Therefore, these interviews were vital in helping to build a picture of working dynamics and value systems that determine news gathering techniques. It is clear from my interviews that social media has been instrumental in raising the standards of journalism as now the Saudi public has more choices in where they turn to for public information. Journalists, more than ever, need to be more thorough in how they gather and report stories if they are to remain relevant in the digital age. It was clear from my interviews that all of the journalists embraced the changes brought about by social media. In many ways it has opened doors that were previously closed and enabled them to report on previously difficult subjects, such as the right of women to drive, and ministerial corruption, without the fear of reprisal.

Although the majority of newspapers do not have social media policies in place, this may very well change in the future. The rate of change in the Kingdom has been so rapid that there may simply not have been the time to make the adjustments for digital journalism. One factor that may bring about greater transparency and outlining of working processes could come from the appointment of a young Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman. One of the very first things he implemented was Vision 2030, which outlines the expectations of various organisations. This is the first real piece of transparent documentation in the Kingdom. As it is gradually implemented this will have a knock on effect on how all businesses operate and may very well result in media organisations more clearly outlining their processes of communication, something that a future researcher may wish to investigate closer to the time.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter will focus on the key arguments and findings of this research and its contributions to the field of study. This thesis has discussed the emergence of social media networks and their impact on professional journalism practices in Saudi Arabia. The main focus of this study is emergent YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia and how these channels, as new media organisations, or perhaps, even, new news organisations, given the way that they blur politics and entertainment, place pressure on traditional media to create and adapt content that is more relevant to the under 30 generation that is so prominent in Saudi Arabia. This thesis also studies the impact of Twitter, which has given voice to many ordinary people and in turn has exerted pressure on newspapers to create content that bears a greater relation to everyday lived experience. The mass adoption and use of Twitter has implications for press freedom, ethics, accountability and how traditional media organisations interact with audiences. This thesis includes eight chapters: an introduction, Saudi Arabia in context, digital media in Saudi Arabia: a digital public sphere, journalism in the digital age, methodology and research design, The rise and impact of YouTube, Twitter's impact on journalism and a conclusion. This chapter will start by revisiting Habermas's concept of the public sphere and how this needs to be rethought when used as a concept to describe public relations within Saudi Arabian contemporary society. It will then summarise the main arguments of the research before identifying suggestions and developments for future research.

8.2 Saudi Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas's concept of what constitutes a public sphere has been highly influential in helping us perceive the conditions in which individuals come together to freely discuss societal problems, and how these discussions may then influence political action (Habermas, 1991). This has been very useful in helping scholars understand how the public sphere has developed in European or Western cities whereby capitalism has

become the dominant mode of social relations. The concept is based on the idea of a religiously neutral or secular rationality, and therefore is not applicable to a lot of countries, particularly those, such as Saudi Arabia, that are constructed around religious conservativism. Does this mean, then, that a public sphere does not exist in Saudi Arabia because it does not mimic the characteristics outlined by Habermas? If this is so, then how do we define the millions of social media users who freely share ideas on Twitter or log in to watch the latest uploaded video on YouTube? Can we really dismiss an entire culture just because it does not follow the pattern and structure of other societies?

I am not the first person to raise these concerns. Salvatore and Eickelman (2004) have argued that there is no universal or standardized single form of public sphere that can be applied to all contexts and times. Recently Jean Burgess argued in a talk in Sheffield, "I don't believe there has ever been such a thing as a public sphere. But digital media has certainly helped create more visible publics" (Burgess, 2016). Therefore I propose that instead of focusing upon the parameters that define a public sphere we should instead look at the tools used by that community in order to understand how individuals make sense of their lives. Saudi Arabia is an Islamic country. Religion is core to the identity of the people and therefore this has an impact on what and how people communicate with each other. Interpretations of religious texts can, however, lead to internal conflicts within communities, such as the relationship between men and women, as highlighted by the many online campaigns and debates around the right of women to drive, such as debated on BanaTube at Sa7i, that have resulted in the Royal Decree (BBC News, 2017). Therefore, within the public sphere of a religious community there are, as Fraser (1990) has noted, a multiplicity of publics. Within these publics, members invent, promote and circulate counter discourses and practices that broaden, deepen and complicate our perceptions of identity. Fundamentally, the digital public sphere provides citizens with the tools to participate in public discourse. Both amateurs and professionals have the potential to confront different opinions, develop their own audiences and followers, or simply find solace through commonality. In this sense, the 'multiplicity of publics' within digital space is far more inclusive than Habermas's conception of bourgeois public sphere where access was not equal for all.

It is my belief that social media networks such as YouTube and Twitter are creating a new wave of 'multiplicity of publics' to flourish, all of which give expression to a diverse range of voices that enable new ideas and conversations to develop. These publics overlap in several ways and at various levels due to the use of various social media networks. Therefore we can no longer think of the public sphere as happening in one particular space with one particular set of rules that apply to all. This is the flat world of print media. YouTube channels such as Sa7i and Telfaz11 are constantly diversifying and producing new channels and programmes to satiate the desires of their expanding Saudi audience base. The emergence of channels shows such as BanaTube give voice to feminist issues and encourage women to talk about issues affecting their lives, but at the same time the channel is not revolutionary in the traditional sense, and does not call for direct action. It's complicated, which is why rigid parameters do not help.

