IJoC   Arab Revolutions: Breaking Fear

#Hashtags for Change:
Can Twitter Promote Social Progress in Saudi Arabia

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Since the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, Twitter has proven to be a useful mobilization tool for citizens. The power of Twitter to mobilize citizens (as seen in the Arab Spring) worries some governments. In response, a number of countries have begun to censor access to Internet technology. The Saudi monarchy, for example, issued a decree banning the reporting of news that contradicts sharia (Islamic) law, undermines national security, promotes foreign interests, or slanders religious leaders. A key question requiring further examination is why the Saudi government issued this decree. Are these controls in place to manage the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's political image on a global level, or are they in place to regulate the morality of its citizens at the local level? Drawing upon the work of Manuel Castells and his discussion of network power, this article asks: Can Twitter usage promote social progress in Saudi Arabia?

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Twitter, communication technology, social progress, gender, #Women2Drive

Since the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, social media has proven to be a useful mobilization tool for citizens to protest perceived injustices. In the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, the microblogging site Twitter emerged as a key source for real-time logistical coordination, information, information sharing, and discussion (Lotan et al., 2011). Twitter helps you "helps you create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers" (About Twitter, 2013). Twitter's global nature and ability to connect people anywhere in the world through hashtags and retweets[1] make it possible for people to share information on topics as mundane as what to cook for this evening's dinner to something as spectacular as the fall of an authoritarian government regime. Given the powerful capability of the latter, people using Twitter (particularly in countries with strict media censorship laws) have the potential to promote social change through this social medium.

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[1] On Twitter, information can be captured and shared by using hashtags (#) before a word as a way for followers to generate interest in a topic. Retweets occur when a Twitter user shares a tweet from a follower.

In Tunisia, for example, public demonstrations in 2011 due to citizens' frustration over economic issues, high unemployment, and a lack of political freedom (Lotan et al., 2011) led to the eventual removal of President Ben Ali. In Egypt, activists organized demonstrations in Cairo to protest police brutality as well as unemployment, corruption, and the lack of political freedom in the country, culminating in the eventual ousting of President Mubarak on February 11, 2011. As Gilad Lotan and his colleagues (2011) highlight, "both revolutions featured prominent use of social media, by activists organizing the demonstrations and by those disseminating or discussing news of the events locally and globally" (p. 1377). Twitter's power to mobilize citizens and demand social change worries other authoritarian governments who feel their reign also may be at risk of an uprising from their people.

In response to the Arab uprisings, a number of Arab countries began to censor access to Internet technology. Libya, for example, severed Internet access and international phone calls due to violent protests (Hill, 2011). In Syria, the telecommunications ministry started monitoring Facebook, stealing and reading the passwords and private messages of political activists (Giles & Marks, 2012). As the political situation in Syria became more volatile, the Syrian government orchestrated a complete Internet shutdown in June 2011 (Flock, 2011). Saudi Arabia also attempted to regulate the activity of its people online. As Arab Spring uprisings gained momentum, the Saudi monarchy issued a decree banning the reporting of news contradicting sharia (Islamic) law, undermining national security, promoting foreign interests, or slandering religious leaders (Freedom House, 2012). As Phillip N. Howard (2010) mentions, during the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, many developing countries feared the impact of new communication technologies. New information and communication technologies (ICTs) have the power to alter the way politics are done. From political discussion to political engagement, technologies have altered the nature of (political) discourse (Garrett et al., 2012).

As a result, some Muslim countries attempt to manage citizens' access to these new ICTs through various means, such as banning computers (in Tanzania); requiring all computers, telephones, and fax machines to be registered with the government (in Libya); or, as Saudi Arabia has done, deny private Internet service providers (Howard, 2010). Proof of Saudi Arabia's commitment to controlling access to the Internet can be found through the King Abdel Aziz City for Science and Technology, the only institution that provides Internet service to the entire kingdom. With all these efforts in place to control communication technologies, a key question requiring further examination is why the government needs to regulate citizens' online activity.

Although various communication technologies can be analyzed, the focus of this article is on the social media platform Twitter. Twitter offers an interesting case study to understand how communication technology can impact political discourse. Twitter offers specific features that are effective for information sharing and for supporting activism and mobilization (Comunello & Anzera, 2012)—more so than Facebook and other social media platforms, because most Twitter profiles are open. "Users can both read tweets by users they follow and have access to general discussions through key word searches known as #hashtags" (Comunello & Anzera, 2012, p. 466) from users they may not necessarily follow. This structure creates an online environment where people can obtain information quite easily without having to ask for permission or send a friend request (as in Facebook). Through this process of mass self-communication, individuals can follow an already established conversation with the possibility of engaging with their digital peers. As Manuel Castells (2012) highlights, "mass self-communication provides the technological platform for the construction of the autonomy of the social actor, be it individual or collective [and] this is why

