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**Online news: A study of ‘credibility’ in the context of
the Saudi news media**

Naif Mutlaq Alotaibi

Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Sussex

December 2016

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted, either in the same or different form to this or any other University for a degree.

Signature:

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Naif Mutlaq Alotaibi

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the 'credibility' of news in Saudi Arabia, comparing online media with official newspapers. The latter are heavily regulated offering limited viewpoints. But the Saudi government has been less able to regulate online. Against a historical background of news development in Saudi Arabia, the thesis explores the rise of online from discussion forums established in the 1990s to online newspapers and social media.

Largely qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups) plus a quantitative survey, were adopted to collect two sets of data: from educated readers, and from journalists working for online publications. Additionally, material from two news case studies was gathered. Questions concerned: how online news was evaluated by users compared to more traditional reporting; how producers perceived the distinctiveness of online titles and the issues they faced. The data from the case studies – an 'internal' news story, Corona virus and an 'external' event, Egyptian elections – was subjected to 'frame' analysis, addressing the different news coverage of official print titles, online news and independent Twitter accounts. Focus was on whether online reporting offered more varied viewpoints and greater reader participation, and whether there was evidence for more management of news by the Saudi authorities in relation to the internal as compared to the external news event.

The thesis argues that compared to official newspapers, online titles have largely gained greater credibility amongst educated Saudi users. They are regarded as offering different views, more 'objective' reporting and actively encourage reader comment. Findings indicate that online is less censored than official newspapers, but editors/journalists have learnt the skills of self-censorship to avoid blocking. Exchange of views on Twitter also demonstrate the possibility of distinctive voices and viewpoints being aired and argued over. In these ways, the relation between online news and readers/users begins to enable the formation of independent 'public opinion'.

Dedication

To my father, Mutlaq, who was illiterate, but taught me the most beautiful things in my life.

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List of Abbreviations

AFP	French news agency
ART	Arab Radio and Television
Ads	Advertisement
Aramco	Saudi Arabian Oil Company
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CITC	Communications and Information Technology Commission
CNN	Cable News Network
KACST	King Abdul Aziz's City for Science and Technology
MBC	Middle East Broadcasting Centre
NCB	Saudi National Bank
SMS	Short message service
SPA	Saudi Press Agency
UAE	United Arab Emirates
USA	United States of America
WHO	World Health Organization

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Introduction

Introduction

The introduction of the Internet has seen great changes in people's access to information across the globe (Ghareeb 2000, p.395). Millions of people are using the Internet to learn about topics of their choice, others are using it for entertainment, and some for business purposes, while others use it to obtain news about specific incidents. It enables information to be exchanged, whether by civil organizations, pressure groups or ordinary citizens, but so too government agencies and opposition leaders are able to initiate discussions and set agendas for issues they believe are important.

Online journalism has become important for both business and media organizations. The latter have found the Internet to be an effective platform from which they can deliver news as it happens, reach a wide audience and gain responses from users. However, concerns have also been expressed about the credibility of online news. Such concerns carry weight because journalism is a field in which journalists are expected to give their audience truthful and reliable accounts of news events (Awad 2010). Further, if a medium does not win the trust and confidence of the audience, then the attention of the public shifts to some other outlet.

This question of credibility has also been raised in Saudi Arabia: how credible are its online news sources? In this regard, the traditional media had in the past, to some extent, won the trust of the public. But the rise of online news sources has threatened traditional news forms in the competition to win readers' or viewers' attention. There has been a growing trend for the public to favour online platforms in order to access news. A number of studies have discussed the issue of new media forms in Saudi Arabia and their impact on the public and journalists, including those by Kraidy (2013), Awad (2010) and Al-Qarni (2004). This thesis, however, particularly explores whether and in what ways online news in the Kingdom may have achieved greater

credibility than traditional¹ news media and whether it has contributed to furthering public discussion and debate and the formation of public opinion in a way that eludes the more strictly regulated traditional news. In this context the usefulness or otherwise of the concept of the 'public sphere' is considered.

The fieldwork research involves the generation of quantitative and qualitative data. It is based on a survey and interviews with users of news and with journalists working for online newspapers, carried out between July and August 2012. In addition, the research engaged with two case studies comparing news reporting by official newspapers² to that by online media (online journalism and the social medium Twitter). The news events selected for qualitative analysis were an internal one plus a second one outside the Kingdom (the Egyptian elections) and focus particularly on how the Saudi news media - official newspapers, online news outlets and Twitter – variously apply different frames to suggest different understandings and priorities in relation to the news events.

Saudi society and online news

According to a report in August 2011 by the Institute of Economic Forecasting for the Mediterranean World, on the use of social media in the Arab world, more than 20 million Arabs were already using Facebook, the social networking site (Alammari 2013). By the end of 2013, Facebook had been ranked as the social networking site most used in the Arab world, and the number of Facebook users amounted to more than 50 million. A quarter of them were Egyptians. The Emirates are the highest users in proportion to the total population, followed by other Gulf States and then Lebanon. According to Alammari (2013), 'Young people aged 15 to 29 represent about 70% of Facebook users in the Arab countries, although a slight increase in the number of Facebook users over 30 since the end of 2011 has been observed' (2013, p.121).

¹ 'Traditional news' (in this thesis) means news that provided by the following media: printed newspapers, radio and television.

² 'Official newspapers' in the Saudi media context suggests Saudi daily newspapers. As Saudi official newspapers are regarded as the mouthpiece of the Saudi government, where this media funded by Saudi government, as well as, the government transport Saudi newspapers free of charge, both by post internally and externally via Saudi Airlines.

By the end of March 2011, there were also about 1,100,000 users of Twitter in the Arab world (Alammari 2013). The events of the Arab Spring probably contributed to the huge increase in users of this site. The number of Twitter users in Saudi Arabia reached 9 million by May 2016, when more than half a million tweets per day were being sent (Al Arabyia net, May 18, 2016).

According to official statistics from its Communication and Information Technology Commission, the number of Internet users in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had reached about 15.2 million by the end of the third quarter of 2012. Internet use increased at a high rate, from 5% in 2001 to about 52% by the end of the third quarter of 2012.

Since then, Internet use has continued to rise, reaching about 22.5 million users by May 2016, and representing about 71% of the population. Based on the trend shown in the chart below, it is expected that with high speed fibre-optic networks (FTTX) being extended across the Kingdom, the demand for Internet services there will continue to grow.

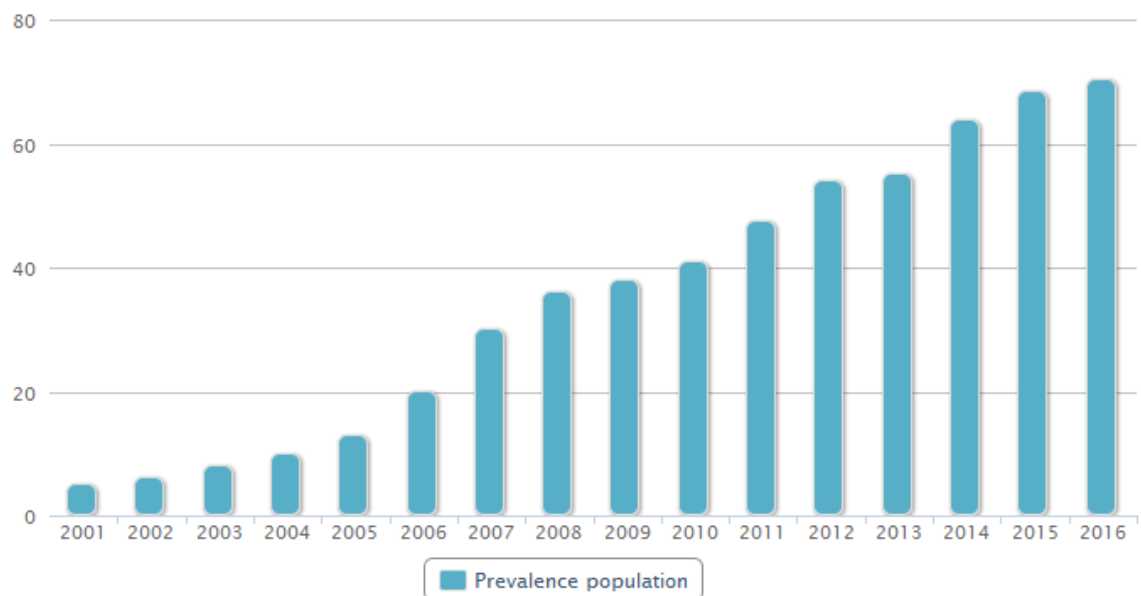


Figure 1: Internet users in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2001 to 2016 (Source: Yamin & Mattar 2016).

In its first stage, FTTX will provide a high speed Internet service to the large cities. It will support richer online content and encourage the proliferation of handheld Smart devices (Communication and Information Technology Commission 2013). The significant increase in the number of Internet users in Saudi Arabia indicates that a large proportion of Saudi society has access to 'alternative' media, including online news, alongside traditional news media.

However, as is the case with most non-democratic countries, the adoption of Internet services is not a technological advance that was easily accepted (Yamani 2000). Such regimes are wary of the impact on their governance systems of embracing the Internet. This was the situation in Saudi Arabia. The adoption of online news platforms faced similar challenges. In Saudi Arabia, a lack of enthusiasm for this development was widespread amongst the ruling groups, partly out of fear of the political awareness it could create in Saudi society, the expectations it might create, and the demands its citizens might make. However, when considering the related economic and commercial advantages of using the Internet, the government modified its reluctance to adopt it (Kraidy 2013, p.32). The official adoption of the Internet led to other notable developments, and the media underwent great changes. The real-time delivery of news via online newspapers was one such advance, enabling Saudis to access information from all over the country including news within different states and from abroad, which helped people to become more knowledgeable about and involved in a range of issues pertaining to governance. As Dahlgren (2005) observes: the 'Internet [is] entering into, as well as contributing to the perceived stabilization of political communication systems, thus extending and pluralizing the participants' (p.102). Nevertheless, the government has proceeded with caution and attempted to limit the spread of news from online platforms out of fear of what it regards as the consequent political risks.

Thus some bloggers in the Kingdom have been charged and imprisoned. For example, Fouad Al Farhan, a Saudi writer, was arrested and imprisoned for 137 days in December 2007 for a discussion in his blog interpreted to be about the advantages and disadvantages of being a Muslim (Bukhari 2011). Seen as the

leader of the Saudi bloggers, his case was regarded as controversial, and not reported by any local official newspapers, arguably because they were under orders from the government to ignore it. Nevertheless, the case received global attention, bloggers in Saudi Arabia having communicated the story worldwide through the Internet. Discussions spread on various platforms, including international television channels as well as Internet sites. Organizations such as Reporters Without Borders demanded his release (Bukhari 2011). For them what was seen from the Saudi state perspective as a 'minor' event was a significant global issue: an example of press censorship and the criminalising of a journalist for pursuing a legitimate debate (Bukhari 2011). Institutions such as Reporters Without Borders act as 'checks and balances' to try to ensure that governments do not intimidate reporters and bloggers in their generation of online news or attempt to define what can and cannot be published and discussed. Defending Fouad Al Farhan was a mark of this position (Awad 2010, p.172; Kraidy 2013, pp.28-42).

In Saudi Arabia, views on the credibility of online news diverge, with those working for or in support of traditional news media tending to belittle it. Some are concerned that the emergence of online journalism undermines control over the professional standards that are required in the field (Guaaybess 2013). Some regard online newspapers and journalism as of lower quality than the traditional news media, and variable in values and norms. Online journalism is sometimes described as 'deviant', altering the accepted standards of professional journalism by redesigning formats, encouraging audience participation and replacing old ways of creating connections between the events reported. Others, however, favour online newspapers, considering that journalism, just like other professions, does undergo development, incorporating novel values, practices and norms (Al-Qarni 2004). They note that even the traditional news media have adopted some aspects of online news into their systems and accept the importance of online sources for seeking out a wide range of information, and as an effective tool for journalistic research.

Traditional and online news media are, of course, competing for audiences. The traditional news media platforms are compelled to work in agreement with the

policies initiated by the government, including more limited press freedom as they try to win audiences. In this context they tend to criticise online newspapers as less credible. However, more politically aware citizens and regular users of online newspaper platforms do not agree that the latter should not be trusted (Guaaybess 2013); many even believe online sources of news to be more credible than the traditional media. According to Alsaeed (2004, p.174), although the credibility of online news is questioned, attacks on bloggers give rise to challenges to the government, whilst the latter continues to criticise online sources. It is pertinent that whenever authorities block websites they witness the creation of many new sites. In addition, even traditional journalists are tending to turn to Internet sources in gathering news, having changed their opinion of the reliability of such sources.

It might be argued then, that the credibility and impact of online newspapers in Saudi Arabia is a divided and politicised issue worthy of further attention.

In this thesis there are two 'contexts' which shape thinking about news media in Saudi Arabia and the issues being explored. The first is the historical development of Saudi media in the 20th century (discussed in Chapter One) and still impacting on the media environment in terms of regulation and the authorities' attempts to 'manage' news and news media to serve their own interests or what they see as the interests of the nation. The second and more recent context is the events of the Arab Spring and the perceptions and theorisations of the role of new media, especially social media. Before considering more specific research issues, the next section addresses this second 'context'.

'Arab Spring' and social media

According to Christakis and Fowler (2011) 'The Obama campaign's use of Internet and mobile technology shows the real power of online social networks. Internet users watched a stunning 14.5 million hours of official campaign ads online' (p.204). They added:

When Obama's former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, made the news with his 'God Damn America' sermon, the traditional media latched on to the story and covered it for several days. Meanwhile

supporters forwarded links to Obama's own speech on race, which made it hard to believe that he shared Wright's views. During the primaries alone, 6.7 million people watched Obama's thirty-seven minute speech on YouTube (2011, pp.204-205).

During the 'Arab Spring' (the events first erupting in Tunisia in 2011 and then extending to Libya, Egypt, Syria and Yemen), social networks were similarly regarded as playing a key role. Observers, participants and scholars have made much of how 'alternative' media, particularly the internet, mobile phones and social media were used by the 'rebels'. It has been argued that the new media enabled citizens to counter the limitations of mainstream news, to communicate directly with others, and to express views and discuss politics more freely. In this way people gained confidence in making political demands and mobilised collectively in public protests aimed at overthrowing their governments. Such media have been thought of in terms of creating a 'public sphere' and furthering more democratic values (Murphy 2006).

The demonstrators during the Arab spring, through their reliance on the social media, and through the creation of a new public sphere, have strengthened democratic ideals among peoples and challenged injustice. Some evidence of this is that the shops and cafés in Egypt and Turkey made their Wi-Fi networks available to the demonstrators. This means that the people felt that freedom of access to the Internet and the expression of their demands was an essential part of democracy, and that the demonstrations that broke out, for example, in Tahrir Square in Egypt and Taksim Square in Turkey, were – as *the Guardian* suggests – 'a lesson in democracy' (*The Guardian*, May 29, 2014). Furthermore, according to Eaton et al (2013), another example can be adduced of the cooperation of the protesters to enhance democratic ideals and confront the information blackout: 'Despite the blackout, many activists soon managed to find proxies to get back online, or simply sent their updates to friends and relatives outside of the country to post their updates online' (p.11).

Thus it has been argued that the Internet was a ground of resistance, helping to overthrow some political regimes. Social media played a significant role by

channelling the mass spread of information, photos of action and confrontations with police, and contributions from those engaging in activities which could not be controlled by the authorities (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, December 26, 2011). The latter were clearly fearful of how the new media mobilised people, enabling them to come together in opposition to the ruling elites.

The role of media, and especially new media, in the events of the Arab Spring have been discussed extensively (for example: Khondker 2011; Skinner 2011; Allagui and Kuebler 2011; Storck 2011) and will not be covered in detail here. But some reflection is useful. This research was embarked on as the 2011 events were unfolding and completed when it was evident that the Arab Spring was short-lived and that rather than having blossomed into summer, winter had returned. Saudi Arabia was also touched by protests even if not on the same scale as in some other countries (as discussed below).

It was social media that fanned the initial spark for the Arab Spring. In Tunisia, a single act by a street vegetable trader triggered people's anger and resentment against the ruling group. Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in a protest against government policies for the poor in his country. The self-immolation of Bouazizi went viral on social networking websites such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. As Khaled Qobaa describes it:

When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Sidi Bouzid city, we had had a similar case in Monastir three months before, but nobody knew about this event, because it was not filmed. What made it different this time was that Bouazizi's image was put on Facebook and everybody saw it (*Elaph*, March 1, 2011).

In this way young people, especially, took action to change the political destiny of their country (Allagui & Kuebler 2011)³.

³ Tunisian demonstrations managed to topple President Ben Ali during the 28 days of protests, and thus ended 23 years of the rule of Ben Ali in Tunisia on January 14, 2011. An interim government took over the conduct of affairs until the election of interim president Moncef Marzouki in Tunisia on December 12, 2011 (Schraeder and Rddissi 2011; Allagui and Kuebler 2011).

In neighbouring Libya, Facebook and Twitter also proved to be useful tools of mobilisation, used by thousands to rally opposition against an oppressive regime⁴, with Bloggers networking via Facebook and Twitter to discuss strategies for initiating mass protests and to compel their autocratic governments to relinquish power. According to Storck, (2011) the TV channel Al-Jazeera 'relied on reputable bloggers and Twitter users during the uprisings for real-time coverage of events, by using Sharek, a citizen's media platform that [was] received and filtered through submissions by citizen journalists' (p.27). Bloggers also connected with other external media organisations, such as the BBC and CNN, 'to spread credible information to their supporters through the revolutionary period' (Howard et al 2011, p.3). Indeed, Skinner suggests that the connection between the new and the traditional media played a crucial role in emboldening political activism in society to a very high level (Skinner 2011).

The role of the citizen journalist gained a new meaning as more and more people used different ICT tools to provide accounts of what was happening in their countries. Storck (2011) outlines it as follows:

Social media tools provide an accessible platform for citizen journalism, defined as the use of digital media tools to 'report on events on the ground, upload text and videos directly to the Internet or feed the information and videos to media outlets ... Though there are obvious accuracy issues related to citizen journalism, the implication for the role of social media within the uprising is that it allowed for those directly involved to shape their own narrative and expose themselves to an international audience (p.27).

Social media, including popular online social forums, encouraged free debate and publicised government misuse of funds, police brutality, high taxes and other abuses (Khondker 2011). Facebook and Twitter were used to raise discussions about state corruption and highlight the luxurious lifestyles which government officials and their relatives were enjoying while most citizens were struggling to make ends meet. Howard et al (2011) describe how:

⁴ After clashes with rebels, and then the escape of Al-Gaddafi in Libya, his assassination and the capture by the rebels of his residence in Bab Al-Azizia on August 23, 2011, which ended the civil war in Libya (Almutairi 2013). It is worth mentioning that by bombing his motorcade NATO involved itself in the killing of Al-Gaddafi.

Users in Tunisia used new technologies for example, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, in creative ways; for instance, democracy advocates embarrassed President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali by streaming a video of his wife using a government jet to make expensive shopping trips to Europe (p.2).

The strong public support for dissenting political movements in Tunisia and Libya surprised their rulers, and according to Abaza (2011) they used violent means to crack down on all forms of protest, including media platforms, to maintain their power. Yet Howard et al (2011) comment that the constant demonstrations on the streets made it difficult for these governments to continue to rule. As the head of the Internet Society in Tunisia, Khaled Qobaa, commented:

The government tried to close Facebook in the first quarter of 2009, but it was very difficult, as it was used by many people. So it seems that Bin Ali's regime fell because the ban may have caused more problems than if Facebook had been left available to users (*Elaph*, March 1, 2011).

In Egypt too, the merits of social media outwitted the authorities:

One of the defining features of the Egyptian uprising is the relative speed with which it occurred. Compared to the uprisings in Tunisia and Libya, which took 28 days and roughly 9 months respectively, the Egyptian activists unseated Mubarak in a mere 18 days, and again, relatively peacefully in comparison to other uprisings in the Arab Spring ... as Egyptian activists were able to successfully play off the strengths of the social networking capabilities of Facebook and Twitter by capitalizing on their 'many-to-many' communication capabilities and the speed with which information can be transferred and spread, an inherent characteristic [of] any digital media (Storck 2011: 25).

In Egypt, the blogger Khaled Said became an icon of the 'revolution'. Killed under torture at a police station in Alexandria in June 2010, his death sparked unrest and political turmoil. As the quote above suggests, the event led to the creation of many pages on the Internet, denouncing the action and criticising the ruling power, and with thousands of images, videos and messages circulated via social media (Howard et al 2011; Storck 2011). 'We are all Khaled Said' was a significant page on Facebook which called for the continuation of demonstrations in Egypt against

Mubarak's regime. Gerbaudo (2012) comments: 'A whopping 36,000 users joined the page on the first day, quickly helping it to become the most popular anti-regime page on Facebook' (p.56). It 'quickly attracted 500,000 members' (Storck 2011, p.22)⁵. Storck states that this page 'provided a crucial platform for potential protesters to network with one another and share their common grievances' (2011, p.25).

Yet, while Facebook was most important in the build-up to the protests, Twitter was a far more effective tool for activists once on the ground, as they were often able to use the Twitter interface through their mobile phones (2013, p.13). However, as Eaton and et al interestingly remark:

When the government blocked cell-phones, people seemingly switched to a more traditional form of communication – word of mouth. In many ways the move appears to have enticed people from their homes down to the streets to see for themselves (2013, p.11).

But social media was effective, as Storck points out, in allowing 'those far away, whether members of a diasporic community living outside Egypt, or members of an international audience, to follow events literally in real-time' (Storck 2011, p.31).

At the same time supporters of the dictatorial regimes also used social networking sites. In Egypt, pages on Facebook supported the former president Mubarak and tried to persuade people to defend him. They named these pages 'Hero of the 73 War' reminding Egyptians of the president's role as commander of the Air Force in the war against Israel in 1973.

In other countries too, from Bahrain (February 2011) to Turkey (June 2013), social media was an important tool. In Turkey (June 2013)⁶ as the authorities imposed a total media blackout thousands of people retweeted images and news in support of

⁵ The administrator was Google's Middle East marketing executive, Wael Chonim, who was arrested by the Egyptian state police.

⁶ Protests in Taksim Square in Istanbul were organized to demonstrate against the government's move to destroy the park and build a shopping centre (Atak 2013). Quickly the protests spread across the country, transformed into action against Erdogan's authoritarianism. Videos of Gezi Park were shared on YouTube for all to see (Della Porta & Mattoni 2014). Dramatic images were captured on the protestors' lenses and they posted them on social media. Thousands of people retweeted and supported the protests.

the protests (Demirhan 2014, Della Porta & Mattoni 2014, Hacıyakupoglu & Zhang 2015). Millions of tweets with different hashtags were sent every second during this period (Hacıyakupoglu & Zhang (2015). Social media had become an 'alternative media' for the Turkish demonstrators.

In Saudi Arabia protests began in Jeddah and Samtah (in the south of the country) in late January 2011. In February and early March in the Eastern province (Al-Awamiyah, Al-Qatif and Hofuf) the minority Shi'a protested against their discrimination and again social media played a role, Matthiesen (2012) noting the use of Twitter by youth activists in the Eastern province. Via Facebook, a 'Day of Rage' was organised after Faisal Ahmed Abdul-Ahad was killed by Saudi security (2nd March) for taking part in a demonstration with a few hundred others in the Eastern province. According to Mabon, the 'Day of Rage' page attracted 36,000 people and was used to make demands 'for an elected Shura council to replace the consultative body appointed by the King, an independent judiciary, the release of all political prisoners, and the right to exercise freedom of expression and assembly ... etc.' (2012, p.3).

Khaled Al-Johani, shown alone in Riyadh in the 'Day of Rage', was interviewed by the BBC's Arabic Television service. Subsequently arrested (March 11, 2011) and put in Ulaysha Prison, he was referred to online as 'the most daring man in Saudi Arabia' (BBC, May 24, 2011). His six-minute interview with BBC television was posted on YouTube and a Facebook page created, entitled 'Where is Khaled?'⁷ These attracted thousands of users and followers. More widely, protesters campaigned against human rights abuses and for the release of political prisoners, relying on Twitter, including @e3teqal, to inform people (Matthiesen 2012, p.629). At the same time Saudi Arabian women created a women's suffrage Facebook page called 'Baladi'. Declaring that Saudi Arabian law should give women equal rights, it specifically attempted to enlist support for their protest against exclusion from voting

⁷ This page on Facebook attracted 9,000 followers in its first few weeks and the number of followers soon reached 13,000 users. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Where-is-Khaled-أين-خالد/171868602863062>

in elections. Perhaps concerned about further protest being amplified by social media, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz issued a royal decree in late September 2011, declaring 'We reject the exclusion of women in society', and promising that Saudi women would be able to obtain membership of the Shura Council as of its next session and would participate in running and voting in the next municipal elections (2015) (BBC, September 25, 2011).⁸

The 2011 Arab Spring ousted some regimes. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was threatened but avoided any large-scale unrest (Quamar 2014) by a combination of repressive measures (arrests and imprisonment) and making some concessions (for instance, to women). Socio-economic concerns, and friction between ethno-tribal and religious groups, remain. Matthiesen (2012) however, is clear that the protest movements, especially in the Eastern province did represent a 'Saudi Spring':

... it is a protest movement that is often overlooked in discussions about the Arab Spring. Therefore, I define this protest movement as part of a 'Saudi Spring', an amalgam of protests, petitions, and online debates about political reform and the release of political prisoners that was influenced by the Arab Spring. This account of the protest movement in the Eastern Province argues that, *apart from new media and a public sphere ripe for revolutionary symbols and narratives, a protest movement is facilitated by personal contacts and a history of political subversion* (Matthiesen 2012, pp.629-630).

Whether or not the events in Saudi Arabia are viewed as part of an Arab Spring, it is evident that social media again featured largely. Matthiesen's comment, however, is interesting in its suggestion that protest cannot solely be created by 'new media'.

The events of the wider Arab Spring and the discussion about the potential contribution of 'alternative' media in countries experiencing severe restrictions on traditional media, are relevant to this research. Firstly, Saudi Arabia did experience an Arab Spring. Secondly social media in the Arab world, as Douai and Nofal (2012)

⁸ Indeed, before his death in January 2015, King Abdullah had appointed 30 women to the Shura Council (the Saudi Parliament). Furthermore, in other progress in terms of women's presence in the public sphere, for the first time in the history of Saudi Arabia women have participated in the municipal elections and 13 of them have won in those elections (BBC, December 14, 2015).

point out, 'have grown more popular, and gained more legitimacy because they are perceived to be autonomous from their authoritarian states, unlike the mass media landscape' (p.269). This is particularly the case in Saudi Arabia. Their statement highlights the issue of 'credibility', a key concern of the thesis. Thirdly, debates about the Arab Spring suggest the importance of social media in extending information and viewpoints on news events and in enabling citizens to participate in discussion. But they also highlight the relations between mainstream/official media and social media, for both 'rebels' and the authorities.

In order to engage with social media more fully it was decided to extend the research to include attention to one social media news platform, Twitter. In the two analyses of news content (Chapter Seven), Twitter accounts are considered alongside official newspapers and online news outlets. A further point to be made in the light of political developments since 2011 and the absence of any 'Arab Summer' is that this study adopts a greater cautiousness in interpreting what might seem to be the progressive impact of new media.

Research, theory and methodology

This research aims to explore the credibility of online news compared to traditional news in Saudi Arabia. The study asks what is meant by 'credibility' and sets out the different ways in which it is defined and mobilized for evaluation in the Saudi context. It considers whether, for those who rate the 'credibility' of online news over traditional news, their evaluation is related to what is regarded as the greater 'freedom' of online news 'spaces'. The study also asks whether online news facilitates discussion and debate to form 'public opinion'. In line with Habermas's ideas about the 'public sphere', it asks whether this 'public opinion' is able to put pressure on government, or at least is moving in this direction, in a way that the official Saudi press is not able to.

A key research question thus concerns whether online news has gained more credibility in Saudi Arabia and the degree to which this may be evident from what editors/journalists and users have to say and from its online news reporting. In relation to this the thesis asks:

- What do different editors/journalists and users understand by 'credibility' and what aspects of news reporting does each group highlight as giving journalism or news stories 'credibility' (or not)? In what terms is the credibility of online news discussed, compared to that of traditional news media?
- To what extent is credibility bound up with the possibility of a variety of viewpoints and some independence from official viewpoints in the reporting of news?
- How important to credibility, from both editors/journalists' and users' viewpoint, is the possibility for users to respond to news and exchange views?
- Do such exchanges create 'public opinion'? What do different parties understand by this and is it regarded as significant? What impact might it be seen to have?
- How if at all do censorship and regulation impact on credibility, whether as seen by editors/journalists producing online news or for users?
- What does the analysis of news content highlight as the characteristics of more or less credible news? Does this correspond with what journalists and/or users understand as 'credibility'?
- Is there evidence from news content itself as well as interviews with journalists, that Saudi online news media is concerned, especially through social media, to facilitate the formation of public opinion on certain issues?

As far as primary research is concerned, the issues are pursued by adopting several different methods: a survey of news media users; individual interviews with online journalists as well as users; and content analysis – in particular here, a 'frame' analysis of specific news stories as reported in official newspapers, online news sites and one social media outlet, Twitter. For the content analysis, the study sampled one internal or domestic news event – 'Corona' disease, and one external news event – the Egyptian elections, for a two-week period in May 2014.

The study pursues its aims and objectives with the help of Saudi consumers/users of news media who were respondents for the survey and interviews, and of Saudi journalists who took part in one-to-one interviews. Underlying the survey and

interviews was the issue of credibility: how it was variously defined; how traditional news media (such as television, radio and local newspapers) and online news media were regarded and measured by the different parties on this criterion. Credibility was also considered via analysis of news texts relating to the two case studies in official newspapers, online news sites and Twitter. But here there was also the aim to explore whether signs of online press ‘freedom’ were more evident in the case of an internal (rather than external) news event, since authorities were more likely to ‘manage’ the news output of the official press.

The second related issue at the heart of the research is to find out whether there is evidence of the opening up of discussion and debate about issues arising in the news, especially in online news media. The concern is whether this is something explicitly pursued by (some) editors and journalists (as well as manifest in online content) and recognized and valued by (some) users. Thus, the thesis is concerned with ‘credibility’ but as part of the wider investigation to see whether there is evidence suggesting the formation of public opinion as a key component in the making of a public sphere, in the way that Habermas describes.

Given these concerns the thesis is underpinned theoretically by a discussion of the concepts of ‘credibility’ and ‘public opinion’ / ‘public sphere’ as first formulated by Habermas and developed by others. In relation to the former, the thesis draws a study initially based in the US before the concept was taken up more widely, including in the Arab regions and in Saudi Arabia. In relation to the latter there is an extensive amount of literature which is selectively drawn on, including one piece discussing the contribution of the Internet and online news in facilitating public spheres. There are attempts to epitomize the Internet as a medium of information distribution and a public sphere and as the democratization of civic culture by focusing on the arguments by Habermas (see Chapter Two below).

The research methods adopted arose from theoretical concerns raised in the literature, from the particular issues related to news in the Saudi context and the aims, objectives and questions of the thesis. The research relies on both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection. More than one approach

was used in order to strengthen the research. Dawson (2002) clarifies that ‘many researchers believe this is a good way of approaching research, as it enables you to counteract the weaknesses in both qualitative and quantitative research’ (cited in Alsairi 2013, p.20). According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994), ‘one of the four factors helping to build credibility in a qualitative research project is the use of multiple methods of data collection’ (cited in Almaghlooth 2014, p.104).

Quantitative research data is characterised by evidence which can be quantified, tested and analysed in order to obtain meaningful findings. In the present study this involved a survey of different groups of news consumers/users who were asked a series of questions about their news habits, their preferences around types of news and so on, via a questionnaire (250 sent out, 213 retrieved). This part of the research was to enable a broad overview of user consumption of news media to be gained. The qualitative research – oriented towards gaining more in-depth knowledge and understanding of practices, their meaning and significance – involved interviews with online editors and journalists (13) as well as consumers/users (23). It was hoped that such an approach would provide rich data and greater insight into a range of editorial and journalistic understandings and practices, including of ‘credibility’. It would also open up how consumers from different social groups (though all well-educated: students, university teachers and civil service and private company employees in Riyadh) understood the qualities of different news media and their respective ‘credibility’ and how they felt about and responded to online journalism in particular. The gathering of news content in official news media, online news outlets and via Twitter in relation to two news events (as mentioned above) was intended to explore ‘credibility’ and ‘freedom’ of the press from different angles.

The approach used in this study is different from those of studies hitherto carried out on Saudi news media. Where other Saudi studies have been done on the credibility of Saudi news media (such as: Baghdadadi 1992; Almakaty 1994; Alarabi 2005; Alsholhoop 2005; Alotaibi 2007), they have adopted a more quantitative approach (such as a questionnaire) and they have not looked across from other approaches

such as: journalists, consumers and texts analysis (See Chapter Three for a more detailed discussion of the methodology applied in this study).

Reflecting on methods

When the research questionnaire for the survey was designed, it focused on issues such as the 'credibility' of the Saudi media (whether online or traditional) and whether online news had become a new 'public sphere' through the new platforms provided to Saudi users. This questionnaire was used to find how readers rated online and more traditional news media and what features they preferred in each medium. As this research was addressing new media forms (online news), it was thought logical to take the sample from the educated sector of the public, which makes greatest use of the Internet. To this end the respondents selected for questioning fell into three categories: students, university teachers and suitable employees (of the civil service and private companies in Riyadh). Selecting from three groups helped the research to reflect a wider range of views than if a single group had been chosen. Some questions in the questionnaire were limited in their answering options, but the questionnaire also provided opportunities for respondents to add further comments. It was distributed in June 2012 to 250 people from the three groups. In total, 213 questionnaires were recovered, but after the process of auditing and reviewing them, 17 of these were ruled out because they had not been completed. The total number of valid responses thus dropped to 196 people (a 74% response rate).

After the survey had been carried out, a number of interviews were held, in the hope of more in-depth insights into users' judgements of traditional news media compared to online media; and also to gain online journalists' perspectives. Other interviews explored the views of both journalists and users about the credibility of online news and other Saudi media. Based on the most popular news providers shown in the questionnaire results, ten online newspapers were chosen, from which editors and journalists were selected for one-to-one interviews. From July 24 to August 24, 2012, interviews were held with 13 editors, editors-in-chief and correspondents working for six Saudi online newspapers. The researcher ruled out four newspapers because

they focused on local news from certain areas in Saudi Arabia or specialised in particular news areas, such as sport.

The chosen sample included five editors-in-chief, two editorial directors and six editors who were working on the following online newspapers: *Sabq*, *Alweeam*, *Ajel*, *Anaween*, *Sada* and *Alwakad*. Two editors, one of whom is an editor-in-chief, did not want to disclose their names. Interviews were also conducted with 23 Saudi users⁹, in the city of Riyadh, between August 25 and September 25, 2012. These interviews were also one-to-one interviews and took from 15 to 30 minutes each. All interviews were recorded after gaining permission from the interviewees; all the interviewees, both journalists and users, agreed to be recorded. The interviews did not rely only on exactly the same questions, but added new questions during the discussion because the researcher wanted the questions to take into account the differences between the interviewees in rank and job expertise. The interviews yielded important information and more depth than would have been gathered from questionnaires alone.

The last source of data to be collected in this study was the framing of two media events reported by the Saudi press, both offline and online. They were selected in order to explore and compare the reporting by online news outlets and official newspapers. The two issues selected occurred in May 2014, and the researcher chose data from three different media: official newspapers, online newspapers and social media (Twitter). The framing method was chosen because this qualitative method allowed the researcher to gain deeper insights into two important issues in Saudi society and provide justifications about the frames used by these three media on the issues in question. Analysis of the written material in these media highlighted the way in which it was connected to the research questions and the previous statistical data identified in the literature review section (for more details, see Chapter Three).