One comment that really stood out from my interviews and one that has shaped my understanding of the role of a public sphere was from A1, the General Manager of *Sa7i,* who said, "In conclusion, we dream to be the public's TV, not government TV or advertiser TV, but People TV". If YouTube channels like Sa7i can become 'People TV' it suggests they are producing public discourse that directly relates to the everyday lives of their citizens. This is surely the goal of any broadcasting company since the invention of TV. To do this, content must bear relation to everyday lived experience or it cannot be the People's TV. To strive for this suggests that YouTube channels have the potential, and the ambition, to continue to push boundaries, in order to represent the needs of the people, needs that will continue to change and transform. I see Sa7i and Telfaz11 as being at the very early start of a journey that is instrumental in giving voice to people in Saudi Arabia and therefore in creating a public sphere. However, the owners of these channels do not hold any loyalty to YouTube. When the next social phenomenon emerges, they will happily move across in order to remain relevant to their audience.

8.3 The Third Stage

In addition to thinking more broadly about what constitutes a public sphere, and the cultural factors that help constitute such a specific space, I believe that we need to think differently about how the conversations connect within this space. When Habermas discussed the impact of the media on a public sphere he was referring specifically to print media (Papacharissi, 2002). Most importantly he was talking about print media in relatively singular terms. There may very well have existed different newspapers with alternative editorial focus, but they all conformed to similar traits in their flow of communication, organisational structure, and reliance on advertising. In the digital age these factors have become more complicated and less easy to pin down, something I will address in a moment. But for now I would like to briefly refer back to another comment made by A1.

When I asked A1 what kind of impact Sa7i and other social networks have had on traditional Saudi media organisations he was eager to point out that "some newspapers have collapsed because they didn't fully understand the importance of social media and how to integrate it into their business". However, he was also keen to point out that social media is not enough on its own as individual tweeters do not have the financial or editorial benefit of an organisation behind them.

> For example, recent footage came up via social media that showed a Saudi football player stabbed by a fan in a stadium. Many traditional broadcast outlets followed up this story and sent out their correspondents to the hospital to follow up on the whole story. This is something that social media simply does not have the capacity to do. It's very important in providing information but it doesn't have depth. In YouTube, we are at a kind of third stage. We can give opinions and context to all of the stories that are discussed on social media and traditional media like TV (Personal interview, 2015).

I like this idea of YouTube functioning as a "third stage" and that emerging media forms are acting as layers, or jigsaw parts, that are coming together in order to facilitate conversations. This layering is also evident in the way that some programmes are

produced with a large brand advertiser in mind and so face certain restrictions, while YouTube shows without a brand sponsoring the show have greater freedom and are able to offer other perspectives. Outside of these shows are conversations emerging on Twitter which act to continue the debate, generate discussions, and give voice to people who simply want to express an idea or comment on an issue raised in a show. Something started on Twitter will be picked up and broadcast by YouTube, which in turn will lead to conversations at home between a husband and wife or father and daughter. This is the nature of the digital public sphere. It works in layers. Communication has become fractured, porous, layered and fragmentary. Online conversations have become cumulative, gaining momentum across networks, expressed in a rich variety of ways depending on the networks and needs of the respective user. This makes online discourse diffuse in nature, making it very difficult to identify coherent political views; though hashtags can help to curate conversations. This is a completely different space to the localised public sphere identified by Habermass. The digital public sphere is more inclusive, encouraging citizens to express their subjectivities, which invariably stimulates political engagement. These conversations act as ripples that gain momentum to help form an overall narrative that has finally enabled the people of Saudi Arabia to communicate with each other in a way that has never happened before.

8.4 Initial findings

This study has used mixed methods of qualitative research. This includes interviews with a broad range of journalists and staff at two YouTube channels, as well as an observational study of the two YouTube channels in order to understand the working practices of these emerging media organisations. Interviews and observations have also explored how Twitter is used and how this may impact on journalism practices. As discussed in chapter six and seven, the analysis and discussion of this study has divided into two main parts. First, YouTube channel content that has resulted in three main concerns: the use of satire; censorship and audience engagement; and the impact on professional journalism standards and practices. Second, the analysis of Twitter's impact

on journalism which also resulted in three main concerns: policies and regulations; press freedom; and interaction and accountability.

8.4.1 Satire in YouTube

One of the main reasons that Sa7i and Telfaz11 have been so successful is because of their use of satire as a means of exploring social issues. I have argued that this form of humour has been absolutely vital in enabling Saudi citizens to push forward debates in the public sphere that simply weren't possible before. Satire functions as a non-threatening means of broaching difficult subjects and social taboos within Saudi culture. By positioning itself as 'entertainment' the content of these channels have been able to address a wide variety of issues without facing censorship. They would not have been able to do this if they had directly confronted authority. Explicit criticisms of government could lead to sever punishments and so this form of humour has allowed a gentle brokering of potentially difficult subjects. The popularity of these channels has created microcelebrities, thereby positioning satirists as opinion leaders who play a key role in political communication. These are presenters that Saudi youth look up to, admire, and in some cases will imitate as new channels emerge. They represent an alternative means of understanding identity and politics that challenges traditional power structures.