governments are afraid of the Internet" (p. 7). This quote provides a useful framework to study the control of Internet use in Saudi Arabia. What purpose does this control of the Internet and Twitter serve in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)? Are these controls in place to manage the KSA's political image or to regulate the morality of its citizens? Drawing upon the work of Castells and his discussion of network power, this article examines Internet regulation in the KSA and its impact on Twitter use in the country.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was formed in 1932 by Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud (Mabon, 2012). Saudi Arabia is a highly revered country for Islam, because it is the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and houses the city of Mecca, where adherent Muslims worldwide face to pray five times daily. This fact, fused with the Al Sauds' espousal of a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam known as Wahhabism, has led Saudi Arabia to develop a strongly religious self-identity that guides many facets of political and social life in the country—including Internet use. Saudi Arabia has a population of just over 28 million people (World Bank, 2011). In two generations, urbanization has changed the face of the Arabian Peninsula. In 1970, 49% of people in Saudi Arabia lived in cities; by 2005, almost 89% did (Gresh, 2006). Driving the engine of the Saudi economy is the oil boom of the 1970s (Moaddel, 2006). The combination of being a religious and economic powerhouse puts Saudi Arabia in a unique position, where international trade and global progress are balanced within Islamic standards and codes of conduct.

In the 1980s, the Saudi government developed an Islamist rhetoric in response to a radical group occupying the Great Mosque in Mecca in 1979, imposing stricter rules concerning the segregation of women and emphasizing the closing of the country to foreign influences (Gresh, 2006). As Simon Mabon (2012) points out, "the mosque siege was part and parcel of the material modernization [in Saudi Arabia]. It was a political awakening drawing upon religious rhetoric . . . demonstrating the importance of the Wahhabi *ulemma* in times of crisis" (p. 534). The strategy of limiting foreign influence, however, was somewhat counterintuitive as the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia necessitated a reliance on non-Saudi workers to develop the country. In this context, the nature of state building and modernization increased tensions within the kingdom (Mabon, 2012), because Saudi legitimacy is based on an appropriation of Islamic symbols that claim that the nation's "constitution is the Quran" and the application of sharia (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 37). As a 2006 report by Mansoor Moaddell (2006) suggests,

> Structural changes coupled with the vulnerability of the single-commodity export economy to fluctuations in oil prices and demands in the world market, the rising economic inequality, and the monolithic religious discourse imposed on society by official clerics [has] set the stage for the rise of diverse political and cultural movements in the kingdom. (p. 81)

As a result, a division within Saudi society has emerged between those who commit to an Islamic awakening, demanding the reorganization of the kingdom on the virtuous Islamic state that they believe existed under the Prophet (Moaddel, 2006), and those who wish for a substantial restructuring of the country's social and political life, seeking such overhauls as a constitutional monarchy, elected institutions, separation of power, freedom of expression, egalitarian gender relations, and the recognition of the rights

of the Shia minority (Moaddell, 2006). In response, the ruling family in Saudi Arabia has sought to reduce these tensions (which essentially challenges their legitimacy) by initiating a number of reforms. Changes such as increasing the number of Shura members in 1997, the crown prince's decision to sponsor three rounds of national dialogue on religion, extremism and moderation, and women in 2003, and the Council of Ministers' issuance of a decree allowing women to obtain commercial licenses in their own names (Moaddell, 2006) were all small steps toward appearing progressive while allowing the ruling family to maintain Islamic legitimacy and control.

Despite these efforts, the Saudi leadership is losing its unique Islamic credentials (Al-Rasheed, 2013) and is facing a struggle regarding who will succeed the current ruler, King Abudullah. Between 2011 and 2012, Saudi Arabia lost Princes Sultan and Nayif, both of whom would have succeeded King Abdullah. The uncertainty in succession makes Saudi Arabia an interesting case study to examine, particularly given the unrest in neighboring countries that have seen mass protests from citizens demanding change from their governments. Although Saudi Arabia has experienced increasing socioeconomic concerns, the kingdom has remained largely free from violent public protest (Mabon, 2012). What has emerged, however, is vocal opposition from the country's young, educated, and tech-savvy Internet users. As Madawi Al-Rasheed points out, a vast number of activist youth have migrated to virtual forums where they call for reform and even the overthrow of the ruling family (Al-Rasheed, 2013). As a result, the Saudi government has strengthened its efforts to control dissent online through various mechanisms of control and regulation. The Internet has become a contested space in Saudi Arabia, where the leadership can divide the public along regional, sectarian, gender, ideological, and political lines to prevent dissenting voices from unifying. As Al-Rasheed notes, "in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, Saudis seem to be engaged in internal cyber warfare, which can only benefit the leadership" (p. 28). New ICTs such as Facebook and Twitter, both of which played an important role in the Arab uprisings, are intensifying debates in Saudi Arabia, further polarizing Saudi society between those who want more openness in the social network sphere and those who wish to see more restriction.