⁹ The interviewees were 15 males and 8 females, of whom 13 held a Master's degree, 6 had a Bachelor's and 4 people had lower qualifications than these.

Finally, the research has temporal and spatial limits. Because the interviews and survey were conducted in 2012, the design of the questionnaire, interview and framing would probably have changed if it had been carried out later, because of the acceleration of events – in the new media in particular. Furthermore, the researcher would have had to choose other issues that were being debated on the Saudi streets as candidates for the framing analysis. The researcher learnt that both the research approaches used in this study had important strengths, in particular when discussing credibility. While the quantitative approach is useful for calculating the quantity and percentage of particular responses, the in-depth interviews gave a much deeper understanding of issues and provided the researcher with leads for further investigations to obtain the information required. Looking at framing gave realistic, tangible and accurate results about the coverage of the selected internal and external issues by particular media, through analysing and examining the frames for language, headlines, news stories, images, tweets and even comments on the news.

Structure of the thesis

Chapter 1 of the thesis offers a historical account of the development of news media in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, providing a context for the emergence of the Internet and online news provision. It particularly emphasizes regulatory issues in relation to 20th century news media. Chapter 2 then engages with the key conceptual terms in the thesis: ‘credibility’, ‘public opinion’ and ‘public sphere’.

Chapter 3 discusses the design of the thesis and the methodological approaches adopted in collecting the research data and addressing the aims, objectives and questions posed by the thesis. The chapter also addresses ‘content analysis’, in particular introducing ‘framing’ or ‘frame analysis’ as a key approach in the analysis of news stories in this thesis. Chapter 4 offers an account of the early development of the Internet in Saudi Arabia and in particular engages with the character and significance of discussion forums from the late 1990s to the early 2000s.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are based on primary research. The first of these three chapters presents and discusses the quantitative survey material and interviews with users, the second focuses on the perceptions and comments from journalists and editors as put forward in the one-to-one interviews. Chapter 7 applies a 'frame analysis' and other modes of content analysis to the two selected news stories across the official newspapers, online news sites and social media.

Chapter One: This chapter explores the development of (news) media in Saudi Arabia in the 20th century, including print, radio and TV considered in the context of the country's religious and political institutions, and paying attention to the social/cultural/economic factors that have shaped the media and news organizations in particular ways. The chapter is concerned to address why and how media policy and regulation in this non-democratic country to make an impact on the news media and their practices. In this way it provides a background to the period just before the emergence of the Internet and online news in the 21st century and its specific characterization in Saudi Arabia. It suggests that the development of (news) media can usefully be thought of in terms of four distinct phases.

Chapter Two: This chapter engages with the concept of journalistic credibility in general and the Arab media context in particular, considering scholarship from Western and Arab scholars. It also explores the idea of 'public opinion' and its development via a mediated 'public sphere' (as seminally laid out by Jürgen Habermas, and developed by others).

The term 'credibility' is focused on because it has become an important issue: recent studies confirm a crisis of trust among Arab audiences. The issue of news media as ideally contributing to a 'public sphere' and being integral to a healthy democracy has long been addressed in the West and the development of online and other new media has often been regarded as enhancing this process. However, with the unfolding of events referred to as the 'Arab Spring', scholarship has addressed how online and mobile media have also provided opportunities for those in non-democratic countries, including an Arab public, to discuss issues that concern them, away from the platforms controlled by their governments. Implicit here has often

been an assumption that this marked a first step on the road to democracy. But in the aftermath and retrenchment following the Arab Spring, there has been a more cautious discussion of whether these media did act as a public sphere able to foster effective public opinion that could politically transform authoritarian regimes.

The chapter thus begins to raise questions about the relation between the terms 'credibility', 'public opinion' and 'public sphere' and their conceptual usefulness in the context of developments in online news media in Saudi Arabia.

Chapter Three: This chapter discusses the methodology used in the data collection and analysis. The study uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods including a questionnaire survey to gain information from a relatively large sample of Saudi informants likely to be consumers of news and also to be regular users of online channels, plus a small number of in-depth interviews with users and the journalists/editorial staff working currently on online titles. Finally, two important news stories in Saudi Arabia, one an internal or domestic issue, 'Corona disease', and the other one external, 'The Egyptian elections', were selected from three media – official newspapers, online journalism and social media (Twitter). They were gathered throughout May 2014 and analysed.

Content analysis and, in particular, 'frame analysis' were mobilized to explore the differences in reporting across the media for the two stories. It was hoped that this approach would first make visible the wider and more open, or at least different approach to reporting online where regulation was less stringent, and, second, point to some formation of 'public opinion', offering evidence of why and how the online media might be regarded by many as more credible than the traditional media.

Chapter Four: This chapter engages with Saudi online journalism, particularly its early history from the emergence of the first Saudi online newspaper in 2001, and is concerned partly with the problems faced by this new medium. The chapter is also concerned with online forums (for example, discussion forums developing in the late 1990s and early in the new millennium) which provided the first online possibility of Saudi people being able to discuss current issues in public. In addition, the chapter

also focuses on the most prominent online newspapers in the Saudi context, discussing the major factors that have enabled local online journalism sites to grow but also constrained them, from allowing Internet use in Saudi to maintaining the censorship process and discrimination against online sources for political reasons. This new media form has gained popularity among members of the public and the chapter identifies the ways in which online journalism has competed strongly with the traditional media.

Chapter Five: Based on interview material, this chapter explores the perceptions of editors/journalists who work on Saudi online newspapers about these publications and other new media, as compared to traditional media. It discusses how they view their work and some of the issues that it presents, for example, confronting or managing censorship and how self-censorship was adopted. It explores how online papers attract Saudi readers and gain their trust and how they see the competition with other media, whether mainstream or social. This interview material enables a more developed exploration of the 'classification of online newspapers' raised in Chapter Four behind the labels 'conservative', 'moderate' and 'liberal'. In this regard, the chapter also contributes to a further exploration of 'credibility' and the 'public sphere'.

Chapter Six: This chapter is based on the survey material and interviews with readers/users. The survey and interviews were based in Riyadh, the capital city. The questionnaire was distributed to men and women in three groups: students, university professors, and employees and aimed to explore their consumption of news media across platforms. A total of 23 Saudis (15 males, 8 females) with different educational qualifications (from a Masters' degree to lower qualifications) were interviewed to explore their views on the media and especially the news media that they enjoyed, depended on and regularly accessed. It also asked how Saudi users evaluate the news in online newspapers and thus about their credibility in relation to other media. Their views on censorship and publishing regulations in Saudi Arabia were also sought.

Chapter Seven: This chapter focuses on two news events – one internal news story and one external one – as reported by Saudi media during May 2014. The media selected were official Saudi newspapers, online newspapers and Twitter. A variety of approaches to content analysis was adopted, including ‘frame analysis’. The chapter analyses the coverage across these three news forms in order to understand the textual components that make news more credible or less so, and perhaps more influential among readers. The chapter is concerned to explore what differences the reporting might make when the event is external rather than internal and the degree to which online/social media might stand out as more ‘credible’ when the news event is domestic. Particular attention is also paid to the responses and interaction with some news reports or comment and to the emergence of what might be described as ‘public opinion’.

Conclusion: This critically reflects on the study, in order to highlight its main findings and raise issues arising from these. It considers the strengths and limitations of the theoretical and methodological approaches employed and lays out some policy implications and thoughts about future possible developments.

Chapter 1

History, Politics and Regulation in Saudi Arabia

1.1 Introduction

According to Mohammed Alghasha'ami, a researcher and historian of the press in Saudi Arabia, the press in the western region of Hijaz (including the towns of Jeddah, Makkah and Almadina) appeared early, long before its appearance in other areas of Saudi Arabia, for several reasons. First, the two Holy Mosques in the region, Makkah and Almadina, provided seats of learning. These cities attracted many educated people from the Arab and Muslim world, some of whom decided to settle there after coming for the pilgrimage season. Second, the area is by the sea and therefore communication/transport was easier; and third the headquarters of the diplomatic corps and foreign consulates were located in Jeddah. There has been an official press in Makkah since 1883, when it was under Ottoman rule (until 1916) and then Hashemi rule (ending in 1924 when King Abdul Aziz occupied Al Hijaz) (*Asharq Al-awsat*, March 8, 2014) and other official titles appeared in Hijaz in 1908 and 1909: *Hijaz*, *Shams Alhaqiqa*, *Aleslah Alhijazi*, *Safa Alhijaz*, *Alraqueeb* and *Almadinah Almonoorah* (Ezzat 1990)¹⁰. Except for the first one, all these newspapers under the Ottoman rule had disappeared by 1916, when the regime ended, leaving the country in the hands of the Hashemite dynasty (Alshamekh 1982)¹¹.

However, the modern news industry dates from the 1920s when *Umm Alqura* was first published (in 1924), during the rule of King Abdul Aziz. Before becoming king –

¹⁰ However, other researchers (Hafez 1976; Alshamekh 1982; Ezzat 1990) do not mention the existence of newspapers at so early a date, but claim that only the printing press of the Ottoman government existed; it issued a book called *Hijaz Wilaity Salnamah Si*, normally once a year. This was the official handbook of the Hijaz region and contained information and statistics on the state of Alhijaz and news of the Ottoman Caliphs, together with reports about the architecture of the holy mosque in Makkah. It was issued in Turkish and sometimes also in an Arabic version (Hafez 1976).

¹¹ During this era, from 1916 to 1925 four newspapers and one magazine were published: namely, *Alqebalah*, *Alhijaz*, *Alfalalah*, *Bareed Alhijaz* and the *Agricultural Jarwal School* magazine (Hafez 1976).

he formally ascended the throne in 1932 – he issued a decree authorizing this newspaper. Most of the researchers who relate the history of the Saudi press agree that it can be divided into two phases. The first phase, 1924 to 1964, is characterised by newspapers owned by individuals. In 1964 an official decree transferred the ownership of newspapers from private individuals to institutions (Khyat 1997; Alshebeili 2002 and Awad 2010). The second phase is characterised by what is referred to as an ‘institutional press’ (the reason for this description is discussed below) and lasted from 1964 to the present. Yet it can be argued that it is more appropriate to divide the history of the Saudi press into four phases: after the second phase ended in 1989, the third continued until 1990 or 2000 and was marked by the rise of satellite broadcasting, such as the CNN channel and Saudis becoming owners of news media – MBC – in 1991 and the ART channels, for example, two years later. This phase included important political events such as the Second Gulf War (1990-1991), which affected the press and other media (Alshebeili 2002). The fourth phase, from 2000 to 2014, focuses on the Saudi media in the new millennium, characterised by the emergence of the Internet and fresh news forms such as discussion forums, blogging and social media, which have all had an impact on the ‘old’ news media of press, radio and television.

The key issues to consider in each of these phases include the economics of news publishing, as well as the regulation of news, which empowers and constrains journalism in a variety of ways. Saudi media policy and regulation have been particularly significant and should be considered in the context of changing internal and external politics. The printing laws and regulations discussed in this chapter cover four printing laws between 1924 and 1999 and the country’s media policy more generally. Other laws and regulations issued after 2000 regarding electronic publishing (online journalism, blogs and discussion forums, etc.) are discussed in the context of online journalism (see Chapter Four).

In order to understand the shifts in news production and practice in this context, this chapter considers how traditional newspapers and other news media developed from the early days to the end of the 20th century, focusing on newspapers, radio

and television (broadcasting). The intention is to give some sense of the economic, political, cultural and social developments in each phase, that is, changes in Saudi Arabia, through focusing on the key conflicts and tensions, both internal and external; in other words, its relationships with other countries. The chapter also pays particular attention to regulation and censorship in the context of a changing society.

1.2 ‘Official’ media and individual ownership: the mid-1920s to the mid-1960s

Although there were earlier titles, the appearance of the *Umm Alqura* newspaper in 1924 set a precedent, in that it was an official weekly newspaper. It was printed by the government printing press until 1940 and was closely associated with the royal court and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Alshamekh 1982; Alshebeili 2002).

Umm Alqura published news which appeared in both Arab and foreign newspapers, notably the Egyptian, Iraqi and British ones. It also provided disclaimers and comments on what was regarded by the royal court and Ministry as negative news; for example, propaganda being spread against the Saudi government, such as published reports criticising the security situation in the Hijaz early in the rule of King Abdul Aziz. *Umm Alqura* also responded to news items and reports, which it denied when necessary and commented on, to explain what it regarded as ‘the truth’ to readers in Saudi Arabia. It also published news from the foreign media and foreign newspapers dealing with Saudi affairs; for example, from the British media such as *The Times* and *The Morning Post* and from the news agency Reuters (Alshebeili 2000; Alshebeili 2002). The title was the only official medium of the Saudi government for nearly a quarter of a century, until in 1949 the government set up Saudi Radio (Alshebeili 2002) in the city of Jeddah.

With Yousif Yasin as its first editor-in-chief, *Umm Alqura* was significant as the only newspaper which focused on contemporary political and military events in the country, including the annexation of Jeddah in 1924; the establishment of the Shura council in 1925; the declaration of Saudi Arabia in 1932; the discovery of oil in Saudi in 1937; and other important events (Hafez 1976; Alshebili 2002). However, in

reporting these events, the newspaper largely gave only the views of the Saudi ruling elite (Alshebili 2002). To this end, it also disseminated summaries of all interviews with King Abdul Aziz, the founder of the kingdom. In this way, the newspaper helped legitimate the king's rule. Alshebeili (2002) suggests that, as the mouthpiece of the Saudi government and reflecting Saudi policy on international issues, the newspaper also highlighted the role played in the Islamic world by the government and the king. It regularly denied and in other ways responded to the rumours that were spread about the Saudi government; for example, refuting reports and rumours published in the Iraqi newspaper *Almoheed* about the withdrawal from their occupation of the Hijaz by most of the Arab tribes of the army of King Abdul Aziz. It also denied a report published in an Egyptian newspaper, *Al-Ahram*, about the existence of a trade agreement between Najd (the central region of Saudi Arabia) and Syria¹² (Alshebeili 2002).

Although the official element was clearly part of the content of *Umm Alqura*, the research by Ezzat (1990) offers a different opinion about an important period in the mid-1930s for this newspaper. He believes that, starting in 1935, *Umm Alqura* changed its line under the editorship of Mohammed Abdel-Maksoud, coming close to that of non-official newspapers such as *Sawt Alhijaz*. It published literary essays and social, economic and historical pieces by some prominent writers, thinkers and poets, such as Muhammad Hassan Kotobi, Ahmed Alsebaie and others. It even began to compete with *Sawt Alhijaz* through its features on science, literature, poetry and criticism. It thus provided a diversity of content with an interest in internal and external news (Ezzat 1990, p.209).

Nevertheless, according to Saudi scholars and researchers, when Saudi newspapers began to be issued daily and depended on scoops in local and international news, *Umm Alqura* returned to its previous approach and published

¹² Alshebeili (2002) gives no details about this agreement but mentions that *Umm Alqura* denied the report of it and confirmed that the talks between Najd and Syria (which was still a French colonial possession) were still on-going (p.295).

only royal decrees, government news and 'advertisements for projects, tenders, instructions and laws' (Ezzat 1990; Khyat 1997; Alshebili 2002; Alaskar 2002).

According to Altaher (1985), Saudi's first magazine *Aleslah* began to be published in 1928. As the masthead on the front page stated, it was a religious, scientific and social magazine and was issued twice monthly. The first editor in chief, Mohammed Hamed Al-Feki, was one of the scholars of Al-Azhar in Egypt¹³, where he was also the director of printing and publishing in Makkah. This department supervised the media before the founding of the Ministry of Information in Saudi Arabia in 1963 (Altaher 1985; Hafez 1976). This may explain the religious character of this magazine. However, Ezzat (1990) argues:

The magazine published articles by local writers, some without a signature, which may indicate that they were written by the editor ... also ... explanations of chapters of the holy Qur'an and Hadith and sometimes [it] reprinted articles published in Islamic and international newspapers ... the magazine is characterised by the simplicity of its output and editorial... but it did not care much to publish literary or political articles. However, the last issue was published on June 27, 1930 (pp.238-239).

Further emerging news titles included *Al Haram*, issued in 1930 as a Saudi newspaper in Egypt. It took an interest in Saudi scholarship students in Egypt and published news and pictures of them (Hafez 1976). It is striking that this newspaper focused on young people with the editor himself, Fuad Shaker, being one of the young Saudis who were studying in Egypt at the end of the 1920s. But it was *Sawt Alhijaz*, launched in 1932, which became the most famous newspaper of its time. It offered contributions from a number of well-known writers and poets, such as Abdulwahab Achi, Mohammed Hasan Owaad and Hussain Arab. Its publication is considered a significant event in the history of journalism and literature because, according to Khyat (1997), it provided 'an opportunity to read the work of influential

¹³ Al-Azhar is the famous religious establishment run by the highest religious authority in Egypt. This Islamic centre supplied Egyptian religious leaders ('Sheikhs') to other Islamic countries to help strengthen Islamic values.

writers and thinkers, offering literary comment and accounts of scientific, social and economic research' (p.138)¹⁴. Most notably, as indicated by Khyat, *Sawt Alhijaz* was a platform for the critical views of writers and thinkers (1997). It also dealt with a number of non-literary topics and was an enthusiastic reformer (Ezzat 1990). For example, concerned about the needs of citizens, it reported on the lack of government-provided services in some areas. Khyat (1997) observes that, in the era of the editor Hassan Gazzaz, the newspaper even sent reporters to remote areas in the south, north and east of Saudi Arabia to investigate the situation and the services that were needed.

But notwithstanding the attempts by *Sawt Alhijaz* to campaign for reform, Khyat (1997) notes that the editor may still have stifled the dissemination of certain news reports or articles out of fear of those in power. He claims that when he himself was working for this newspaper as a journalist (after it changed its name to *Albilad* in early 1959), he wrote an article in 1964 about the bread crisis in Saudi Arabia but the editor-in-chief Abdul Majeed Shobokshe refused to publish it, even though the staff sent the article to the printing press more than once. The editor told him, 'I do not want to lose my job' (Khyat 1997, p.177). This would seem to demonstrate that even a 'progressive' editor in this period might be nervous about publishing anything which could be deemed critical of the government. Moreover, the criticism that was published for the sake of reform was always about the service sector or a default in the performance of ministries, not criticism of the policy of the state, for example, or of influential figures in the government.

In fact, *Sawt Alhijaz* continued publishing for ten years and then stopped, due to paper shortages during the Second World War. It resumed publication after five years under the title *Albilad Al-Saudia* and then merged with the *Arafat* newspaper in 1959 under the title of *Albilad*. But its interest in literature and poetry declined and it became more concerned with local news because of the difficulty of transportation and lack of communication with the outside world at the time. This was also partly

¹⁴ Due to its spread and popularity amongst intellectuals in the western region, other similar newspapers or magazines began to be issued from the city of Almadinah; for example, the magazine *Almanhal* in 1937, launched by Abdul Quddus Alansari (Khyat 1997).

due to its inability to draw upon news agencies or appoint correspondents inside or outside Saudi Arabia. According to Hafez (1976), the newspaper could not afford the expense incurred, perhaps due to a shortage of advertising income at the time, and because the newspaper, unlike the *Umm Alqura*, which depended on the efforts of the owner, was subsidized by the government and printed and distributed at government expense. *Albilad* is still published in Jeddah today (albiladdaily 2016).

Before World War II, the Saudi press largely depended on the efforts of private individual owners, and all newspapers, as noted above, were launched and distributed in the western region. However, in 1953, Hamad Aljasser started up the newspaper *Alyamamah* in Riyadh, the capital, first as a monthly magazine and then a weekly newspaper (Altaher 1985). Aljasser attributes the absence of a press in Riyadh to the delay in education in that region: 'It was not connected to the civilized world nor acquainted with modern culture' (cited in Khyat 1997, p.146). But, despite the circumstances, journalists in this region, such as Hamad Aljasser and Abdullah Bin Khamis (founder of the newspaper *Al-Jazirah*), benefited from their studies in Makkah and from their years of work as journalists and editors at *Sawt Alhijaz*. They were therefore keen to transfer this experience to the central region. Through their efforts, a press, including the *Alyamamah* newspaper, was launched in Najd, the central region, in the 1950s.

However, the absence of adequate printing facilities in the central region led to *Alyamamah* being printed in Cairo, Makkah and then Beirut in Lebanon, before finally moving to Riyadh in 1955, after the first news printing press was established there (Khyat 1997). The latter enabled more newspapers to be issued in the central region; for example, *Al-Qassim* in 1959 and *Al-Jazirah* in 1960. It also contributed to the printing and publication of many historical, cultural and literary books (Abbas 1971).

In the eastern region of the country, newspapers were published initially in English, because of the presence of the oil company Aramco (Saudi Arabian Oil Company). For example, the *Sun and Flare* newspaper was issued in 1946, its editors supervised by the Department of Public Relations at Aramco. *Aramco World* was

published in 1949 as a bi-monthly magazine sharing some of the characteristics of the renowned *US Life* magazine (Khyat 1997). *Aramco World* was interested more broadly in historical, geographical and social research related to the Middle East and it mostly aimed to inform the American staff of Aramco about Saudi civilization and culture (Khyat 1997).

For Arabic speakers, *Qafelat Alzaeit*, introduced in 1953, is considered the eastern region's first magazine in the vernacular; its title means 'Oil Convoy' in Arabic. This reminds us of the impact of the oil industry on the development of newspapers in this region. At a time when cultural platforms were limited, *Qafelat Alzaeit* contributed to cultural life and attracted a number of well-known Arab writers who were significant figures of modern Arabic literature and well-informed, prominent people. It too was issued under the supervision of the Department of Public Relations at Aramco, later taking the title *Al-Qafelah* and coming out weekly (Khyat 1997).

Subsequently, a number of newspapers and magazines appeared, such as the newspaper *Al-Dhahran*, later called *Al-Dhahran News* (the first Arabic language newspaper in the eastern region). This title emerged as a weekly newspaper in 1954 in Dammam, focusing on local and foreign issues and the publication of readers' complaints, as well as literary themes and stories. It provided a further outlet for writers and thinkers. But *Al-Dhahran News* was closed down by the state in 1957 after 44 editions, owing to a controversial article. As Vassiljev (1980) explains: 'AlGhuhihan (the editor of *Al-Dhahran News*) published...an article by Mohammed Abdullah¹⁵ concerning female education which was considered to be critical of the government. This article cost the editor his job and freedom' (cited in Almaghlooth 2014, p.60).

AlGhuhihan was kept in custody for three weeks and then moved to Riyadh to work in the Ministry of Education. Perhaps this gives the impression that the Ministry of

¹⁵ Probably 'Mohammed Abdullah' was a pseudonym; AlGhuhihan under interrogation said that he did not know this writer, and he insisted that he himself was responsible for the consequences of the article. This suggests that the article had been written by AlGhuhihan himself.

Education was more progressive than other ministries in this period¹⁶. However, he published under the same title ('The other half of us') 'He means that women are half of society'. The same article about female education was published in the newspaper '*Alyamamah*', edited by his friend Hamad Al-Jasser and a further article in June 1958. AlGhuhiman also re-published the former article in his book, 'Where the road leads' which was printed in Beirut (Alghasha'ami 2007). The subject was censored and it was risky to attempt to publish controversial ideas, but his action indicates the presence of a group of journalists in the 1950s who were prepared to resist the authorities in order to push for progressive change.

Not surprisingly, from the mid-1920s the Saudi press relied exclusively on male writers and editors, most being literary men and intellectuals. Alshebeili (2002) believes that the first appearance of a woman writing for the Saudi press was an article written for *Umm Alqura* newspaper in 1940 by Zakia Abdel Alim under the title 'Greetings to His Majesty King Abdul Aziz'; it thanks the king for his efforts in the pilgrimage season (Alshebeili 2002; Alhazemi 2005). But since women's education was considered a taboo subject even to discuss in public, it was not until the 1950s that women contributed as journalists. The magazine *Al-Manhal* is considered the leading magazine in giving women the chance to engage in journalism, publishing a short story by Jehan Alamawie in 1956. From this date, newspapers began to run sections for women and to devote more space to their interests (Alshebeili 2002).

Returning to the eastern region, other titles, *Alfajer Aljadid*, *Alesha'aa*, *Arab Gulf* and *Aladwa* were also launched (Khyat 1997). But none of these publications lasted long: *Alfajer Aljadid*, a weekly newspaper (provisionally issued twice a month) issued by two brothers, Ahmed and Yousef Alshaikh Yaaqoub in 1955 in Dammam, closed after only four issues. The newspaper achieved notable success in its first three issues – according to Alghasha'ami (2002) – and thus increased the number of copies printed in its third and fourth issues to meet the increased readership, but after the fourth one it was banned. Some commentators suggest that this paper

¹⁶ The Saudi Ministry of Information did not exist at this time; it was established in March 1963 (Ezzat 1990).

disappeared from the market owing to a decision by the government. The editor, Yousef Alshaikh, was arrested and banned from writing, 'because of his criticism of government bureaucracy' regarding subsidies for farmers (Almaghlooth 2014, p.61). As Mohammed Alghasha'ami, a historian of the Saudi press, suggests, this newspaper boldly exposed the practices of some companies. Aramco was one of them, adopting a policy of not treating Saudi workers on the same footing as others, and giving them different housing, as well as transportation and subsistence advantages over their foreign counterparts (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, March 8, 2014).

Alesha'aa, a literary magazine, the first in the region, was published by the writer Saad Albawardi in 1955, but closed down after two years. The first issues, printed using Khalid Faraj's limited printing presses were, according to Albawardi himself, modest. But over time, the magazine began to attract the most promising young writers and enthusiasts who later became well-known, such as Prince Abdullah Al-Faisal, Mohammad Hassan Awad and Ibrahim Al-Awaji (Alghasha'ami 2002). *Alesha'aa*, according to Alghasha'ami (2002), discussed issues incisively, as perhaps later journalists were unable to do, because it was produced in an era of social and political transformation, to which the press contributed. But he goes on to describe the banning of this magazine:

As Albawardi was celebrating [the magazine's] third year (a few days after *Alesha'aa* had passed its second anniversary), a policeman knocked at his door at midnight and said that he would have to spend a year in Shagra, a small town near the capital of Saudi Arabia, or go to jail. Albawardi chose exile and his paper was shut down by government order. The demise of *Alesha'aa* remains a mystery today: nobody knows why it was suppressed, even fifty years later (cited in Almaghlooth 2014, p.61).

The *Arab Gulf* newspaper was issued by Abdullah Shobat in 1957 in the town of Almubaraz near the city of Al-Ahsa (150 km from Dammam), but it ceased publication after six issues for what the owner called 'financial reasons'¹⁷ (Alghasha'ami 2002). The newspaper *Aladwa* started up in Jeddah in June 1957. It

¹⁷ It had turned into a socio-cultural weekly newspaper in August 1958 and remained one until 1963, before the era of institutional journalism (Ezzat 1990).

was published weekly by Abdul Fattah Abu Madian and edited by Mohammed Baeshen. This newspaper was also known for its boldness in addressing sensitive issues; it too criticised Aramco for its treatment of Saudi workers. Abdul-Fattah Abu Madian claimed that Aramco had invited him for a visit – perhaps in an attempt to change his image of the company – but he returned with an even more negative impression. Like *Alfajer Aljadid*, *Aladwa* accused the company of favouring American employees over Saudi ones. According to Abu Madian (n.d.) Aramco tried again to persuade the newspaper to bring its constant criticism to an end. The paper's offices were visited by Aramco's Director of Public Relations, who offered to give *Aladwa* services and equipment. Butler asked why such a campaign was being waged. Abu Madian told him:

You have 14,000 Saudi workers. These men enter Aramco young and work there all their lives without health insurance or financial security and no treatment and accommodation are provided for them even after retirement. He replied, 'This is our agreement with the state'. Butler offered these things after he knew that we normally printed our newspaper on printing presses which we did not own. He promised to contribute to a printing press for us, but we refused his offers and we continued to criticise Aramco until the newspaper was shut down (Abu Madian [no date]).

There may also have been another reason for the closure of *Aladwa* by the Saudi authorities; it published another story about a sensitive issue in Saudi society: the presence of slavery. It dealt with the issue of the slave trade in Saudi Arabia (until 7 November 1962, when a decree from Prince Faisal officially brought it to an end). According to Alghasha'ami (2005), *Aladwa* carried in its penultimate issue a big headline saying 'Aramco, we will not surrender!' alongside another significant headline on its front page, accompanied by an image of a man above the caption 'Salem buys himself out.' *Aladwa* filed this important news report on the first slave to buy his freedom from his master¹⁸. In Alghasha'ami's view, the closure was in response to pressure from Aramco (Alghasha'ami 2007) but it seems likely that the

¹⁸ The story describes the slave collecting enough money to buy himself out. He stated that as a child he had gone out to play with other boys and had been stolen by a gang who sold him off to slave traders in Hijaz. Issue 86 of *Aladwa* published this famous news report (Alghasha'ami 2007).

slavery story played its part. However, *Aladwa* did not last long (it closed down in 1958), but in spite of its short life, it 'contributed many enlightened articles and attracted writers to contribute to the cultural scene' (Alhimidin 2015, [no page]).

The discussion above gives strength to the view first, that some editors and journalists in this period of the 'individual press' attempted to raise sensitive issues in the name of the progressive transformation of the country, but second that such actions could lead to the permanent shutdown of a newspaper. Such a situation contributed perhaps to a culture of newspapers avoiding topics that might anger either the government or large companies such as Aramco. Nevertheless, most of the writers who were silenced returned as new titles emerged. For example, Abu Madian established the magazine *Alraied* in September 1959, a few months after the banning of *Aladwa*, and others, such as AlGhuhiman, returned to writing in other newspapers (Ezzat 1990; Alghasha'ami 2007). In the era of institutions (discussed below), things were different: if a newspaper brought up a controversial topic, such as slavery or women's education, it did not close down, but the editor or journalist responsible was often forbidden to go on working.

What seems to characterize newspapers in the era of the individual press is that titles focused more on culture than they did in more recent times, when what is central is news. According to Bin Najem (2006), the Saudi press in its early stages was more interested in religious and literary topics because readers of the time were less interested in economic, political and military topics and, after the unification of the country brought relative stability and security, least of all in politics. The latter also, according to Ezzat (1990), contributed to the expansion of the press, with journalism helped by the greater availability of paper and printing machinery after World War II, an increase in the number of educational missions abroad and the reduction of restrictions, excise duty and taxes. Nevertheless, scholars also highlight that newspapers suffered from a lack of funding, some failing for this reason. This aspect could also account for their greater emphasis on culture than news. For instance, Ezzat (1990) states that inadequate finance prevented newspapers from subscribing to international news agencies. As a result, they often relied on the radio

to gather foreign news and ‘for some newspapers, even the radio was too expensive, given the lack of wireless engineers to repair the sets when necessary’ (pp. 250-251) (see below on the relations between press and radio). Khyat (1997) mentions that *Heraa*’s¹⁹ editor-in-chief, Saleh Jamal, was doing the work of both reporter and editor in order to reduce expenses. Alghasha’ami (2002), too, claims that newspapers were trying to reduce staff numbers in order to cut costs. This occurred in the case of the magazine *Alesha’aa*: its owner, Saad Albawardi, recalls doing the work of editing, writing columns and writing stories in his own newspaper and giving up more than half his salary for the sake of his publication.

These difficulties arose from the type of funding available. In a situation where subscriptions and sales were low, Alghasha’ami (2014) explains that the government paid only for the insertion of official notices in newspapers, whilst some newspapers also gained subscriptions from certain ministries and government departments for one or two years, with the subscription depending on the relations between the minister and the owner of the newspaper. The ministries might take out subscriptions for possibly a hundred copies or fewer and some ministries would cancel their subscription if the newspaper had given them adverse publicity (Alghasha’ami 2014). This strengthens the idea that, in order to earn revenue, the early owners of newspapers nurtured good relations with ministers/ministries and officials. But it also implies that such a relationship is likely to have affected editorial policy, since newspapers would lose lucrative advertising by publishing reports which officials would see as damaging to the state’s reputation. Additionally, the problem of funding forced the owners of newspapers to strengthen their relations with some traders in order to continue publishing and to gain some advertising.

Abu Madian (the founder of *Aladwa*) stated that his salary (in the late 1950s) was low and his partner Mohammed Baeshen was paid as a junior member of staff. They had to ask the Property Manager of the National Bank (NCB) in Jeddah for an apartment ‘as a regular office’ for their newspaper, offering in return to advertise the

¹⁹ The newspaper *Heraa*, issued in Makkah in December 1956, lasted two years only and then merged with the *Alnadwah* newspaper at the beginning of 1959 (see below) (Ezzat 1990).

bank. They also asked Ford's Saudi agent for a fee of two thousand riyals to publish advertisements for his company's cars (Abu Madian [no date]). But overall, advertising did not play an important role in the funding of the press in these years, because the economic growth of the kingdom was also in its infancy. Most companies in the different regions in Saudi Arabia were not interested in advertising, apart from Aramco, which advertised only once a year. Indeed, Khyat (1997) mentions that most of the ads were personal; people who had lost their 'personal stamp'²⁰ (a Saudi custom at the time) used to advertise to see if anyone had found it.

At the same time distribution was sporadic (Khayat 1997), as Alshebeili (2002) recounts:

Abdul Karim AlGhuhrman – editor-in-chief of *Al-Dhahran News* in the eastern region – told me that newspapers and magazines were not issued regularly and readers got copies from civil servants who worked in a ministry office and sold newspapers after they had read them ... Intellectuals who were interested in reading newspapers were getting some of the Hijaz newspapers and Egyptian magazines, such as the *Alhilar*, *Al-Manar* and *Alresalah*, delivered through subscription by mail or through bookshops (p.58).

Further, there was only a small potential readership, since illiteracy was widespread, thus keeping revenue from subscriptions or sales also low. However, with the development of the Saudi economy and improved means of transportation, the distribution of newspapers and publications between cities in Saudi Arabia improved as well, in particular in the mid-1950s, after King Saud ascended the throne (November 1953). He issued a royal decree allowing the free transportation of Saudi newspapers and magazines by Saudi airlines (Alghasha'ami 2014). When his rule ended in 1964, however, the Saudi airlines began to charge for this service²¹ (Alghasha'ami 2014).

²⁰ Personal stamp: a small stamp made of silver, bearing the owner's name inscribed upon it, and used for proving their identity.

²¹ By January 1979, the government had reverted to transporting Saudi newspapers free of charge, both by post internally and externally via Saudi Airlines. The service included government payments to other airlines for transport to countries where Saudi Airlines did not operate flights (Alaskar 2002).

Nevertheless, the various constraints on the press meant that the reliance on good relations with ministries was very important, but this dependency led to a very weak press with little power or autonomy to act against the state. This weakness arguably led to government intervention and the creation of what was described in 1964 as the institutional press. However, before moving on to this later period it is worth discussing further the relations between the state and the press, by focusing on state legislation and regulation.

The Saudi authorities issued the first printing law in 1929²² about twenty years before administrative and technical regulations were released by the relevant authorities (the Directorate of Radio, the Press and Publishing). This may perhaps be considered an early attempt by the regime to regulate newspapers in the Hijaz region and make the media conform to the goals and policies of the Saudi monarchy. It is not surprising, then, that the regulation was issued three years before the founding of the state in 1932.

However, the first printing law of 1929 marked an early attempt to regulate newspapers. The law was aimed at preventing the publication of anything that would encourage acts against public morality, calls to atheism or the dissemination of habits that did not fit the culture of the community (Article 24). The law stressed the need to adhere to the objectives of Islam and morality (Article 26). It also forbade the importation of newspapers, pamphlets and books which called for atheism and corruption (Article 28) (Alqarni 2013).

Alshebeili (2002) writes that this printing law was issued after it had been discussed by the Shura Council²³ in Saudi Arabia and some of its articles were derived from the Ottoman Publications Law of 1909, which had been imposed on the press in the Hijaz region. In 1940, this printing law was amended. Its 62 articles confirmed again

²² It is worth mentioning that the Saudi government was formally established in 1932; this means that this printing law was issued 3 years earlier before the establishment of the State.