I have argued that not only is satire relevant to the youthful (CDSI. 2017) demographics of Saudi culture but that its main function has been to expose social problems and contradictions, rather than resolve these issues. I have argued that the primary function of satire is to create awareness of these issues with the overall hope that decisions may then be made by the government, which is a closed system. Therefore the predominant use of satire in YouTube videos is not subversion of the elite through semiotics, rather it is issue led. Issue-led satire depersonalizes situations and is enabling individuals on both sides of a situation to understand alternative perspectives. I have argued that this is a vital step in opening up conversations that I believe over time will broaden from micro issues to macro issues. Future research may wish to track how far these channels have gone to bring about change, or what methods the government has used to counteract this change. Whatever happens in the future, dialogue has started for the first time and ordinary Saudi citizens have the means to directly communicate with each other and the government in

ways that weren't possible before the advent of social media networks. It may very well be that satire is the first tentative step towards more serious issues-based social media networks, something that can only be explored in time.

8.4.2 YouTube Censorship and Audience Engagement

Digital media has transformed audience engagement by enabling active participation in conversations. The issue-led content of YouTube channels is encouraging Saudi people to debate and discuss what it means to be a Saudi in the 21st century. All areas of life are being explored and as audiences increase, so too the content of programmes diversifies and expands. However, these channels are not fully free to express every topic of conversation and so I identified three forms of censorship that determine audience engagement. These are:

- External censorship
- Censorship to protect an individual
- Advertising as censorship

External censorship

External censorship is a particular problem in Saudi Arabia because there are a lot of cultural taboos that are not actually law, but to cross these taboos can nevertheless cause great problems; the most obvious and topical example being women forbidden to drive. There is no law explicitly denying women the right to drive, rather it is an assumption due to the cultural taboo of male guardianship of women. This is why the Royal decree was so important as it helped to address these ideas. These kinds of cultural taboos create ambiguity surrounding socially acceptable behaviour and therefore have the potential to invoke the wrath of external influences, namely that of the Ministry of Information and Culture. During my interviews with Sa7i I was informed that the Ministry do not like 'surprises'. Traditionally this has meant non-criticism of Islam or political leaders, although this is becoming more blurred as the humour of these channels is becoming increasingly more confrontational. As audiences become more used to this it will be more difficult to return to a diluted version of events.

Censorship to protect an individual

One inevitable consequence of giving voice to a variety of issues has been the public backlash from those who do not want change. This, perhaps unsurprisingly, was most evident in my conversations with the female host of BanaTube. When her clip was first broadcast it became a trending hashtag on Twitter for three days, generating a lot of hatred and insults. It became apparent that the comments had less to do with the actual views expressed on her programme and more to do with the fact that she had been given the opportunity to speak in the beginning. Being publicly humiliated by strangers in the comment section of YouTube videos was not something I considered when embarking on my research and clearly this is the negative side to social media. However, the response from Sa7i was really positive. They refused to bow to the pressures and instead supported the opinions and integrity of their presenter. The solution was simple. Remove the comments section from the video and let the video speak for itself. Although this may not seem like rational critical debate it is a rational reaction to a difficult situation in order to facilitate a space for an alternative view. This case study also demonstrates a layered public sphere in action. As women become presenters on shows they have a virtual presence in debates as well as a physical presence in the decision making process at the YouTube channels. Issues raised are debated, criticised or applauded across social networks, and, in some instances, debated in political circles.

Advertising as censorship

One of the biggest surprised I encountered on my visit to Sa7i was the discovery that they are not an independent channel as I presumed but funded by Dallah, a huge private company in Saudi Arabia. Being owned by a large organisation has obvious ramifications for the level of freedom individual presenters can expect as clearly they will want to promote the image and reputation of the organisation, while ensuring content does not offend advertisers who sponsor individual shows. This form of censorship is inevitable in any kind of capitalist structure, but it did appear from my visit that it was not a major concern. The appeal of sponsoring shows was due to their unique viewpoints and high production values, as this is what attracts the younger audiences they are so keen to tap into. Therefore I see this form of censorship as a pragmatic consideration. What might be useful to observe in future studies is the extent to which the government is able to exert

influence over advertisers who are funding contentious programmes, thereby indirectly impacting on the creative output of YouTube channels.