Power and Control: Understanding Internet Regulation in the KSA

A power struggle is evolving between the government's control and citizens' use of the Internet in Saudi Arabia. As Castells (2009) explains, power is the most fundamental process in society. Power is strongly related to communication issues, and the rise of communication networks has contributed to changing power relations (Comunello & Anzera, 2012). As Castells (2009) suggests:

> Power is the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favor the empowered actor's will, interests, and values. Power is exercised by means of coercion (or the possibility of it) and/or by the construction of meaning on the basis of the discourses through which social actors guide their action. Power relationships are framed by domination, which is the power that is embedded in the institutions of society. The relational capacity of power is conditioned, but not determined, by the structural capacity of domination. Institutions may engage in power relationships that rely on the domination they exercise over their subjects. (p. 10)

This is a useful lens for viewing Saudi Arabia. Historically, the ruling family has relied on domination over their citizens through their unquestionable authority. However, since Internet use has become widespread, there has been an increased effort by the ruling family in Saudi Arabia to control citizens' access to the Internet due to the potential for Saudi's to question online the authority of the government.

There are an estimated 13 million Internet users in Saudi Arabia (Middle East Internet Usage Stats, 2013), amounting to roughly 46% of the country having access to the Internet. Among the 46% who have access to the Internet, 1.9 million of them are active Twitter users, making Saudi Arabia the world's fastest-growing Twitter nation (Bennett, 2013). According to the *Arab Social Media Report*, 47% of all tweets in the Arab region stem from Saudi Arabia (Arab Social Media Report, 2013). With an active Internet and Twitter community in the KSA, government officials have an insurmountable task in trying to control what happens online. As Castells (2009) notes, power is exercised not by exclusion from the network, but by the imposition of the rules of inclusion. Officials in the KSA use various control strategies to regulate online behavior, emphasizing what Castells calls network power: the power of the standards of the network, which favors the interests of a specific set of social actors.

Anything deemed immoral or against Islamic values is banned through the Internet Services Unit (ISU), a subdepartment of the King Abdel Aziz City for Science and Technology (OpenNet Initiative, 2009). According to a 2004 Open Net Initiative study, "the most aggressive censorship [in Saudi Internet use] focuses on pornography, drug use, gambling, religious conversion of Muslims, and filtering circumvention tools" (para. 3). The official justification for this censorship stems from the 2001 resolution by the Council of Ministers on Saudi Internet Rules, which states that citizens of the KSA are permitted to use the Internet as long as their use does not run counter to "anything contravening a fundamental principle or legislation, or infringing the sanctity of Islam" ("Saudi Internet Rules," 2001, para. 1). Accessing pornography websites would certainly violate the sanctity of Islam; however, the 2001 Internet rules also include other conditions on Internet use that seem to stray from the protection of Islamic values and delve more into protecting monarchy and leadership.

For example, the 2001 Internet rules explicitly state that all Internet users in the KSA shall refrain from publishing and accessing data contrary to the state or its system; publishing and accessing anything damaging to the dignity of heads of states or heads of credited diplomatic missions in the kingdom or that harms relations with those countries; and/or publishing and accessing false information ascribed to state officials or those of private or public domestic institutions and bodies, liable to cause them or their offices harm or damage their integrity ("Saudi Internet Rules," 2001). Although the preservation of Islamic values might be the motivating factor in developing these rules, it is clear that the real purpose of regulating citizen access to the Internet is politically driven in an effort to control dissent that might emerge from within the KSA. As Phillip Howard (2010) suggests, "states that choose to regulate the internet [do so] to protect political leadership, but [these regulations] are also enacted in the name of safeguarding cultural values" (p. 82).

The KSA does not hide the fact that it heavily regulates Internet activity. The official web page of the ISU provides general information on what is being filtered and why and how it is being filtered.

> The Internet Services Unit oversees and implements the filtration of web pages in order to block those pages of an offensive or harmful nature to the society, and which violate the tenants of the Islamic religion or societal norms. This service is offered in fulfillment of the directions of the government of Saudi Arabia and under the direction of the Permanent Security Committee chaired by the Ministry of the Interior. (Internet Services Unit, n.d., para. 1)

To strengthen the justification for censorship, the ISU website references both religious doctrine and academic studies to support its actions. The section titled "Usefulness of Filtering" mentions a verse from the Qur'an that outlines how God will feel closer to those who do not succumb to the enticements of others.[2] The ISU further justifies its duty to regulate information online by citing a 1986 study in the *Duke Law Journal* to highlight that "countries which impose strict laws relating to prevention of pornography enjoy a reduction in the rate of rape and murder" (Internet Services Unit, n.d., para. 5).

Although the major function of Internet regulation, according to the ISU, is to limit access to pornography websites, the remainder of content blocked refers to "pages related to drugs, bombs, alcohol, gambling and pages insulting the Islamic religion or Saudi laws and regulations" (Internet Services Unit, n.d., para. 2). Anyone caught accessing these websites may be liable to penalties, which include 10 years in prison and a fine for website operators that advocate or support terrorism; 3 years in prison and a fine for financial fraud or invasion of privacy; and 5 years in prison and a fine for those guilty of distributing pornography or other materials that violate public law, religious values, and social standards of the KSA (OpenNet Initiative, 2009).