²³ The Saudi Parliament is a Consultative Council and its members are unelected; the King appoints all its members. This Shura Council, according to Alhawsawi (2013), 'plays an advisory role, but has no power to pass laws' (p.25).

the importance of the commitment not to publish anything that contravened Shari'ah (Islamic law), or incited crime. Awad (2010) comments on this new printing law:

The second law was more detailed and elaborate than the first (Alshamikh 1981). It consisted of 62 articles, while the first contained only 36. Alshamikh points out that the most notable article in the second printing law was the attribution of responsibility for articles in part directly to the writer, with the Editor-in-Chief of the publication bearing the other part. However, this article was cancelled by further printing laws which placed the complete responsibility for any materials published in the newspaper on the Editor-in-Chief (Alshamikh 1981, cited by Awad 2010, p.20).

In 1958, in the era of King Saud, the printing law was redrafted and reissued for the third time. This version of the law included 57 articles and confirmed the importance of preserving Islam, state security and the safety of the army. The law was divided into five sections: the first and second sections dealing with printing, the third section with provisions for newspapers and journalists, the fourth with what constituted fair criticism and the fifth with the legal sanctions for all irregularities (Alshebeili 2002). Awad (2010) states that this printing law was not much different from the previous law. He claims: 'The third printing law contained no marked differences from the previous law, except the clear focus on and enhancement of the role of General Directorate for Broadcasting, Press and Publication as a sole reference for information and press activity in the Kingdom' (p.20). Although this law contains articles that regulate the work of journalists and determines the conditions that should be available to them, it still controls them through a system of sanctions.

This printing law underpins and makes possible what some researchers call the 'Merger phase', from 1959 to the beginning of 1964. They suggest it should be treated as a 'separate phase' (in other words, not associated with either the 'individual' or 'institutional' phases (Ezzat 1990, Khyat 1997) and some regard it as an extension of the phase of individual ownership (Alghasha'ami 2002 and 2014). Implemented by the regime through a decree in 1958 (applied from the beginning of 1959), mergers were 'forced' through, so that every city was limited to issuing only one newspaper. For example, in Jeddah, the *Arafat* newspaper merged with *Aladwaa* and *Albilad Alsaudia* to form a daily newspaper under the name '*Albilad*',

while in Makkah city the newspaper *Alnadwah* merged with *Heraa* under the title '*Alnadwah*'. The regime's aim, according to Alshebeili (2000), was allegedly to improve the quality of Saudi newspapers by assembling the largest possible number of competent journalists for each remaining newspaper. Hafez (1976) also highlights the regime's rationale for improving the quality of newspapers. However, the limit to the number of titles did, of course, make it easier for the Ministry of Information to control what news was published (Hafez 1976).

The owners of some newspapers, according to Albader (2008), were able to circumvent the decree by obtaining a licence from a certain city and then issuing the newspaper from another city; for example, *Okaz* was licensed in the city of Taif (200 km east of Jeddah) but was issued in Jeddah, and *Al-Qassim* had a licence from Buraidah (300 km north of Riyadh) but was issued in Riyadh. So, although some may have seen this decree as an attempt to silence pluralist voices, it did not entirely prevent journalists from continuing to issue newspapers, even when there was more than one newspaper in a city.

In addition, during this phase a prominent feature, according to Abbas (1971), was the emergence of specialized pages, including pages dedicated to economics, literature, sports and agriculture and sections directed at women, with most newspapers carrying a daily or weekly page for women and covering events relevant to them (Ezzat 1990). There was also more extensive journalistic activity by women. Not unrelated to this, in the early 1960s girls also gained the right to education²⁴.

In addition, humorous columns began to be seen in certain newspapers and literary magazines and in 1961 the art of the cartoonist appeared there for the first time, in the *Quraish* newspaper (Hafez 1976). Specialist magazines were also issued between the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s, such as the magazine *Alrawdah*

²⁴ Nevertheless, Ba Ismaiel (2010), in her study, 'The women's pages in the Saudi press', claims: 'These pages lack depth. They keep pace with the evolution of women in society, but no researchers have evaluated their content. These pages do not reflect the conditions borne by Saudi women, nor their concerns or their needs and do not reflect the actual role of women (p.19).

for children in 1959, the magazine *Alriyadah* specializing in sports news in 1960 and the magazine *Alaosebue Altijary* for business (Hafez 1976).

1.3 The emergence of radio

King Abdul Aziz issued a royal decree on July 18, 1949 establishing Saudi Radio. The first pilot programme was broadcast from a studio in Jeddah on September 19, 1949. This station was called Makkah Radio. It opened with a description of the rituals of the Hajj and a speech by King Abdul Aziz to the pilgrims, delivered on his behalf by his son, Prince Faisal. In 1952, a further substation was established in Makkah to link the Holy Mosque with the studio by wireless. By this means, Makkah radio was able for the first time to broadcast live the call to prayer (Koriem 1982).

It seems that the Saudi government resorted to establishing radio for both internal and external reasons. Internally large sectors of the Saudi population at the time were illiterate and therefore would have no access to news or written culture. Radio could thus contribute to religious culture and strengthen social ties. Externally the end of the 1940s and early 1950s was a politically important period in the Arab world, with the Palestinian and Israeli conflict in 1948, tensions in Egypt in relation to the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1940s and the war of independence in Algeria from 1954 (the revolt against French colonialist rule). Radio became vital for the coverage of Arab and Israeli war news and was even a means of delivering messages to the military leaders at the front (Ezzat 1990). Besides, most Arab countries had already set up radio stations in the 1930s and 1940s²⁵. In this way the Saudi regime tried to keep pace with the Arab and Islamic world and at the same time used radio to spread its goals and policies.

²⁵ For example, the Egyptian Radio began in 1934, the Tunisian one in 1935, and those of Iraq, Sudan and Syria in 1936, 1940 and 1941 respectively (Ezzat 1990).

The radio broadcast news received from foreign sources, but also and importantly broadcast tracts from the holy Qur'an and provided religious sermons and historical lectures about Islam and the Arabs. Koriem (1982) points to its connecting Saudi Arabia to the outside world and spreading culture, in particular religious culture and knowledge among Saudis. Set up by a Saudi royal decree, its scope was limited. The 1955 statutes of Saudi Radio established a publicly administered radio service under the supervision of the Council of Ministers. *The Radio Magazin*²⁶, set up to announce monthly radio programmes in Arabic, Urdu and Indonesian, was also published. Furthermore, it introduced political, artistic and sports programming supervised by radio staff (Ezzat 1990).

Saudi Radio was first affiliated to the Ministry of Finance and then in 1958 set up under the Directorate General of Radio and the Press and Publication. Alshebeili (2002) in his research on the history of the media in Saudi Arabia makes other important points about the early days of radio and the relationship between the radio and the national press:

When Saudi radio was established, the director, Ibrahim Foudah, became its announcer, moving between regions – like a correspondent – covering the news of the Royal Court and of other regions; the first announcer recruited to do this job was Abdullah Al-Maniae. This announcer had been a reporter for *Umm Alqura* in 1952. Then another announcer joined him, the famous Bakr Younis, who worked there until the beginning of 1960. Consequently, news gradually became available on the radio before it reached the newspaper *Umm Alqura* and other newspapers (p.55).

Compared to newspapers, which had had years of experience, radio was considered a new medium. Yet due to the possibilities of wireless technology – speedier production and distribution – important news was first broadcast on radio. Moreover, broadcasting a news item first on the radio gave reassurance to the newspapers,

²⁶ After the establishment of TV in Saudi Arabia in 1965, the *Radio Magazine* changed its title to *Radio and Television Magazine*. But it ceased publication in 1967, saying that it would reappear in a new form, which it failed to do (Ezzat 1990).

hesitating to publish an item, that it had already been published in an official medium and must therefore have been passed by the censor. After Saudi radio emerged in 1949, it became the formal mouthpiece for the regime, replacing the *Umm Alqura*, and in this way, according to Alshebeili (2002), the primary source of news gradually shifted from newspapers to the radio. Further evidence of a closer relationship with state-controlled radio than with newspapers is that 'the office of the first Minister of Information in Saudi Arabia, Jamil Alhejailan, occupied a floor of the radio building in Riyadh' (Alshebeili 2002, pp. 56-57).

Riyadh Radio, transmitting from January 3, 1965, acquired giant transmitters and broadcast multiple programmes in different languages, compelled by the presence in the pilgrimage season of thousands of pilgrims from different countries. There was also an urgent need to communicate with the Islamic world and other Muslim peoples and to strengthen the loyalty and allegiance to the policies of Saudi Arabia.

However, news programmes did not exceed 15% of the total output. Other programmes included religious ones (20%), cultural ones (25%), variety shows and entertainment (13%) and songs (27%) (Ezzat 1990). These percentages show that approximately half of the total content (45%) of radio programmes was religious and cultural (literary), suggesting that political programmes took up less time than other kinds, an arrangement similar to that in the press in the early 'individual' days of Saudi journalism.

Yet in the early 1960s a private radio also broadcast from Riyadh. It is considered the first private radio in Saudi Arabia and gained fame among listeners in Riyadh. This was Tami Radio, owned by Abdullah Alawaid, who was known as 'Tami' (Alshebeili 2002).



Figure 2: Tami in front of the first transmitter in the city of Riyadh (Source: *Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 4, 2009).

The importance of this radio station lies in its being broadcast first from the central region and from Riyadh. This station was characterised by simplicity and spontaneity; these were what made it famous and attracted more listeners than other stations did. Its programmes included advertisements by small traders in Riyadh and announcements asking for help to find things, such as important documents and lost children. The names of students from the city of Riyadh who were successful in exams were also broadcast, as were talks by Sheikh Bin Baaz²⁷. This was a very different form of broadcasting from the state radio stations (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 4, 2009).

The beginning of the 1960s witnessed much political instability in the Arab world and hostile media campaigns were waged against Saudi Arabia by some political regimes. This led the Saudi media to protect its citizens, through what might be described as counter information, from what it saw as the policies and broadcasts

²⁷ A famous cleric of that time who later became 'the Mufti' who was considered the highest religious authority in Saudi Arabia.

attacking the Saudi monarchy, which listeners in most parts of Saudi Arabia could hear from powerful transmitters in neighbouring countries (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 4, 2009).

In addition, Abdul Rahman Alshebeili finds in his research that Saudi radio in this period carried many complaints by the state and its citizens about the poor quality of Saudi radio itself. In the tension and political turmoil spreading throughout the region, the failure of Saudi transmitters to cover the country and to confront, as the regime saw it, campaigns of sedition effectively and efficiently, led to the reform of radio. The monarchy wanted it to do its duty of directing social and political education, provide news and help to make the country heard internationally. As a result, the Ministry of Information was set up in the same year, 1962, partly to regulate output. Whilst the output of Tami radio was 'superficial' and 'simple', it represented an implicit criticism of the official radio where programming was narrower in focus and transmission could not reach Riyadh or the northern and southern extremes of the eastern region, so that the population listened in to neighbouring countries' broadcasts (cited in *Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 4, 2009). After two years, Tami radio closed, when Riyadh radio began to relay transmissions from Jeddah (Ezzat 1990).

1.4 Television: supporting nationhood

On September 16, 1957, Dhahran TV began broadcasting in Arabic and English in the eastern region of the country; it later became known as Aramco TV (Almadani 2004). According to Alsahli (2006), it was set up by the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco), the first in the Gulf region and second in the Arab world and Middle East. As Dr Abdullah Almadani (2004) comments in *The Gulf and television: the full story of the first television station in the Gulf*:

The idea of TV Aramco stemmed from the mind of the American Harold Talbott, who was seconded in 1955 to visit the Aramco facilities, inspect the conditions of their American employees and identify their needs. Harold Talbott recommended the establishment of a television

station. Aramco [felt] at the time that this would enhance its image in the eyes of the citizens, support their interests and ensure the flow of work at a time when the tide of Arab nationalism was strong and there were feelings of hostility against the West and Western companies ...This required the creation of a media spotlight on their projects or services and the way in which they contributed to the economic and social development of the Eastern region (Almadani 2004, p.29).

This suggests that Aramco wanted TV to improve the image of the West among Saudis and to some extent to promote Western culture, at a time when the company employed many Westerners, Americans in particular, and when Arabs were very hostile to the West because of Algeria and the aggression against Egypt from Britain, France and Israel. But Almadani (2004) believes that Aramco did not seek to promote Western culture, because its programming, the work of nationals and Arabs, was mostly local. It showed Egyptian movies at a rate of four per week, in addition to other movies and travel/discovery and wildlife programmes. It also showed modern American movies, documentary films, animated films from the Disney studios, Arab-Islamic cultural programmes and special programmes to bring literacy to the Eastern Province, such as the 'Learning Arabic' programmes geared to the Saudis who suffer from illiteracy. In any case, only a small number of Saudis watched Dhahran TV because only a few households had TV sets.

In contrast, Saudi official television, launched on 17 July 1965 from the Jeddah and Riyadh stations, reached the whole population, with the Saudi state organizing a major expansion of TV transmitters for this purpose. The decree setting it up had been issued in 1963 by the Council of Ministers headed by Crown Prince Faisal bin Abdul Azis. Broadcasting was to raise awareness, give guidance and counselling and educate and to exclude topics which contravened Islamic morality (Ezzat 1990; Alshebeili 2000). In many ways this continued the policy which marked the establishment of radio in 1949. Religious and conservative elements in the country were in fact opposed to this modernizing influence in the country but were appeased by the reassurance that it would follow Islamic principles and that there would be a large proportion of religious programming. It is worth noting here that the percentage of illiterate people at the time was up to 70% of the Saudi population (Albader 2008). The decree also stated that television broadcasting should be established in two

phases: first, creating transmitting stations in both Riyadh and Jeddah and, second, after a few years, developing an advanced television system to cover all the regions of Saudi Arabia. Ezzat (1990) explains:

It was a wise decision by the Saudi government to create TV in two phases, because the Saudi land is wide, nearly two million square kilometers, and the population of Saudi Arabia is distributed sparsely over vast areas in varying numbers (pp. 441-442).

TV started in Jeddah and Riyadh, because they are seen as the centres of civilization in Saudi Arabia and are home to an educated class. Moreover, Jeddah itself (with other cities in the Hijaz region) had also witnessed the inception of newspapers to cater for its writers and intellectuals, while Riyadh is the political capital of the state and the city where the royal family lives. From the first, the TV service was affiliated to the Ministry of Information and, like radio, has always been managed entirely by the Ministry. Saudi television is considered a department or government organization. This means that it is wholly owned by the state, unlike the newspapers, which are privately owned (Sopihi 1987). As a result, the content of Saudi TV is also supervised to serve national policies. For example, TV broadcasts include religious, cultural and educational programmes and programmes about projects and services provided by the state, as well as programmes that cover national events such as the 'National Day'. As for the news, at first it occupied just 10% of TV programmes, two bulletins each day, along with a bulletin in English and another in French, in addition to the news programmes on Thursday and Friday highlighting the major events around the world during the week (Ezzat 1990).

Observers who discuss Saudi TV (Sopihi 1987; Ezzat 1990) suggest that news programmes were not at first particularly interesting to viewers, with stories about the king and the royal family, the opening of development projects and limited news about Arab and Muslim events. News programmes were probably not interesting to viewers because of government control over the news and the consequent lack of freedom. Barayan (2002) suggests:

That the news coverage transmitted by Saudi TV is not satisfactory for most Saudis... Saudi viewers, since 1991, have abandoned national channels and watch satellite channels such as Aljazeera and MBC instead and receive several satellite channels not under governmental control (cited in Awad 2010, p.49).

1.5 'Institutional' Press: mid-1960s to 1989

The second phase of press development began in 1964 with the establishment of press 'institutions' in Saudi Arabia. This phase may also be seen as a further move by the state to regulate the news media. Newspapers were converted from private ownership to public institutions or public companies with investors or shareholders and boards of management. However, the argument made by the regime was that this re-organisation would enable a wider group of citizens from different classes to participate in the ownership of newspapers (*The Press in Saudi Arabia* 1993).

Alshebeili (2000) believes that the greatest enthusiasm for changing the ownership of the Saudi press from individuals to institutions came from the Minister of Information, at the time Jamil Al-Hejailan. He observed press regulations in other countries and evaluated them, notably the publishing laws in other Arab countries (Egypt in particular) which resemble Saudi Arabia politically, socially and economically. The Saudi Council of Ministers launched a committee consisting of the Minister of Information, Minister of Agriculture and Minister of Petroleum to study the development of newspapers and make recommendations to the King. After several meetings and consultations the committee sent its conclusions to the Council of Ministers. On the basis of these, the Prime Minister, Prince Faisal, issued a royal decree giving private institutions the right to own and publish newspapers. The decree also stated that under this new law the authorities had the right to reject any institution that seeks to issue a newspaper (Ezzat 1990). This means that the authority has the right to reject any application without giving reasons.

A number of owners and editors of Saudi newspapers in the Hijaz region (the newspapers *Quraish*, *Okaz*, *Alnadwah*, *Almadinah* and *Albilad*) travelled to Riyadh in an attempt to dissuade the state from passing this decree; they met the Minister of Information, Jamil Al-Hejailan, and tried to convince him of the effect that it might have on the medium. According to Sabbagh (2011), the argument that was adopted by the owners is that most experiments have proved that group projects always fail. In contrast, individual projects succeed and most of the newspapers in the world are owned by individuals, except for the socialist countries, where the newspapers are owned by institutions. The owners tried to convince the Minister that the masses would react badly to institutionalizing the press and would call it 'nationalization'; they claimed that it would be a step toward socialism, which had turned its back on religion and the state.

It seems that these owners used the word 'socialist' to refer to states which were communist states at the time, because Saudis were very hostile to communist countries, in particular to the Arab countries which had begun to apply what Saudi Arabia saw as communism, such as in Egypt in the era of President Abdel Nasser (Sabbagh 2011). However, the owners were unsuccessful, although they issued a statement opposing the decree, which they all signed and sent to the Prime Minister, Prince Faisal Bin Abdul Aziz (who later became King Faisal). They told him at a subsequent meeting that they believed the institutional press system would fail, but Prince Faisal stressed his keenness to support the newspapers, declaring that one newspaper published well was better than dozens of newspapers published badly. He probably took this stand because the merger phase (1959-1964) had not helped to reduce the number of newspapers, as had been envisaged. He was concerned to develop a system to prevent newspapers from being controlled by one person, namely, the owner. In the event, Prince Faisal's view prevailed. He told the owners to 'choose the members carefully' (Khyat 1997) as a sign that the decree was irreversible and that they must obey and begin to choose who should join each institutional press board.

According to Khyat (1997), an editor and owner of a Saudi newspaper who went to the meeting, they all reluctantly accepted this decree, except the owner of *Okaz*, Ahmed Abdul Ghafor Attar. He delayed providing a list of members of his institutional board for several months in protest against what he described as 'the nationalization of the press' (p.188). Eventually, however, he produced a list, which was approved by the Ministry of Information. But, according to Hafez (1976), Attar later resigned for 'special reasons' from the *Okaz* institutional board, before 17 October, 1964 when *Okaz* published its first issue in the new institutional era. Sabbagh (2011) reports that Attar mentions in his memoirs (*When I worked in journalism, 1931-1968*) that he and the ministry were not on good terms and it had not approved his list. It stayed under consideration for about seven months, during which time requests from Makkah, Jeddah, Riyadh and Al-Khobar were received and approved. Attar also complained about the method of choosing the members of the board and of interventions by the Ministry of Information, that excluded certain names or added others.

Notwithstanding the above, it seems that Attar was more disgruntled over the new regulations for newspapers. From the first he had not accepted the prospect, because he thought of himself as a newspaper owner and did not want others to share control of his newspaper, contest the disposition of its profits or interfere in its policy. Still, he returned to press ownership and in 1967 began to publish the magazine *Kalamat Alhaqe*, though it closed down after a few months for 'financial reasons'. In 1983 he earned a State Award for Literature in recognition of his work in the medium. He was also appointed as an adviser to King Fahad. Fifty years after the launch of *Okaz*, it is now acknowledged to be one of the most readable of the Saudi newspapers (*Okaz*, March 26, 2011).

Alshebeili (2000) believes that several factors persuaded the authorities to issue the decree about institutionalization when they did. He sees it as the:

... desire of government to develop a strong national press to attract Saudi readers and use the press against rival political forces at the

time, particularly the secular Arab nationalist regime of the Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser. The government was keen to develop the national press in order to counter such ideological threats and their possible negative effects on public relations at the height of Nasser's prominence in the Arab world (cited in Awad 2010, p.18).

The fears and criticisms of Attar and others with regard to this 'institutionalization' and what might be argued is a politicization of the press, do not seem unfounded.

This regulation of the press institutions imposed 34 conditions. The most prominent of these were that:

- Article (3): The members of an institutional board should total 15 at least.
- Article (4): The institution's capital must be at least 100 thousand riyals at the outset.
- Article (6): The head office of the institution should be in the city in which the newspaper is published and printed.
- Article (11): No member of the institutional board may use his membership to influence the editor-in-chief and editors.
- Article (13): Members of the institution should not interfere in the work of the editor-in-chief, the editors or other staff of the institution.
- Article (15): No member of an institution is responsible for press offences related to editing that may be committed by the newspaper.
- Article (13): The editor-in-chief must be a full time employee and the newspaper must also employ four full-time editors, two translators, a photographer and three reporters in three global capitals.
- Article (8): The institution's licence will be cancelled if the institution has failed to fulfill its financial obligations and the institution will be declared bankrupt (Ezzat 1990; Alqarni 2013).

As for the content or editorial line of the press, the regulations were not clear, or did not go into much detail about them and this may have given the Ministry of Information (the body responsible for implementing these regulations) the right to interpret them in accordance with its goals. For example, Article (21) says that the editing (editorial line) of the newspaper must be approved by two-thirds of the members of the institutional board. Article (25) states that the editor alone is responsible for all press offences committed by the newspaper. Article (28) says that the editor's contract will be terminated if the ministry notes that he is unable to carry out his responsibilities in accordance with the public interest (Ezzat 1990).

The intention of these is to allow the ministry to intervene and cause an editor to be dismissed; but it also shows that the regulations are obscure and not explicit. None of these 34 conditions specifies what sanctions can be imposed by the state for breaking any of these regulations.

Given the weight of these restrictions and the potential intervention by the government, Khyat argues that the era of the individual presses was preferable, because of the extent and breadth of press activity at the time (Khyat 1997). The writer Alghasha'ami also confirms the strengths of the earlier period (1924-1964), which he calls the 'golden age' of journalism in Saudi Arabia. He suggests that:

This was when the press reported the facts and published what they believed to be true without censorship, the ceiling of freedom was high and the aim of newspapers was to raise awareness among citizens and demand what was lacking in the health services and in cultural, scientific, transportation and other areas (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, March 8, 2014).

However, it could be said that the new regulations gave newspapers and journalists some advantages, because the impact of organization through institutions was to increase their funding, through board members and advertising. For example, newspapers in the new era improved the technical side of production, gaining access to new techniques in printing through the services of skilled technicians and directors with extensive experience in journalism, publishing and printing in other Arab

countries (Ezzat 1990). Hitherto the newspapers had been printed abroad, but this period also saw the development of printing presses in Saudi itself (Ezzat 1990; Alshebeili 2000). Newspapers also expanded their pages, highlighting artistic and cultural activity in special pages or supplements and including photographs and discussion. Advertising in newspapers was stimulated, partly through the increased wealth and economic activity of the nation on the back of expanding oil production, but also because newspapers were able to offer higher production values, presenting advertisements in attractive and interesting ways. Advertising campaigns for national products flowed in. The increased funding attracted journalists and writers from other Arab countries to comment on international events and engage in political analysis. This helped Saudi journalists to develop their own editorial and journalistic skills (Abbas 1971). And at least some journalists believed that the press institutions gave newspapers a chance to represent different views, since the editor-in-chief was no longer the only person making decisions about what to publish.

Osama Al-Sibaie, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Almadinah* by the 1990s, retrospectively condemned the system of institutions in his *Almadinah* column (12 June 1994) and summarized what he saw as the disadvantages of the institutional press regulations:

- Many members of press institutional boards did not belong to the media, still less the press and therefore did not know much about journalistic practices or the news business.
- Many members, including the directors of institutions, often failed to attend meetings of the board and this may have distanced them from what was happening in the newspaper.
- Few editors joined the institutional boards, possibly because they could not afford to do so or because of their lack of journalistic competence (professionalism) to join, or perhaps because the rest of the board did not encourage new members. Furthermore, the boards of the institutions had no power to appoint editors or select

the news content of the newspaper. However, the members of the institution could choose the editor-in-chief in compliance with the regulations; and the editor-in-chief was responsible for everything published in the newspaper.

- Some members of the institutions were interested only in profit and attended the meetings only if the news title was making profits (cited in Khyat 1997, pp.216-218).

It should be noted in addition that most members of those institutions were famous ('celebrity') names in the country; for example, the director of Almadinah institution, a well-known businessman, Haider Bin Laden, and Abdullah Saleh Kamel, the director of the Okaz institution, who was the son of the famous millionaire Saleh Kamel (www.okaz.com.sa) (www.al-madina.com).

By the mid-1990s, then, journalists and editors were suggesting that the regulation of press institutions needed to be changed. For example, the director general of the Okaz institution, Iyad Madani, who later became Minister of Information, argued:

Institutional press regulation was issued many years ago and this system needs to be reviewed in full. It was published in certain circumstances and a certain situation and now the circumstances have changed, so we have to change the regulations in accordance with present circumstances and conditions. Imagine wearing the same clothes that fitted you 30 years ago (cited in Khyat 1997, p.216).

For his part, Abdullah Al-Qaraawi, the director of the Al-Yamamah institution which published the magazine *Al-Yamamah* and newspaper *Al-Riyadh*, also demanded an overhaul, a view supported by the ex-Minister of Information, Mohammed Abdo Yamani (1975-1983), who even suggested that the 'individual' press was better since the 'institutions' tended not to appreciate discerning journalists (Khyat 1997).

Although Khyat (1997) also praised the press in the age of individuals, he did not reject the institutional system altogether, while admitting that it had many disadvantages and should be updated and amended in light of the changing times and circumstances. He advised that newspaper journalists and editors should become members of the institutional boards in order to be properly rewarded for

their work. Khyat raised a further issue. He pointed out that the institutional press regulations were created to prevent a newspaper from being controlled by one person, yet 'the same problem remains under the institutional system' – in some newspapers the editor-in-chief may still control everything. Khyat thus demanded that the members of boards should discuss policy with the editor-in-chief and participate in decision-making (1997, pp.216-218).

At around the time that the institutional press was being established, radio broadcasting also took a different and arguably modernizing turn. In 1965 Saudi Radio, with the encouragement of the Minister of Information, Jamil Al-Hejaylan, took the bold step of launching a new weekly programme, entitled 'Seminar of the Week'. It allowed the political elite, opinion makers and well-known intellectuals to speak freely without censorship about issues of concern to the community. The programme was prepared by the Minister himself and presented by Abbas Ghazzawi. This perhaps suggests that the ruling monarchy was becoming more open and democratic than the leading religious clerics of the time.

The first episode dealt with issues of the economy and development and the second, which became famous and soon caused a media crisis, was called 'Women and their role in the Muslim community'. The guests of the programme were divided: one group supported women's liberation and wanted to launch unlimited freedom. This group consisted of Ahmad Al-Sibaie (one of the pioneers of the Saudi press, editor of the newspaper *Quraish* and one of the enlightenment figures, who had created the first theatre in Saudi Arabia), Salafi Sheikh Faisal Almubarak and a young doctor, Abdullah Manna. On the opposing side, wanting to limit the role of women, were the Islamist writer Ahmed Mohamed Gamal (editor of *Alnadwah*) and Abdulaziz Al-Rifai.



Figure 3: Recording a radio seminar (on issues to do with women) in 1965²⁸ (Source: Mahmoud Sabbagh's Blog, 2011).

The programme provoked uproar by raising the issue of women's right to be educated, employed and eligible for public life. Manna describes the event in his memoirs '*Baed Allayaly and Baed Alayyam*' ('Some nights and some days') as a conflict between the two wings of 'moderation' and 'advancement'. This symposium had a huge impact, exceeding the perceptions of what radio was thought to be able to do, but the official reaction was harsh. The group favouring 'advancement' (Al-Sibaie, Al-Mubarak and Manna) were forbidden to write or talk in the media, as punishment for their explicitly 'progressive' views; a decision was made to deport Sheikh Al-Mubarak to his home town Harimla (a small town near Riyadh) and Ahmad Al-Sibaie was fined two months' salary, despite his high cultural and social status. Manna (who was then working in the health field) was harshly reproved by the Minister of Health and also fined two months' salary (Sabbagh, May 15, 2011).

One striking outcome of this incident was that the minister Jamil Al-Hejaylan was not punished by the authorities in any way. There was a response to this debate in

²⁸ This photo tells its own story about women's position in Saudi Arabia in those days, as a programme on women in which all the participants were men.

support of the 'Progressive' team. According to Sabbagh (2011), Manna remembered this punishment with some regret, but was heartened by the attitude of his colleagues at the Ministry of Health in Riyadh, who wrote to send him their support and shared in paying his fine.

In the 1970s, whatever the limitations on editorial content, the Saudi press attracted well known writers, poets and cartoonists from the Arab world. Maybe Saudi newspapers attracted those writers because of the industry's improved economic conditions, which led to better methods of production and distribution (Albader 2008). For example, the newspaper *Okaz* attracted the famous Lebanese cartoonist Pierre Sadek (Khyat 1997). At the same time newspaper companies expanded. The Saudi Research and Publishing Company, by 1972 the largest publishing house in the Arab world, was founded in London by the two Hafez brothers. As a private company, it began to publish a number of newspapers and specialized magazines on the economy, politics and issues of interest to women and children, in addition to issuing Arab News in 1974, the first Saudi newspaper in English. In 1978 it also launched the newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat* which built up the largest circulation of any Arab newspaper published overseas (Ezzat 1990).

The 1980s represented a period of prosperity for the press, with the development of technical capabilities and equipment and the creation of many new jobs. Professional standards were strengthened, with more emphasis placed on training institutes which provided scholarships in a bid to improve the quality of journalism. In addition, media departments in Saudi Universities sent Saudi students to outstanding universities in America, Britain and France to gain higher qualifications. According to Saati (1992), a number of newspapers, starting with *Okaz* in 1983, also established advanced centres of information where the specialized information included much about local and international fields. Saudi newspapers sought to take advantage of centres that relied on research to provide the information they demanded to support their analyses of and conclusions about current and future events (Bin Najem 2006).

The upshot of these developments was that journalists had a wider range of expertise from their experience in other capitals and countries, so that the press began to publish news and comment beyond what the official sources in Saudi Arabia provided. According to Ezzat, the press enjoyed more freedom than it had done previously (1990). More space was given to newspapers to express views on various events, even if these did not agree with the views of the monarchy or religious clerics. Therefore, criticism of government and the private sector increased through news, reports, investigations and cartoons, with some of the Kingdom's leaders believing in this role for journalism in society and desiring through the press to open channels of dialogue between government officials and citizens (Alaskar 2002).

As a consequence, further 'media reform' in the shape of the fourth printing law, which included extensive amendments, was authorized in 1982. The 'Press and Publications Law' replaced the 'Printing Presses and Publications Law' of 1958. For the first time, this law covered all Saudi media and publications, including more modern forms such as photographs and illustrations, video cassettes, audio-tapes, pamphlets, brochures (Alshebeili 2000). It was not clear whether the fourth law was an attempt to stop the growing openness of the press or to accept it. Perhaps because of this, the law, according to Al-Ahmad (2014) 'tended towards generalities'. Yet it talked for the first time about respect for the freedom of speech and the rights of groups and, furthermore, affirmed that the 'Saudi media must be committed to objectivity in the presentation of facts and keep away from exaggerations and bickering' (Al-Ahmad 2014, [no page]). At the same time, the law announced a number of criteria that must be met when censoring publications; the criteria derive from Articles (6) (7) and (13) of the Press Publications Law, 1982. For example:

1. It prohibits any printed publication in breach of the rules of public morality.
2. Publications from abroad have to comply with all the prohibitions in the Press Publication Law (Alqarni 2013). This meant that they were also subject to printing laws and censorship in Saudi Arabia; such publications were censored by blurring

or the excision of pages if they contained, for example, the image of a semi-naked girl, or a forbidden word.

3. The law prohibited the printing, publication or circulation of publications that contained the following:

- Anything that contravenes Shari'ah (Islamic law) or the Islamic religion or that is contrary to public morality.
- Anything that contravenes state security or the security of the regime.
- Any topic that would expose members of the armed forces or weapons to risk.
- Any topic that damages the dignity of the heads of state or heads of diplomatic missions accredited in Saudi Arabia, or that would harm relations with other countries.
- Any item which includes a libel or defamation of individuals.
- Extortion, or threatening anyone with the publication of a secret in order to force him/her to pay, or to force him/her to do something, or deprive him/her of his/her rights (Ezzat 1990; Awad 2010).

Alaskar (2002), for his part, believes that the media policy law which was issued in 1982 contributed to developing the work of the media in Saudi Arabia and raised the quality of their content:

Media policy is considered one of the most important factors that impact positively on the process of journalistic work in Saudi Arabia. Media policy contributed to the consolidation of the institutional dimension of the work of the journalist in Saudi Arabia. It also contributed to the development of the professional performance of the Saudi media through introducing the need to produce human resources capable of achieving the objectives of media in society ... Media policy focused on encouraging youthful energies and gave them opportunities to upgrade their scientific and professional knowledge. The media policy emphasizes the importance of developing human resources and creating an expert intelligentsia capable of achieving the objectives of the media and supporting these energies by training and continuous evaluation (Alaskar 2002, pp.101-102).

Others disagreed. Sabbagh for one criticises censorship:

This censorship means in practice that *Time* magazine and other foreign publications, including newspapers, are available in the market but in an incomplete form. Whole pages will be removed because of a picture or a paragraph in a story or novel which displeases the gatekeepers in the Ministry of Information. It has become normal to see, on the shelves of Saudi supermarkets or bookstores, books and newspapers which have been cut. Saudi readers, unlike those in other countries, continue to suffer the disappointment of finding that their favourite publications are incomplete (Sabbagh 2009, cited in Almaghlooth 2014, p.60).

There were also new elements in these regulations, including limiting a newspaper in its criticism of other Arab countries. For example, Article (21) stated: 'The Saudi media must call for Arab solidarity and cooperation and the avoidance of any matter leading to dispersal' (Alqarni 2013). The editor of *Almadinah* newspaper, Ahmed Mahmoud, was dismissed because of an article that he wrote about the illness of the former Syrian president Hafez Al-Assad, despite the continuing political dispute between Saudi Arabia and Syria (Alghasha'ami 2005).

In March 1984, a confrontation between the censor and the press occurred when the newspaper *Al-Jazirah* published a poem called 'Message to the Saif Aldawlah'²⁹ by the famous poet Gazi Al-Gosaibi (at the time Minister of Health). In the poem he warns King Fahd about current corruption and hypocrisy; it caused Al-Gosaibi himself to be dismissed from the ministry but also resulted in the dismissal of the editor of the cultural page of *Al-Jazirah*³⁰. However, in November of the same year, Al-Gosaibi was appointed ambassador to Bahrain (Alghasha'ami 2005). This incident reflects some tension between political figures within the state and demonstrates that censorship could affect anyone, even such a well-known figure as Al-Gosaibi.

²⁹ Saif Aldawlah was the leader of an ancient tenth-century Arab state (915-967) in Aleppo, to the north of Syria. It seems that Al-Gosaibi used the name of this leader instead of King Fahad's. The article was, however, understood by its readers and censors as a message from Al-Gosaibi to King Fahad.

³⁰ Alghasha'ami (2005) gives no details whether the cultural editor continued his career or not.