8.4.3 YouTube's Impact on Traditional media

It would appear obvious that mainstream media, as represented by newspapers and television channels, simply doesn't represent the needs of Saudi youth in terms of aesthetic values or general content. In fact, it is misleading to refer to newspapers as mainstream media. Mainstream media is now social media. Part of the reason for the popularity of social media networks is it simply gives people a voice and enables them to participate in culture. This active participation in social life is creating a generation of citizen journalists, all of whom are eager to develop their photographic skills or ability to deliver bytesized commentaries on social life in order to raise their visibility and build their own audiences. Smart phones have been vital in nurturing citizen journalism by equipping individuals with the basics to share information, all of which is having a direct impact on traditional media. The most obvious impact from my interviews with journalists at newspapers is the drive to be more relevant. This is of particular concern given the changing demographics of the country under the age of 30. A more youthful audience also demands content in more varied forms and so newspapers' online presence has to be updated, embedding videos into articles as a means of offering different means of understanding a story. Future research may wish to look at the development of bespoke YouTube channels for newspapers or whether they embed more video into their websites. Sa7i and Telfaz11 get millions of hits within hours of uploading their latest videos. This is transforming aesthetic values and expectations as to how news should be presented and delivered. This could be the biggest impact on newspapers.

8.4.4 Twitter Policies and Regulations in the Press

From my interviews I found that five of six national newspapers have no official regulations or general guidelines for their staff to follow when using social media networks. Likewise none provide, or have been given, a specific policy or training from senior management with regards to expected online behaviour, although one newspaper gave very general guidance. I found this one of the most surprising findings from my study and something that needs to be addressed in order to protect individuals. The

prevailing attitude from the journalists and editors I interviewed was that social media is personal and therefore it is down to the individual how they choose to express themselves online. Clearly there are lots of potential problems here, not least that individuals are under the impression that they can say what they like online but they may be punished for this retrospectively if their comments offend the wrong people. But as I was informed that the Ministry of Information and Culture do not like 'surprises' it may be best practice to identify what these surprises may entail in order to protect staff. I have concluded in my research that one of the reasons for this is that self-censorship is a large part of Saudi culture and behaviour and people are aware of taboos. Therefore they do not necessarily need to be told what to say and do with their personal accounts. However, Twitter taps into the culture of the majlis. The majlis are spaces where people gather in a room and discuss ordinary life. For this reason, the right to express an idea in an informal setting is acceptable and I believe that Twitter functions as a virtual majlis, which could explain why Twitter is not as regulated as traditional media in terms of freedom of expression.

8.4.5 Twitter and Press Freedom

Social media is helping to extend press freedom and the topics that journalists are able to broach. This was reinforced by every journalist I interviewed. The gradual widening of issues being discussed throughout the media is partly due to having access to express ideas online. If journalists choose to ignore an issue or present an issue in a way that is deemed biased then they face the wrath of the Twittersphere. From this I conclude that Twitter is acting as a Fifth Estate (Dutton, 2009) that is there to hold media institutions, as well as government officials, to account. Integral to this process is the credibility of the new breed of digital opinion leaders. The credibility of social networks may now be judged in terms of the number of followers, suggesting popularity could guide content rather than ethics. This is clearly an area open to abuse, with false accounts being bought as a means of hyping popularity and so should be seen with caution. But it is my belief that there is more press freedom now in Saudi Arabia than at any other point. There is a long way to go to improve this, as Freedom House rankings show, but the sheer diversity of topics being discussed suggests that social media is influencing traditional journalism.

Future research may wish to examine this by tracking a specific issue and seeing how and where it is discussed and whether this leads to specific changes in the law.

8.4.6 Twitter, interaction and accountability

As noted by Dutton and Peltu (2007) the Internet has been described as a "mosaic" encompassing a wide variety of actors, issues and regulation. This is a kind of 'structured anarchy' in that there is no central control as there is with traditional media. This has led to suggestions that the Internet acts as a 'Fifth Estate' whereby 'networked individuals can perform a role in holding institutions such as the media and government more accountable' (Dubois and Dutton, 2014, p. 239) by indirectly arousing debate which, once spread across networks by various independent actors, is difficult to control. Social media is able to go beyond the boundaries and restrictions of traditional media, largely through ease of access, and create a more meaningful and transparent dialogue for Saudis. This has the potential to function as a form of citizen journalism (Campbell, 2014) by enabling political communication that is curated by hashtags and YouTube channels in order to create an overarching narrative.

As my research has shown, social networking sites are creating a space for individuals to hold governments, media and businesses accountable for their actions. In my opinion it is irrelevant how far this accountability goes, it is a process that has started and it is a process that will continue to grow in directions it is impossible to predict. Who would have thought thirty years ago that a culture whereby a woman is deemed the 'property' of a male would give a space for women, such as BanaTube, to question tradition and demand better rights and greater respect? This is why I believe that social media is enabling a public sphere to emerge as clearly we are witnessing a space where all types of people can speak and be heard. It is a space that has never existed before and it is a space that is inhabited in numerous fractured ways.