It is clear that the purpose of regulating Internet use in Saudi Arabia goes beyond maintaining the moral standards of the country. Anyone who speaks up against the ruling Saudi government is liable to be punished under the laws on the use of technology. This rule allows the Saudi government to control the potential for dissent to manifest and suppress the potential for resistance to develop in the country. As Castells (2009) notes, there is always the possibility of resistance that calls into question the power relationship. By quelling resistance, the Saudi government can manage the power relationship within the country. Controlling resistance is important to understand, for when resistance and rejection become significantly stronger than compliance and acceptance, power relationships are transformed; the powerful lose power, and ultimately a process of institutional or structural change ensues (Castells, 2009), something the ruling Saudi government may not be ready to embrace.

The Ministry Wants to Know Everything—Even Your Shower Times!

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[2] The exact verse the ISU website states:

> He said: My Lord, prison is more beloved to me than that to which they entice me, and were you not to divert their plot away from me I will be drawn towards them and be of the ignorant. So his Lord answered him and diverted their plot away from him, truly, He is the All-Hearer, the All-Knower. (Internet Services Unit, n.d., para. 5))

In recent years, the Saudi government has increasingly become suspicious of online activity, particularly blogs and Twitter accounts of influential bloggers, leading some of the content written on these sites to be categorized as deviant activity under the banner of the Saudi Internet rules. Blog sites and Twitter accounts are monitored by the ISU specifically because a number of them are critical of the ruling Saudi government. Because of this concern, in 2009 the government department responsible for regulating print media attempted to expand its oversight and control into the online world. Quoting a spokesman for the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information, Ashraf Khalil (2011) notes that "due to the burgeoning online publishing world, [the Saudi government] felt responsible for monitoring and governance, and that all locally produced Internet content would be subject to the same rules and regulations as the countries restricted print media [policies]" (p. 141). One of the ministry's most notable attempts to control online behavior was its policy toward monitoring content on blogs.

Although the Saudi government acknowledged that it did not intend to license blogs, it hoped that bloggers would be "encouraged" to voluntarily register with the government (Khalil, 2011, p. 142). These new regulations would also apply to multimedia websites, online advertisements, text messaging, mobile phone services, and any type of online publications that the ministry might find fit to add (Khalil, 2011). Later in 2009, the Saudi government went so far as to attempt to block Twitter pages. However, this did not stop anyone from tweeting, because Saudi's were still able to access their accounts from mobile phones (Khalil, 2011). In an even more striking effort to limit Twitter use, the Grand Mufti (head religious cleric) of Saudi Arabia issued a fatwa against Twitter in 2011, demanding that "'real Muslims' avoid it, [because it is] a platform for trading accusations and for promoting lies" (Mutter, 2012, para. 4). Not surprisingly, however, these attempts at censorship against blogging and Twitter use were met with disdain, resistance, and sarcasm. As one online activist tweeted, "those who optionally register their blogs and information with the Ministry of Information, should also report their shower times to the Ministry of Water" (Khalil, 2011, p. 142).

The cat and mouse game between the Saudi government's attempts to suppress Internet use and Saudis' refusal to adhere to these constraints echoes Manuel Castells' model of programmers and switchers within the network society. As Castells (2009) explains, in a world of networks, the ability to exercise control over others depends on two basic mechanisms: (1) the ability to constitute networks and to program/reprogram the networks in terms of the goals assigned to the networks (i.e., the programmers) and (2) the ability to connect and ensure the cooperation of different networks by sharing common goals and combining resources (the switchers) while fending off competition from other networks by setting up strategic cooperation. Castells asks who holds the power in the network society. As Castells (2012) points out, the programmers and switchers both have a share in the production and maintenance of power in the network society—the programmers, with the capacity to program the main networks on which people's lives depend, and the switchers, who operate the connections between different networks. In the context of Saudi Arabia, one can view the regulation of Internet use and the rules associated to violating these regulations as an example of a programmer. The Saudi government, through its Internet Services Unit, attempts to filter acceptable websites and block those that violate the goals of the network while preserving Saudi morality and government authority. The switchers are those who echo the sentiments of the programmers in an effort to create connections between various networks. Influential religious clerics who also have Twitter accounts, for example, are an interesting example of a switcher in

Saudi Arabia, as they often try to suggest the immorality of the Internet used outside of the programmers' restrictions.

Where there is power, however, there will also be counterpower—a deliberate attempt to change power relationships by reprogramming networks around alternative interests and values (Castells, 2012). Various Internet users in Saudi Arabia are engaging in this exercise as they use ICTs to question and bring to light social issues within Saudi society. One of the reasons that attempts to regulate online content have met with resistance is due to the age and tech-savvy nature of Saudi Internet users. As Saudi journalist and blogger Ahmed al Omran points out,

> The social dynamics of the kingdom make it fertile ground for a new generation of youth
> to seek new forms of expression. The newspapers in the country do not really represent
> the people, so [online] has become the natural realm for them to express themselves.
> (in Khalil, 2011, p. 142)

Twitter allows users to generate a connection and "develop autonomous networks of horizontal communication" (Castells, 2012, p. 9) whereby momentum can develop in a way that allows the "citizens of the Information Age to invent new programs for their lives with the materials of their suffering, fears, dream, and hopes" (ibid.). As Castells emphasizes, "[citizens of the Information Age] build their projects by sharing their experience and [overcoming] their powerlessness by networking their desire" (ibid.). Among those who are most vocal in sharing their experiences and networking their desires online are Saudi women, who, for the first time in the history of the country, have a vehicle to voice their opinion on various issues.