1.6 Challenges: the 1990s

In the 1990s, the Saudi media faced many challenges, including issues arising from the Second Gulf War and the emergence of satellite television channels. The biggest challenge was its confrontation with the Iraqi press, which had considerable experience of war and crises, relying, as the Saudi government saw it, on propaganda and disinformation about their opponents, including Saudi Arabia. The Saudi press tried to offer a different account of the position of the Saudi government in relation to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait³¹. Altimyat (2001) explains:

The media of the Iraqi regime resorted to the use of methods of propaganda and psychological warfare, which exceeded the size and seriousness of the weapons that were owned and the dissemination of rumours about the presence of aircraft for them on standby for an attack on Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The Iraqi media aimed to weaken the coalition to liberate Kuwait and stepped up media campaigns against Saudi Arabia through the dissemination of rumours intended to change the Saudi attitude toward the invasion (pp. 39-43).

In his study, Altimyat (2001) states that the Ministry of Information in Saudi Arabia developed a strategy to confront the campaign waged by the Iraqi media. But he criticises the Ministry for delaying the application of this strategy until 3 months after the crisis began. He also believes that the Iraqi media used offensive methods against Saudi Arabia, such as propaganda and psychological warfare, whereas the Saudi media (and those of the Arab Gulf states in general) used the method of defence and a little propaganda and did not resort to psychological warfare at all.

This view contradicts that of Albazzaz (1995) who had earlier claimed that the Saudi media had attacked the Iraqi media through directed radio stations and the local, Arab and international press. However, the Saudi press learnt a valuable lesson from the Second Gulf War – through reliance on its own resources ‘and not solely on the news agencies’ – and gained good experience of emergencies (Altimyat 2001). But

³¹ The general issue relevant to the news media was, as Altimyat (2001) highlights, that the Iraqi media used advanced technology to enable them to extend their transmissions beyond national borders. They were able to communicate with other Arab and Muslim states in a way that Saudi Arabia could not and thus influence wider Arab/Islamic public opinion. For example, Iraq possessed 6 television stations which could transmit to a range of areas in the Arabian Gulf.

perhaps a more significant result was the country's expansion of satellite news media. It seems that the debacle of Iraq's misinformation and the attack on Saudi Arabia by the Iraqi media and some Arab media awoke Saudi Arabia to its need for special means to communicate abroad. Cochrane (2007) argues:

Over the past seventeen years the Saudi establishment has used its deep pockets to influence the region's media and minds, morphing from an approach that paid off and an intimidated media that ran negative reports on the kingdom to become one of the Middle East's most influential media owners (p.1).

As a result, Saudi Satellite TV was launched in the early 1990s by figures close to the royal family and the inflow of Saudi investment in the media (specifically in satellite channels) when the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) was established in London in December 1991. This TV channel is owned by the Saudi millionaire Walid Al-Ibrahim, whose sister married King Fahad Bin Abdul Aziz. In October 1993, the Arab Media Holding Company (ART) decided which broadcasts should be made from Rome by a group of diverse television channels owned by the Saudi businessman Saleh Kamel. In the middle of 1995, the Almwared Alsaudia group launched broadcasts from the Orbit channels (encrypted channels), 50 television and radio channels which broadcast from Egypt, Italy and Cyprus (Alshebalie 2002).

Alghadban (2010) explains why Saudi Arabia launched its satellite channels from abroad and not from inside the country and why these channels are in private hands. He claims:

The government in Saudi Arabia derives its legitimacy from religious power and Islamic Sharia (Islamic law) and Islamic Sharia prohibits some behaviors and some arts and imposes strict rules on women in regard to behavior, actions and type of clothing. The Saudi media are committed to abide by these criteria. Therefore, the official media in Saudi Arabia has no access to many of the attractive features and excitement that attract viewers and thus Saudi Arabia planned to launch these channels from elsewhere, so that it could provide all the attractions and dazzle of art that the religious institutions in Saudi Arabia forbid (p.32).

The launch of these satellite channels and other Arab TV channels impacted on Saudi viewers and on religious leaders whose influence was being challenged. The latter looked with suspicion on new technology and warned their followers about its dangers and the effect on people's behavior and ethics that it would bring. Almaghloouth (2014), though believing that the confrontation between religious figures and people who supported the growth of TV did not begin in the 1990s, but had been going on since the introduction of TV, comments:

Religious leaders warned that it [the satellite service] would ruin Saudi society and weaken the faith of Muslims. In the early 1990s, many houses which had satellite dishes on their roofs came under gunfire in an expression of anger and an attempt to intimidate the owners into removing them. Many others had leaflets delivered by hand, warning them that these devices were evil and dangerous to the unity of the country and its religion. Owners of satellite receivers were not alone in being attacked by some religious extremists: technical workers at Saudi TV channels also suffered harassment at times. One media pioneer in Saudi Arabia, Saad AlFuraih, then director of Saudi national TV, was attacked by religious individuals who detested his profession (p.33).

However, the government supported the TV service and increased the number of broadcasting stations. Yet it is worth mentioning that, under pressure from religious clerics, Saudi Arabia government banned satellite dishes in 1994. That was apparently an attempt to channel everything through Arabsat. However, this ban did not last long, as Awad (2010) mentions:

Despite the alliance between government and religious leaders at that time, satellite dishes spread throughout Saudi Arabia. Even though the government does not permit the ownership of satellite dishes, this ban has become obsolete and unenforceable ... therefore, satellite dishes became an easily affordable, high-quality part of the average Saudi household's furniture. In 1999 the number of satellite dishes in Saudi Arabia was estimated at over one million (Khazen 1999, cited in Awad 2010, p.96).

Nevertheless, over time some of the religious leaders who were opposed to TV later became permanent guest speakers on certain programmes.

But the greatest challenge facing the Saudi broadcast media was the channel Al-Jazeera, launched in November 1996 from Qatar, which attracted large numbers of Arab viewers, in particular after its coverage of the Afghanistan war in 2003. However, the channel was controversial and caused concern to Arab regimes because it raised the issues of corruption, repression and the abuse of human rights (Cochrane 2007; Alghadban 2010). However, as Cochrane points out (2007), 'when it comes to the channel applying the same exposure to governmental malfeasance and social issues in Doha as it does elsewhere in the region, Al-Jazeera comes up short' (p.5).

In fact, some Arab regimes tried to exert pressure on Qatar in order to change Al-Jazeera's methods, in particular after the channel invited some opponents of Arab regimes. However, these efforts failed, obliging some Arab countries to think of establishing rival news channels of their own (Alghadban 2010). To this end, the channel Al-Arabiya, owned by the Saudi MBC Group was launched in 2003. Since its beginning it has tried to be an alternative and a strong contender against Al-Jazeera in attracting the attention of Arab viewers. Cochrane (2007) claims that Al-Jazeera has lost much advertising because of the pressure exerted by the Saudi government on major companies in the Arab world, which has deprived the channel of income from advertising. Meanwhile Al-Arabiya has been a powerful rival to the older channel as time has passed and has attracted many viewers, more than ever after the Iraq war in 2003. But the latter provoked controversy when it spoke of Palestinians being 'killed' by Israeli forces, when Al-Jazeera was saying that they had been 'martyred,' a word with a religious meaning within Islam.

Alongside developments in broadcasting during this 'institutional' era, the first Saudi newspaper titles, *Al-Jazirah* and *Almasayiah* created online sites and electronic versions which initially did not differ from the print versions. At the same time, all Saudi newspapers began to print issues every day of the week, including Thursdays and Fridays (public holidays for government agencies in Saudi Arabia and Friday being the day of prayer). Most newspapers do not stop publishing even during the two holidays and religious periods of Eid (al-Fitr and al-Adha) (Alaskar 2002). These

moves mark a degree of modernization and a more secular stance in the face of the pressures from the conservative Islamic moral guardians.

1.7 Conclusion

This review of the developments in the Saudi press, radio and television and successive media policy involving printing laws and regulations shows clearly the tensions in Saudi Arabia. First, tension ran between the modernizing forces (often represented by elements of the royal family – the al-Saud family – as well as by sections of the educated cultural elite) and conservative Islamic forces – the Al-Shaykh family – represented by the leading Islamic clerics. The liaison between these two groups in ruling the country has shaped the nature of the Saudi state and the way in which the media have developed. Second, Saudi media policy demonstrates an impetus towards managing internal relations, creating a sense of national unity and avoiding challenges to the state, whilst also attempting to impact and manage external relations (and threats) in the Arab world and more widely. Perhaps for this reason the government, or Ministry of Information in particular, issued four printing laws (1929, 1958, 1964 and 1982) in order to keep the mass media under the control and monitoring of government through strict regulations. The Internet service which emerged in Saudi Arabia before the end of the 1990s (1998), forced the government to impose a Fifth and Sixth printing law (the law of electronic publishing) issued in 2000 and 2011 respectively. This law and its impact on the new media are discussed in Chapter Four.

A salient feature of the media – the promotion of a particular conservative Sunni Islam (Wahhabiyya) – has been facilitated by media policy. Some of the Saudi media; for example, certain radio and television stations, operate special services for religious events, such as the Hajj pilgrimage or the holy month of Ramadan. From the outset religious leaders have exercised their influence on the cultural content of the media and most of the sanctions imposed on newspapers or journalists come from the religious leaders. For example, the closing down of *Al-Dhahran News* and the arrest of its editor Abdul Karim AlGhuhrman, the curtailing of the radio programme ‘Seminar of the Week’ and the fining of journalists who participated in

this programme resulted from the displeasure of religious leaders at the more enlightened ideas put forward in these programmes.

At the same time, professional and technical developments in the media field have contributed to the modernization of the Saudi media, which adopted the most advanced print, broadcast and distribution technologies, together with digitalized broadcast channels and radio stations. In addition, the economic growth of the state (built on immense oil reserves) in the late 1970s and 1980s, in particular, contributed to the growth of the Saudi press and other media. At the same time more progressive views and spaces for criticism have also emerged.

This chapter has highlighted the history of the Saudi media since its inception in 1924, with the issuance of *Umm Alqura*, until the end of the 1990s and just before the beginning of the new millennium and the period on which this research focuses (the emergence of online journalism and the social media). It will become clear later (Chapters 4 and 5) that aspects of media management in this earlier period inform the practice and regulation of online journalism and other new media. The next chapter will explore two important concepts relevant to the evaluation of news media, and will explore how Western and Arab scholars discuss these terms.

Chapter 2

From Credibility to Public Opinion and the Public Sphere

Public opinion is identified as the collective desire, attitude or perception of the majority of the people. It is what the society, people or state thinks about a given issue. Public opinion is believed to shape people's behaviour; also something can be considered good or bad depending on what the public deems right or wrong (Al-Qarni, 2004). On the other hand, the public sphere is identified as a given area within social life, where people and individuals can congregate to discuss and also to identify societal problems in a free manner; these debates influence public opinion. This chapter focuses on the scholarship which engages with current developments in online journalism, focusing in particular on the issue of 'credibility' in the Arab media context. It explores how this concept has been understood in Western literature since the emergence of such studies in the 1960s and the various components which a range of American, European and Arab scholars believe contribute to 'credibility'. The term is then considered in the context of the concept of the 'public sphere'. The latter discussion starts by investigating the ideas of Habermas, before engaging with other Western theorists and those who have argued for the idea of a plurality of public spheres and discussed how 'subaltern public spheres' – often linked to an oppositional/alternative politics and media – are in tension with the dominant mainstream. Public opinion is formed in a variety of ways: in the early 17th century, opinion was regarded as 'the mistress of success' by scholars and authors such as William Shakespeare, since it influenced how people would think about given issues (Duelund 2002). Today in the technological world, people tend to discuss things through the use of social media, accessing information through media such as television, radio, the Internet or websites; these platforms are regarded as the public sphere. However, public opinion may be based on inadequate or erroneous information, and this often depends on how and by

whom the information is distributed. The world being a 'global village' means that information is disseminated much faster. However, differences in cultures and beliefs make it difficult to ensure that public opinion will be correctly perceived. In Arab communities, where there is a strict code of beliefs and rules about how people should behave, public opinion has more importance as a means of social control. The media also exert more control over public opinion in democratic nations where the right of association is protected.

2.1 Debates about 'Credibility'

'Credibility' first emerged as a term in the United States during the late 1950s and early 1960s, when communication researchers focused on the way in which public relations communications were evaluated by the public (Abdullah 1996; Rieh & Danielson 2000). This term caught the attention of media researchers who studied the perception by the public of the credibility of media – newspapers in particular. The motivation for such research was economic: a decline in the numbers of newspapers and magazines sold and the lack of advertising revenue for radio and television (Alam Eddin 1989).

There was also another motive for the emergence of credibility research in the United States, mentioned, among others, by Weibel et al (2008): 'In the early days of the development of communication research and in line with most American researchers, their main concern was to gather useful data about the effectiveness of campaigns and various methods of communication' (pp.468-469). Weibel's et al research was intended to examine the methods used by channels to broadcast news and other information to gauge (or 'with the intention of gauging') how far the viewers saw them as credible. This was done to ascertain the most effective ways to raise viewing figures and compete with other media. With this in mind, '[they] set up carefully controlled experiments to test the effects of different characteristics of the channel through which information is communicated. Their findings state that people are more likely to believe a fact when the source presents itself as being credible' (Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953 as cited in Weibel, Wissmath, & Groner 2008, pp.468-469).

In Arab countries, the media credibility is compromised since sometimes the government feeds the media with what information should be distributed to the people and how this should be done. Additionally, closing social media platforms to control information distribution is a common phenomenon where bloggers and other media personnel are identified as with making anti-state inflammatory statements. Therefore, the information within the public opinion and the media is largely questionable since its credibility is interfered with.

According to Hovland et al (1953), the two factors that the credibility of the media depends on are 'expertness' and 'trustworthiness'. 'Expertness' includes age, experience, status and similarity to the recipient, while trustworthiness is composed of seriousness and compatibility between verbal statements and actions (Weibel, Wissmath, & Groner 2008).

However, Weibel et al (2008) criticise Hovland's et al concept of credibility, stating:

Several variables of the receiver of the message, such as experience, intelligence, or demographic factors, were disregarded, and the specific situation was not taken into account. Furthermore, Hovland et al. did not make it clear what the subjects in their studies really evaluated, whether it was the newsreader, the institution this person is working for, or even the medium itself (p.469).

There are a variety of factors that influence the credibility of a given source of information: firstly, the platform disseminating the information should have a track record of providing credible information, as a source with a record of disseminating information that is not credible gains a reputation for lack of credibility. Secondly, the source of the story should be established and backed with evidence; it is important not to rely heavily on amateur information sources since they can be misleading. Biased sources can distort information and erode the credibility of a report. People will always prefer credible information that they can depend on in making an argument about a given scenario. Presenting an argument without evidence interferes with the credibility of a given story, making it seen as less dependable.

Despite this valuable criticism highlighting many issues around credibility, Hovland's et al concept of credibility is easy to understand. It is also notable as being one of

the first definitions of credibility. In the 1970s and 1980s, communication researchers turned to making comparisons between the credibility of newspapers and that of radio and television (e.g., Meyer, 1974; Newhagen & Nass, 1989). Then, in the 1990s, they turned to comparing the credibility of the media in general with that of the Internet (Slater & Rouner 1996; Rieh & Danielson 2000). Comparisons were made to discover which media were the most credible or most trusted by subjects who were asked to listen to conflicting reports. Other studies aimed at uncovering the criteria used to evaluate credibility in different media. For example, Newhagen and Nass explored how US audiences used different criteria for judging the credibility of news on TV and in newspapers (1989).

According to Gaziano and McGarth (1986), in the mid-1960s the Americans had less trust in newspapers, for many did not believe what they saw as state propaganda. This was due to the government's influence and control of the media about what it could say and when to publish information about the progress of the Vietnam War. It was the first time that they could see for themselves what was happening in a war, with television cameras filming events and bringing the conflict into the American living room (Meyer, 1974). Gaziano and McGarth's research demonstrated that Americans in the 1960s trusted TV news more than newspapers (Gaziano and McGarth 1989; Abdullah 1996; Alboloshy 2000). Scholars thus attempted to engage with what seemed to be a 'crisis of credibility' for newspapers (Abdul Aziz 2006), raising the issue of what constitutes news credibility.

Gaziano and McGarth (1986) suggest that one of the most important research projects was the study by four American institutions, namely, The American Society of Newspaper Editors, The Gannet Centre of Media Studies, The Times Mirror and The Los Angeles Times. This study concluded that credibility has the following aspects: accuracy, integrity, covering the facts and story, confidence in media institutions, the relationship between news sources and the government, belief (belief in the truth of what is published in the newspaper), accuracy and ethical standards, which depend on specialization by journalists and vocational training in the media field. Another important aspect is the hallmarks of a newspaper's

performance, such as scoops and comprehensive coverage of news stories, the independence of the media from personal gain, independence from other institutions and organizations – impartiality and balance in news coverage – and the autonomy of the media (Gaziano and McGarth 1986).

The above research results demonstrate that some aspects of credibility are linked to the performance of the media, such as accuracy in news reporting, scoops, and comprehensiveness, whilst other aspects are linked to the ethics of journalism, such as integrity, impartiality and balance. Further, this research took the audience's point of view in determining the credibility of the media and did not explore the views of journalists or use content analysis. Some researchers – for example, Abdullah (1996) – consider this insufficient to determine the credibility of a medium.

According to the definition that has been provided by Gaziano and McGarth, different approaches have been taken with regard to defining credibility. However, most definitions include justice, impartiality and accuracy. The inclusiveness of the definition is that it gives consideration to public order, public interest, public morality and realism. However, scholars such as Aldokhi (2010) have also argued that the definition should be able to identify the necessary qualities of media content: the sources relied on by journalists, their relationship to government and the practices of journalism regarding training, integrity and ethics.

In turn Newhagen and Nass (1989) discuss the credibility of the mass media from the perspective of the audience or 'public.' They state that 'if credibility is defined from a receiver-oriented perspective, [credibility means] the degree to which an individual judges his or her perception to be a valid reflection of reality' (p.278). Thus, by focusing on audience reaction alone, Newhagen and Nass were able to identify that recipients of news use several different criteria to determine how credible they believe news to be. In their view, television, with its more visual presentation, has an advantage over newspapers in the credibility which it enjoys (Newhagen and Nass 1989). Thus TV is regarded as a more credible source of information since people are able to see and hear material witnesses on given issues. It provides a visual

backing to the stories, where the source of information is actually shown giving that information.

The European Union also discussed 'credibility' in relation to journalists but through a content analysis of news and journalistic practices (Van den Berg & Van der Veer 1989). This particularly emphasized journalists' moral obligation to look for the truth, carefully following the details of news stories and taking social norms into account (Kuldip & Clifton 1990). One of the most important observations in the European study is that it suggests that credibility of content is a more accurate criterion for evaluating the credibility of the media than the views of the public would be.

In the Arab world, most of the studies which focus on credibility were initially conducted in Egypt at the 1980s. One was carried out by Hijab in the early 1980s (see below) though it did not directly address the issue of credibility (Abdullah 1996; Abdul Aziz 2006). The motivation behind the Arab studies of credibility, in Egypt in particular, was that the mass media are owned by governments who control most of the media output in newspapers, radio, and television. This situation means that over a long period the public has not trusted the Arab media and often turned to Western media such as the BBC and others for reliable news (Abdulrahman 1987; Abdullah 1996). Many political events in the Arab world during the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Arab-Israeli war, the Lebanese civil war, and political assassinations and military coups, led to a greater need for news credibility and to the significance of the term. But the reporting of all these events, in fact, reduced the credibility of the Arab media and the public resorted still more to accessing international media.

Arab scholars such as Alam Eddin (1989) and Abdullah (1996) appear to have similar views about the concept of credibility to those of their Western counterparts, (1996). Some define it as 'confidence in the media' or 'the possibility of reliability' (Abdulghani 1991, p.18). Others say that it means 'respect for the media and the appreciation and preference for reliable sources of information and opinions' (Abdulghani 1991). Yet others have defined it to mean 'public satisfaction with the performance of the media' (Alam Eddin 1989, p.46). Credibility should be judged through the confidentiality portrayed by the news source. Protecting the source of

information goes hand in hand with raising the story's credibility. Media houses should be given their media rights and also be protected from external harassment from the government, individuals or organizations.

The Egyptian researcher, Hijab (1982), in his book 'Theories of Islamic media: Principles and Practice', has defined credibility from an Islamic standpoint and does not address credibility as this term is presented in Western studies. He specifies three levels of credibility, namely: 'credibility of acts' (behaviour), with reference to the performance of the media; 'credibility of saying' (meaning that journalists should publish the truth) and 'self-truthfulness' (meaning truthfulness in intent and the utmost conviction in their work) (Hijab 1982, p.15). Hijab's definition of credibility highlights the principles and ethics informed by Islamic faith that he believes should be adhered to by all staff working in the journalistic field. He is the first Arabic scholar to directly define the concept of credibility, but he does not explain why he is exploring credibility and does not specify the reasons why credibility had become an important issue in the Arab media context.

For his part, Alam Eddin (1989) believes that most Arab definitions of credibility agree that it refers to news operating according to professional codes of journalistic practice (1989). However, according to Abdullah (1996), Alam Eddin relies on 'the translation of concepts and dimensions of credibility from Western studies and he [does] not address the concepts and dimensions of credibility suitable for the Egyptian press and [does] not take into account the conditions of ... Egyptian society as a developing society' (p.29). Abdullah thus considers Alam Eddin's study not empirical enough, in that it does not discuss how these concepts could be applied to the Egyptian press in practical ways. This would also seem to apply to other Arabic definitions of credibility in the 1980s and early 1990s (Abdullah 1996; Nassar 2003; Alotaibi 2007).

Mustafa's work (2003) stands out in this respect: she is concerned with the particular news coverage of the Iraq war in the local, regional and international media, and explores the views of the Egyptian elite on the conflicting reports broadcast by the Arab and international media about the war in Iraq in 2003. She identifies the

indicators which help to determine the credibility of news content. In many ways, these are similar to those articulated in the Western context: balance to avoid bias; pluralism as opposed to unilateralism; confidence to combat doubt; and integration and comprehensiveness as opposed to fragmentation. Thus, Mustafa argues that news must contain indicators and elements which make it more believable to its audience, such as balanced and unbiased news and news that presents multiple perspectives. However, whilst emphasizing the need for freedom of media practice and journalism that takes into account public interest concerns, Mustafa also highlights the observance of public morality that the Arab context implies (Mustafa 2003).

Mustafa's definition is more far-reaching than Hijab's and more comprehensive in that it focuses on the indicators that help to determine the credibility of media content and also addresses the credibility of the journalist. However, both Mustafa and Hijab talk about ethics and values as components of the concept of credibility.

Overall, however, Arab studies on the issue of credibility focus on two main aspects, namely: the public's trust in the mass news media and the extent of satisfaction with the news provided. Nassar (2003) elaborates: 'The concept of credibility has tended to refer to the impact of the message conveyed by the source as something that can persuade the readership to accept it and see it as coming from a credible source' (2003, p.1385).

Abdullah gives one such understanding of credibility:

A type of processing – professional, cultural, ethical – of journalistic material, whilst having all of the dimensions of the subject at hand and portraying trends in the subject in a balanced way based on the evidence. There should be accuracy in the presentation of information and opinions should be declared clearly and openly and stripped of passions and special interests. Credible news is consistent with the reporting by others in the newspaper or reported at another time or in another place, within a framework of depth and comprehensiveness which takes into account the relationship between the private and the public and links all the evidence in a way which reflects what they believe are priorities for what is in the public's interest (1996, p.89).

Abdullah's definition of credibility seems the most profound and covers the dimensions of credibility by focusing on the content, the source (journalist-editor-news anchor) and the medium (newspaper, radio, TV, etc.) Furthermore, Abdullah's contribution to the concept of credibility also suggests that it includes the notion that credible information facilitates the formation of 'public opinion', and indicates the overlap between the two main concepts discussed in this chapter.

It is clear that many of the Arab researchers already mentioned, such as Mustafa (2003), Nassar (2003), Alsholhoop (2005) and Alotaibi (2007), have benefited from Abdullah's definition in their studies of the elements involved in the establishment of media credibility. Thus Aldoukhi (2010) treats 'credibility' as a group of factors and criteria that persuade the public to trust in news media. Aldoukhi's study focuses on times of crisis to explore the reasons that lead the Emirates' public to rely on the media and, in particular, their exposure to conflicting reports regarding local and foreign issues since these conflicting reports are more prevalent in times of crisis and war. Conflicting reports lose their credibility, since no one can know which is the true account. Such reports show that the source is largely untrustworthy, thus making the information lose its credibility. The elements of how credible the news content is may relate to the source for instance, the editor or anchor, the timing of distribution, the media and professional practices, among others. Abdullah (1996) and Aldoukhi (2010) elaborate on the concept of 'trust in the news media' and 'satisfaction with the news provided'. The former sees trust as being based on the reader's judgment of one particular source in the context of the methods that are used in reporting the news, such as the internet, radio, television or in the print media, that are employed by many journalists. The latter identifies satisfaction with the accuracy of the news as crucial in times of crisis when readers most need to rely on the news provider. As the former director general of the Al-Jazeera channel, Waddah Khanfar, puts it, 'credibility' is 'simply fully convincing the receiver that what he hears or watches is characterised by honesty and impartiality and reflects truth and reality' (2006, p.365).

Notwithstanding the attention by Arab scholars to the issue of credibility, few studies have covered Saudi Arabia. The Saudi press, like all Arab presses, is government controlled and does not enjoy independent power as in the West; consequently, attention to the issue of credibility came late. It was not until the late 1980s, moreover, that the Arab media became more open to information from the media elsewhere, thus raising the issue of which news media were the more credible. The launching of satellite channels in 1990 – in particular, Al-Jazeera in the mid-1990s and Al-Arabiya at the beginning of the new millennium – marked an important moment in this respect: the audience for international news widened to include Arab audiences. These two channels compete with other global channels in covering news and events around the world and also contribute to raising the ceiling of freedom in the official Arab TV channels.

The first study in the Kingdom was conducted by Baghdadi (1992), addressing the credibility of advertising on television. Others include Almakaty (1994) and Alarabi (2005), as well as a study by Alotaibi (2007). Such researchers as Alsholhoob (2005) and Alotaibi (2007) confirmed the existence of a crisis of credibility in the Arab media, most marked in Saudi Arabia, where there were excesses in press coverage. Their research indicated that Saudi news media did not adhere to 'accuracy' and often depended on exciting reports to attract the public, thereby eroding public trust in the Saudi media.

Credibility is thus a major factor in the evaluation of news media, and it could be argued that the success of the news media, whether traditional or modern, is linked to the degree of its credibility. In the Arab world, and above all in Saudi Arabia, the question of the 'credibility' of news points to the crisis. Credibility is significant in shaping whether a news audience is fully informed and thus the degree to which informed debate is possible. To this extent, the term 'credibility' relates to the possibility of 'public opinion' being formed through interaction with news media and thus to the rather different concept of 'public sphere.' The next section explores these terms with reference to Habermas and other scholars.

2.2 Habermas: public opinion and the public sphere

The history of the formation of public spheres and their role in forming public opinion are discussed by Jurgen Habermas. His theories encompass a variety of meanings of these concepts that imply they relate to the social sites or areas. According to this theory, discussions that are held in public presuppose that the common concern is given priority. This is a democratic ideal, since the majority has its way while the minority is less considered. However, it is also important for the message to be inclusive in any given concern, to ensure it is understood and included within the public domain. This has led to the cultivating of a better public sphere in various locations where people can meet and discuss matters that concern them.

This principle is demonstrated by the modern democracies through their enacting laws where people who are chosen to represent the population must discuss issues affecting the larger population. They include parliaments, senates and cabinet boards where issues are discussed and decisions made.

In his article 'The structural transformation of the public sphere' (1962), Habermas reiterates his definition of the public sphere as 'the realm of people's social life where public opinion is formed and accessed by every citizen' (Habermas 1991, p.39). It is a space where individuals assemble as a populace and articulate their views independently of government, thus allowing 'public opinion' to emerge through debate. However, to achieve this, the public also needs unfettered access to information, as Habermas 'emphasizes the importance of public opinion as a legitimizing force in the public sphere... public opinion requires information and critical deliberation' (Habermas 1991, cited in Wahl-Jorgensen 2013, p.143). Nevertheless, an issue to be picked up below is in relation to news media. This public opinion is then brought to bear to influence political institutions and policy. Later Habermas also describes the public sphere system as one that is extremely intricate, consisting of groups of different sizes, which can overlap and mutually influence each other (Kellner 2000). He further visualizes engagement in the public sphere as a sphere of private people who leave behind their class positions and particular private interests, in order to come together publicly. Or, in another formulation

(Habermas 2006), he explains that the principle of the public sphere entails the discussion of all matters of general concern and with a focus on the public good. This public sphere is conceptualized as a product of democracy but necessary in a sustaining democracy. According to Vallier and D'Agostin (1996), the establishment of a robust 'public sphere' has made possible the formation of a rational public opinion that guides political systems, and is seen as vital to strong democracy (Vallier and D'Agostin 1996). For Habermas, the public sphere is evident historically but it is also an ideal, a normative concept suggesting what might be, and a means of evaluating whether the key component of democratic processes – the provision of information, domains for debate and channels for impacting on those in power – are working effectively.

Habermas holds that in medieval times in Europe when a class pyramid characterised the feudal system, the few having power over the many, there was no separation between private and public (McCarthy 1981). Rulers saw themselves as the state, not as state representatives; they represented power over the people and not for the people. He argues that the public sphere developed in England during the 18th and 19th centuries. According to Habermas (1991), there are philosophical contradictions inherent within the liberal, constitutional social order, which are reflected in the social and economic development and the industrialization of the period.

The development led to the emergence of the consumer capitalism which facilitated the development of the middle classes. These were people who were comfortably off and could meet in coffee houses and, salons to discuss different issues. The rise of democracy made them vote and make decisions about the state based on information they had accessed through the available media sources.

There are many critiques of this article: for example, feminists argue that women are largely excluded from the explanations. There is also a problem in the definition of the 'common concern'; this is because there are no contrasting matters that are regarded as 'private' or 'general'. The categorization thus simply makes what is not 'general' appear to be a private issue, which may not be the case. Secondly, the

public sphere is supposed to be an arena where interlocutors are able to establish their differences and then discuss ways to resolve them.

According to Holton (1998), the establishment of the public sphere in Europe occurred via a class struggle when a new concept of social life developed as a middle class emerged to challenge aristocratic dominance. As part of this, new cultural forms emerged where the middle class (Holton 1998) came together. Theatres, art exhibitions and concerts, as well as coffee houses and other informal meeting places, provided the social preconditions for what Habermas refers to as the bourgeois public sphere. These were places where the public could meet as free and equal individuals. A listening and reasoning public developed through the consumption of books, newspapers, periodicals, concerts and other cultural events, and from discussion in such informal meeting places as those mentioned above. These cultural institutions became a prerequisite for the formation of a public sphere and a more democratic and representative democracy.

However, some researchers have posited that Habermas adopts an idealistic view of the bourgeois public sphere (Delanty & Rumford 2005), and that he tends to overestimate the importance of the emancipator features of modern public life, hence underrating the continuing sway of its repressive elements. In fact, discussions in the bourgeois public sphere have shown the particular interest of the most powerful social group. Dahlberg (2004) also describes Habermas' account of the public sphere as largely based on gender-blindness. Following the objections raised by feminist critics, Dahlberg argues that it is very hard to ignore the patriarchal nature of the European public sphere in the 19th century (as is still the case).

Negt and Kluge (1996) have criticised Habermas' idea of concentrating on the bourgeois public sphere while neglecting the plebeian and proletarian one (Kellner 2000). Squires (2002), in considering African-American culture, also wonders whether several public spheres can coexist and questions the labelling of these, often named only in relation to an assumed 'dominant' sphere, such as 'counter-public,' 'satellite', 'marginal public' and so on. In his later work, Habermas, too, rather than visualizing a single liberal or democratic public sphere, went on to envisage a

multiplicity of public spheres, which sometimes overlap and may also be conflicting. Susen (2011) argues a slightly different point: that the public sphere is different in different historical contexts, such as the classical, medieval, Enlightenment and modern periods, in relation to notions of public/private spheres in particular. This is because every period has its own form of public sphere: in the early period, 'public' was considered to be what was conducted in public areas and gathering in places such as coffee houses while 'private' referred to those personal beliefs about something which the individual might not necessarily communicate to other people.

Nevertheless, whatever the criticisms in relation to Habermas's account of the 19th century in England and his initial view of a single bourgeois sphere as the 'site' for the formation of 'public opinion', his account has been highly pertinent in relation to the study of media, especially news media.

2.3 News media: the formation and degradation of public opinion?

For Habermas, the formation of public opinion and the operation of a public sphere to sustain democracy were endangered by the power of the mass media in the mid- and late 20th century, transforming society into a passive public, the objects of a consumer culture (Habermas 1962, cited in McCarthy 1981). Here, the term 're-feudalization' refers to the process of recovering mechanisms and relationships that are used to define the theory of public sphere, as defined in this research. It is largely based on the imaginary virtual community that does not exist in any identifiable physical space within the universe. It is evident that the media sometimes impedes the formation of public opinion since sometimes the public tend to discuss issues they have no understanding of, hence leading to confusion.

Other Western social scientists and philosophers have criticised Habermas' theory of communicative action, including Castells and Granovetter, who study the influence of networks (Susen 2011). Habermas argues that the rationalization of society happens through the use of democracy, morality and law and the communication should be supported by these three pillars to ensure its effectiveness and credibility; and Lee Salter's (2005) arguments and the communication ethics can be related to those postulated by Habermas. Salter (2005) helps us to draw

attention between public relations and journalism in the interests of good journalism as well as in the interest of democracy. This section of the present thesis does not, however, refute the fact that public relations has become an inevitable part of the communications order but instead, contrary to the opinion held by Lee Salter (2005), there are good reasons for maintaining that good journalists should reject the adoption and use of public relations approaches in their practices. As a matter of fact, journalists need to defend their practice in policy and a clearly articulated self-understanding. What tends to stand out in these theorists' ideas is that Habermas, in putting forward an argument that communication and language are the key features of human life that can withstand money and power, has nevertheless so underrated communicative structures that for him media communication has to some extent failed to provide what has been expected (Susen 2011).

In this context, Dahlgren's research, 'Media Logic in Cyberspace', (1996) clarifies the underlying theoretical concepts of civil society and the public sphere and relates them to a critical analysis of the practice of television as journalism, as information and as entertainment. He demonstrates the limits in a relatively short time. The point this thesis attempts to argue with regard to the relativity of time is Dahlgren's view of the public sphere. As a matter of fact, he sees this aspect as a constellation of communicative spaces in our society that allows for the circulation of ideas, information and debate in an unfettered manner. However, he notes that the mass media environment has become saturated with talk about cyberspace and the vast universe created by the linkage of computers (Dahlgren 1996).

The media are fundamentally important for creating the institutional structure that makes the organization of the common interest and development of public opinion possible, domestically and also internationally. Additionally, contemporary scholars such as Lynch (2012) argue that communication channels initiate and shape the topics of public discussion.

The public sphere has been further developed by the emergence of new media technologies in the 20th century, in particular, broadcasting, and towards the end of that century, the Internet. Some contemporary studies describe the Internet, online

news and so on as offering more potential as a public sphere than the traditional media that Habermas observed (Dahlgren 2005), since they allow multiple voices to speak and be heard. Indeed, Dahlgren (2005) observes that the Internet has received a permanent place in the intellectual investigation of the public sphere.

The potential of online media creates a large range of responses as well as reactions. Much of Uslaner's argument (2004) is centered on the ability of digital and online media to restrict and at the same time to empower people as they interact with one another in public life. Lynch (2012) states that the new public sphere is more than a driver of transformation or a new source of information for scholars. His definition of the public sphere takes the form of open discussion of all issues of general concern, where issues relevant to the public good can be subject to informed debate and examination. This gives new chances for ordinary people to enter the Western public sphere on their own terms. In this regard, the media contribute to the public debate by offering a platform and also by setting off discussions about issues of general concern. They offer forums which are essential to initiating discussion and to setting agendas that constructively form public opinion (Grbeša 2003). Yet at the same time, the media are also seen as deforming the public.