8.5 Conclusion

What has distinguished this study is the claim that social media is absolutely vital in creating a digital public sphere in Saudi Arabia. There has been much written about how social media should be deemed public opinion rather than a public sphere (Alotaibi, 2017) but I fundamentally disagree with this perspective as I believe it dismisses cultures that do not fit neatly into Habermas's Eurocentric model. It also fails to take into consideration the nuances of modern forms of communication that overlap and enhance each other at various levels and operate to create an overall discourse across media platforms. A hashtag on Twitter may inspire a video made on YouTube which in turn may lead to an Instagram post or blog that continues the conversation. This is how I see the modern public sphere operating - in layers, fractured, and across publics and platforms. Saudi Arabia is experiencing a tidal wave of change at present as a result of social media. Fundamental to this is the speed with which it has made citizens active participants in everyday life rather than passive observers. This is key to a functioning public sphere. Platforms such as Twitter and YouTube are offering modes of expression that weren't possible before. For the first time in the kingdom's history, citizens are able to express opinions online and represent their own ideas. This is why (Worth, 2012) accurately described Twitter as acting like a mini parliament. Social media has provided an interface between government and people. It facilitates political communication.

Saudi Arabia is an Islamic country with religion absolutely central to the identity of the people. Inevitably this creates taboos around certain topics. But this does not mean that public conversations are not starting to emerge around other issues that are equally important to our identity or are, to some degree, born from our religious identity. It is my belief that by the time this thesis is published, women will be able to drive in Saudi Arabia. Male guardianship of women is a long tradition within the kingdom and to some extent is born out of interpretations of Islam teaching. But the use of hashtags on Twitter raising awareness of gender politics coupled with the emergence of bespoke YouTube channels such as BanaTube have helped bring conversations about women's rights to the table. The very fact that female presenters are able to present alongside male presenters is

an additional visual reminder of changing attitudes and changing times. Arguably the most powerful example of this process was a recent tweet of a photograph of a group of male politicians debating women's rights. Tweets pointed out 'where are the women?' (Raghavan, 2017). This lack of representation of women debating women's issues infuriated many people within Saudi Arabia as well as externally, as the tweet then informed conversations with women across the globe. Needless to say this type of situation lends itself to satire.

In addition to provoking conversations from within, social media is having an impact on the values and practices of traditional media. It is no longer possible for newspapers to simply reiterate and repeat positive aspects of government policy, as journalists are now held accountable by the Twittersphere. The high quality production of satirical YouTube videos that expose contradictions within Saudi culture are forcing newspapers to become more 'relevant' if they wish to hold on to their readership. They are also shaping the tone through which politics can be understood. Given the changing demographics that have seen 65% of the population under 30 years of age, failure to embrace their needs could signify the end of print media.

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Appendix 1: YouTube Staff Interview Questions

Part 1: YouTube, Video production/commissioning

1- How many videos do you commission a year?

2- How often are videos released? (do you stick to rigid deadlines or are your videos reactive e.g. something happens in the news and you create a response to it.

3- How much do videos cost to make and how long do they take to make.

4- How do you finance videos e.g. from when you started and were smaller to today.

5- Do you use the same team to make videos and how did you assemble this team together? (to find out how 'open' their policy is and if anyone can get involved)

6- How long do videos last? this about the target audience e.g. small content v big documentaries)

Part 2: Video Content

1- Where do you source your inspiration? e.g. do you have an editorial team who meets and discusses what's happening in the world? Or do you turn to social media to ask fans what they want? Do you read newspapers and finds stories that way?

2- How would you classify the content of the videos? e.g. Are they all 'social issues' do you try to get a balance between content?

3- Where are videos made? E.g. do you have a studio?

4- How many female staff do you have and how many male staff? Give me specific details on the roles of women e.g. are they in editorial, making important decisions about content?

5- Have you rejected content before and if so, why?

6- Given that you satirize popular Saudi culture is there anything you wouldn't satirize and why? (red line)

7- Given that Saudi Arabia has traditionally been a very respectful country in terms of how public decisions are discussed, why do you think satire has become so popular? (this gives me an insight into the changing demographics of the country and perhaps a change in attitudes of people)

8- Have you been put under any pressure by external organisations (government/media) about any videos you've made?

9- Tell us about the editorial team. Who are they and how does the decision making process work in terms of videos commissioned?

10- At the moment there seems to be a certain degree of freedom with these new videos being critical of social issues. Why do you think the government has been so 'relaxed' and do you think this will change?

Part 2: Business (marketing/owner)

1- How independent are you?

2- For Sa7i, you've expanded recently to include niche channels addressing a variety of different issues (sport, social, etc) How have you coped with this expansion?

3- Have newspapers or TV channels turned to you for advice or asked you to write/produce for them?

4- Do you think your values would be compromised by teaming up with national newspapers/TV channels who are under more restrictions?

5- Finance – how much do you make and where does this come. How does it break down in terms of overheads e.g. what profit are you making and do you reinvest this into the company, etc?

6- Advertising – who advertises with you? How many clients etc. Do advertisers put pressure on you in terms of content? Public sphere argument

Part 3: Audience

1- Who do you target, audience?

2- How do you keep them engaged? E.g. when they leave feedback on videos (Twitter/YouTube) do you have a team to respond to comments? How many, how often do they do this? How many people do this job? How long do they work on commenting?

3- Do your staff declare they are members of your team or do they post anonymously in comment sections to drive conversations? How important is following up on social media?