Saudi 1.0: The Status of Women in the KSA

According to a 2008 Human Rights Watch report, Saudi Arabia has one of worst records on women's rights in the world. Women are treated as legal minors and often must have a man's permission to leave their homes and participate in public life. Saudi men and women are also strictly segregated in public life. The status of women in Saudi Arabia is determined by traditional and religious practices that are often, though not always, sanctioned by law. As Sifa Mtango (2004) highlights:

> Women in Saudi Arabia can be seen to be in a position subservient to men as restrictions are
> strictly applied. These restrictions are often explained by reference to Islamic requirements, but
> the Quran and other sources of Islamic law do not necessarily support the interpretations of the
> law the Saudi authorities apply. (p. 49)

The Saudi government has historically used aspects of religion to justify the unequal treatment of women. One of the main reasons given for why women need "extra" rules of governance deals with aspects of modesty and protecting the image of women as chaste and obedient. In several Muslim countries, a specific political discourse on women has tended to transform them into a symbol to ascribe them a uniform identity (Le Renard, 2008). In countries like Saudi Arabia, for example, women are supposed to represent the virtuous implementation of Islam by way of the obligation of being veiled in public space (Le

Renard, 2008, p. 612). Because Saudi Arabia is seen as the foundational country for Muslims worldwide, representing Islam in the most conservative way is imperative for Saudi Arabia's political legitimacy. State rules concerning women have contributed to defining Saudi women as pious, modest, and devoted to the family (Le Renard, 2008, p. 613).

Practices such as veiling and sex segregation are said to be required by sharia law (Mtango, 2004); however, the government as a whole interprets the sharia to permit the denial of certain rights to women, including the freedom of travel and equal access to education and employment (Mtango, 2004). In 1970, women were forbidden by law to work in an environment where they would be in the company of men. In 1979, a fatwa was issued by a Saudi sheikh, invoking verses from the Qur'an that demanded that a woman stay at home. In 1980, another fatwa was issued, designed to reinforce the ban on women working in places where they will come into contact with men, restating the moral dangers inherent in women's work outside the home. As Mtango (2004) notes, not allowing women to work "may have been economically viable in 1980 when there were government subsidies to male heads of households, but in times of financial stress, this strategy is out of touch with the financial needs of families" (p. 57).

The insistence of the Saudi government on protecting the morality and chastity of the ideal Saudi woman was complicated in 1992 with the introduction of the Basic Law, which resembles a constitution that provides the powers and duties of the state but is inconsistently interpreted, particularly as the law relates to women. As Mtango (2004) points out, "the unfortunate result of the ambiguity of how the Sharia is applied is that there is nothing to guide government policy, and women's rights are a permanent hostage to the vicissitudes of public sentiment or pressure from interest groups" (p. 52). The interpretation of the sharia is left to government-appointed (male) officials whose agenda often suppresses women's rights in the name of religion (Mtango, 2004), making it quite difficult for women's rights issues to receive any type of proper attention at a state level.

Saudi 2.0: Updating the Status of Women, One #Hashtag at a Time

In 2003, among a cycle of "national dialogues," the Saudi government sponsored the National Dialogue on Women's Rights and Duties, involving about 70 participants, half of whom were women (Le Renard, 2008). The outcome of this dialogue was a series of recommendations that reaffirmed the first duty of women (their role side by side with men in the conservation of the family unit) and specified the right for women to work and to earn a living within the limits defined in the Qur'an and consensus of religious scholars. For some women participants, the dialogue seemed to be a step in the right direction for the gradual inclusion of women in Saudi society. As one participant mentioned, "despite its lack of results, the important thing is to open the dialogue. This might mark a step towards making women's problems more public" (in Le Renard, 2008, p. 619) and also tackle the most difficult issue in Saudi society: segregation (Baker, 2013).. Other women participants, however, left the dialogues disappointed, not really sure whether the dialogues accomplished anything to advance the rights of Saudi women. Although the dialogue took place in 2003, there has been marginal improvement in Saudi society as it relates to including women in the country's decision-making processes. Frustration in some instances is mounting, and women are finding alternative spaces to connect with like-minded networks, sharing their experiences and networking their despair. Since the 2003 dialogues, much has changed in the arena of

ICTs. The Internet has evolved, Facebook was born, and Twitter emerged as an ideal space where "networks of outrage and hope" (Castells, 2012) can coalesce and promote dialogue and perhaps change.