As Dahlgren argues, the Internet 'enters into, as well as contributes to the perceived destabilization of political communication systems, in particular.' At the same time, he suggests that the Internet 'extends and pluralizes' (p.102) the public sphere to the benefit of pre-political debate. Finally, he proposes a theory of 'civic cultures' as an aid to understanding 'the significance of online political discussion' (p.147). The theory is mainly based on the acceptance of the authority of the state and a belief in participation in civic duties.

While Habermas sees the 20th century as having been a period that marked the beginning of deformation through commercialization, 're-feudalization' is brought into the picture to help in the understanding of how the public sphere has been stifled thus increasing the autonomy from the state. This is because the public sphere is the main source through which public opinion is created.

With regard to the more recent media, various arguments have been developed. Susen (2011) argues, as indicated above, that the public sphere differs according to the historical context, such as the classical, medieval, Enlightenment and the modern periods, in relation to notions of public/private spheres, in particular. She adds that new technologies have radically reduced broadcasting and print media production costs and revolutionized the delivery platform of media, not least with the introduction of satellite and cable. More importantly, the spread of the Internet and mobile telephony, together with the rapid fall in the costs of telecommunication following the liberalization of those industries, has created a communication environment where communication increasingly connects people horizontally rather than being directed to them vertically. He argues that democracy has faced challenges that arise as a result of pressure from the public sphere. One of the challenges Habermas points to is the autonomy of democracy, where States attempt to stifle free debate. This pressure, he argues, has seen the destabilization of systems of political communication.

Within the context of the argument, civic culture entails a political environment characterised by the acceptance of authority and the participation of individuals in the civic duty. This is largely discussed by the political class (politicians and civil servants); this is done to provide a better explanation of the stability of the democratic political structure within the society. At this point, this thesis attempts to epitomize the Internet as a medium of information distribution and public sphere and the democratization of civic culture through governing concern to the majority in the sense that while one may conceivably analyze aspects of civic culture by focusing on the arguments by Habermas. It is worth mention to see how Habermas is utilizing his theory in conjunction with other studies. In positing that the theme of the Internet and the public sphere is now 'permanent' and 'mainstream' within research agendas, he argues that we can, therefore, 'expect the research on the Internet to evolve' (Dahlgren 2005, p.149).

These debates thus suggest that the Internet plays a role in both political and economic destabilization, making the public sphere more pluralistic, and allows

greater interaction with political communication. Gerhards & Schafer (2009) argue that the most traditional media were not capable of promoting a free and pluralistic society in terms of communication. *Why the Net is not a Public Sphere*, according to Dean (2003) is that the Internet can be thought of as a 'zero institution'. The author further uses the definition given by Claude Levi-Strauss to 'explain how members of a tribe can think of themselves as members of the same tribe even when they are radically split, even when their very representations of what the tribe is are radically antagonistic to one another' (Dean 2003, p.105). The reason is that they were controlled politically – a sign that they were somehow connected with the media's present provision of civic culture. Research by Dean (2003), however, has indicated that the Internet does not qualify as a public sphere. According to him, the mediation that has been facilitated by computers cannot be understood or defined as a public sphere because it is not applicable to society and even makes it suffer.

2.4 Arab Studies: Possibilities and limits to 'public opinion', 'public sphere' and the media

The account by Habermas of the development of the public sphere in the West suggests a very particular history and development, tied to the rise of democratic institutions and particular cultural forms, including the media. Given the Arab world's rather different historical development over the last two centuries and its contemporary political institutions, it is perhaps not surprising that scholarship in this area has been limited. The issues to explore here include whether what these scholars refer to as 'public sphere' bears any relation to the related set of ideas Habermas associates with this term around the formation of 'public opinion', the significant role of the media and democratic processes of change as the upshot of public opinion.

One of the few Arab scholars who has touched on this term, as applied by Habermas, is Al-Qarni (2004); he mentions that 'Arabs maintained their own private/public sphere through their meetings in mosques, markets, cafés and households where news was deconstructed and analysed by literate Arabs and

explained for the laity' (p.215). For example, popular cafés in Egypt were the best places to debate the issues and the economic and political problems faced by the Egyptian people. These included the famous Fishawi Café, which was used by a great many intellectuals, politicians, and writers. Although Egypt was one of the more open and developed Arab countries in those days, due to the Arab tradition that tended to discriminate against women, there was a limit to their participation in the familiar meeting places for men such as the Fishawi Café. The café was established as far back as 1797, more than two centuries ago, but it has become more famous and glamorous, thanks to the global Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz (Alahram, December 13, 2010). As for its renowned customers, they have been the elite of Egypt and the Middle East, though diverse in their political views. For example, in the 19th century Jamal Al-Din Afghani (a Muslim philosopher, opposed to Western imperialism), in the 1960s, Sheikh Mohamed Abdou (an Islamic modernist), the long-term Algerian President Bouteflika (an internationalist), the president of Yemen (until 2012), the former Sudanese president Jaafar Nimeiri (noted for the introduction of Shar'ia law in 1983 which precipitated that country's second civil war), Ali Abdullah Saleh (a supporter of Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait) and Amr Moussa (Egyptian diplomat since the 1950s, Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, 2001-11 and currently political advisor to President El-Sisi) (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 19, 2007).

In Kuwait, 'Diwaniya' means places where traditionally male friends and relatives meet together – a platform where they can all express opinions about social issues (the definition excludes women). For over 250 years such 'spaces' have provided a cultural meeting place: while drinking tea and coffee, the traders, sheikhs and judges discuss and engage in matters of business, culture and politics. They have been a means of consensus-building and decision-making in the country. To this extent they have played a similar role to that of the 19th-century coffee houses discussed by Habermas. Members of the diplomatic corps in Kuwait know the dates of the famous Diwaniya (they meet only on particular dates, sometimes at the weekend), with their weighty social and political resonances and visit those places regularly for public and private events. For diplomats, they represent a chance to connect with the

community without formality and to develop relations between their countries and Kuwait (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, October 26, 2007). Some of these places have become famous, as have the names of their owners: for example, Alkhaled's Diwaniya, Shamlan's, Asousi's, Alnesef's, Rawdhan's and Mulla Saleh's Diwaniya (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, October 26, 2007).

In Saudi Arabia, taking into account the strength and role of religion, the most influential forums in the community have been mosques, where speakers discuss issues of interest to the community and give advice. Friday's Khutbah is considered one of the most important forms of mass communication for Saudi society; it contributes to guiding people towards a particular opinion or mobilizing public opinion on a particular issue. The speakers at the Friday Khutbah, according to Islamic principles, must be men, but women can listen to the Khutbah in a separate section of the mosque. Of course, these Khutbahs are not presentations that open up the discussion to the audience.

(Almakaty et al 1994). For example, Friday's Khutbahs and other religious platforms have contributed to the Saudis' approval of foreign, non-Muslim forces landing in their country to liberate Kuwait from Iraq in the 1990s, despite the opposition from some Saudi religious leaders.

2.5 Media mobilization

In the 1980s, cassette recordings were one of the most important means of communication for discussing issues and mobilizing public opinion. Some Saudi religious leaders have used this method to urge their followers to take part in religious ceremonies or form resistance to the country's enemies, one example being the jihad against the Russian troops, who occupied jihadist territories in Afghanistan in the 1980s. These cassettes were intended to change people's attitudes, notably when the message contained in them came from enthusiastic campaigners from a wide area. Some religious leaders (during that period) had the information that made them able to fully debate jihadi issues and the management and manipulation of so-

called public opinion which some would describe as propaganda. Propaganda is seen as spreading anti-state information whether it is true or not (Dahlgren 2005). People are not allowed to publish any information which seems to be against the government, since such acts are taken to be offensive and could lead to imprisonment. Opinions about government officials, government projects, the use of money by the government and how government affairs are being conducted are not allowed to be made. This is done to prevent public opinion that can lead people to revolt or rise against a government on the realization that it is not treating its citizens in a fair manner. While scholars such as Albuloushi (2000) and Alobied (2012) saw it as propaganda, the intention of the whole process was to create a public sphere. Making it actually limited levels of public sphere being proposed when other options had not been developed.

In the same vein, other religious platforms such as 'Alsahwa's Discourse' have been used by the clergy as a form of mass communication. Alobied (2012) argues that the 'Alsahwa Movement' is movement with a religious 'Salafist' background. Its members consist of some religious people, and those who give themselves pseudonyms such as journalist, thinker, educator, jurist, enlightened and reformist. They were able to some extent to gain the trust of Saudis who were angry with the Arab regimes. The Alsahwa Movement demanded a civilized Islamic rule, as an alternative to the ruling regimes of that time (Alobied 2012). Moreover, this Islamist movements had dominated the public sphere after Kuwait's war of liberation. However, one should consider taking control of a public sphere as anathema to the ideology of public sphere. The internet should not be controlled to allow people to effectively communicate with others in a better manner and form strong public spheres that can raise strong public opinions. Such spheres included discussion groups, or hash tags within the social media. This to some extent should be entered into freely. Alobied adds:

During the Kuwait Liberation War, news of the Iraqi aggression against Kuwait, published in the traditional media, was reacted to with growing anger among Saudis. 'Oshawa's Discourse' took this opportunity to spread their thoughts and prove their existence' (p.4).

According to Almoshawah (2011), the 'Alsahwa Movement' (which adopted Alsahwa's Discourse and the form of a public sphere in this era) in their discourse depended on two cases. The first issue was whether the US should form a presence in an Arab land, which resulted in the formation of the Al Qaeda organization (cited in Alobied 2012, p.4). Al-Qaeda (and its ideology) did not spring from the ground wholly formed in 1988/1989, as it is sometimes portrayed. Much of what passes for al-Qaeda's own views owes its origin to others who came before them. In addition, the concepts and ideas that underlie al-Qaeda's body of literature have continued to develop after the initial foundations in the late 1980s. Individuals such as Hassan Banna and Sayyid Qutb laid much of the earlier groundwork. In particular, Sayyid Qutb's works such as 'Social Justice in Islam' and 'Milestones' are required reading for an understanding of the early thinking of jihadists (Quiggin 2010).

The second issue was whether women should be allowed to drive cars, a question that was asked because Saudi women's representations on this subject made it one of the most widespread discussions in the Alsahwa era. Alsahwa's Discourse took advantage of the flyers, brochures, books and tapes that were issued on these questions to discuss them. Of course, Alsahwa's Discourse opposed the US military presence and women's driving cars. Alsahwa's Discourse in those days, according to Alobied (2012), employed social horror to warn the community about the danger of allowing these things by stressing certain themes such as sedition, fears and faith (p.4). These elements are commonly used in the management of public opinion through appealing to people's feelings on given topics or issues.

However, the possibilities of discussion in Saudi Arabia began to develop another dimension in the mid-1990s, after Prince (later, King) Abdullah, who supported more openness and the acceptance of other cultures, unofficially took over the reins of power during the illness of his brother, King Fahd. Awad (2010) reports these events and adds: 'In 2004 King Abdullah established the King Abdul Aziz Centre for National Dialogue, which allows Saudi citizens to discuss subjects previously taboo' (p.11). Awad comments: 'One of the purposes of founding this center was to enlarge the participation of members of society in order to help achieve justice, equality and

respect for different points of view' (p.11). It created an environment where issues could be discussed in ways that commanded credibility amongst a broad audience. These issues were not limited to a small number of highly committed social activists, but extended to a broader swathe of people who were directly and indirectly affected by them (these might include, for example, mainstream journalists concerned about press freedom and access to the Internet as well as people from development and civil society organizations). International freedom rights mean that foreign journalists should be allowed to operate in a foreign land. They should be given access to the internet and facilities with which to access the internet freely. Additionally, local indigenous persons should also be allowed to access sources of information and internet without being controlled.

But these possibilities for debate in the Arab world, and Saudi Arabia in particular, which might shape public opinion and impact in some way on people's lives, have been limited and led from above, whether by the mosques or the ruling monarchy. Unlike conditions in the West where a diversity of media contribute to a public sphere, in Saudi Arabia with all offline media heavily regulated by the state, this has not been possible. However, access to a more international media, with the rise of satellite broadcasting and the development of online communication, started to change this situation. From the mid-1990s, Internet services contributed to the opportunity for an Arab public to express its opinions and talk about problems beyond those raised by the official media and to some degree outside the control of officialdom and official discourses. Al-Qarni (2004) describes this as providing 'a space where dialogues between people occur outside the realm of government. These dialogues can result in new discourses that are created by people for people with minimal intervention from the official discourse' (p.208).

Al-Qarni notes that 'The Internet has not only been a public sphere where Arabs exchange views and formulate opinions regarding political issues, but also a place for political activism outside formal state control' (p.252). As Al-Qarni shows, the Internet means more than this. However, some scholars point out at the same time that 'Cyber ghettos threaten to undercut a shared public culture and the integrative

societal function of the public sphere, and they may well even help foster intolerance where such communities have little contact with or understanding of one another' (Dahlgren 2005, p.152)

In the Arab world, however, what is important is that this 'new public sphere' provided by the Internet has also perhaps contributed to reducing the level of censorship of the media (Dahlgren 2005). Dahlgren adds, 'Indeed it can be argued that the Internet has also contributed to increased freedom in the Arab media and reducing the role of gatekeepers in [official state regulated] newspapers and other media' (p.175). These ideas are explored further in subsequent chapters.

A discussion on the Arab public sphere begins with arguments postulated by Douai and Nofal (2012). According to the authors, there are emerging online Arab sphere that has been enabled by the web. This trend has explored ways in which Arab locals interact with the world. The authors point to the aspect of the Swiss minaret that banned the so-called 'Ground Zero Mosque'. In answering the question, the authors wonder how the Arab public sphere responds to and frames such issues. The study analyzes online comments and responses that readers of Al Arabiya.net and Al Jazeera.net posted on related news articles. The article concludes that the new online public sphere does make it possible for Arab citizens to circumvent and challenge traditional authoritarian controls. What we can conclude from this article is that as far as the Arab public sphere is concerned, domestic policy decisions have serious global repercussions and such has been entrenched fact of today's media-saturated political environment.

This argument has been supported by Al-Saggaf and Simmons (2015) when assessing social media in Saudi Arabia and exploring its use during two natural peacetime disasters [the floods] in the country. They argue that it was characterised by periods when the participation of citizens in public matters was controlled. The qualitative thematic analysis using concepts from the online public sphere, public sphere and previous studies of social media further indicates that the tool that people used after the government restraint was social media, which helped people to communicate the gravity of problems including floods. While the study recognizes

that rational discussion was evident on Facebook and Al-Saha Al-Siyasia, the platform (online media) was regarded as a useful tool for reading the emotional state of the people rather than as a vehicle for communicating the deliberative and rational aspirations of the public sphere. Furthermore, within the context of the Arabic world, the authors noted that social media such as Facebook was unlikely to create the needed social change on its own, but was likely to facilitate social and political trends for change already occurring in other countries. Indeed, the Arabic world has governments that consider social media to be a tool for undesirable pressure.

The development of the Saudi public sphere through the new media and satellite television as suggested by Bukhari (2011) differs significantly from the viewpoint of Al-Saggaf and Simmons (2015). Bukhari believes that the Arabic world had been enjoying spheres for discussion based on Islamic logic which if scrutinized, were similar to the public sphere currently enjoyed (2011). However, the development of the Saudi public sphere through the new media and satellite television has ushered in different ways in which Saudi people regard the public sphere. First, the development of satellite television has altered what Saudis consider to be the public sphere, but these spheres have been under the control of the government, and as such, people's views regarding the free expression of views are intertwined. Conclusively, Bukhari (2011) notes that the process of the so-called 'development of the Saudi public sphere through the new media and satellite television' can be regarded as the process of mutual interaction between the mainstream public sphere and development of public sphere. From this analysis, it can be concluded, based on studies such as that of Al-Saggaf and Simmons (2015), that social media and the public sphere are related. The relationship is that social media is likely to produce the needed social change on its own. Furthermore, with regard to public matters, social media is likely to facilitate political and social trends for change that can already be seen occurring in other parts of the world.

2.6 Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the term 'credibility' developed in the West in the 1960s. But it also has a meaning in the Arab world. In Saudi Arabia, where news has long been controlled by the state and where citizens have come to question the credibility of the official media and often lost trust in them, there has been a crisis of credibility. The concept of the public sphere, as developed by Habermas, has been less evident in studies in the Arab world. Although cafes, Diwaniya and mosques traditionally provided cultural sites for debate and for the possible formation of public opinion, a mediated public sphere was not able to develop like the one that exists in Western culture. But the Internet (and the media that have emerged from the Internet) has provided readers with a 'public sphere' which allows them to discuss their issues more freely; indeed Al-Qarni (2004) concludes that 'one of the most significant findings of this [his] research is the fact that the Internet has become a public sphere for its Arab users' (p.307).

Without a 'credible' media and thus without the necessary information about government, public institutions and other matters of importance in the country, any potential public sphere was also policed by religious and political institutions. But, as the thesis goes on to explore the rise of the online media and the Internet began to challenge this situation. In subsequent chapters this thesis returns to the issue of the 'credibility' of news and to the notion of a mediated public sphere.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In exploring the credibility of online journalism in the Saudi context and the possible emergence of what Habermas understands as public opinion, this study comes within the interdisciplinary fields of journalism and media studies. With a focus on social transformation, it is concerned with shifts in the forms of news – from traditional newspapers, magazines and broadcasting to more recent platforms, such as online journalism and the social media (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube). It considers the expansion and availability of information, as well as changes in people's access and response to news. It explores how new technological possibilities in the news media, with their ability to avoid aspects of state regulation, have reshaped public access and the possibilities for public exchanges and debate. In a country such as Saudi Arabia where news (and other) media have been heavily controlled and censored, this change has been very significant.

As indicated in the Introduction to this thesis, the study aims to explore the question of the credibility of online news compared to traditional news, especially the official print media, in Saudi Arabia. The study also asks whether online news facilitates discussion and debate to form 'public opinion' in a way the official Saudi press cannot (see Introduction for specific research questions).

The key research question thus concerns whether online news has gained more credibility in Saudi Arabia and the degree to which this may be evident both from what editors/journalists and users have to say and in certain online news reporting.

The chapter first outlines the research design and methods that this study relies on (the survey, interviews and comparative method) and how they were adopted. It then moves on to the stage of conducting the research, and points out how the researcher

has applied these methods in the field work. After that, it provides justifications for data organization and analysis, while taking the ethical issues into consideration.

3.2 Research Design and Methods

In order to address its issues, the research for the study relies on a variety of qualitative approaches with some use of a quantitative approach where appropriate. The research design uses three major methods of data collection and analysis: a survey of news media users; individual interviews with online journalists as well as users; and a content analysis – including a ‘frame’ analysis of specific news stories as reported in official newspapers and online, focusing on one social media outlet, Twitter. The combination of these approaches offers a richer account than would be possible if only one main method had been adopted. The use of more than one approach strengthens the research and may enhance its credibility: according to Maykut and Morehouse (1994), ‘one of the four factors helping to build credibility in a qualitative research project is the use of multiple methods of data collection’ (cited in Almaghlooth 2014, p.104).

3.2.1 Design of the study

Certain decisions were made early on in the study (in 2012) about which social groups of users to focus on and how to access them. These decisions impacted on the kind of data collected.

A questionnaire was designed to obtain information about the credibility of online journalism and other Saudi media in the eyes of the Saudi audience. The respondents selected for the exercise fell into three categories: students, university professors/lecturers and employees of ministries and companies. These three categories ensured that a range of age groups in the Saudi community were represented amongst those most likely to be familiar with and have access to the internet and to regularly access news. They were thus largely from the more privileged sections of the population, but the use of some different groups ensured

that findings based on them would help the research to reflect a wider range of views than if a single category had been chosen.

Before the questionnaire was distributed, it was planned to pilot it using a sample of 10 people, to ensure the clarity and appropriateness of the questions. In the Saudi context, it is also particularly important to check whether some questions may be 'sensitive' in some way and so need to be rethought. The outcomes of the pilot study are discussed below.

For example, 'digital journalism' was changed to 'online journalism' because the word 'online' is more commonly used among Saudis and thus clearer. The researcher also took into account the sensitivity of some of the questions. For example, an open question about monthly income could be seen as somewhat embarrassing, so four options were given, which meant that the respondents did not have to disclose their precise incomes. It also became evident that some of the respondents thought that 'online newspapers' meant 'online versions of daily newspapers'. So it was made clear that the phrase meant online newspaper sites that lack a hard copy version, such as *Sabq*, *Alweeam*, *Ajel*, *Elaph* and *Anaween*.

In the design of the questionnaire, questions were largely directed but also provided an opportunity for respondents to add further comments (see Appendix I).

The questions aimed to find out how readers used/consumed and rated online versus more traditional news media and what aspects of each media form they preferred. They also attempted to find out what might give a news medium credibility. As a multidimensional construct, the credibility of journalism is often defined (see Chapter Two, above) by such features as its objectivity, fairness, accuracy, reliability, trustworthiness, believability and expertise. The researcher sought the opinions of the respondents on these dimensions, but through some indirect questions. The selected areas were 'political issues in Saudi Arabia' (internal) and 'the crisis in Syria' (external). Both these topics in the context of the Arab Spring were, at the time, attracting much discussion by the Saudi community, in the new media particularly. People were thinking about change in the political situation and

this attracted many writers and intellectuals also to join in. The questionnaire asked what the respondents thought about the treatment of these issues online compared with their treatment in the traditional media, such as official newspapers, radio and TV and, more generally, how this compared with the media treatment from news media outside Saudi Arabia (Appendix I).

Before the fieldwork began, the researcher received permission to distribute the questionnaire at the University and, once there, he obtained permission in person from the College of Arts and the College of Computer and Information Sciences to distribute the survey in these departments. The reason why the researcher chose these two colleges was because King Saud University consists of a number of literary (Humanities) colleges and science colleges. And therefore, the researcher chose the College of Arts to represent the literary colleges, and chose the College of Computer and Information Sciences to represent the science ones. Thus, the researcher ensured that the sample selected represented a range of university students. The researcher chose one class at random in each college for each academic year. As the period of study at the College of Arts is 4 years, the researcher chose 4 classes; whereas in the College of Computer and Information Sciences the length of study is 5 years, so the researcher chose 5 classes³². Again it was hoped this would contribute to a wider range of viewpoints.

In order to conduct the survey at the Ministry and other companies, identity papers and approval letters were obtained from the Saudi attaché in London regarding the fieldwork and were used to obtain permission to question employees. Over and above the official permits, the researcher found it useful to use personal contacts, in particular in the companies, to seek permission to distribute the questionnaire to employees. The researcher also informed employers in charge of the Ministry and at the companies that he wanted to choose a random sample of educated staff with access to the news on the internet and this was agreed to.

³²The total of classes selected were 18 classes at King Saud University (9 classes in the male section and 9 classes in the female section).

Interviews were also carried out, to offer more in-depth insights into the same judgements and also to learn about the standpoint of the online journalists. It was hoped that exploring the views of both the service providers (journalists) and consumers (users) would provide richer data and a better sense of what ‘credibility’ might mean for the two parties. Users³³ were selected for their perceived ability to answer questions connected with the thesis statement and to help the researcher to go deeper in interpreting the answers to the research questions. To this end, the researcher was keen to select the respondents from the educated class, rather than from a wider section of society, to make sure that they were people who had access to the news via the Internet. The views and evaluation of online newspapers in Saudi Arabia were sought from a sample of highly qualified people who were considered likely to watch the news and read such papers, bearing in mind that, in some respects at least, Saudi Arabia is a ‘third world country’: whilst there is still a lack of clear data from different ministries, it is reported that almost 40% of Saudis still do not use the Internet. However, according to Yamin and Mattar (2016), the number of Internet users in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had reached 22.5 million users by May 2016 (i.e. about 71% of the population).

Of course, the researcher was vigilant to ensure that the respondents in the interviews were some of the people who had already filled in the questionnaire: the interviews were meant to capture deep and detailed answers and there were some respondents in the survey who had views worthy of further discussion through in-depth interviews.

In relation to the interviews with editors and journalists, it was decided that around ten online newspapers should be selected, on the basis of what the questionnaire results indicated were the most favoured news providers. From these, editors and

³³ The criteria for selection were that the respondent held at least high school qualifications, had the ability to access the news via the Internet and had some interest in the news in general. This was in order to have interviews that would yield detailed information relevant to the research questions (more details about the qualifications of interviewers will be discussed later).

journalists would be chosen for face-to-face interviews, which were planned to be half an hour to an hour.

In the interviews with editors and journalists the questions were planned to be quite wide-ranging. They aimed both to gain information and enable the respondents to express their views. They were formulated in the context of the objectives of the research: to explore whether online news media has gained greater credibility than traditional and official media and whether in enabling user response and engagement with online news there were signs of 'public opinion' being formed and becoming established and also whether those interviewed – producers and users – regarded the opening up of some kind of public sphere as a significant development. The questions devised focused on three themes. Firstly, the method of working on online newspapers in Saudi Arabia; in other words, newsgathering, verification of the reliability of the news, choosing editors and reporters, and the constraints and obstacles that might limit the work of online journalism. Secondly, how journalists saw their relationship with Saudi readers (trying to attract them and to gain their trust). Thirdly, the competition with other new media, social media in particular (see a copy of interview questions with journalists in Appendix IV).

For the interviews with Saudi users there were ten questions, some consisting of more than one part. The questions aimed at finding out how audiences/users accessed news (traditional media or online), their evaluation of news via different platforms (what they viewed as constituting 'credibility' in the context of censorship and publishing regulations in Saudi Arabia) and their expectations about the future of online newspapers in Saudi Arabia (see a copy of interview questions with Saudi users in Appendix V).

Additionally, the researcher chose a further method of data collection in relation to news content produced by journalists and consumed by readers/users, in order to approach the issue of 'credibility' from another angle. Some of the literature discussing 'credibility' also analyses news itself as well as considering producer and

consumer understandings (see Chapter Two above). This involved the selection of two media events reported by the Saudi press, offline and online. The internal issue selected was the coverage of the Corona disease outbreak in May 2014 and the external one was the Egyptian elections in the same month.

The researcher chose the Corona issue because this case was the most prominent one to attract the attention of the Saudi people at that time, and was particularly reported on in the new media. It was also significant in that the Minister of Health, Dr. Al-Rabiah, was sacked for his handling of the issue. Further, if the researcher had chosen a more controversial and sensitive news topic, for example, corruption or political reform, then in the context of the restricted freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia, journalists and editors – especially those working on the official newspapers committed to the official line of the government – might have felt unable to report and comment on it in their pages. In that case it would not have been possible to compare reporting across media platforms.

The second issue concerned the Arab Spring. Events in Egypt were chosen because the country was affected by the Arab Spring; since the events began, Egypt had seen the fall of two presidents, Mubarak in February 2011 and Mohamed Morsi in July 2013. Similarly, the researcher selected the 2014 Egyptian elections because Egypt is the most populous Arab country and the elections were the upshot of the Arab Spring events. The turmoil was of serious concern to the Saudi authorities and of significance to news media and consumers. Al-Rakaf's (2012) study found that approximately one-third of the Saudi journalists whom he interviewed (20 journalists) confirmed that they had written tweets, mainly about the earlier Egyptian revolution.

In analysing the news coverage of these two events it was planned that the presentation by the official newspapers would be compared to the news provided via Twitter and online journalism. Twitter was chosen because it has become the most popular media outlet in Saudi Arabia; and according to Almutairi (2013), Saudi Arabia 'outperforms all the Arabs in the number of active users of Twitter' (p.89). According to Alqarni (2013): 'Twitter [...] has produced in the Saudi society, in particular, a number of new leaders of public opinion, and they are the ones who

impose their agenda on their followers, as well as the accounts holders on Twitter who have large numbers of followers, they have a great deal of interaction among the Saudi community' (cited in Alghamdy and Alhedaithy 2015, p.24).

The researcher chose prominent independent Saudi Twitter accounts, because the Saudi audience interacts with them more than others, and also believe them to be more credible than Saudi newspaper Twitter accounts. In addition, according to Alghamdy and Alhedaithy:

Students of universities in the city of Riyadh have a high degree of uncertainty about the credibility of Twitter, but the degree of credibility of Twitter rises when opinion leaders [on Twitter] tweeted or re-tweeted any information or news about any of the cases (2015, p.29).

One internal and one external event were selected in order to explore and compare the reporting of online news outlets with official newspapers over a two week period in May 2014 (further details are provided later in the chapter). It was thought that the reporting and commentary about an internal event might be more cautious, even online, than about an external event, due to the regulation of the press and perhaps concern on the part of editors and journalists about possible censorship (see Chapter Seven).

The framing hypothesis and the recommendation behind framing is the idea that the way in which something is introduced (its 'framing') influences the related decisions made by individuals. This thought is critical because, as Alatefy points out, 'framing of the media message provides the ability to measure the content of the message, and explains their role in influencing the opinions and trends' (2015, p.47). Entman (1993) discusses a method of drawing on key texts, which has established the frame analysis as an approach, and argues: 'to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (cited in Fogarty and Chapman 2012, p.3).

For the significance of media framing, Tankard (2001) explains this point in more detail: 'Media framing is important because it can have subtle but powerful effects on the audience, even to the point of helping to overthrow a president. The study of media framing can help us identify and examine crucial points in the opinion change process where these powerful effects are taking place' (p.96).

The users of social media such as Twitter frame the orienting so as to drive the effort themselves to sets of pre-built up social ideas; this is fundamental to the examination. Frames can also be defined as structures of desire taking into account the speakers' past learning and experience to uncover the inter-textual way of framing a discourse (Almahmoud 2015). According to Hamdy and Gomaa (2012), the Egyptian uprising was framed by the media; the dataset in this research was composed of Arabic dialect content culminating in such things as news stories, conclusion sections, blog entries and posts on Twitter and Facebook posts.

Finally, this study tries to focus on the content by highlighting the political and social context so that the content can be assessed and understood by 'the reorganization of the messages and texts related to these events, and [putting] them in the contexts or frames, to confirm or deny a specific meaning' (Alatefy 2015, p.46). Alongside the content, this study focuses on photos, headlines and any information that has been hidden from the news during the Saudi's media coverage for these two issues. According to Entman (1993), 'one way of framing news is [to] hide or ignore certain information and make a decision to void keywords; no speaks of the 'presence or absence of keywords, stock phrases, stereotypical images ...etc.' (p. 52).

3.2.2 Research methods

3.2.2.1 The survey: using questionnaires

The questionnaire has been considered by scholars as a research tool that can provide succinct quantitative data (Rowley 2014). The standardization of questions asked across a range of groups and addressed to a large number of participants is

one advantage of the questionnaire method. For instance, questions that offer multiple choices or tick boxes do not allow respondents to give information beyond the specified options, and so comparisons can be made. According to Rowley (2014):

The main advantages of questionnaires is the ability to make contact with and gather responses from a relatively large number of people in scattered and possibly remote locations. Questionnaires are typically used in surveys ... the big advantage of questionnaires is that it is easier to get responses from a large number of people, and the data gathered may therefore be seen to generate findings that are more generalizable (pp.309-310).

Data collection by means of questionnaires is also relatively fast. The time spent by respondents on completing questionnaires is short, although it may take a long time to design and analyse the results. However, the information obtained from questionnaires is usually limited, even if results lend themselves to numerical analysis. Further standardization deters respondents from giving additional information or providing relevant detail which could also be useful to any research investigation. Thus, questionnaires are not appropriate for an in-depth exploration of people's understanding or of their daily practices.

Other issues raised in using questionnaires include respondents not answering some questions, as can happen for a number of reasons. Respondents may simply not know the answer. Or in some contexts, they may fear being victimized for giving their views or they may be worried about what might happen to their replies to the questionnaire. These issues can complicate the results. Thus, when devising a questionnaire, to ensure its usefulness a pilot study is advisable. This allows the researcher to ensure that the final questions are clear and direct and to change any that may have proved controversial, or hard to understand or answer.

3.2.2.2 One-to-one interviews

Since interviews involve a social encounter, adaptability is one of their major merits (DeMarrais & Lapan 2004). Whatever their purpose and type, they give interviewers a better chance to witness and try to understand the ideas, emotions and reflections

that lie behind or inform the responses than is possible with questionnaires (Patton 2002, p.341). Therefore, an interviewer can often discern the feelings and thoughts of his respondents without these necessarily being made explicit. Altheidi (2003) argues: interviews 'help researchers to explore people's thoughts, ideas, opinions and attitudes by asking them the appropriate questions...the researcher can easily record them and then analyse them in detail afterwards' (p.16).

In the approach adopted for this study, it was noted that interviewing the respondents gave the interviewer some sort of guarantee that he would receive responses to all his questions. Interviews were considered one of the most effective methods of data collection in this study for obtaining the opinions of the Saudi audience regarding the topic of online journalism and the associated media platforms, since they give participants a fuller opportunity to express their ideas (Wilkinson and Birmingham 2003).

Although the use of interviews has these advantages, it also has some drawbacks: for example, conflicts of power during interviews may hinder the quality of the data collected. As Steinar (1996) points out, there is no generally accepted procedure or direction to an interview conversation and the virtue of some adaptation of questions, depending on how it proceeds, is both an advantage and a disadvantage in terms of making comparisons across data. Furthermore, interviews are time-consuming; and the total time involved is even longer since they usually require transcription. This means that a single researcher can only pursue a relatively small number of interviews.

3.2.2.3 Comparative method: Using case studies

The third method adopted for this study was a comparative method of research. This method has 'gained considerable ground' due to its proven usefulness in research works (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2016, p.3). Specifically and briefly, the comparative method facilitates a deeper comprehension of one case by comparing its routines and composition with those of one or more other cases. This research method enables issues to become visible that might not be 'seen' if only one case study is

the object of research. It also prevents the researcher making over-generalised claims about particular phenomena.

However, Azarian (2011) asserts that the method contains particular weaknesses; for instance, there may be no alternative to be compared. He also highlights that due to permission and ethical or other issues, the researcher may not be able to go into enough depth with one of the cases, compared to the other(s). This inadequacy can mean the comparison process is an uneven one.

As already mentioned in this research, the comparative case studies were based on news reporting of Corona disease and the coverage of the Egyptian elections.

3.3 Doing the research

The researcher was engaged in fieldwork in Riyadh from mid-June to late September 2012, starting the distribution of the questionnaire on June 25, then interviews with editors/journalists beginning from July 24 to August 24, 2012 and interviews with users between August 25 and September 25, 2012. As in any other Arab country, researchers in Saudi Arabia face a number of limitations and difficulties in conducting local interviews³⁴. For instance, shaking hands or any type of bodily contact between different genders is not generally approved of, for religious reasons. This means that caution must be exercised in interviews with women. Green and Thorogood (2004) point out the connection in an interview between eye contact and listening. In this research, however, this may be inappropriate when interviewing women. Furthermore, it is a common practice for women in Muslim countries to lower their voice when talking to men. As social norms and traditions prescribe, attention should be paid to the issues of dress and the wearing of different clothes in different places. For example, in some official buildings, such as the university and ministry, the researcher should wear traditional dress, in other words the Saudi *Thobe* (a full-

³⁴ This point applies to both doing the survey and the interviews.

length long-sleeved garment) and the *Shomagh* (a traditional scarf placed on the head). The researcher wore these at all the interviews.

Saudi men and women are usually segregated. Thus when the questionnaire was distributed to university students, the women students were in a separate building from the men, in another part of the city of Riyadh. In these gender-segregated buildings, however, meetings between men and women may occur in designated meeting rooms and this is where most of my interviews took place. The other barrier that characterizes the Saudi context and the constraints on research was that, in some of the interviews with women, the researcher was obliged to bring his wife to sit next to him, because it is difficult to meet women alone. Sometimes if he came to an interview alone, the woman's husband or one of her relatives would attend. This difficulty resulted in the repeated postponement of some interviews, where the female interviewee was free but her husband or relative was busy.