Appendix 2: Journalists Questions

Part 1: Policies and Regulation

1- Please give an overview of how you manage your newspaper's Twitter account.
   a. How regularly do you tweet? (Do you schedule tweets for out of hours e.g. 24 hours per day?)
   b. Do you tweet every single article published in your paper or just a selection?
   c. Are all journalists expected to tweet and promote their work or is it done by a small team?
   d. How many people are in your social media team?
   e. What is the hierarchy of your organisation (e.g. does a social media manager report to a general manager, etc.)?
   f. Do staff have clear guidelines on what and how to tweet?
   g. How do staff interact with people on Twitter, e.g. do they seek out conversations or simply push your stories?

2- Do your newspaper staff have personal Twitter accounts? If so, do you issue guidelines on acceptable behaviour and expectations of conduct online that could potentially reflect on your newspaper?
3- If staff are not given guidelines on acceptable online behaviour, what would you do if they created any negative publicity for your newspaper due to comments they had made in their personal accounts?
4- Does anybody monitor staff Twitter accounts?
5- Do you (or would you) encourage their Twitter profiles to state 'this is a personal account' or 'I am a journalist at the newspaper'?

Part 2: Press freedom & Interaction

1- Newspaper content: Are your stories generated from your journalists or sourced from Twitter?
2- How do you follow up stories from Twitter? (E.g. Do you verify tweets before publishing stories to ensure content is correct and accurate?)

3- Are there any topics discussed on Twitter that you would not follow up on, perhaps because they are too sensitive?
4- How important are hashtags in determining newsworthy stories?
5- How do you judge when a hashtag is worthy of investigating? E.g. is it about the *amount* of retweets and comments or the *credibility* of the cause or the *number* of people involved in the conversation?
6- Topics discussed on Twitter can be controversial. To what extent do you believe they are helping to push freedom of expression in your newspaper?
7- If people are turning to Twitter for conversations about issues that affect them in their everyday lives, do you think this will put pressure on newspapers to diversify what they write about?
8- A journalist recently said to me that Twitter is like a *mirror*. You look into it everyday to see your reflection. How do you feel about this quote?
9- How is Twitter incorporated into your newspaper e.g. do you have comment streams on your website?
10- Does having millions of followers make a person more credible?

Have you disciplined anyone for their behaviour on Twitter, or their behaviour online more generally?

Appendix 3: Interview transcript with (A1) the General Director of Sa7i

How many videos do you produce monthly?

About 16 to 17.

Do you have deadlines or schedules for your videos?

Yes, we have timetable for them

How much does it cost you per video?

Not minimum than 50 thousand Saudi riyals (£9,500)

How do you finance your videos?

From the company budget

How often do you get advertisers or sponsors?

Every show has its own sponsor

Do you have the specific team for each video?

Yes, but sometimes the same team can work with more than one show; I mean technical team here.

Where do you source your inspiration from? Do you read newspapers to get from or social media?

We have an editorial team, writing and content management. The newspapers are dead, they became yesterday's news. We also have our own social media department

How would you classify the content of the videos? E.g. Are they all 'social issues' do you try to get a balance between content?

About everything, our channel has diversity.

Where are your videos made?

We have our own studio, and sometimes we produce them outside.

How many male and female staff do you have?

Five females, it represents about 15 per cent of our all employees. (specific breakdown of roles)

Have you rejected content before and if so, why?

No, but sometimes if the content is bad or the idea is not convincing or the scenario is not well written, it would be rejected. So it is technical rejection only.

Why do you think using satire is so popular now in your channel?

It is more acceptable and it arrives faster, but because the Saudi culture is conservative, therefore, the satire is more provocative. It makes audiences smile and like it but officials, people in positions of responsibility, doesn't like it.

Does the satire style help you to push press freedom?

I don't think so, there are lines in Saudi Arabia that can't be crossed. There are certain issues in the country that have consensus, such as the political shape. There are no republicans or democrats as in Western democracies. The only disputes are; whether the country should be conservative or not, the level of participation in decision-making, and how to raise awareness of and fight against corruption. These are the main disputes in Saudi Arabia.

But I mean, in term of press freedom?

As you can see in my other programme Action Yadwri, which is broadcast on television, there are people who think that I am 'crossing the red line' and that I can raise difficult issues because I have the support of powerful people behind me. No, the issue in Saudi Arabia is the way that you approach and talk about an issue. If the government – the real people in charge – suspect that your criticisms are deliberately insulting or that you have

an ulterior agenda, then you have a problem. But if these two areas are dealt with professionally, then you are ok.

Have you been put under any pressure by external organisations (government/media) about any videos you've made? And why?

Yes, the Ministry of Information and Culture, because they don't like 'surprises' and if somebody is offended then they will complain to the ministry, and if the complainer is an important person the Ministry would probably hold up their claim and say: Ok, no worries. We would then be asked to take the content down.

Is there a regulation that you follow from the ministry of information?

Not yet, but they have just started, it regards the person in charge of our channel. The regulation regards his competency within the media.

Is there any video has been censored?

Yes, twice. And we deleted them

Why?

Because they came at the same time with political circumstances, therefore, might be misunderstood.