The online world has become an area of choice for Saudi women to experience a nonrestrictive lifestyle. Tech-savvy Saudi women are using Twitter as a way to raise issues about women's rights in the country. According to a recent *Arab News* report,

> For Saudi women social media is an ideal platform to join forces and take up their issues. They face the problem of immobility. It is not possible for women in different regions in a vast country like Saudi Arabia to come together in one place to raise their voices for their rights. (Abdul Ghafour, 2013, para. 3)

In a sense, power and counterpower are reproducing themselves in the online realm, where certain segments of society are trying to circumvent traditional notions of power through mobilizing and promoting women's rights issues online. Some of the social advances for women are an indirect result of a number of online protests that emerged on Twitter, placing local and global pressure on the Saudi Arabian government to reevaluate the treatment of women. As previously mentioned, women Internet users in Saudi Arabia are fairly active on Twitter. According to the *Arab Social Media Report*, 47% of all tweets in the Arab region stem from Saudi Arabia (Arab Social Media Report, 2013). Other data suggest that there are roughly 135,000 female Twitter users in Saudi Arabia (Bennett, 2013). According to Saudi journalist Maha Akeel (2011), the rise in social media use began when women writers, frustrated by censorship and restrictions in traditional media, created their own blogs and web pages to express their opinions more freely. As Akeel notes, "with the introduction of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media, it has become easier to exchange ideas quickly, raise awareness and launch campaigns to demand that women's rights be recognized [in the KSA]" (para. 4).

Although the Saudi government mostly permits online discourse as a way to let citizens vent their frustration (Burke & Calzonetti, 2013), women's use of Twitter to raise awareness about their social condition in Saudi Arabia perhaps has stronger consequences than what the KSA initially imagined—not just within the nation's borders but outside as well. Since 2011, the #Women2Drive campaign has generated both local and global interest in the status of women in Saudi Arabia.

#Women2Drive Campaign

On May 19, 2011, Manal al-Sharif, an Internet security consultant for Saudi Aramco (the Saudi Arabian national oil company) was filmed by a friend driving through the city of Khobar. She posted the eight-minute video of her driving on YouTube, saying in Arabic: "We are ignorant and illiterate when it comes to driving. You'll find a woman with a PhD and she doesn't know how to drive. We want change in the country" (Medeiros, 2013, para. 2). Within two days, the video was watched 600,000 times on YouTube. What Sharif did was unheard of in Saudi Arabia and strictly went against Saudi conduct. Sharif— a woman—was driving a car, an action that is simply not permissible in Saudi Arabia. As mentioned earlier, shared public space in Saudi Arabia is generally segregated between men and women; however, women in Saudi Arabia are subject to a strict notion of male guardianship over women that is based on

sharia family law (Mtango, 2004). Within the context of male guardianship, women are banned from driving. The main reason given for the ban is that it is necessary to preserve the modesty and chastity of the ideal Saudi woman. According to some Saudi religious clerics, driving requires women to unveil themselves, and this often uncovers certain shameful parts of the body (quoted in Mtango, 2004, p. 60). Driving also facilitates the mixing of women with unrelated men, which can provoke subversion and incite evil (Mtango, 2004). Recently, a Saudi psychologist suggested that women who drive are putting themselves at risk of negatively impacting their ovaries and pelvis ("Driving Affects Ovaries and Pelvis," 2013), presumably impacting their potential to have children.

Although there is no clear Islamic basis for prohibiting women from driving, the social mores of the country rigorously support the ban (Mtango, 2004). Women who demand to drive perhaps represent a Western value that the Saudi government has no interest in promoting. As this issue becomes more contentious, the ruling family must tread lightly. If they allow women to drive, will there be a backlash? Where might this backlash come from? Although it is only speculative at this point, history suggests that there would be calls for women to be arrested and perhaps worse. In November 1990, for example, 47 women drove in Riyadh, challenging the social norm prohibiting women from driving. In response, the Saudi government arrested some of the women, and a number of religious leaders even petitioned for the women to be beheaded (Mtango, 2004).

Fortunately, the outcry from Manal al-Sharif's transgression in 2011 was not as extreme, although she dealt with a fairly aggressive response from Saudi officials. According to a 2013 Wired.co.uk interview, after Sharif posted the video, "the religious police came into my house at 2am. They took me and my brother. I was detained for nine days. My picture was on the front of all the newspapers, all saying horrible things about me" (quoted in Medeiros, 2013, para. 4). Prosecutors charged Sharif with tarnishing the KSAs reputation and for stirring up public opinion (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Sharif's defiant act became a rallying cry for Saudi women to be given equal access and opportunity to what some consider "a basic human right" (Medeiros, 2013, para. 6). The Twitter hashtag #Women2Drive emerged and created significant momentum within Saudi Arabia, culminating in an attempted (but failed) public protest in the latter half of 2011. Pressure from within the KSA, mainly from male citizens and religious clerics, added a complex layer to the #Women2Drive campaign's lack of success reaching the public sphere. A report to a high-level advisory group in Saudi Arabia shortly after the Sharif incident claimed that allowing women in the kingdom to drive would encourage premarital sex—a claim that increased pressure on King Abdullah to retain the kingdom's male-only driving rules despite international criticism ("Saudi Arabia," 2011).