As discussed above, three groups (students, professors/ lecturers and employees) were selected. Although these groups were spread across quite a wide age group, they were all affluent and well-educated (see Table 1 below). After piloting and redrafting, the questionnaire was distributed to male and female students at King Saud University; male and female professors at King Saud University, and staff (male and female) at the Ministry of Culture and Information and in private companies (Saudi Telecommunications Company and the National Bank in Riyadh).

Given the various 'sensitivities' in Saudi Arabia and therefore the strong possibility that there might be some issues about completing a questionnaire, it was decided that the researcher should enlist three assistants. One was an interpreter who translated the questions from English to Arabic and from Arabic to English once the questionnaires had been collected; and the other two, one male and one female, assisted in distributing questionnaires in the University, the Ministry and the private companies. The assistants were to be present when the questionnaires were distributed. The reason for co-opting a female assistant was that as an insider (at the university) she could more easily work with the female participants, distributing and collecting questionnaires as required. The presence of an assistant also made

the situation more comfortable for respondents when they wanted further explanation about questions in the survey. The assistants were volunteers, one (male) from a university and the other (female) a relative. The researcher met them beforehand and described their role in the process, the research problems and the ethical issues. He also went through the questions and how respondents should interpret them. At the same time he asked them to explain to the respondents each time that this research was only for academic purposes and that they would not be named. The researcher also asked the assistants to communicate with him by mobile, if they faced a question or a comment from the respondents and believed that they did not have an appropriate answer. A further reason for enlisting assistants was that the time available to the researcher for the distribution of the questionnaire was limited. Since respondents (students and professors in particular) were in different places (in the College of Arts and the College of Computer and Information Sciences), enlisting assistants helped logistically. Sometimes they had to wait for more than an hour outside the classroom, when lecturers or professors preferred to have the questionnaire distributed just before the end of their lecture, some of which went on for two hours. This inconvenience to the assistants, as well as some lectures being cancelled without notice, caused some difficulties. The researcher and assistants reassured participants that their answers would be used for academic purposes only and that any information they provided would be handled anonymously. This was also emphasized on the front page of the questionnaire (see Appendix I).

The distribution of questionnaires took over two weeks. They were distributed to 250 people from the three groups and 213 questionnaires were recovered. After auditing and reviewing them, 17 questionnaires were ruled out because they were not complete. The total number of valid responses thus dropped to 196 people, as shown in Table 1 below. The researcher then began to process the data. This phase continued until July 24, 2012.

SN	Demographic	Level	No.	%
1	Study population	Students	66	33.7
		Employees	82	41.8
		Professors/ Lecturers	48	24.5
2	Age	Less than 20 years	6	3.1
		20 to 29	137	69.9
		30 to 39	32	16.3
		40 to 49	16	8.2
		50 years and over	5	2.6
3	Gender	Male	106	54.1
		Female	90	45.9
4	Marital status	Single	111	56.6
		Married	81	41.3
		Divorced	3	1.5
		Widowed	1	.5
	Total		196	100%

Table 1: Breakdown of those responding to the questionnaire.

It is worth mentioning that the initial assessment of data from the questionnaire shaped how the researcher selected those whom he interviewed and the questions he asked. Moreover, guided by the answers to the questionnaire indicating the most favoured news providers from the point of view of users, ten online newspapers were selected from which to interview editors and journalists on a face-to-face basis. The interviews with 13 editors, editors-in-chief and correspondents working for six Saudi online newspapers were held from July 24 to August 24, 2012 (see Appendix II for a list of journalists interviewed). This was fewer than had been hoped, due to some interviews being postponed and no possibility of rescheduling. Moreover, some journalists refused to be interviewed but offered no reason for their refusal. It was also difficult to fix precise times for the interviews, because most editors are at work elsewhere in the mornings and work on online newspapers only as part-timers. Thus, all the interviews had to be in the evening, which gave a very narrow window of opportunity. In addition, apart from *Sabq*, most online newspapers have no office. For this reason most of the interviews were short, between 15 minutes to half an hour, with only a few, mainly with journalists, exceeding that.

The chosen sample included five editors-in-chief, two editorial directors and six editors, who worked on the following newspapers: *Sabq*, *Alweeam*, *Ajel*, *Anaween*, *Sada* and *Alwakad*. Two editors, one of whom is an editor-in-chief, did not want to disclose their names. The researcher understood this and respected their anonymity, leaving them free to talk about any issues to do with online newspapers that concerned them. Although the interviewees were happy to be interviewed, the researcher was keen to keep interviews short, since these were busy professionals, as noted above. Permission to record the interviews was sought and in all cases given, though it had been feared that the interviewees would refuse, since online news sites in Saudi Arabia were at risk of being blocked by the Ministry of Information and the interviewees might have felt that giving interviews was risky.

The interviews did not always rely on the same few questions, but added new ones in the course of the discussion; closed questions, which require only a 'yes' or 'no' response, were avoided. Rather than making the interviewees feel interrogated, the researcher tried to conduct the interviews in the spirit of a discussion. In addition, the researcher wanted the questions to take into account the differences between the interviewees in rank (position) and job expertise. Some interviewees were editors-in-chief and others editors or reporters; some, such as Lotfi Abdullatiff, an editorial director of *Sabq*, had had as much as 24 years' experience, in contrast to Khaled Alrougi, who had been editor of *Ajel* for only two years. The researcher also gave the interviewees a chance to talk freely about their past experiences and noted their views and expectations for the future of Saudi online journalism. There was also time at the end of each interview to talk about any important issues or to mention any new information about their online newspapers.

The researcher having commented on answers then turned immediately to other questions, writing notes about important answers or what might require more discussion. The interviews yielded important information and insight into online newspapers (for more details, see Chapters Five and Six).

In addition, interviews were conducted with 23 Saudi online users in the city of Riyadh, between August 25 and September 25, 2012. These interviews were also face-to-face and took from 15 to 30 minutes each.

The final sample represented a range of educational qualifications with a total of 23 interviewees (15 males, 8 females), of whom 13 held a Master's degree, 6 had a Bachelor's and 4 people had lower qualifications (see Appendix III for a list of users interviewed).

The interviews with women were somewhat shorter than those with men because of conditions in Saudi Arabia where the sexes are separated in many places of work and study. However, interviews were conducted in interviewees' houses or their relatives' houses, as most of the interviews took place in the evening. After due consideration, in some interviews the researcher was accompanied by his wife, in order to put the respondent at ease. The problem of some very brief answers also arose with these interviews and the questions had to be followed up with further questions in order to gain more detail. But in spite of this, some women gave rich answers and included more detail in their interviews, in particular the women who were highly qualified (the researcher interviewed two women who held Masters' degrees). (For more details, see Appendix V for a copy of interview questions with users).

However, all the interviewees agreed to have their interview recorded, having been assured that they could ask to have the recording device switched off at any time; in the event, no-one did ask. The researcher considered it a pertinent indication of some improvement in people's sense of security that they could express their views on issues without being fearful (itself perhaps the outcome of the greater openness of the new online platforms). At the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained that the term 'online newspapers' referred to news provision which did not appear as hard copy, but only in an electronic version. This was done to forestall confusion. The researcher organised and conducted these questions slightly differently in the light of the data from the questionnaires and the issues associated with distributing and collecting them.

As discussed above, the third data collection method involved the selection of two media events reported by the Saudi press, offline and online. This collection of data took place nearly two years later than the other two (questionnaire and interviews). These two events were selected in order to explore and compare the reporting by online news outlets with that done by official newspapers. On the coverage of the Corona disease, the researcher chose data from three different media: official newspapers, online newspapers and the social media 'Twitter'. Two Saudi newspapers (*Al-Riyadh* and *Okaz*) were chosen because they are among the most widely-read newspapers and are considered the country's official news organs. *Al-Riyadh* is published in the capital city and *Okaz* is published in Jeddah, in the western region of Saudi Arabia. In addition, three online newspapers (*Sabq*, *Alweeam* and *Ajel*) were selected, because *Sabq* is the most widely read and *Alweeam* has criticised the Ministry of Health in Saudi Arabia and freely published news about the Corona disease issue. The *Ajel* online newspaper has also addressed the subject and is considered one of the most readable online newspapers in Saudi Arabia.

Four Saudi accounts on Twitter, by the following writers, were also chosen:

1. Mohammed Alehaidib (@alehaidib)
2. Saad Aldousari (@saaddousari)
3. Saleh Alshehi (@SalehAlshehi)
4. Abdull Aziz Alsuwayed (@asuwayed)

Each of these Saudi writers has thousands of followers, who were tweeted breaking news about the Corona disease. These accounts often address problems involving the Ministry of Health; they criticise the Ministry and its procedures in confronting this disease and their tweets generally have an impact on Saudi readers, exciting emphatic responses. However, those writers represent different political positions in what they write in their tweets, as Mohammed Alehaidib always supports the Islamist

line and thus he represents a 'conservative' trend. For his part, Saad Aldousari tends to follow a 'liberal' line, while Saleh Alshehi and Abdull Aziz Alsuwayed tend towards 'moderation'.

On the Egyptian elections the researcher chose some different media since they needed to have substantially reported in this area. These were two Saudi newspapers, *Al-Jazirah* and *Asharq Al-Awsat*. The former comes from the capital city, Riyadh and is one of the newspapers committed to reproducing the official. *Asharq Al-Awsat* is issued in London and is one of the largest Arab newspapers to be issued in Europe and considered more 'liberal'. It has an impact on Arab readers and on Saudis and its editors are close to the Saudi ruling family, for example, Othman Al-Omaeir (the owner of the online newspaper *Elaph*) and Abdul Rahman Al-Rashed (the former General Manager of Al-Arabiya News Channel).

Three online newspapers were chosen: *Sabq* and *Alweeam*, both of which were also used for exploring reporting on Corona, and *Lojainiat*. The third one was chosen because it expresses the Islamist point of view'. Most sites and online newspapers that sympathize with the Islamists were opposed to the latest Egyptian elections, following the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt which boycotted them.

Six different Saudi accounts on Twitter were also chosen:

1. Ahmed bin Saeid (@LoveLiberty)
2. Fahad Alharhti (@Dr_fahad_harhti)
3. Fahad AlabdulJabbar (@fahadjababbar)
4. Mohamed Alahmari (@alahmarim)
5. Mohammed Alshaik (@alshaikhmhmd)
6. Abdul Rahman Allahim (@allahim)

These are typical providers of accounts engaging with Egyptian affairs. In news and tweets they described the elections to choose a new Egyptian president after the

overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi. They differ in their viewpoints on these events, some attacking the military regime in Egypt, suspicious of the elections and opposing the Saudi government's support for them, while others supported the Egyptian election, believing that elections could be the starting point for resolving the situation in Egypt.

Finally, the researcher has researched all available content for 'Corona' and 'Egyptian elections' (over a two-week period in May 2014, with one week for each issue) and collected everything possible, including news stories, comments, photos, articles and features.

3.4 Data organization and analysis

Just as different methods were adopted to collect data, so the modes of critical analysis of the data also varied. The researcher adopted quantitative and qualitative content analysis in relation to the data from the questionnaires but concentrated on qualitative content analysis of all interview material and the news items gathered from the two case studies (the internal and external issues). In relation to the latter, the researcher particularly adopted a 'frame analysis' but also drew on more semiotic/discourse-based analysis paying attention to headlines, photos and the language used.

The results obtained from the respondents who answered the questionnaire was subjected to statistical analysis and represented in relevant tables, figures and charts, in accordance with the descriptions by Marshall & Rossman (2006). The quantitative data (based on how many people said what) and the qualitative data (user/consumer views) were organised and compiled using SPSS³⁵. This approach uses coding in order to capture some attributes of the data (Miles & Huberman 1994). According to Miles & Huberman (1994), 'the majority of qualitative

³⁵ SPSS means 'Statistical Package for the Social Sciences'. According to Rowley (2014), 'SPSS is a more specialist package that is a core tool for academic research and is a must for any quantitative researcher studying at doctoral level or beyond' (p.323).

researchers will code their data both during and after collection as an analytic tactic, because coding is analysis' (cited in Almaghlooth 2014, p.118). The data was coded according to keywords, themes and repeated phrases and then classified in order to interpret it and highlight emerging points and trends. An interpreter had translated the original questionnaire from English to Arabic, and respondents completed it in Arabic. For analysis the data were translated back into English to help the analysis of the data using SPSS software.

To analyse the interviews with journalists and users, the researcher began by listening to the recordings and writing up transcripts for all the interviews. After this was finished, the researcher carefully read all the transcripts in order to proofread them and gain a comprehensive understanding of the interviews. Then the researcher's assistant (the interpreter) translated the text from Arabic to English, and afterwards reviewed the transcripts and verified the accuracy of information, ensuring the English version matched the original Arabic one. The researcher then read the English version of the transcripts to see how the main topics related to the concerns of the study – credibility, public sphere, public opinion, censorship – plus other issues. The themes and topics within the text of each transcript were identified and the transcripts annotated with appropriate abbreviations to signal the themes/topics referred to. Further revisions and refinements were made, bringing to the fore what seemed significant aspects across interviews as well as aspects distinctive to a particular speaker. Crabtree & Miller refer to this former process: 'Connecting codes is the process of discovering themes and patterns in the data' (cited in Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006, p.89). Joffe & Yardley further comment: a thematic analysis method is 'able to offer the systematic element characteristic of content analysis', as well as allowing the researcher 'to combine analysis of the frequency of codes with analysis of their meaning in context, thus adding the advantage of the subtlety and complexity of a truly qualitative analysis' (2004, p.57). However, views that stand apart can also be highly significant and are discussed in Conclusion Chapter.

In analysing the data collected from three media (official newspapers, online journalism and Twitter), the researcher used content analysis, analysis of frames in particular, as content analysis is 'essential to finding patterns, based on which scholars and researchers can methodically evaluate news media and its use of framing. In turn, this allows for the comparison of possible agenda setters' bias of the event' (Cissel 2012, p.70). Regarding the relationship between the content analysis approach and public opinion, Alshehri (2000) points out: 'content analysis has also played an important role in research programmes that have explored the relationships between news content and public opinion and behaviour' (p.131).

The scholars who have studied the 'framing' (such as Van Gorp and Vercruysse 2012; Cissel 2012; Kiwanuka-Tondo et al 2012; Luther and Zhou 2005) have conducted frame analysis to explain how the media used 'framing' in the news to present and interpret issues; for example: dementia, the Internet, Occupy Wall Street, AIDS and the SARS virus. Thus, the researcher in this thesis has used frame analysis to explain how the Saudi media (offline and online media) present and interpret two issues to the Saudi audience.

Media framing is associated with the cultural background of the country. In their study about *Media ownership and news framing*, Kiwanuka-Tondo et al (2012) identified a link between frames and local culture, asserting that 'the news frames identified are intricately tied to that country's culture, media environment ...etc.' (p.373).

The researcher has employed four phases for analysis of the frames used by Saudi media regarding the two selected news events. Firstly, the text of the news stories were read in their entirety, to extract the main themes and concepts, focusing on the content of all the news stories, including headlines, images and copy. According to Van Gorp and Vercruysse (2012), 'Each element (the metaphors used, the images, and recurring arguments) represented a potential framing device' (p.1275). It might be thought that such an approach might not be appropriate for analyzing Twitter. But the researcher judged that the absence of sound-related and visual signs in online networking does not mean that framing does not take place or that frame analysis

cannot be applied. Rather, non-standard spelling and punctuation marks and the utilization of tweets via Twitter make up for them.

Analysts of news coverage and data science disciplines have frequently taken a look at how social activists (such as Twitter users) use online networking to shape public opinion when it comes to socio-political issues.

In the second phase, the texts of the news stories were coded and each code given an 'abbreviation' that reflected the meaning of the text; for example: reassure, warning, disaster, awareness, doubts, fabricated, farce. These codes needed to be clearly commensurate with the themes and concepts that frequently appeared in the text. Thirdly, after review, these were reduced in number to highlight the most significant ones and to suggest the framing being adopted. This produced a set of frames, with each frame referencing a number of themes and concepts. Three particularly clear frames were identified for each issue (with every media outlet having one frame characterizing its coverage). There were thus three frames on the issue of Corona, and three frames with regard to the Egyptian elections.

The fourth phase involved describing and commenting on these frames. Here the analysis borrows from Entman (1993), who argues: 'The presence or absence of keywords, stock phrases, stereotypical images, sources of information, and sentences provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments' (p.52). The researcher also took into consideration aspects of framing developed by Tankard (2001), who refers to 'headlines, subheads, photos and photo captions, leads, source selection, quote selection, and concluding statements' (Tankard 2001, cited in Kiwanuka-Tondo et al 2012, p.365). The analysis also draws on the study by Almahmoud (2015) who discusses the relevance of 'intertextuality' in thinking about framing, through analysis of the frames used by Saudis in Twitter on the issue of 'women drivers campaign'. According to Almahmoud, 'Analyzing the intertextual basis of utterances is necessary to understand their sociocultural functionality and implications' (p.8). Becker (1995) explains how this term is used by saying: 'Intertextuality involves connecting texts across different time periods and

sociocultural situations by incorporating prior text into new contexts' (cited in Almahmoud 2015, p.8).

3.5 Ethical issues

Any research should take ethical issues into consideration. For example, the research should show responsibility in meeting the security and privacy requirements of all its participants (Silverman 2000, p.200; Gilbert 2008, p.146). Ethical considerations in research enhance the purposes of research, such as gaining truth and knowledge and avoiding errors. An ethical approach protects the research participants from misrepresenting, falsifying and fabricating data, and thus encourages accountability, trust, mutual respect and fairness.

As this study deals with human participants (whether in the survey or interviews), and because it is conducted in a third world country, which may include risks with freedom of expression, due care is essential. Before embarking on the fieldwork, the researcher received approval from the University of Sussex to do the 'research journey'. Furthermore, in this research, as mentioned earlier, both consent and approval were adhered to by informing the participants that there was no need to disclose their names. Ethical conduct requires seeking consent from participants (interviewees) whether they need to be named in the study or not (Barnbaum and Byron 2001). Therefore the researcher maintained the anonymity of the two journalists who requested this. Further, the participants were informed that the questionnaire was for academic reasons only. For the interviewees, a consent form was provided which explained the rationale of the study and let them register their approval (see Appendix VI, for Consent Form).

As part of an ethical consideration, it is important to know how the researcher 'placed' himself in relation to those he interviewed: the researcher's own position while applying research methods (questionnaire and interviews) was both as insider and outsider. His place in relation to users/consumers was different from that in relation to editors/journalists. Thus, when distributing a questionnaire among

respondents, the researcher was an outsider, and he did not interfere with the choices and answers of respondents. This was the researcher's own project that he was in control of and he assumed that those completing the survey would answer the questions as set. But he explained what the research was about and how the results would be used, and also gave those completing the survey the opportunity to ask questions. Aware of concerns about data privacy, he tried to reassure the participants by notifying them before starting the survey that their answers would be used only for the purpose of scientific study and that it was unnecessary to provide their names. On the other hand, he was an insider, in that he was also a Saudi and understood certain cultural codes, and thus the researcher was keen to wear the national dress (Saudi *Thobe* and the traditional *Shomagh* scarf) while distributing questionnaires and during interviews. When conducting interviews with respondents, he was aware of certain kinds of cultural sensitivity that were difficult to discuss. However, there were questions which the researcher felt that he could not ask and follow-up questions he did not ask because he felt they were inappropriate in some way. For example, in questions regarding the amount of monthly income or salary for respondents, the researcher tried to be respectful of users' privacy, and thus solve this matter by giving four options to users. As discussed above, the researcher took into account the social norms and traditions in Saudi society regarding interviewing women, and thus he had to bring his wife to sit next to him in those interviews.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the way in which data on the perspectives and opinions of readers/users and producers was collected from a survey and interviews (with editors and users) and further data was gathered in relation to the two selected news events. In doing so it has raised some of the issues the researcher faced in the field. It has also schematically discussed the approaches to analysis that were adopted. Through the analysis of informational content of the news in Saudi media and providing an interpretative commentary attached to the frames used by Saudi

media, the present study attempts to identify whether these media are credible in their coverage of these issues. Finally, it considers whether that applied 'framing' has affected the credibility of the news, as well as whether new media (online journalism and Twitter) have raised the ceiling of freedom among Saudis. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present the research data and engage in detailed analysis but will also elaborate on further aspects of the analytical approaches adopted.

Chapter 4

The Development of Saudi Online Journalism: Towards a More Open Press?

4.1 Introduction

Over the last twenty years, online journalism has become a strong competitor in the news field, capturing a large proportion of traditional newspaper readers and taking a large proportion of advertising. According to an annual status report on the media in the United States in 2004 and 2005, while the press, radio and television audiences continued a decline which began two decades earlier, the Internet audience continued to increase (Pew Research Center 2005).

By the mid1990s, Arabic newspapers began to emerge on the Internet, a few years after the first online newspaper appeared in Chicago in 1992, followed by *The Washington Post*, which in 1994 published some topics on the Internet for a subscription of \$10 a month (Maali 2008). Initially, Arabic newspapers published only advertising on their websites but then they began to copy news items from their paper versions (Alhomood and Alaskar 2003). By then, early in the new millennium, the number of newspapers and other Arab media (for example, TV channels) on the Internet had reached 12,000 sites (Almajed 2003). The Saudi newspaper, *Al-Jazirah*, which emerged in 1997, is considered to be the first Saudi title to appear on the Internet. Various newspapers and other Saudi media then followed. The online newspaper *Elaph* – which does not have a paper copy – is seen as the first Saudi online newspaper, first published on the Internet in 2001.

This chapter discusses Saudi online journalism³⁶, addressing its history and focusing on the most prominent online newspapers in the Saudi context. The chapter also explores the difficulties and challenges faced by these papers, focusing on censorship in particular. It also explores why this new form has gained popularity among Saudis, and the ways in which Saudi online newspapers compete with traditional media.

4.2 Discussion forums on the Internet

The Internet did not exist in Saudi Arabia until 1997, when the Saudi government approved the launch of an Internet service. Al-Qarni discusses the wider obstacles to the provision of Internet services in Arab countries, such as poor infrastructure, poverty, the high price of services, censorship and control, and lack of awareness of programs, in addition to language barriers and social resistance (2004, pp.157-160). Besides the social factors reported by Al-Qarni, it is clear that there was also political resistance from regimes in the Arab world that were and still are blocking certain sites on the Internet. The impact of this delay is evident in Alferm's study (2009) of the new media, in which he points out that by 2005, the number of Internet users in the Arab world was 19 million, about 7.5% of the Arab population, and that this was much lower than in the 'developed' world.

On 15th December 1998, under the supervision of King Abdul Aziz's City for Science and Technology (KACST) (Almohareb 2011), Saudi Arabia's internet system was established. Connected by computer network with other universities and research centres in the Arab Gulf States, according to Awad, '[t]he City controlled the Internet and blocked access to sites that [came] into conflict with Saudi religious, cultural and political principles' (2010, p.97). However, by 2004, the supervision had moved to the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC). The latter is a government commission that regulates the telecommunications sector and

³⁶ The online newspapers talked about in this chapter are newspapers that do not have hard copies. All Saudi media - including traditional newspapers - have online sites now, but this chapter focuses only on online journalism without a traditional counterpart.

information technology in Saudi Arabia, ensuring that consumers have high quality connectivity and pay appropriate prices (Aba Numai 2009). CITC also blocks or closes sites, as well as blocking 'pornography and gambling websites' (Awad 2010, p.97).

The online predecessors of Saudi online newspapers, giving access to news and discussing it, were the dialogue and discussion forums, dating from around 1999. Through these the Saudi user received news from elsewhere than the Saudi official media; namely, broadcasting and the traditional newspapers. Since the latter monopolized most of the news that circulated, the margin of freedom, speed of the news, and not having to rely on official sources were all elements which enhanced the role of these forums and allowed them to present themselves to the press as alternative media. For the first time, Saudi users could participate in the commentary and opinions on any important issues, political ones in particular; there had been no public platforms in Saudi Arabia from which to discuss political affairs, nor any political parties. Aba Numai (2009) notes that many of the topics that arose in the forums, such as conflicts in Arab world, women's rights, the claims of the political opposition, and scandals, were about things that were not published in the traditional media. Moreover, Aba Numai (2009) believes that one reason for the Saudi people's interest in the forums was the speed at which they could exchange information and receive news.

At first, dialogue forums coming from abroad, such as the forum *Al Saha Al Arabia* based in the Emirates and emerging in 1997, were 'the most watched and had the most impact on readers in Saudi Arabia, especially in the period post-September 2001 in the United States' (Alqwifily 2002, [no page]). The *Al Saha Al Arabia* forum was considered one of the most important Islamic forums of the period, featuring well-known writers and some radical Islamic organizations, such as Al-Qaeda, also contributing writers and supporters. Although the *Al Saha Al Arabiya* forum was established in the Emirates, it looked to Saudi Arabia for investment. To Saudi users it offered the chance to express their views (Alqwifily 2002), including support for

Islamic terrorism. Movements such as Al-Qaeda found that the forums on the Internet were a suitable place to disseminate their ideas and inform the public about their activities (Aba Numai 2009). Interestingly, this forum published many statements from armed Islamic organizations, including organizations that practised acts of terrorism within Saudi Arabia itself (Almohareb 2005). There were also other Islamic forums supporting Islamic fundamentalism, including the *Sahab*, *Salafist*, *Al Wasatiya* Forum (supported by Dr. Mohsen Alawaji)³⁷ and *Wijdan Al Muslim*. These forums differed from *Al Saha* in their stance on the political situation of the state and support for terrorism (Almohareb 2005). Of course, these forums are similar to *Al Saha* in being fundamentalist, but they differ in the degree to which they reflect the political position of the Saudi government (Almohareb 2005). For example, *Sahab* was more extremist and a supporter of terrorist operations in Saudi Arabia, while *Al Wasatiya*, which means 'moderation' in Arabic, is considered more moderate.

As an alternative to these forums, which were 'regarded as subject to foreign ideologies, religions, political organizations and other parties deemed suspicious' (Alrougi et al 2011, p.23) some young Saudi people and intellectuals set up other dialogue forums in Saudi Arabia. Significantly, Almohareb notes that some of the writers for these sites were critical of the Saudi government's policies and of a number of politicians, intellectuals and Saudi journalists (2005). They discussed topics such as women's rights, sectarian disputes and political opposition, as well as the ongoing scandals; in other words, issues in the community that are not published in Saudi traditional media because they are officially taboo. Thus these forums were seen as the appropriate place for publication because of the freedom of expression they allowed (Aba Numai 2009, p.101).

Internet forums in Saudi Arabia since 1999, when the first forum *Al-eqlaa* emerged, cater for a variety of interests in that there are political, social, cultural, sports and satirical forums. Some of these represent specific groups, such as women or

³⁷ A political activist and reformer, who was arrested several times (Amnesty International Report 2007).

students, and some, such as *Aleqlaa* and *Aalm Hawaa*, have won great fame (Almohareb 2011). For example, *Aleqlaa* was an opportunity for talented and cynical writers to write stinging criticism in a satirical style using colloquial dialect. By August 2002, this forum had over 26,000 members and more than 33 million viewers (Alqwifily 2002). The *Aalm Hawaa* forum was the first forum specifically for women, discussing women's needs and topics of interest to them³⁸.

According to Almohareb (2011), the most prominent role of the forums is to be a space in which to express opinion. It was apparently an attempt to form a new public sphere through discussion forums, although the official media and 'Alsahwa's Discourse' were alone responsible for the formation of a public sphere in the 1980s and 1990s. These forums carry a plurality of opinions on a particular issue or event or news item, because they can give ordinary people a platform to express their views in a way that the terrestrial media do not. These forums give an indication of the concerns that the public has about issues that are tackled in the traditional media and online newspapers. Thus the topics discussed in the forums sometimes then move back into the traditional media who also take them up (Almohareb 2011, p.109).

One example was the problem of female high school students in the city of Dammam, eastern Saudi Arabia, who were penalized because they criticised their high school system in entries on an online forum under aliases. The Department of Education was able to keep track of the students, discover their identities and punish them. They were later pardoned because of the controversy that this incident provoked in the forums. The Department of Education cancelled the penalties under the pressure of public opinion (Alqwifily 2002).

The *Aleqlaa* forum is one of the oldest forums in Saudi Arabia, created by four young male Saudis on 27th December 1999. It immediately became popular, moving after

³⁸ Not much information seems to be available about the history of the emergence of the *Aalm Hawaa* forum. However, it seems that the oldest subject posted on this forum dates back to 2000.

ten days from a free site to its own site, due perhaps to being the first fully Saudi forum; but also, unusually, allowed colloquial Arabic to be used in entries, and this had a significant impact in attracting a huge number of visitors. *Aleqlaa* began with nine sections, none political or religious. But by 2010 it had more than 120 sections and more than a million topics, with approximately 880,000 registered members (*Aleqlaa site 2013*). Political and religious subjects were considered banned in the *Aleqlaa* forum; however, since its establishment in 1999, it has been using 'political humor' through the satirical literary approach that it adopts when discussing political issues (Alqwifily 2002).

It is perhaps not surprising therefore that there is little definite information about the real names of the founders of this forum, who make themselves known by nicknames only. The founders of most forums in this period do the same. Alqwifily considers the use of aliases, stating 'when someone writes in the *Aleqlaa* forum under a pseudonym, and uses colloquial and intimate language, this produces honest writing, revealing the real views of the writer. This can be achieved only in the *Aleqlaa* forum' (Alqwifily 2002). It seems that writers do this to avoid recognition and censure from the authorities. But writer Abdullah Bin Bakhit (2004) in the *Al-Riyadh* newspaper criticised these forums and its users' writing under nicknames, claiming that: 'Internet forums in their present form will disappear soon, we cannot accept a culture that grows in the dark' (cited in Aba Numai 2009, p.109). Furthermore, journalists, according to Alqwifily (2002), mostly believe that what appears on the forums is 'irresponsibility and chaos'. It seems that this negative verdict on forums refers to the fact that the official media are 'not welcome' in this new medium, which shared with them in shaping the public sphere in Saudi Arabia.

Another forum that attracted a large number of Saudis users is *Aalm hawaa*. This is a women's forum, one of the most popular with Saudi women; it occupies a high position in Alexa's list of Top Global Sites, which classifies which sites are most read throughout the world. This forum, which has over a hundred thousand members, now owns a specialist television channel and offers dozens of specialized sections

and commercial marketing through the Internet (*Aalm hawaa* site 2013). It also has a section which discusses social issues in Saudi Arabia; for example, educational issues and the high cost of private schools; the issue of unemployment; the high cost of living; wars in other countries such as the war in Syria and revolutions such as the Arab Spring.

Often *Aalm hawaa*'s members support the view of the Saudi government, especially regarding the Arab Spring. It is striking that the discussion section includes some instructions developed by the department of *Aalm hawaa* to inform its members, for example, that its message is social and educational and it has no relation to the policies of non-official organizations which are incompatible with the Saudi state's policy (*Aalm hawaa* site 2013).

Although both the *Aleqlaa* and *Aalm hawaa* forums won great popularity, they were either diverse forums, where most users were young people, or specific groups; for example, groups of women in the case of the *Aalm hawaa* forum, which did not allow men to register and where most of the themes were especially for women. These forums were not dialogue forums with the strength of the *Al Saha Al Arabia* forum or other Islamic forums, which are dominated by Islamic movements. Thus there was no strong forum that could provide a vision different from the Islamic forums that discuss Saudi political issues and criticise the policies of the Saudi government. For example, the *Al Saha Al Arabia* forum published topics in support of terrorist organizations in Saudi Arabia and criticised the efforts of the Saudi government to combat terrorism. Almohareb points out that all this did not prevent the emergence of views and topics that took a position opposed to the Islamic radical movements (2005).

Almohareb refers to some labels of various forums used by Saudis in those days, that tried to confront Islamic forums; for example 'liberal' forums. Almohareb asks why the Islamic forums have spread more than the liberal forums have, and offers four hypothetical reasons for this:

Firstly, the number of Islamists is greater than the number of liberals. Secondly, liberals can survive within a unified framework despite differences of opinion, in contrast to the Islamists who do not accept differences of argument, which leads them to disperse into many different forums. Thirdly, the authorities usually ban or block liberal forums (for example the *Elaph* forum has been banned and blocked, as have the *Twa* and *Dar Al Nadwa* forum, for instance), yet in contrast, no action was taken against Islamic forums with the exception of a simple procedure against 'the political *Al Saha*' which was blocked in February 2003. Fourthly, Islamic forums follow regulations more than liberal forums do (Almohareb 2005, p.14).

Almoussa (2012) gives a similar opinion about the spread of Islamic forums; he believes that the 'liberal line is elitist and does not have a large presence in the Saudi street if we compare it with the Islamic line' (p.143). However, the strength of the Islamic forums led to the emergence of other forums offering a different vision, which tended to be liberal. Liberal forums are a collection of forums that originated on the Internet and focused on offering topics related to public affairs in Saudi Arabia. They were dominated by the writings of participants with a liberal vision. The liberal vision in Saudi Arabia is different from that of liberalism in the West, being simply that which adopts a different opinion from the Islamic view. Thus, all forums opposed to political Islam were called 'Liberal forums'. In this point, Almohareb emphasizes that one 'must beware of confusing the meaning of liberalism in the philosophical sense and its meaning in the West and that of the Saudi version. This is an issue that fundamentalist forums devote much time to, so as to prove that Saudi liberals are a reflection of Western liberals' (i.e. similar to Western liberalism) (2005, p.15). Of course, fundamentalist forums try to benefit from the mistrust that exists among Saudis about Western liberalism, given the strength of the religious factor in Saudi Arabia.

These Saudi liberal forums have passed through two stages: the first started in 2001 with the so-called 'journalists'-electronic forum' created by the online journalists of the *Al-Riyadh* newspaper site; this carried the work of a number of journalists and intellectuals who approached their country with a liberal vision. Of course, there is nothing on the site that refers to a liberal line which corresponds to the western

understanding of 'liberal', or even to not following political Islam. However, most of the participants on this site had liberal sympathies and they moved first to the *Elaph* forum and from there to the *Twaa* one after the closure of the 'journalists'-electronic' forum. The site's supervisor, Nasser Alsaramy (2001), claimed that all the topics discussed on the forum were in the national socio-economic and administrative interest; and that a range of opinions was discussed.

Others see the beginning of the liberal forums in the symposium of the online newspaper site *Elaph*, arguing that the *Al-Riyadh* site was not an electronic forum, merely a space where readers could express an opinion. They seem to have meant that the posts on this forum are subject to censorship and audited before publication and thus this forum is similar to readers' pages in the newspapers, which are not published until they have passed the censor. The supervisor of this forum, Alsaramy (2001), admitted that some posts or replies in the forum are subject to 'limited revision' and claimed that this action was taken in order to 'improve the language of the electronic journalists.' But he confessed that the censorship had led to protests from some readers, some of whom threatened to move to 'more free and open forums' ([no page]).

In any case, early 2002 witnessed the closure of both of these sites (*journalists-electronic* and *Elaph*) (Almohareb 2011). The newspaper *Al-Riyadh* decided to close its forum, giving as the reason 'not our target' (Almohareb 2005, p.24). The *Al-Riyadh* newspaper and Almohareb (2005) did not give further details about the 'targets' that this forum had not hit; but probably the reason was that most members were liberals who often criticised the religious police in Saudi Arabia, as we have seen above regarding other liberal forums that closed down.

According to Almohareb, the second stage of liberal forums, from 2002, represents the actual beginning, 'the first stage forums being merely harbingers preceding the first real breakthrough' (2005, p.24). He adds that the latter 'came through the first forum for liberal independent media organizations, *Twaa*, which emerged in August of 2002 and was an exceptional leap forward in political forums. It appeared as a

rival to the fundamentalist forums – *Al Saha Al Arabia* in particular – and caused them some confusion’ (Almohareb 2005, p.24). It is striking that the *Twaa* forum appeared in the brief period before the first terrorist attack on the city of Riyadh³⁹. The anger of the Saudi people towards Islamic organizations (after the bombing of Riyadh in May 2003), was perhaps a factor that helped this site to become famous and gain greater support from Saudi users. Almohareb comments:

The *Twaa* forum benefited from the time period in which it was issued as it began in the phase between the bombings in New York (September 2001) and their counterpart in Riyadh (May 2003). These produced over recent years a series of events, local revisions and transformations, which have been profound and influential. However, the first moments were the most volatile and these gave the forum more momentum than if it had appeared in other circumstances (2011, [no page]).