How does the decision-making process work in terms of videos publishing?

The presenter is a corner, the content manager is a corner, the general director is a corner, and the production manager is a corner. These are the four corners who must always agree.

How independent are you?

We are more independent than others.

How, and Why?

Because we have no political agenda. You don't find in Sa7i any content to support

Muslim Brotherhoods clearly. Or ethnicity support. The channel is comprised of all ethnicities, from everywhere in Saudi Arabia. It's a very diverse organisation and we're very proud of that.

For Sa7i, you've expanded recently to include niche channels addressing a variety of different issues (sport, social, etc) How have you coped with this expansion?
We are not a group of amateurs who just launch a company, we are a project company who has been running since 2011, but launched officially on 01/01/2012. We created a new business model that basically sourced the most talented people across the country who were running individual projects and brought them together under one platform. We provide the budget and we make marketing studies and we make an agreement with advertisers and invest our money where the circulation of equity capital started.

Have newspapers or TV channels turned to you for advice or asked you to write/produce for them?
No, but we have a special relation with MBC group. It is a strategic partnership.

Do you think your values would be compromised by teaming up with national newspapers/TV channels who are under more restrictions?
No. This business we are doing can only flourish in a non-Conservative society. Creativity can only happen when there are no social restrictions. Therefore, we chose to be in Jeddah because it is the most diverse city in the country and therefore has no restrictions.

How much do you make and where does this come. How does it break down in terms of overheads e.g. what profit are you making and do you reinvest this into the company, etc?
We get about 15 million riyals per year from advertising and we spend about 16-17 million. So, we are not benefited. (so how does the business model work then? You are technically bankrupt!)

Who advertises with you?

We have global brand companies who are continuing advertising with us like Pepsi and Doritos, Kitkat, and the international advertisers are better for us because it gives annual contracts.

Do advertisers put pressure on you in terms of content?

Yes, correct. Especially the international advertisers who do not like controversial content that could potentially damage their brand. However, the programmes that don't have international advertisements might have the stronger view, and we have some programmes that don't have any adverts at all.

Who is your target audience?

We target the entire population within the kingdom; therefore, we have to produce more programmes to target more audiences specifically.

How do you keep them engaged?

Through our big social media department, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Telegram, our team is managing the communication with our audience. This team is following up every single video and reads people's comments and they write a report after one week. This is then published internally and helps us understand public opinions trends.

How big is the social media department.

They are 3. They all diverse from different cities.

Do they declare they are members of your team or do they post anonymously in comment sections to drive conversations?

Yes, they use Sa7i official platforms accounts.

How important is following up on social media?

It is important and it represents 30% of our work.

To what extent do you think Sa7i has influenced public opinion?

It has been influential. If we say 10 things that have influenced Saudi society, I would say Sa7i is one of them.

What kind of impacts that Sa7i and other social networks have on traditional media in Saudi Arabia?

Two kinds of impacts, some newspapers have collapsed because they didn't fully understand the importance of social media and how to integrate it into their business. However, social media is about individuals who do not have the financial or editorial benefit of an organisation behind them. For example, recently footage came up via social media that showed a football player stabbed by a fan in a stadium. Many traditional broadcast outlets followed up this story and sent out their correspondents to the hospital to follow up on the whole story. This is something that social media simply does not have the capacity to do. It's very important in providing information but it doesn't have depth. In YouTube, we are at a kind of third stage. We can give opinions and context to all of the stories that are discussed on social media and traditional media like TV.

Are the employees full time?

50% of them are in full time employment.

In conclusion, *we dream to be the public's TV, not government TV or advertiser TV, but People TV*.

Appendix 4: Interview transcript with A3 Female broadcaster of BanaTube

How did you get involved with YouTube in Saudi Arabia?

Actually, because media is my background and I studied media, therefore, I was keen to produce for TV. But the opportunity arose out of a chance encounter when I was visiting a friend at the Sa7i channel. I got talking to producers and they mentioned that they were looking for a female presenter for a new YouTube channel. Given my media background, they asked me if I was available or interested in taking up the position. I was hesitant at first as I was already working for a commercial radio station in Jeddah and I enjoyed this because I was anonymous. It was a big step to suddenly be on screen and recognisable by lots of people so I consulted with my family. My father was very supportive and so one day later I signed the contract with Sa7i as it was a fantastic opportunity.

Were there any other reasons that made you hesitant?

Coming from a broadcast journalism background I was concerned that YouTube was not as credible or as powerful a medium as TV channels. I've now been working on the YouTube channel for two years and clearly it is very successful and a medium that's taken very seriously.

Did you experience any prejudice once you became visible on YouTube?

Yes. My programme is called BanaTube and to promote this we run short clips advertising the latest programme. These are about 15 seconds long and highlight main features of the show. When my clip was first broadcast it became a trending hashtag on Twitter for three days. People across Saudi Arabia used the hashtag to curse and insult me. What was really upsetting is they hadn't even seen the programme yet and they were all judging me because I am a woman who dares to have an opinion on social issues that have traditionally been discussed only by men.