Although Twitter generated awareness and slight pressure on the KSA to consider changing driving rules to include women, tradition and the focus on preserving the morality of Saudi women trumped much of the effort to allow women to drive in the KSA. Change however, did occur in another area of women's mobility: bike riding—highlighting that perhaps the #Women2Drive campaign generated some awareness and made some small impact on the rulers of the KSA.

On April 1, 2013, the Internet was abuzz with media reports suggesting that Saudi Arabia had lifted a ban that would now allow women to ride a bicycle in public (with certain limitations imposed). According to *The Stream*, an online Al-Jazeera news program:

> Saudi officials are saying that women can now ride bikes in parks and recreational areas, [however], women must wear a full-body clothing attire, be accompanied by a male relative, and stay within certain areas. [Women] are allowed to bike for recreational purposes only, not as a primary mode of transportation. ("Saudi Bicycle Ban Lifted?" 2013, para. 2)

This apparent step into modernity was met with skepticism and mixed reviews in the Twitter world. Below are some of the reactions from Twitter accounts from inside and outside of Saudi Arabia:

> **@GappistanRadio**—In shocking news, Saudi women can now ride a bike. . . . Only for leisure, not transportation . . . Accompanied by a guy. . . . Progress!!
> **@CanadaKaz**—Another 300 years and they may be allowed to buy a bike RT @GemColl Saudi women can now ride bikes.
> **@fatimamanji**—Apparently in the time I was away from Twitter Saudi women can now ride a bike if with a male relative . . . errrr. #dizzyinglyfastprogress.

Critics view allowing women to ride bikes as a form of gesture politics by Saudi Arabia as a way to highlight that the country is progressing and starting to recognize the inclusion of women in Saudi society. As one blogger put it,

> The fact that the ban on women driving cars remains shows that the government in Saudi Arabia [does] not want women to be mobile or independent and that this change in the law is merely a gesture to defend its position of trade partner and ally to the West. (Russell, 2013, para. 12)

Interestingly, these slow attempts of inclusion allow the Saudi government to appear progressive while managing what women are permitted to do.

This control, however, might be short-lived. At the time of writing, recent developments have once again brought local and global prominence to the #Women2Drive campaign, again unfolding via Twitter. On September 19, 2013, the head of the religious police in Saudi Arabia said that the ban on women driving has no real basis in sharia law ("Saudi Women Driving Ban," 2013). This statement reignited fervor in Saudi Arabia, because for the first time the government conceded that there is no religious justification for why women cannot drive. With this single statement, the government's power has been put into question, and the counterpower capacity of the network society is showing its strength. In response to the statement, the website www.Oct26driving.com was set up to provide a one-stop

location for people to receive updates, get information, and sign a petition in support of #Women2Drive.[3] The name of the website reflects the date (chosen by activists) for when women are encouraged to protest and relive the events of 1990 and drive a car in public. To control the situation, however, the Saudi government blocked the Oct26driving.com website from being accessed from within Saudi Arabia,[4] limiting the momentum that this most recent version of the #Women2Drive campaign will have within the country where it matters the most.

Can Twitter Promote Social Progress in Saudi Arabia?

As effective as Twitter has become in creating and generating awareness of the status of women in the country, it has equally showcased how much work there is yet to be done because of the constant restriction and intrusion by the government in controlling the network from what it deems unacceptable content. As Howard, Agarawal, and Muzammil (2011) note, this is one of many reasons that states interfere with digital networks. States often disable social media by way of claiming an urgent need to preserve the public good and cultural and religious morals (Howard et al., 2011). In this context, it is clear that the Saudi government is trying to remain in control of the #Women2Drive campaign by blocking access to this website. Ironically, the best practical reason to think that social media can help bring political change is that both dissidents and governments think they can (Shirky, 2011). As a result, the Saudi government has somewhat allowed its citizens to use the online forum as a way to vent their frustrations without real concern that these frustrations will manifest themselves in meaningful public protest. For example, a 2011 Facebook page called for a "Day of Rage" across Saudi Arabia to address social and political problems within the country. The Facebook page attracted 36,000 people, but on the chosen day of the protest, only one person showed up (Mabon, 2012). One can presume that the low turnout for this protest was a result of the ban on protesting in Saudi Arabia. (On March 5, 2009, the government reissued a ban on demonstrations within Saudi Arabia in an effort to prevent Arab Spring–style demonstrations).