Twaa was closed in May 2004, after hosting debates about religious matters and discussing atheism on the site itself. To do so was considered an abuse of religious truths, surpassing the limits of religious tolerance in Saudi Arabia. It also published politically oriented discourses that could be understood as insulting to Saudi political figures (Almohareb 2005). There has been no official statement from those responsible for the site about the real reasons for its closure, but Almohareb (2005) suggests a dispute amongst the supervisors of the site about acceptable and unacceptable topics and the limits of freedom allowed in the forum. However, regardless of the reasons discussed above, it is likely that this liberal site was breaking state regulations or had breached a taboo in Saudi society.

In January 2004, the *Dar Al Nadwa* forum was established. The content of this new forum was similar to that of *Twaa*, but it was technically better and the site dealt more carefully with religious issues. However, this liberal forum closed at the end of 2005, leaving a message on its home page that it was closed for maintenance – but the site never returned. According to Alsaramy (2005), whilst sympathizers of *Al Saha Al Arabia* forum carried out electronic attacks, which temporarily closed down

³⁹ This attack by Al-Qaeda took place in May 2003.

Dar Al Nadwa, the Al-Arabiya Channel site suggested that the site's adoption of 'anti-fundamentalism' was perhaps the reason. The owner of the *Dar Al Nadwa* forum claims that 'their [the fundamentalists'] attitude towards national issues has provoked extreme visionaries and this hacking is an attempt to silence us in every way' (Al-Arabiya 2005).

Although several more liberal forums emerged (*Al toumar*, which included the archive of the *Elaph* symposium, *Alhuria* and *Montadana* (Almohareb 2011), after 2006, liberal forums declined in popularity due to the emergence of online journalism in Saudi Arabia and the emergence in 2006 of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Before moving to the online journalism section, it should be recalled that the history of discussion forums in Saudi Arabia 'is an issue interspersed with multiple difficulties. For example, it is difficult to obtain correct information, as most writers use pseudonyms; and often the owners of these forums are unknown' (Almohareb 2011, p.107). Therefore we 'find a lack of studies dealing with the phenomenon of forums in Saudi Arabia' (Almoussa 2012, p.135). However, it can be argued that Saudi discussion forums have opened up the possibility of the public discussion of political, social and cultural issues; in other words, all the issues which had perhaps not been discussed in the traditional media. Al Nashmi et al (2010) claim that politics was one of the top three issues, calculated by the number of discussions it provoked on Saudi forums. Political issues ranked as having 'the highest number of threads followed by the open dialogue and Islamic categories' (pp.726-727). The most prominent issues highlighted by Saudi forums in those days were: the September 11 attacks in the US, the Iraq war in 2003, the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Danish newspapers in 2006 and other political topics. Among local issues the topics of poverty, unemployment and high prices were the most often debated, followed by political issues such as political freedom, the promotion of popular participation in decision-making and criticism of the performance of some ministries, such as health, education and security (Almoussa 2012). In fact, most of these topics

have been discussed differently by the traditional news media in Saudi Arabia, but the Saudi users had discussed these issues ore freely in public spaces, not controlled by the authority.

Most studies report that the participation of women in Saudi discussion forums was low, in particular on political and social questions; Al-Saggaf (2011), for example, noted 'a lack of female participants in online political forums' (cited in Madini and De Nooy 2013, p.235). Additionally, Almousa (2012) in his study confirms that the participation rate of women on Islamic forums in Saudi never exceeded 10% (p.144). Discussion forums in Saudi Arabia have turned into a platform for public opinion, where people (men in particular)⁴⁰ can discuss the news, add comments and have an opportunity to form opinions on internal or external issues. The French researcher Stephane Lacroix describes discussion forums in Saudi Arabia as 'the real Saudi parliament; a member 'user' need only choose a pseudonym and can then participate in a discussion about the religious, political and economic issues that concern them' (cited in Almousa 2012, p.136). For her part, Abdulla (2007) suggests that 'since these forums are uncensored and are outside the realm of government supervision, they provided a good opportunity for Arabs and Muslims to voice their honest opinions, even if those opinions contradicted those of the governments' (cited in Al Nashmi et al 2010, p.725).

4.3 The emergence of Saudi online journalism

Online journalism proper began in 2001, but was not to have a real impact until 2006. However, documenting the history of online journalism in Saudi Arabia is difficult, because of the absence of information, changes in sources, changes in the links that lead to online newspaper sites, the end of web hosting for some online newspapers, and changes to domain names, with a quick turnover of workers. In addition, and importantly, in Saudi Arabia there has been a lack of specialized studies of online journalism, because 'it is a relatively new topic in the context of the Saudi press'

⁴⁰ It is largely men who are engaged in discussion and participate in the formation of public opinion.

(Alsairi 2013, p.11), unlike, for example, the context of the US and Europe. Nevertheless, based on the available evidence, two phases can be discerned: the first from 2001 until 2005 and the second from 2006 until the present. The year 2001 saw the start of online journalism, with the issue of the first Saudi online newspaper, *Elaph*. In the same year, *Bab* online was also issued, as were dozens of other online newspapers. Some were regional, covering a specific area such as a town or village, and some specialized in news of particular fields such as economics, sports, medicine and scientific inventions. The first period ends with the closure of *Alwefaq online*, the most popular online newspaper at the time.

Many other titles also closed, for a variety of reasons, including low readership, due in part perhaps to the amateurish and unprofessional nature of the sites. The number of Saudi Internet users at that time was also low: in 2001 there were 450,000 users (5% of the population) (Alqwifily 2002). By 2003 the number had reached 1,460,000 (Al-Qarni 2004), but this was still much lower than the international average. This fact partly explains why the only online Saudi newspapers surviving this period (for different reasons) were *Elaph*, *Alwefaq* and *Bab*. *Elaph* is published from outside Saudi Arabia and has many readers in Arab countries and the Arab communities in Europe and America; according to Alsairi (2013), '*Elaph* has a global audience of 1.3 million users per month' (p.12). *Bab* has continued because it is part of a bigger media institution, *Rawnaa*, which owns many publications, such as specialized trade magazines. Only *Alwefaq* survived, largely on account of its popularity among Saudi readers, and in 2006 it too closed.

Thus the second phase of Saudi online journalism begins in 2006 with the closure of *Alwefaq* and the launch of *Alweeam* online. This phase witnessed the issue of hundreds of online newspapers and a big increase in their readership, notwithstanding the competition from Saudi official newspapers and other media. During this phase, the decrease in popular discussion forums on the Internet benefited online publications, giving them a strong impetus to meet the needs of

readers and develop possibilities for interaction and participation by users. The following section discusses these two phases in more detail.

4.3.1 The first phase

Elaph, as mentioned earlier, was the first Saudi online news title, and was launched in 2001 and edited by veteran journalist Othman Alomair, who had been editor-in-chief on *Asharq Al-Awsat*, the largest Arab newspaper, issued in London. Partly on the back of Alomair's reputation, *Elaph* attracted a large number of Internet users in Saudi Arabia. It also benefited from not being subject to national regulation, and thus had greater scope in terms of what it could report and comment on. Othman Alomair and his editors were able to focus attention on critical issues that might not have been published in nationally based Saudi newspapers. For example, it published reports and news about strikes and protests in some Arab countries, as well as raising the issue of women's rights and the rights of journalists. It also published reports on the reactions of Arab communities toward political decisions taken in Arab countries. Nevertheless, it was banned in some Arab countries owing to news items or articles that criticised them. For example, Tunisia banned *Elaph* more than once.

Bab online newspaper (2001) is considered the first Arabic online site that gave readers the opportunity to comment on the news it published or to ask questions. Sometimes the comments turned into a debate among commentators/users which spilled over into debates in their online newspapers. From the very start, *Bab* also established sites linked to its main site, including those specializing in cars, communications, literature, travel, women, young people and children (Almohareb 2011).

As already indicated, *Alwefaq* online, established in 2005, towards the end of the first phase, became one of the most important news sources in Saudi Arabia. But it has had to cease publication more than once, its Saudi web site blocked by the organization responsible for the regulation of Saudi online material (i.e. King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology). According to the online newspaper *Okhdood*

(2006), this was due to news articles being held to criticise significant public figures in the Saudi government (*Okhdood* online, March 11, 2006). *Alwefaq* re-published an article by Dr Mohsen Alawaji (in 4 March 2006) that was highly critical of the former Minister of Labour, Dr Gazi Alqusaibi, in a manner unprecedented in the Saudi press. Alawaji suggests that the Minister of Labour, Alqusaibi, was trying to drag down the values of Saudi society. He also claims that Alqusaibi (allegedly) stands behind decisions that call for openness and violate the Islamic religion; for example, economic conferences that involve mixing of the sexes and the sale of books at book exhibitions which criticise Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (Alawaji 2006). Probably Alawaji criticised Alqusaibi because the latter is responsible for the employment of Saudi women in shops, a decision which was opposed by hard-liners in Saudi Arabia. The Al-Arabiya Channel hinted that perhaps there was another reason: a few days before being blocked, this site had published a report criticising the King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology regarding the blocking of websites, although *Alwefaq* after a short time deleted this report (Al-Arabiya, March 9, 2006).

These titles, together with other short-lived online newspapers during this period, opened the way for online newspapers to emerge. They addressed wider issues and problems of concern to Saudi society and first involved readers/users, as the discussion forums had begun to do (Alrougi et al 2011).

4.3.2 The second phase

On April 8, 2006, *Alweeam* online was issued. At the outset, *Alweeam* sought to provide quality news, attract talented reporters, give access to advertisers and provide diversity in its opinion columns (Alrougi et al 2011). At about the same time, a forum with the same name, *Alweeam*, was launched to discuss Saudi Affairs. Its editor-in-chief, Turki Alrougi, recounted the beginning of *Alweeam* in a paper presented at a conference of newspapers and Saudi forums organized by the Literary Club in Riyadh:

When our online newspaper was launched, there was no clear editorial policy and we were afraid of the future of the online newspaper. Months passed and our online newspaper was not being read. We began to feel bored and some people advised us to stay out of online newspapers. Therefore we decided to close the forum because of the many discussion forums and their impact on the management of the online newspaper and the quality of its content. We decided the focus should be on the online newspaper. *Alweeam* became famous after publishing the film of the execution of former Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, which it had redeployed from Al-Jazeera. This dramatically attracted readers to *Alweeam's* site, because this news was published in a famous forum '*Al Saha Al Arabia*' that quoted *Alweeam* (Alrougi et al 2011, p.25).

Alweeam was not the only online publication, several other online newspapers were also launched – but *Alweeam* dared to discuss controversial issues, in spite of several attempts to stop it. For example, *Alweeam* was critical of the religious police in Saudi Arabia; it also criticised some religious figures who appeared on satellite channels, such as Sheikh Mohammed Al Nujaimi, who was arguing against men and women mixing at public events. *Alweeam* published a picture of Sheikh Al Nujaimi talking with women at a conference in Kuwait, probably to show his hypocrisy. Nevertheless, as a result of *Alweeam's* popularity, some government departments became keen to invite its editors and journalists to attend its conferences and seminars (Alrougi et al 2011). Although *Alweeam* has been blocked three times in the past, its editors have become more experienced in handling sensitive issues without being taken offline, unlike *Alwefaq* (see Chapter Six, which discusses the interviews with editors and journalists). *Alweeam* also benefited from the accumulated experience of the editors who had worked in other areas of online journalism and had solid experience in editing news.

Before the end of 2006, Mohammed Alasmari issued his online newspaper *Alwakad*. The *Alwakad* network for public relations provided the title for this newspaper, which, according its editor, does not focus on news about fighting, wars, or information about political parties. Instead it covers political, economic and arts news. *Alwakad's* founder, Mohammed Alasmari, is a professional writer who has studied

communications in the USA for a quarter of a century; his column in the *Okaz* is published daily in Jeddah (Alasmari interview, 2 August 2012). About his experience in online journalism, through *Alwakad*, Alasmari states:

Alwakad does not have a local Saudi flavour, but is for the whole world. Our followers are from the USA, China, Europe, Britain and the Arab world. Regarding Saudis, those who follow us are mostly from the educated class that is interested in science, culture, the arts and discoveries (Alasmari interview, 2 August 2012).

With regard to the ways to attract audiences to his online newspaper, he argues: 'The seriousness of news, the spread of globalism and fleeing from being drowned in parochialism are the most important factors of attraction and loyalty to *Alwakad*'s products' (Alasmari interview, 2 August 2012).

Sabq online was established in 2007 by Ali Alhazmi, who had previously worked on *Alwefaq*. He prepared, published and dealt with technical aspects aided by a few colleagues who did the editorial work from home. This stage continued for more than a year during which *Sabq* popularized itself with the Saudi public through building a reputation for speed in publishing and gaining scoops (Alshehri et al 2011).

Sabq is the first and so far only⁴¹ Saudi online newspaper that has a fixed office equipped with modern technology – TV screens, fixed computers and laptops and mobile phones – perhaps because it is the strongest financially, with a good income from subscribers and advertising. According to the international site Alexa, which classifies internet sites, *Sabq* is the site most visited by Saudi users. This is endorsed by the results of the questionnaire in the present study, which was distributed in 2012 (see Chapter Six). It also ranks ninth among the most important sites favoured by readers and users in Saudi Arabia (Alexa site, 2013). By 2015, *Sabq* ranked fifth among the sites that Saudis accessed, preceded by google.com.sa, google.com, YouTube and Facebook (Alexa site, 2015). Indeed, according to Awad (2010) it 'has

⁴¹ According to its editor, *Alweeam* established a fixed office in Riyadh in late 2013.

become a major local news provider; its visitors exceed the visitors to the websites of Saudi national newspapers' (Awad 2010, p.287).

By 2011, the number of editors and reporters working for *Sabq* online had reached 56 and by 2012, 70, covering most regions and cities of Saudi Arabia (Abdullatiff interview, 26 July 2012). The reporting team at *Sabq* consists of approximately 30 journalists, who can attend workshops and sessions provided by the newspaper for its reporters and editors to develop their writing skills and qualifications (Alhazmi 2008). According to *Sabq*'s editor-in-chief, Mohammed Alshehri:

Sabq is committed to its professional performance and it has an in-house style of writing. All its editors and reporters follow its Style Book. *Sabq* has given a new generation the opportunity to train. It has also contributed to editors and journalists from traditional newspapers moving on to online newspapers. *Sabq* has also contributed to the competition between the online sites and the traditional newspapers and provided encouragement to talented journalists to transfer to online media (Alshehri et al 2011, pp.104-106).

Sabq not only attracts a great number of readers in Saudi society, but is also considered to be closer in its news editing to Saudi traditional newspapers. The process of editing news involves a management editor-in-chief assisted by four editors. The latter receive news stories from reporters and sub-edit them before approval by the editor-in-chief (Alshehri interview, 24 July, 2012). It is clear that this procedure may take a long time, because news items must be checked by the editor-in-chief's assistant and the editor-in-chief before publishing. This action does not happen in other online newspapers, where the editors (who verify news) are fewer and less time is spent on the verification process, which may affect its credibility.

In 2007, *Ajel* online was issued from the Al-Qassim region, in the middle of Saudi Arabia. This online newspaper's editor-in-chief is a columnist and has experience in other media. He has also developed *Ajel* to be one of the most important in the Saudi context. However, in the first few months he faced many difficulties, in particular a low readership and trying to produce the title with only one reporter. Yet by August

2012, there were 15 to 18 editors and a translator for international news items from English sources (Alrougi Interview, 2 August, 2012).

Ajel's focus on culture and ideas alongside the news distinguished it from other online newspapers and attracted contributions from such well-known writers as Turki Al Hamad, Mansour Al Nogidan and Abdul Aziz Al Sweed. This is uncommon in online newspapers in Saudi Arabia, because they mostly feature unknown writers (Almohawas et al 2011). Perhaps they cannot attract well-known ones because the financial difficulties that beset most of the online newspapers prevent them from paying the high fees demanded. *Ajel's* editor Khaled Alrougi describes his newspaper thus:

Ajel was able within a short period to be an influential factor among Saudi readers by highlighting some of the issues and problems of concern to the Saudi society and attempting to resolve them. *Ajel* also was influenced by the observations and comments of readers and even amended some news based on readers' comments, regarding a mistake in the name or place or time of news, after verification (Alrougi interview, 2 August, 2012).

He also adds: 'In the latest classification from the global site 'Alexa', *Ajel* ranked as the second most read online newspaper in Saudi Arabia. This classification made us proud, because it indicates the level of success that we reached in a short time' (Alrougi interview, 2 August, 2012). According to Alrougi, 'There are nearly 500,000 visitors to *Ajel's* site per day, where *Ajel* launched an urgent SMS in March 2009 and there are now [2012] a large number of subscribers' (Alrougi interview, 2 August, 2012).

Anaween online was first issued on 1st January 2009, by its founder Tareq Ibrahim, who had worked on the (official) newspaper *Al-Watan*. The editorial and production teams were professionals, with *Anaween* online being the first Saudi online newspaper to publish the names of editors and editors-in-chief on its site. It is worth mentioning that no other Saudi online newspapers give out the names of their editors on the site – and *Ajel* has only done so recently. Perhaps this is due to the frequent changes of editors and owners on the online newspapers. Naming editors and

owners, however, may result in winning the trust of readers, because it gives the newspaper a degree of transparency. On this matter, *Anaween's* editor-in-chief justifies the policy:

We put the names of the newspaper's staff on the main page in order to be more responsible and cultivate confidence among the readers, who are not interested in most of the news published in online newspapers and websites because it is anonymous (Ibrahim et al 2011, p.62).

Anaween is moderate, not a liberal online newspaper such as *Elaph*, nor a conservative one like *Sabq*. In other words, it stands between two trends in Saudi online newspaper: whereas *Sabq* tends to be conservative and religious (Alobied 2012; Almaghlooth 2014), *Elaph* is more open, being committed to the liberal line (Alshabandar 2011). *Anaween* has tried to respond to public attention and become independent, a word which, according to *Anaween's* editor, means 'relying on correct and accurate information that comes from a confident source; and disseminating it with objectivity and without exaggeration' (Ibrahim et al 2011, p.62).

Sada online emerged on 10 December 2009, its founder being Fahad Alsalem. This title relied on only four editors at the outset, but by 2012 it had approximately 20 journalists and editors and three translators turning English news into Arabic, from British newspapers in particular. This online newspaper has attracted specialist writers but, according to its editor-in-chief, the title supports young people, notably university students, who also write for *Sada* online (Alsalem interview, 8 August, 2012). By 2015, the Alexa global website ranked *Sada* the third favourite online newspaper of Saudi readers (Alexa site, 2015).

Yet the titles discussed above are only the most visible and most accessed sites. By 2010, according to official sources, the number of online journalism titles in Saudi Arabia had reached 200 (*Aleqtisadiah*, March 16, 2010). In late 2012, the number of licensed online newspapers in Saudi Arabia exceeded 600, the number probably increasing in 2011 due to the new regulations on electronic publishing issued by the Ministry of Culture and Information. Perhaps the number of newspapers has

increased because the ministry (after the start of electronic publishing) allowed the owners of online newspapers to obtain a licence, which made most owners keen to license their newspapers, and thus encouraged others who were planning to start an online newspaper to make haste to obtain their licenses.

Before moving on to discuss the regulations that organize the work of online newspapers, the 'stance' of these online newspapers (their conservative, moderate or liberal outlook) should be addressed. *Elaph* takes a liberal stance, as reflected in its news items: it publishes articles whose content often addresses taboo topics, which has led several times to its being blocked in its own country. *Alwefaq* tended towards a conservative stance, as can be seen from its temporary silencing after it published an article by the Islamic activist Alawaji that criticised the Minister of Labour and the liberal trend in Saudi Arabia. *Alwefaq* did not last long and closed down after less than eighteen months.

Despite the fact that *Alweeam*'s editor-in-chief, Turki Alrougi, says that the paper does not take any particular stance, it is known for criticising some religious leaders. Such articles suggest that *Alweeam* opposes the conservative trend. For example, it opposed Sheikh Al Nujaimi⁴² and has published columns by Wael Al-Qasim, who usually criticises this trend. *Sabq*, the most widespread online paper in Saudi Arabia, according to recent studies (Awad 2010; Alobied 2012; Almaghlooth 2014), even outperforms the most official newspapers in Saudi Arabia in terms of readability and views. This newspaper unquestionably belongs to the conservative trend, always taking the conservative standpoint and adopting the official view. *Ajel*, however, probably has no particular stance, but seems to tend towards moderation: it publishes news items in support of religious authority and the conservative vision while also publishing columns by well-known liberal writers; for example, Turki Al Hamad and Mansour Al Nogaidan (Almohawas et al 2011).

⁴² A Saudi cleric, who always appears in the media and criticises the liberal trend in Saudi Arabia.

Anaween, as mentioned above, also tends towards a moderate stance; similarly, *Sada* online publishes the latest videos on YouTube that are popular on the Saudi streets. Some of these videos may be religious sermons by prominent Sheikhs, or even a dance party for girls. Perhaps this is because *Sada* is looking for topics that attract readers and will result in many hits for the site.

4.4 Regulating online journalism

As discussed in Chapter One, there are four printing laws in Saudi Arabia, issued in 1929, 1958, 1964 and 1982. The fifth printing law, which was issued in 2000, i.e. after the emergence of the Internet, is next discussed⁴³, followed by the sixth printing law, issued in 2011, which deals with electronic publishing and Internet services in general.

The fifth printing law comprises 49 Articles and is more comprehensive than its predecessors. It is a paradigm of development work in the field of media and includes several positive aspects, which reflect positively on the process of media work in Saudi Arabia (Alqarni 2013). For example, this law allows the issuance of new local newspapers outside the institutional press and, after the approval of the Prime Minister, the publication of newspapers by private bodies and individuals under licence from the Ministry of Culture and Information. This made it possible for private bodies and individuals to publish scientific and specialized professional journals once they had gained the approval of the Ministry of Information. This was in contrast to the previous law, which limited the issuing of newspapers to news organizations and the issuing of scientific and specialized professional journal to government agencies and educational institutions. Furthermore, the 2000 law allows non-Saudi newspapers to be printed in Saudi Arabia, if approved by the Prime Minister (Alaskar 2002; Awad 2010). Moreover, this law has also had a positive effect on the performance of workers in the Saudi media (journalists, editors, technicians and

⁴³ Although this law focuses heavily on mainstream media, it is discussed in this section because it was issued in the new millennium (in 2000); and after the official emergence of the Internet in Saudi Arabia in 1999 (i.e. in the era of the Internet).

administrators), because the provisions of this regulation allow the creation of professional associations to deal with their problems and coordinate their missions.

Despite the positives contained in this law, reported by researchers such as Alaskar (2002) and Alqarni (2013), other researchers have criticised it, saying that some articles are not clear, or are ambiguous. One of those is Awad (2010), who criticises it thus:

An analysis of the Fifth printing law reveals that there are some ambiguities. The articles are characterised by generality, lacking clear details of what is and what is not allowed for publication. The law uses broad language; for instance Article Eight states that freedom of expression is guaranteed for all publications within Islamic Shari'ah and constitutional rules, yet there is no clear definition of freedom of expression within the Islamic and constitutional rules. There are, in fact, several interpretations of Islamic rules and the Qur'an. Therefore, it is hard for journalists and editors to identify precisely which stories can be published or which may be prohibited by relying on this article (Awad 2010, p.23).

To implement this law, the Ministry of Culture and Information issued regulations in September 2001. The list of electronic media laws refers to 99 articles in seven sections, one of which is allocated to regulating the affairs of the press. This section comprises three chapters: the first one dealing with the affairs of the local press, and the second with the publication of newspapers and magazines outside the institutional press, while the third is devoted to the provisions for reply and correction (Alqarni 2013). The most positive aspects of this law are: first, the equality between newspapers issued by organizations and those issued by private bodies or individuals; second, it is no longer necessary to submit articles for prior censorship; and finally, non-Saudi newspapers can be printed in Saudi Arabia, subject to prior censorship, like other international publications imported by the country (Alaskar 2002; Alqarni 2013).

In the same vein, Alaskar (2002) explains some of the positive aspects of these regulations which may assist in improving the performance of Saudi newspapers and other media:

These new regulations, especially the one allowing non-Saudi newspapers to be distributed within the Kingdom on the date of publication, contribute to the open competition between Saudi newspapers and other newspapers. This has resulted in Saudi newspapers developing their professionalism and upgrading technology to the level of what is offered in the non-Saudi newspapers, which are mostly characterised by high professional standards and advanced technology (Alaskar 2002, p.119).

In contrast, Alaskar (2002) believes there are still some obstacles and negative aspects in this law which affect the performance of the media in Saudi Arabia. He summarizes these problems as follows:

There are some shortcomings in the regulation of [the] press in Saudi Arabia; in particular these regulations do not identify the exact available margin of freedom for professional practices. In addition, these regulations lack the required limits of guarantees of practice for qualified Saudi journalists, who are not adequately protected by these regulations. Therefore, Saudi journalists do not have job security, as these regulations focus attention on the regulatory aspects of journalism at the expense of the professional aspects; most of the internal regulations on the institutions of the press are about the administrative and financial procedures of these institutions. The interpretation and application of employment laws to workers in these institutions and the printing regulations of Saudi Arabia do not give proper consideration to the rehabilitation and training of journalists (Alaskar 2002, pp.119-121).

It is worth mentioning that the fifth printing law does not deal with the media which accompanied the emergence of the Internet, such as discussion forums and others. Awad (2010) criticises this law for ignoring these new media:

Although the Fifth printing law was issued in 2000, it does not take into account global developments in information and communication technology, including the Internet and satellite channels. There are no major differences between the Fifth and the Fourth printing laws, which makes the Fifth out of touch with developments in the media field (p.25).

As mentioned earlier, the latest printing law in Saudi Arabia is the sixth one, which was issued in January 2011. It refers only to electronic publishing; namely, the new media that emerged with the Internet, such as blogs, online newspapers, electronic

forums, the social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and My Space), electronic ads and mailing groups. This law has been amended twice, the first version being issued early in 2011 and an amended version in February of the same year. After these regulations had raised much discussion among specialists in electronic publishing, the Ministry amended 14 of the 19 articles. The amendments dealt with activities that need a licence and the conditions that journalists who request a licence must meet, as well as the terms of appointment for a newspaper editor (Alqarni 2013). For example, Article (5) obliges anyone who wants to set up an online newspaper or electronic publishing house or website or a site that broadcasts messages on a mobile phone service to obtain a licence. Article (6) is more general, stating that all other media applications not mentioned in Article (5) need only register with the Electronic Media Department in the Ministry of Culture and Information. Article (7) and (8) define the terms for obtaining the licence. Article (13) forbids censorship. Article (15) says that the Ministry of Information is the only one that has the right to investigate irregularities (Almohareb 2011, p.94).

No doubt there are some positive articles in the sixth law that made a positive impression on the journalists; at least the existence of a list may strengthen their position. However, some journalists argue that this regulation is 'an attempt to handcuff the online newspapers for the benefit of traditional newspapers' (Almoshwah et al 2011, p.88).

For his part, Dr. Abdul Aziz Khoja, the Minister of Culture and Information, attempted to dispel the concerns of journalists about this regulation by emphasizing 'the absence from electronic publishing organization regulations of any terms or conditions that limit the freedoms or impose strict limits on the users of Internet services in all areas of the media' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, January 6, 2011). He believes that the aim of the regulation is to establish rules and regulations for the electronic media to achieve their ambitions in line with the extensive growth and development witnessed in this sector. The minister also pointed out that 'these regulations establish a complementary relationship between the Ministry and electronic

publishing, through communication and cooperation in order to achieve benefits for this country and achieve the goals of every citizen' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, January 6, 2011).

It is interesting to note that the regulation requirements for obtaining an operating licence for electronic publishing activities are that the applicant should be a Saudi citizen and not under the age of 20. They should have obtained a qualification of at least high school standard or its equivalent, should have obtained a licence compatible with electronic media publishing activity, be of good behaviour and have a specific address (Alqarni 2013, p.169). However, some of these articles duplicate to some extent the regulation introduced for newspaper 'institutions' which was issued in 1964, when it stirred resentment among journalists and owners of Saudi newspapers.

With regard to online newspapers, the regulations say that the Ministry must approve every online newspaper editor, that the licence should last for three years and be renewable and that it is the editor-in-chief or his representative, in his absence, who is responsible for what is published by the newspaper.

However, the regulations do not mention whether an individual who is refused a licence to issue an online newspaper is allowed to know why. This leaves the Ministry decision unaccountable. The register entitles residents to register their sites with the Ministry in a systematic manner. With respect to sanctions relating to electronic publishing and computer-related crimes, 'the regulations stipulate an obligation to publish correct content, fines for violations, compensation for the victims of breaches of rights of privacy as well as partial and temporary blocking of the offending site' (Alqarni 2013, p.174). The purpose of these regulations, according to Alsairi (2013), is 'to protect the public from crimes and offences that may occur via electronic media such as insults, defamation, vilification and security breaches' (p.10).

The regulations confirm that if the licence for electronic publishing does not exist or the owner has not registered his newspaper, this will not relieve the owner from responsibility for what is published electronically. Irregularity in electronic publishing 'is considered a crime and is mentioned in the law 'Combating Information Crimes' and if a complaint is made to the authorities, they have jurisdiction to implement this law' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, January 6, 2011).

In fact, the issuing of these regulations triggered controversy on the Internet, despite attempts by the Ministry of Culture and Information to reassure activists on forums, blogs and online newspapers that the regulations 'did not come to restrict freedoms, but to be more organized'. A Ministry spokesman, Abdul Rahman Al-Hazza, in a meeting with the owners of online newspapers and websites, also tried to reassure them that the field was open to amendments and suggestions on the list of electronic publishing regulations (*Al-Jazeera*, January 4, 2011).

Since the announcement of this list in Saudi Arabia in both the versions of 2011, the debate rages among Saudi intellectuals about the ability of these regulations to control the electronic media. Some observers of the media scene in Saudi Arabia believe that they will cause chaos, because they are characterised by foggy thinking and are not clear (*Al-Jazeera*, January 4, 2011). Additionally, no clear obligations are stated in the policies about the Saudi media; they yield several different meanings and interpretations.

The Ministry's assurances did not satisfy a number of activists on websites and social media networks, who accused it of seeking 'to try to control cyberspace and gagging media freedoms', as indicated by a Saudi blogger speaking to *Al-Jazeera Net* (*Blogger* who preferred not to be named). She stated 'I am not surprised by the issuance of the regulation, which was only to be expected'. She also adds: 'I will be transferring my blog service to one of the other Arab countries, far from the scalpels of these regulations' (*Al-Jazeera*, January 4, 2011).

Simon Mabon (2012) believes that the electronic publishing regulations are an attempt to manage electronic content in Saudi Arabia. He comments:

The Ministry for Culture and Information requires all bloggers to have a license, with those who can apply for a license limited to individuals over the age of 20 who possess a college degree. Blogging was then to fall under the purview of the Saudi Press and Publications law, which was amended in April 2011 to reflect growing security concerns (Mabon 2012, p.15).

However, Mohammed Alshehri, the editor-in-chief of the conservative online news title *Sabq*, took a different view, stressing that the regulation 'will not be a regulatory exercise in censorship or gagging, in accordance with the rules and statements of the leaders of the Ministry of Culture and Information' (Al-Jazeera, January 4, 2011). He added, 'online newspapers will feel more stable with this regulation, which is to protect journalists working in the field of online journalism' (Al-Jazeera, January 4, 2011). He claimed that his online newspaper had already participated in panel discussions and was one of the first advocates and supporters of these regulations (Al-Jazeera, January 4, 2011).

In this regard, Youssef Al-Hazza, editor of the more liberal *Elaph* in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, agreed with Alshehri, adding: 'The regulations, from my point of view, are adjustable according to the assurances of the Ministry of Culture and Information', (Al-Jazeera, January 4, 2011). He went on, 'There are a lot of conditions that need to be rewritten and considered, especially in dealing with this media. Electronic space is difficult to control, because it is like the sea' (Al-Jazeera, January 4, 2011). Nevertheless, he did criticise some provisions: 'most phrases of the regulations are flexible and 'rubbery'. Their interpretation may depend on the mood of those responsible in the Ministry of Culture and Information; in addition, some terms contradict each other' (Al-Jazeera, January 4, 2011).

*Anbacom's*⁴⁴ editor-in-chief Faisal Almoshwah is perhaps more positive about the change in regulation:

Despite the negatives that exist in the rules which organize the work of the online newspapers in Saudi Arabia, there are important advantages. For example, there has been a reliable management we can rely on for providing recognition of workers in the field of online journalism in order to preserve their rights, just like their colleagues in traditional newspapers (Almoshwah et al 2011, p.89).

He adds:

Beginnings are always difficult, so officials must listen to the views of experts and specialists to proceed, anticipate the results of the experiment and work to develop rules and regulations to achieve the required goal. They do not have to rush the results of these systems or make an early judgment on this experience (p.89).

For his part, Ali Al Hazmi, *Sabq's* founder, believes that the new regulations have placed journalists under a responsibility. He explains:

Regulation came after sensing the importance of these new media and I think that formal recognition provides stability. This opens the way for anyone who wants to cooperate with this notification, whether officials or recipients, to work within a framework of clarity and transparency (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, January 6, 2011).

He continues: 'The terms of this regulation stipulate the lack of control and thus responsibility rests with the editors and administrators of electronic newspapers to take into account the interests of the homeland and the citizen' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, January 6, 2011).

Abdul Rahman Al Hazza, the Deputy Minister of Information in Saudi Arabia, defended the regulations and urged sceptics to take the trouble to look at item 13, where the Ministry makes it clear that there is no restriction on freedoms or muzzling of online newspapers. The evidence is that it put an end to censorship, pressure on electronic publishing and the blocking of sites. The regulations, according to Al

⁴⁴ *Anbacom* is an online newspaper, first issued in 2009. Its founder, Khalid Almoshoah, is a columnist for the *Al-Watan* newspaper. This title, according to its editor-in-chief, 'is characterised by re-publishing the most prominent columns in Saudi and the Arab press, and this has attracted many readers to the online newspaper's site' (Almoshwah et al 2011, p. 82).

Hazza, are 'an attempt to reach universally applicable standards without any harassment and there is plenty of time for discussion to amend the regulations and to address any errors they contain' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, January 6, 2011).

The Open Net Organization, which includes specialists from Canada, America and Britain, has studied the censorship which has been imposed on the Internet world-wide. According to this study, Saudi Arabia and other countries impose strict limits on the media by blocking pornographic sites, gaming sites and those discussing homosexuality (Open Net 2004). However, it could be argued that the Internet has led to less censorship for other traditional media, despite the censorship and blocking of the Internet by some states, but has actually proved that censorship is ineffectual, since the number of websites has steadily increased and sites can easily find ways to circumvent censorship and appear again if they are banned (Aba Numai 2009).

4.5 Challenges facing online journalism

Online journalism has developed in Saudi Arabia as a strong competitor to official newspapers, to such an extent that the new generation no longer reads the news in hard copy. But it faces many difficulties and challenges; for instance, many online newspapers in Saudi Arabia suffer financial difficulties related to their inadequate funding and the cost of their expenses (Alrougi et al 2011). Moreover, advertising brings no profits to online journalism such as official newspapers earn, because advertisers still lack confidence in online journalism (Alshibani interview, 1 August, 2012). This is puzzling when paper-based newspapers have such limited distribution (300,000 copies for the largest) while some Saudi online newspapers are visited by a million users per day (Almoshwah et al 2011). Online newspapers cannot convince advertisers of the importance of advertising on the Internet (Alferm 2009). These difficulties in marketing and attracting advertisers perhaps result in their reliance on volunteers rather than professional journalists; besides, specialist online journalists are scarce. Alferm (2009) mentions that it is the technicians – not the journalists – who control these online newspapers.