How did you personally deal with these online attacks?

I was frustrated. I cried. I became very sad. I didn't expect it to be so difficult. Nothing can prepare you for being publicly humiliated. But the fact that the show has now existed

for two years and is very successful has helped me prove critics wrong. I am very grateful to sa7i for having stood by me and having the guts to challenge accepted norms in society. Having the support of my family was very important in helping me get through those difficult initial months of abuse. This instilled me with a positive energy and I slowly started to enjoy the challenge.

How has the role of being a female presenter on a YouTube show shaped you as a person?

Sa7i is a successful, strong and professional media platform. They are leading the new wave of social media platforms and now dominate the digital landscape, as is seen by the high volume of subscribers to their channels. They have a smart management team. I want to be a part of this successful group for a long time because surrounding yourself with success people has a big impact on how you perceive yourself. I am very lucky at such a young age to be given the opportunity to have such a powerful role and to be valued for my opinions and artistic integrity. This fills me with confidence that spills out into every area of my life. There is also a social status that comes with being associated with Sa7i which means that people take your more seriously. Since presenting BanaTube I have received several offers from TV and Radio, as well as being regularly invited to events to share my experiences on panel discussions or as a guest speaker. Sharing my experiences with people in public is one way that I can help people gain the confidence to embrace new experiences and make a difference. This is how you slowly make change happen in society.

How do you decide on the content of your videos?

This can be anything as long as I steer clear of what people call the 'forbidden trinity,' by this I mean religion, sex and politics. In our culture, it is traditional and a custom to not discuss such issues before the government has spoken about it. At Sa7i I have a certain degree of freedom in that I am allowed to discuss some issues around these subjects but I choose not to. This is because I am a woman and I don't want to experience harassment on Twitter again. I have more important priorities that I believe can bring about more meaningful change on a micro level, such as debating issues that affect woman such as

persecution, sexual harassment and creating jobs for women that make a difference, or the many problems faced by school teachers. Many female school teachers are given jobs in schools that are very far away, meaning they have a male drive them for up to four hours a day just to get to work. I want women to be given jobs in schools closer to home and their family so that they aren't reliant on a man to drive them to work. These are the battles I choose to face as they are battles I have a chance of winning.

Who is your target audience on BanaTube?

If you change women, you change society! Our focus is generally on women, but we also target the men to some extent because the men also have an important role to play in determining women's issues and still hold the influence in lots of important decision making roles in society.

Is making a female YouTube programme different than making a male-hosted programme?

Yes, of course. BanaTube show is far more difficult than other shows because we have to be incredibly sensitive to the way it looks and feels. When each show is produced we have to think about every possible scenario and how the most smallest of details may cause offence or outrage on Twitter. These are still early days for female presenters and so pre-empting all possible problems is vital. This is why I like sa7i so much as they are always very professional.

Have any shows been rejected before?

It is actually the opposite. The management does not reject any topics, but I have rejected some topics given to me because of the reasons stated previously.

Why do you choose to produce your shows in satire style 'comedy'? Do you think it is successful? Do you think it takes you through censorship?

Newspapers are serious, TV is serious and Radio is serious. We get enough from serious programmes. With new media such as Snapchat, YouTube and Instagram, we get *new* things and different perspectives. It is not acceptable to talk in an episode of five or ten

minutes in YouTube about serious issues. Given the social pressures we live with, both politically and culturally, we need to find new ways to express ourselves. Personally, I am not a satirist, I have a serious personality, but I accept I may be labeled a satirist because my genre is black comedy. My goal is not to make you laugh. It's to have a positive impact and create change.

Do you interact with your audiences on YouTube after shows are produced?

I always ask for people's judgment, starting first with my family and internally from the producers at sa7i. But it is also important to get feedback from fans, be it negative or positive, or from critics. I do this largely through Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, reading through comments and replying to them when time. I have 60,000 followers on Twitter, 100,000 on Instagram and 40,000 on Snapchat. I benefit from being able to source all of these opinions but time means I can't respond to all.

How do you see your show influencing people?

I like this word 'influence'. My goal is to be influential, not a celebrity because celebrities can be forgotten easily and there is no need to remember them. They are not influential in a way that makes a difference. Yes, my shows have an impact on people, we always put at the end of each show a message that explicitly states the overriding message or theme from each show. For example, when debating women's rights I might include percentages of people who have reported sexual harassment.

How have traditional media reacted to your shows?

Some foreign newspapers have talked about it as well as local media. But so far there have been no comments from the government.

Do you work here part of full time?

I have a two-year contract. This means I am in the studio two to three times a month to record shows and the rest of the time I am researching subjects or filming interviews outside in public for future shows.

I notice that you've disabled the comments feature on your YouTube channel?

I ordered this to happen as a condition of my contract. As I said, when my first show was published and I read all of the horrible comments my hands froze at that time, seriously. I then felt like my heart was about to stop. That's when I rang the channel and asked them to disable the comments or I would quit. Overtime I've become more used to public comments and negative feedback. I can deal with this on other social media platforms but I don't like it directly under my YouTube channel. So the comments are still disabled.