The ban on protests reflects a theoretical dilemma that Manuel Castells outlines in his book *Networks of Outrage and Hope*. As Castells (2012) explains, although movements usually start on Internet social networks, they become movements by occupying the urban space. So far in Saudi Arabia, this has not happened, particularly as it relates to the #Women2Drive campaign. While the calls encouraging women and their supporters to drive a car on October 26 gained momentum via Twitter, only 60 people actually publically protested, "making it the country's biggest ever demonstration against the ban" (Dozens of Saudi Women Drive, 2013, para. 1). As Saudi society heads toward a period of transition, the internal and external pressure mounting from the #Women2Drive campaign is certainly a dividing factor in the country. There is a gap between the current generation and the younger generation, particularly with regard to women. As Le Renard (2008) points out, "a large proportion of the women are educated

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[3] According to a Huffington Post online news report, at the time of writing, there were over 9,000 signatures on the petition (Elgot 2013).

[4] As of October 3, 2013, the www.Oct26driving.com website displayed the message, "Sorry the requested page is unavailable," which the organization suggests is showing up for users attempting to access the website within Saudi Arabia.

and want to have their own activities beyond their families" (p. 629). For the more progressive citizens, there is a push to encourage equal participation in Saudi society. For conservatives, there is a counterpush to encourage the government to not allow this.[5] The uprisings in other Arab Spring countries occurred in response to adverse social, economic, and political conditions (Rane & Salem, 2012) that most people in the country felt needed to be addressed. In Saudi Arabia, even though there is online momentum pushing for the right for women to drive, it is not manifesting itself in the urban spaces, where real change can happen, mainly because there is little consensus surrounding the issue. As Evgeny Morozov (2011a) states, "digital tools are simply, well tools, and social change continues to involve many painstaking, longer term efforts to engage with political institutions and reform movements" (para. 3). Until Saudi citizens are able to transmit online activity into real-life action, the use of Twitter and other ICTs will have limited success in promoting change.

Conclusion: Hope, but No Outrage

Although Twitter created awareness and a forum for support for the #Women2Drive campaign online, very little has happened in the off-line world. As Evgeny Morozov (2011b) outlines, Twitter and other social networking sites on the Internet run the risk of being perceived through a cyber-utopian view—that is, a belief in the power of the Internet to do such things as "eradicating illiteracy in Africa, to opening up closed societies and flushing them with democracy juice until they shed their authoritarian skin" (p. 19). The potential for Twitter to promote social change for women in Saudi Arabia certainly seems tempting for consideration under the lens of cyber-utopianism; however, as Morozov (2011b) points out, "tweets don't topple governments, people do" (p. 11).

In Saudi Arabia, it is the people in government and the citizens of the country who are ultimately limiting the progress of women for two key reasons. First, the KSA does not allow public protests. According to a Reuters report, the Interior Ministry warned Saudis to "refrain from staging rallies or taking part in any gathering or procession in violation of the law and that those detained for doing so would be dealt with harshly" ("Saudi Arabia Should Stop," 2012, para. 11). As a result, the general population is hesitant to engage in public protest due to a fear of punishment. The second limitation on the progress of women in Saudi Arabia has to do with the practice of gender segregation, making social change quite difficult for women in this male-ruled society. There do, however, seem to be limited steps toward the inclusion of women in Saudi society. Since the 2011 #Women2Drive campaign, KSA officials have made two key adjustments that have created an opportunity for women to have more input in society and greater participation in public life: the right to vote and run in a municipal election in 2015 and the addition of 30 women to the previously all-male Shura (government consultative council). Although these moves highlight King Abdullah's commitment to creating an inclusive space for women in Saudi society, the steps forward have been marred with hateful public statements (via Twitter) from several high-ranking

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[5] The Oct26.com website has captured screen shots of comments from both prominent Saudi Arabians who support the cause and religious clerics who denounce this campaign, giving a sense of where Saudi public opinion is on the issue.

male Saudi officials.[6] In this context, it will be interesting to see how the next phase of the #Women2Drive campaign will be received by the Saudi public.

The Saudi government continues to struggle with controlling the use of Twitter and other social media in the country, and it faces a unique challenge in handling the expectations of some male citizens regarding the status of women. Fortunately for the women of Saudi Arabia, progress is happening despite these controls on social media. A quiet revolution is slowly empowering women to demand more rights and inclusion in the social and political life of the country. Internet use empowers people by increasing their feelings of security, personal freedom, and influence. This effect is particularly positive for women (Castells, 2012). The Internet makes the networked structure of society more visible while empowering networked individuals (Raine & Wellman, 2012, as cited in Comunello & Anzera, 2012, p. 465). In this light, one may view Twitter's potential for promoting social progress in the country from a hesitant cyber-utopian view, for without the existence of Twitter, one can argue that these small improvements to women's inclusion in Saudi society may not have emerged. Although there is hope in the online realm that the situation for women in Saudi Arabia will improve, there is currently little outrage in the public sphere. Although Twitter alone will not create this change, it has promoted a space of awareness for both local and global audiences to pressure for social change in the country, handcuffing the KSA to begrudgingly take on more inclusive practices toward women.

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[6] For example, in response to the appointment of 30 women to the Shura council, a controversial Saudi cleric used Twitter to publicly insult the recently appointed women members, equating them to "prostitutes" and "the filth of society" ("Prostitutes," 2013).

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