There are also legal difficulties from, for example, the absence of clear rules, regulations and laws. Although regulations were issued in 2011, some journalists still suffer from a lack of clarity about them (as discussed above). In addition, they suffer fierce competition from the sources of international, Arab and foreign news which issue online 'publications' in Arabic. For example, French publishers began to compete in the marketing of Arab online newspapers. The famous *Le Monde* newspaper issued an electronic Arab edition, aimed at Arab readers, in addition to its paper version. This electronic version is updated around the clock (Alferm 2009).

Journalists and editors in online newspapers still suffer from 'a lack of recognition; official invitations to attend activities, conferences and seminars that are usually covered by the mass media are not sent to them' (Almoshwah et al 2011, p.85). Probably they are also seen as a threat to official newspapers and perhaps as critical of the government and for these reasons are not invited to certain events.

In the same vein, these journalists' rights are incomplete without a commission or club to protect their rights and they are not allowed to join the Union of Arab Journalists (Almoshwah et al 2011). Furthermore, online journalists do not have the same rights and privileges as their colleagues who work in traditional media. This makes them more susceptible to injustice and extortion, which affects their work and their interactions with others (Alferm 2009).

Some editors-in-chief and editors of official newspapers have through their publications tarnished the image of the Saudi online newspapers and their staff and owners. They still demand blocks on online newspapers or punishment for their editors, perhaps because of the strong influence exerted by online newspapers which have attracted a large public following (Darwish et al 2011, p.123). For example, the editor-in-chief of *Al-Jazirah* newspaper, Khaled Almalek, who criticised online newspapers in Saudi Arabia, was recently quoted as saying 'online

newspapers are based on individual work (not professional), and their content is weak' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, March 15, 2015).

In general, journalists' and reporters' salaries are low, whether they work on Saudi official newspapers or online newspapers. Pintak and Ginges (2009) commented on this matter: 'In Saudi Arabia, with its high cost-of-living, the average starting salary for a reporter is only about \$920 a month. Journalists there jokingly call it "the beggar's job"' (Pintak and Ginges 2009, p.165). Finally, Saudi online journalism always suffers from hacking and attempts to disable sites (such as the sites of the online newspapers *Sabq* and *Alweeam*). It costs a great deal for a newspaper to enhance its protection systems and make use of professional companies that have experience in this field.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter engages with the development of Saudi online journalism from its emergence at the beginning of the new millennium to the end of 1990s when the Internet emerged and discussion forums attracted a Saudi audience. This chapter argues that online newspapers contributed to raising the ceiling of freedom for other Saudi media and lowering the level of censorship. This statement is supported by Almaghlooth (2014), who has pointed out that Turki Al-Sudairy, editor-in-chief of *Al-Riyadh*, during competition with online newspapers 'had to change his policy on reviewing stories to decide which should be published. ...he [Turki Al-Sudairy] delegated to his department heads the power to approve news items, in order to accelerate the process of publishing' (cited in Almaghlooth 2014, pp.66-67).

In relation to news forums, it is argued in this chapter that they provided an early source of 'alternative' information and viewpoints, prefiguring the later function of social media, as these discussion forums on the Internet benefited from the margin of freedom, speed of the news on the Internet and not having to rely on official sources, to present themselves as alternative media to the press.

Eventually, by 2001, the year which witnessed the emergence of online newspapers, several changes had been happening in the Saudi news media environment. Moreover, new laws and regulations were issued in that period which took into account this new type of media, and censorship was formulated in order to adapt to the new circumstances. This chapter has revealed these changes, with the development of Saudi online newspapers and publication laws that were issued in this period, as well as the challenges and obstacles faced by these new media. The next chapter explores the perceptions of Saudi journalists concerning online newspapers and other new media in the period from 2000 to July 2012.

Chapter 5

Producing Online News: Perceptions Among Saudi Journalists

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is based on face-to-face interviews with thirteen editors, editors-in-chief and correspondents working for the six Saudi online newspapers referred to most often by readers and users in the questionnaire conducted for the thesis: *Sabq*, *Alweeam*, *Ajel*, *Anaween*, *Sada* and *Alwakad*. Discussion in the interviews was organised around three main areas: first, the working methods of online newspapers (for newsgathering, verifying the reliability of the news, choosing editors and reporters) and the constraints and obstacles limiting journalists' practices, including censorship; second, the relationship with the Saudi reader – how online sites attract Saudi readers and gain their trust; third, competition with other media: on the one hand, traditional media and on the other, new media – in particular, social media.

It is worth noting that every online newspaper, unlike traditional newspapers, has more than one editor-in-chief. It was not unusual, for example, to meet someone who introduced himself as the editor-in-chief of an online newspaper, only a few days later to meet the owner of the paper who also introduced himself as the editor-in-chief. I have tried to avoid this confusion by distinguishing the 'owner' or 'founder' from the 'editor', 'deputy editor' and 'editing manager' (i.e. the editorial director). Some interviewees were editors, or reporters, who had as much as 24 years' experience, such as Mr. Lotfi Abdullatiff who works on *Sabq* as an editorial director. Others, such as Mr. Khaled Alrougi at *Ajel*, had only two years' experience. The questions put to them reflect their differences in terms of experience, expertise and rank.

As discussed above (see Chapter Three), one editor and one editor-in-chief did not want to disclose their names.

5.2 Online journalism in practice

5.2.1 News gathering

According to the journalists interviewed, news gathering online relies on five main sources. First, all respondents rely on news agencies; most editors mentioned the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), followed by Reuters. A few mentioned the French news agency, AFP. Other editors, including Turki Alrougi, *Alweeam*'s editor-in-chief, also highlighted that, 'We have to depend on news agencies when reporting on situations happening in places that are far away' (Alrougi interview, 4 August, 2012). However, some editors, in particular those on *Sabq* online, believe that reporters themselves are the most important sources of news, above all for local news. The editor who did not want to be named remarked:

We get our news from reporters and the news agencies, and we have a network of reporters in the Kingdom in most cities. We depend on the agencies for external news but not for covering local news because when they cover local news they cover it in a biased way; we seldom take our local news from the agencies (interview, 26 July 2012).

It seems likely that in referring to 'bias', the editor is indicating that foreign news agencies tend to focus on what in Saudi Arabia is judged 'negative news' or news critical of aspects of Saudi Arabian society; for example, women's rights or the role of the religious police. In contrast, they [editors] believe that local reporters are more 'reliable' sources in developing stories more in tune with the domestic social and cultural 'sensitivities', more acceptable to readers/users and (to some extent) more acceptable to the Ministry of Information. It can be argued that in developing stories in a way more in tune with Saudi Arabia's 'sensitivities' and acceptable to readers/users, they are, in fact, demonstrating a degree of self-censorship, an issue discussed further below. *Sabq*'s editor-in-chief Mohammed Alshehri claimed that 90% of the news published in *Sabq* was supplied by 'reporters who cover events and then send the reports to us' (Alshehri interview, 24 July, 2012). This method is similar to that used by the official media, but, according to Awad (2010), Saudi official newspapers also rely on different sources of news; for example, official websites,

city websites (run by local people), and even online journalism itself, referring to such websites as '*Sabq* and *Alweeam*' (pp.219-220).

The third source that the respondents relied on was 'independent sources', mentioned by four editors. Such sources are people with no official position in government Ministries or departments who pass on news to online newspapers; in other words, they are acting as undercover reporters⁴⁵ sometimes for a particular news outlet. However, the editors gave no details as to whether these sources were people in high and influential positions or lower ranking employees. Mutlaq Almarshady, founder of the *Alweeam* online newspaper, described these sources differently, saying: '... most important are our sources and our connections with some decision-makers'⁴⁶ (Almarshady interview, 4 August, 2012). As with other media which use such sources, the main reason for online newspapers to do so is to be competitive: they are either trying to get more details about news items – to find something distinctive or simply trying to disseminate the news more quickly. For example, some of the editors or reporters mentioned that they have a good relationship with a manager or official, who provides them with important news before it is published in other media.

The fourth source on which Saudi online newspapers rely, mentioned by three editors, is social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Such media enable journalists and ordinary citizens to quickly communicate events, often accompanied by dramatic photos, and spread them around the world, as during the Arab Spring. In the Saudi context, such news, whether local or international, can often escape the censorship experienced by the official news media. For these reasons, Saudi online newspapers are interested in social media sites.

Saudi online newspapers depend least on foreign newspapers for news. Only one editor mentioned them as a source – *Sabq*'s editor-in-chief. He indicated that this

⁴⁵The editors suggested that these 'undercover reporters' secretly leak material to news providers.

⁴⁶ This suggests that the sources may have powerful positions.

paper greatly depended on 'translating from foreign newspapers, in particular American ones; we have three translators who do the job' (Alshehri interview, 24 July, 2012). However, *Sabq* is the only Saudi online newspaper to employ professional translators for this purpose⁴⁷. Perhaps this is one of the key reasons why *Sabq* occupies the top position in its field. The editor-in-chief added that it was stories from foreign newspapers - exotic or humorous news items – that interested a certain group of Saudi readers, but he did not go on to specify the percentage of foreign news items in his paper.

From these comments, it would seem that the differences among the titles about the sources that they use are not related to their political attitudes, i.e. whether they are 'conservative', 'liberal', or 'moderate', but to a newspaper's financial strength. The more popular online newspapers are economically the strongest, and more successful at gaining advertising revenue (see below). These titles are also the ones able to employ the greatest number of correspondents. This was made evident by *Sabq*'s editor, who said that 90% of their news comes from (salaried) reporters. This would also apply to *Alweeam*, one of the most important and popular online sources.

5.2.2 Becoming an online editor

Approximately half the editors indicated that they had experience of working for traditional newspapers. This was to be expected, because online journalism in Saudi Arabia has appeared only within the last ten years, and therefore most practitioners have come from other media; in particular, official newspapers. However, three editors mentioned that they had begun to work for an online newspaper without any experience in other media. It soon became clear that the latter are always taken on as editors or reporters, not as editing managers or editors-in-chief; in other words, owners of online newspapers look for journalists with press experience to manage their online newspapers. Two other editors said that initially they became involved in journalism informally, through the online discussion and dialogue forums (see

⁴⁷Although *Sada*, another online newspaper, later appointed three translators to translate the news from foreign newspapers (mostly English language ones).

Chapter Four) and had then moved on to work in online journalism. One of the journalists who followed this route is Mutlaq Almarshady, the founder of *Alweeam*.

With regard to the question of experience in the traditional media, whilst six editors thought that an online editor need not have such experience, four indicated that they must. For instance, some mentioned the knowledge and skills that are needed by online editors, which may be acquired through practice. One of the former group, (the unnamed editor-in-chief) stated:

A journalist in online journalism doesn't necessarily have to have experience in paper-based papers, but naturally these papers qualify and prepare the journalist to work for online journalism... Most journalists now in online journalism come from paper-based newspapers (interview, 7 August, 2012).

On the other hand, Mutlaq Almarshady, founder of the *Alweeam* online newspaper, believed that print media experience was essential for an editor, although not for a reporter. He stated:

I feel that an editor has to have experience in print journalism, while a reporter, on the other hand, does not require it, but instead needs to have a serious willingness to do the work, with guidance from the editor (Almarshady interview, 4 August, 2012).

He is implying that if someone was committed to being a reporter for an online newspaper, he could gain expertise on the job. However, *Sabq's* editor-in-chief Mohamed Alshehri explains why he believes that experience of print media is important for reporters as well:

A journalist who works for an online newspaper must have experience in paper-based newspapers so that he can identify the limits of publishing, and also to observe the interests of his country and the guidelines which should not be encroached on (Alshehri interview, 24 July, 2012).

What he is interestingly highlighting here as necessary knowledge and expertise relates to the legal and cultural/social constraints within which journalism in Saudi Arabia operates. To put it another way, the reporter must already have learnt the

skills of self-censorship in journalism and know, through practice, the regulations around censorship.

However, according to the interviewees, the knowledge and skills that an online editor needs, include: talent, having a good background in journalism, and the journalist who had come to work on the online newspaper had to have trained adequately in the printed press or in any other media outlet. Yet it seems that the issue of the importance of print news experience relates to two aspects: a) they [interviewees] believe these people (editors/ journalists) will have learnt what makes a news story credible; and b) what the parameters of regulation and cultural/political 'sensitivities' are which a journalist has to adhere to. Besides this, the journalist who has experience in the printed press knows what the red lines are in the publishing world and is also experienced in confronting censorship.

5.2.3 Checking the reliability of news

Five editors believed that the editor was the main element in the process of establishing the 'credibility' of a news item. Some of them said that a good editor or reporter must be chosen and that the editor must be committed to the use of publishing controls. These are in practice instructions that must be followed by journalists in the presentation of news, which may include the publication of social and cultural taboos and topics that should be avoided. But more generally the key issue was establishing 'credibility'.

On this point, editor-in-chief, Tareq Ibrahim commented about *Anaween*:

There are no mechanisms for verifying news items, except where strange or unbelievable information is concerned. However, there are general rules that the editor abides by, that give us trust in what we publish by way of news. If a journalist made up news, he would be dismissed immediately. Everyone knows about this policy, even before joining us. That is why we assume that they will not do what would require us to investigate the authenticity of the material they send, except where certain information has to be enquired about in order to verify or clarify it (Ibrahim interview, 5 August, 2012).

Tareq Ibrahim is suggesting that there are no agreed on, explicit professional rules in online news reporting but that these are tacitly assumed and developed through practice and experience. Maybe the approach to verifying the news indicates a difference between Saudi online newspapers. *Sabq* has taken a step forward: from time to time, it conducts workshops and professional training in news editing for its editors, and it also invites journalists and experts in new media to train its staff (Alshehri interview, 24 July, 2012; Abdullatiff interview, 26 July, 2012). This provision by *Sabq* is the same as that which Saudi official newspapers usually provide to train their journalists and reporters. Moreover, they also cooperate with universities in training journalism students, because they wish to attract the most talented ones. In relation to online, the lack of training and experience of some journalists is one factor perhaps affecting a site's credibility.

In addition, interviewees spoke about ways of checking the reliability of the news through having confidence in the reporter. Some interviewees said that they determine the credibility of news from whether the reporter has experience. Mutlaq Almarshady from *Alweeam* describes the editorial process and some of the elements he takes into account to verify a story:

Normally the verification of an item is the initial duty of the editor-in-chief or the managing editor, but it also depends on the reliability of the reporter. For instance, some correspondents are quite professional and corroborate their statements with sound and pictures, so there are not many objections to publishing the items, except that the final signal must be given by the editor-in-chief or the managing editor who has the authority to allow publication (Almarshady interview, 4 August, 2012).

Several editors (4) emphasized the importance of contacting the relevant institution or relevant Ministry (those having a direct relationship with the news items). They believed it is one of the most important methods of verifying its credibility. This view is similar to that adopted by the official media, who would be failing in their legal responsibility if they did not check the accuracy of the story with the relevant Ministry, or organisation. Other editors (5), elaborating points made by Almarshady (above)

believed that the editor-in-chief and deputy editor-in-chief should check the accuracy of the information published. For example, Turki Alrougi from *Alweeam* commented on the role of the deputy editor-in-chief in this regard:

We have an editing manager and evening and morning supervisors who follow up the material and make sure of its authenticity, whether through contacting additional sources, spokespersons, officials, or witnesses ... etc. (Alrougi interview, 4 August, 2012).

Some editors (4) referred to verifying the source of a news item, to establish whether or not it is reliable. Some of these, such as Lotfi from *Sabq*, stated that the source of a news item must be known before it can be published. The online editor, Naif Almosheet, of *Alweeam*, indicated that stories were verified before publication from local sources, if possible from more than one. If the source was an agency or an official Ministry source, then the news item was deemed more trustworthy (Almosheet interview, 3 August, 2012).⁴⁸

As for the number of staff who check news stories before their publication, five editors mentioned that two to three people carry out this task, while four said that one person alone was responsible. Often it is the editor-in-chief or his deputy, or the editing manager who checks the news sources. Despite the limited number of journalists who check and filter the news on some online newspapers, readers are, to some extent, still convinced of the credibility of their reporting (according to Survey findings)⁴⁹. This is because readers tend to identify certain social media or certain online newspapers as generally trustworthy, and do not wonder how far these outlets can, in practice, check the accuracy and reliability of what they publish. As Metzger (2005) points out:

Unlike most traditional (print) publishing, information posted on the Web may not be subject to filtering through professional gatekeepers,

⁴⁸ However, in the Saudi context it can be argued that the mere fact that the source of information is a government department or official does not automatically mean the information is trustworthy. Fact-checking may reveal bias or spin or what some working in government agencies would prefer to keep hidden'.

⁴⁹ According to Survey findings, social networking' sites (social media) and online journalism gave a more objective account of social and political issues in Saudi than of mainstream news (traditional media). (for more details, see chapter six).

and it often lacks traditional authority indicators such as author identity or established reputation (cited in Awad 2010, pp.229-230).

Although not providing evidence, Awad goes on to criticise the news editing in some online newspapers, claiming that:

Local Saudi news websites such as *Sabq*, *Alweeam*, and *Kabar* are very keen to beat the press to news stories, even at the expense of reliability and credibility. Therefore, they publish some stories regardless of the reliability of the source, in order to get the scoop and beat other news outlets (Awad 2010, p.230).

5.2.4 Constraints and obstacles for Saudi online editors

Saudi online editors talked at length about the challenges and obstacles that affect Saudi online journalism, with the most important being the lack of financial support (as stated by seven editors). Some editors attributed it to the shortage of advertisers, partly the upshot of online newspapers not yet (in 2012) being widely read. Salem Alshibani from *Alweeam* comments that: 'The most important obstacle we faced is the lack of belief among advertisers in electronic advertising' (Alshibani interview, 1 August, 2012). In agreement, Meshal Aldalbahi claims: 'The advertising market and companies are not very cooperative and have no code that governs their activities or relationship with the medium' (Aldalbahi interview, 2 August, 2012). It seems that advertising companies still prefer traditional media, and still do not trust online newspapers, thus raising the issue of why this should be. They have become an important source of competition with the traditional media and perhaps have even outperformed in the provision of news. Is it perhaps that these sites do not provide adequate data about the nature of their readers/users? Such information, and its communication to potential advertisers, is still not very reliable. Salem Alshibani confirms this argument:

Perhaps they [advertisers] believe that these online newspapers are still of unknown ownership; and information about them and their editors is inaccurate. It is therefore difficult for them to be trusted by advertisers (Alshibani interview, 1 August, 2012).

Providing a paid messaging service by phone is the primary source of income for online newspapers, with *Sabq* one of the earliest to adopt this (in 2008) followed by *Ajel* and then *Alweeam*. The second source of income is advertising, whether at the top of the site, which commands the highest price, or on the cheaper 'inside pages'. As already suggested, according to editors and reporters, this potential revenue source generates much less revenue than in other Saudi media; it is still under-used. Providing evidence for this, Almoshwah et al (2011), state: 'online advertising is below 10% of the ads market' (p.87).

The second constraint is the lack of cooperation with online journalism on the part of Ministries and institutions. Some editors (3) said that some Ministries refuse to be interviewed or give news to online reporters. As Salem Alshibani from *Alweeam* commented: 'There are many obstacles, the most prominent being the rejection shown by officials to enquiries made by the editors of online journals' (Alshibani interview, 1 August, 2012). This demonstrates perhaps that online has not yet convinced officials of its credibility, gained their confidence, or proved itself influential in the community. As one editor-in-chief offered: 'Many Ministries still do not regard online newspaper as real papers. Some refuse to give us any statements, and some officials still have a derogatory view of the news media' (anonymous editor-in-chief interview, 7 August, 2012). There is perhaps another reason for being rejected: some online news providers do not adopt the political line (or policy) that is required by Ministries and officials, and even, according to Almarshady from *Alweeam*: 'There are attempts by some influential officials to interfere in the policies of the paper for their own agenda and purposes' (Almarshady interview, 4 August, 2012).

Another key constraint is a shortage of specialist Saudi journalists qualified to work on online newspapers. All the editors who were interviewed agreed on this. Some suggested that it resulted from a lack of Saudi specialists in certain areas of technological expertise and in the design of websites. *Sabq's* editor in chief, Mohammed Alshehri supports this argument:

Our paper has made great jumps and overcome many obstacles; with the greatest obstacle being the lack of Saudi online journalists. Unfortunately, there are now no journalists of this kind in Saudi Arabia who can deal with modern technology (Alshehri interview, 24 July, 2012).

But a shortage of funds also exacerbates the shortage of journalists qualified to work on online newspapers.

Usefully, Mutlaq Almarshady offers a summary of the wider range of difficulties facing online newspapers, based on his experience of working at *Alweeam*:

Obstacles include many things indeed: editorial issues, material issues, and organizational and governmental problems. Summarizing these, one can include the blocking of the site which has damaged the paper in the past, the lack of experience of some reporters, the lack of Saudi personnel who are skilled in editing and the reluctance of advertisers, specifically big companies, to advertise in the paper. While there is some advertising presence, there has been no increase in the volume of advertising.

Likewise, there is the technical problem of hacker attacks, which have forced Saudi online newspapers to spend extra money to protect themselves. Almarshady states:

There are no regulations to protect our sites from illegal access and electronic attack, and our online newspaper site has been broken into more than once by hackers, but we were able to restore it (Almarshady interview, 4 August, 2012).

Almarshady added that some international media, news agencies in particular, have published news taken from his site [*Alweeam*]; however, these international media and news agencies did not mention the original source. He gave an example of the story of a girl who fell into a well (in January 2011) in the northern of the city of Taif, in the western region of Saudi Arabia (Almarshady interview, 4 August, 2012).

On the whole, then, the journalists who were interviewed referred to two main kinds of obstacles facing them, one financial (finding sufficient funds), the other their problematic relationship with the authorities (the Ministries and their officials) who neither supported their efforts to expand and develop nor favoured them when offering news stories. But in fact, in both instances, the obstacles are partly due to

lack of trust in the medium and doubt about its credibility. Both advertisers and the Ministries play safe: advertisers think their money will be better spent elsewhere – where they know who the audience/readers are; the Ministries and officials cannot trust online news outlets to tell the news as they would like it to be told, but can rely on official news outlets to do that.

As regards the relationship with the authorities, as outlined above some of the Ministries and their officials refuse to deal with online newspapers. In addition, there are no clear rules governing the work of these media, nor regulations to protect their journalists, as Almarshadi points out:

Unfortunately there is no constant media policy for the steering of our newspapers so that we can conduct our work accordingly. And censorship is sometimes subject to the preferences of certain officials (Almarshady interview, 4 August, 2012).

This means that censorship can be practised, but it is done in such a way that the online newspapers do not know in advance what rules they may find themselves flouting. The next section addresses censorship more fully.

5.2.5 Censorship of Saudi online news

A number of online editors (7) claimed to have had problems or to have faced censorship directly. One mentioned that censorship is sometimes annoying, another that, whereas other media may be censored before publication – such as the official newspapers which routinely have pre-censorship – in online journalism the problem of censorship arose after publication. Titles such as *Sabq* and *Alweeam*, have suffered more than once from being blocked for publishing news which was regarded as conclusively infringing certain laws or dealt with sensitive issues, such as security. This censorship can be experienced by other news media, except that they undergo censorship in advance of publication. Another point, raised by one of the editors, refers to an absence of clear regulations in the Saudi media context, as online newspapers do not know who has censored them and assessed their work. One interviewee, Almarshady, commented that the official censorship of online

newspaper content depended on who was assessing it: 'in some cases ... [it is] subject to the whims of officials' (Almarshady interview, 4 August, 2012).

But censorship is not always exercised only by the government; it can also come from inside the online newspaper itself. The anonymous editor confirms: 'I had no problems with [government] censorship; most of the problems I did face were with the editing managers who exercise the first line of censorship for the editor or reporter' (interview, 26 July, 2012). He is suggesting that the editing managers exercised the function of internal censor perhaps due to fear of official censorship otherwise.

Other online editors (6) stated that they had had no problems with Saudi government censorship, although the editing manager of *Sabq* qualified this:

We have had no problems with censorship⁵⁰, but there might be a misunderstanding with the reporter of an item when another party is involved. If he [the other party] has an opposing view he might complain to the Ministry of Information. However, our online newspaper is always open to the other side and we will allow the publication of any opposing view, and will apologize if we are proven wrong (Abdullatiff interview, 26 July, 2012).

Some editors and reporters confirmed that their confrontations with censorship were due to their handling of sensitive topics, seven noting that their online newspapers had been blocked, some numerous times, including *Sabq* and *Alweeam* which had been blocked three times. Lotfi Abdullatif, the editing manager of *Sabq*, recounted:

Our site has been blocked many times, I don't remember how many exactly, and most of the time it was not because the information or news item we published was not true, but because we were publishing news on sensitive topics (Abdullatif interview, 26 July, 2012).

Other editors, however, including Tareq Ibrahim from *Anaween*, Khalid Alrougi from *Ajel* and Mohammed Alasmari from *Alwakad*, indicated that their online newspapers

⁵⁰ However, when the editing manager of *Sabq*, 'Abdullatiff' says: 'We have had no problems with censorship'; this does not mean that they had not been subjected to blocking, as *Sabq*, according to its editor in chief 'Mohammed Alshehri', has been censored/blocked more than once (Alshehri interview, 24 July).

had not been blocked, while one editor was not sure whether his online newspaper had or not.

On one occasion *Sabq*'s site was blocked because it published a story about security, as *Sabq*'s editor-in-chief Mohammed Alshehri commented:

Sabq was sent a message [news item] by mobile to its subscribers that it was not appropriate, security-wise. But, after understanding our situation [by the authorities] the site came back; and this may have been because of our haste to print the item' (Alshehri interview, 24 July, 2012).

In another incident of blocking, *Sabq* published an article criticising the former Minister of Labour (for more details, see Chapter Four). In the context of these blockings, Abdullatiff describes how:

... *Sabq* was the first to suggest that we should have a system of regulations for Saudi online media, and we have defended the idea so that we would know who is monitoring (censoring) our online newspaper and why it is being blocked (Abdullatif interview, 26 July, 2012).

In this regard, the online newspapers that experienced blocking, such as *Sabq* and *Alweeam*, are the most popular sites with Saudi readers (according to the questionnaire findings; see Chapter Six below). That is, these sites are popular precisely because they are willing to publish stories which print newspapers would not dare to print. However, this may lead to the creation of a new problem for these online editors, because if their site is blocked, readers may go elsewhere and not return.

Thus the popular online newspapers are more concerned not to antagonize the authorities when publishing news about what are regarded as 'sensitive' issues. More obscure online newspapers with relatively few readers/users are perhaps less likely to provoke censorship by the Ministry of Information, even when they report 'sensitive' items, simply because their news will not find many readers.

Regarding the avoidance of topics that might be censored, four editors mentioned that they would avoid such topics in future. Whilst not specifying what issues these might be, Turki Alrougi from *Alweeam* justified his decision:

It is natural to preserve the site's gains, its name and the future of its employees through avoiding the publication of material that would lead to the site's closure, in particular because the stories about these matters in any year can be counted on the fingers of one hand (Alrougi interview, 4 August, 2012).

An element of self-censorship is going on here in order to safeguard the site's future. Thus, it can be said that self-censorship is one of the options resorted to by editors and journalists in order to circumvent official censorship or blocking.

In contrast, four editors, three of them from *Sabq*, asserted they would not promise to avoid any topic. This perhaps provides some evidence that journalists in more 'conservative' online media outlets have more freedom and are less likely to be censored or blocked than those who work in online newspapers with a more liberal or moderate tendency (such as *Anaween* and *Alweeam*). Another editor who belongs to a 'conservative' one claimed:

We will not avoid publishing on any topic important to the reader, no matter what trouble this might cause us, because we are supporting the Saudi reader and will continue printing what is important to him. On the other hand, we have a social responsibility to take precautions in publishing anything that touches national security, or might be hurtful to society or the customs and traditions of the people, because our goal is to print the truth responsibly and without causing harm to any party (Anonymous Interview, 26 July, 2012).

However, even editors of this latter type are in consensus regarding the dictum that 'there is no absolute freedom in journalistic work' and they would probably draw the line in relation to some aspects of government policy, such as certain issues of security (as suggested above). Further, Abdullatif from *Sabq* states:

In our publishing of news we must observe the policies of the land and the policy of the newspaper, because there is no such thing as total freedom – or else work in newspapers would be just chaos (Abdullatif interview, 26 July, 2012).

It is evident, then, that for editors censorship regulations are not clear in the Saudi media context, and for some editors censorship is an annoyance – a constraint to be worked around. Publication on ‘sensitive issues’, such as security and cultural ones, may lead to blocks on the paper, as discussed above in the case of *Sabq*. Given that online, censorship is enacted after publication, journalists must learn through experience how to handle the red lines and push the boundaries of journalistic freedom. In turn, however, the lack of clarity around censorship has also led to the practice of self-censorship among editors and journalists, especially in the more popular online titles.

5.3 Winning and keeping readers

One available strategy to establish a sounder financial basis for online newspapers would be getting readers to pay for access. Yet although most editors said that they would not consider asking Saudi readers to pay to read the news in online newspapers, two were considering such a proposal in the future. One of them, Khalid Alrougi from the *Ajeel* online newspaper, commented: ‘I think we must have a specific mechanism to do that, as well as having distinctive and exciting news that can attract the visitor’ (Alrougi interview, 29 July, 2012). Supporting this view was Naif Almosheet, *Alweeam*’s reporter:

The reader can be persuaded to pay a nominal monthly fee, or an annual subscription, that is paid via accessible means. We should think about charging readers and users in the future because it will support the survival of online newspapers as rivals to other media (Almosheet interview, 3 August, 2012).

Those who ruled out the idea of charging readers for access to an online newspaper site said that this idea was difficult to apply because most media, such as TV channels, broadcast news free of charge, as well as online services themselves being free. For example, the unnamed editor-in-chief observed:

We have not, up till now, charged fees to the reader for using our site; we need years to reach that stage and I don’t think that any Saudi online newspaper will make that choice in the near future (interview, 7 August, 2012).

Lotfi Abdullatiff from *Sabq* more firmly insisted:

The Arab reader will never pay to read the news. This idea has not even entered our minds, and it is totally dismissed from our thoughts because we know the nature of the Arab reader. However, we have something similar, i.e. pre-paid messages via phone. We have readers to whom we send urgent news for a monthly fee of 12 Riyals (Abdullatiff interview, 26 July, 2012).

Instead, editors believed they had to expand their readership in other ways. Six editors mentioned that they were keen to publish scoops and continuously update their news in order to attract readers. Two editors said that they would continuously maintain a presence on social networking sites, Twitter in particular⁵¹. But most editors did not think that the social media were direct competitors, though they might attract some readers away from online newspapers. Overall, most of the respondents said that they in fact benefited from the social media in the dissemination of news and that these media provided an opportunity to promote online titles and gain more readers/followers.

As regards competition with new media in the future, most editors said that they had to take advantage of the latest communication techniques in order to remain competitive and that they should be active partners with them. The editing manager of *Sabq* showed how keen his publication was to keep abreast of developments in communication technology:

We have a specialized section for electronic development that is always up to date with the technologies of the new media and it develops the paper in that direction; that is why you will always find that we have a synergy and compatibility with all new media (Abdullatif interview, 26 July, 2012).

⁵¹ Most Saudi media outlets, whether traditional or online now, have followers on Twitter. *Sabq* has 7 million, both *Alweeam* and *Ajel* have about 1 million, *Elaph* has 250,000 and finally *Anaween* has only 25,000 followers. This also shows that the 'conservative' online newspapers (such as *Sabq*) have more followers on Twitter than other online newspapers have, whether 'moderate' or 'liberal'. However, these figures roughly correspond to their respective readership figures.

More significant, however, for all the editors of the Saudi online newspapers was winning the trust of their Saudi readers through accuracy of information and treating with caution topics that incur censorship, such as security. Gaining reader trust was the main factor that they depended on in their competition with other media. Mohammed Alshehri described trust as,

the crux and the real foundation on which the *Sabq* online newspaper was built ... officials have started to respond to us because of the trust our readers have in the paper (Alshehri interview, 24 July, 2012).

Turki Alrougi from *Alweeam* agreed, adding:

Naturally, Saudi readers' trust is a priority because the Saudi market is the biggest and most important, so we must be very keen to gain the trust of the Saudi reader who has become conscious [of current issues] and knows that this is what distinguishes credible news (Alrougi interview, 4 August, 2012).

Winning reader trust was also seen as important economically, enabling the online newspapers to win a larger share of the Saudi advertising market. Trust, as Alrougi's statement suggests, also rests on these newspapers attaching great importance to the credibility of their news (as signposted in the previous section), not only to maintain their present readership but expand it further.

On gaining such trust, many editors (7) indicated prioritising the readers themselves, what kinds of news attract them, what they want from the news, and then discussing the problems and issues that concern them. Lotfi from *Sabq* emphasized the importance of this point:

We are the citizens' press and care only about the readers because they are the ones who support our site, and we are not interested in pleasing an official or manager at any Ministry or government agency. These readers are the ones who subscribe to us and pay for the news we send to their phones. The online editor is free of the pressure from huge corporations and the major advertisers in the paper-based newspapers. That is why we only care about the readers; they are the 'thermometer' of the paper; and we give voice to people's needs and sufferings because we are the press for the citizens (Abdullatif interview, 26 July, 2012).

A majority of editors (9), said that the best way to attract readers is to focus on issues and topics which are important to them, that touch their lives, as well as letting them air their anxieties, in relation to such issues as unemployment, gaining promotion, poverty and housing. In this way, Saudi online journalism was trying to address readers' concerns and those of the community.

To this end some Saudi online newspapers have opened channels of communication with readers in order to gain their loyalty; for example, providing readers with a name and a code to preserve their confidentiality if they comment on the news and gain access to previous responses in their own files. To strengthen readership, Mohammed Alshehri (from *Sabq*) and Mutlaq Al Marshadi (from *Alweeam*) emphasise giving readers more opportunity to express their views in the comment columns.

At the same time, editors were clear that providing what readers want does not mean neglecting the values of journalism and press ethics. As the editing manager of *Sabq* put it:

We have a continuous plan for each period; we review and appraise our work and our way of publishing news, so that we know what each reader of *Sabq* wants. Each generation has its preferred ways of accessing the news, and we try to keep up with the expectations of the reader but within the bounds of journalistic professionalism and ethics. That is why we concentrate on what the reader wants, whether sports or arts (Abdullatiff interview, 26 July, 2012).

Knowing what the readers want is easier for online newspapers than the official press. They can log the public's most read articles, showing how many people access them (usually on the left side of the home page) so that readers also know which reports were of most interest to other readers. In further trying to ensure that current Saudi readers stay faithful to their online journalism sites, most editors said they also monitored readers' comments on the site, and some that they followed up the average number of visits to a site, which told them what the interests of the

readers were, where the readers were heading, and what kind of news they preferred.

However, Lotfi Abdullatif added that responses, comments and interactions with their site were looked at for other reasons:

We have about eight people who monitor the responses and comments of the readers. This is really important and must be given considerable attention, because if it is disregarded it might cause problems for an online newspaper. There might be legal liability if the online newspaper published statements or comments offensive to someone or threatened security or attacked beliefs and religions (Abdullatif interview, 26 July, 2012).

Clearly this monitoring is part of the process of ensuring regulations are met and censorship not incurred, as well as about not offending some readers. The emphasis they place on reader responses and comments is one way the online titles differentiate themselves from official news titles.

A smaller number of editors (4) mentioned that priority should be given to credibility and accuracy in the dissemination of news, and the avoidance of publishing unreliable material. They believe that for readers, credibility of the news is paramount. According to Tariq Ibrahim:

Accuracy, comprehensiveness, and objectivity are all characteristics which an online newspaper should have, besides having an interest in news and issues that are local and also allowing for a margin of freedom (Ibrahim interview, 5 August, 2012).

Anaween's editor-in-chief Tareq Ibrahim spoke of the importance of professionalism:

We provide ... what cannot be found anywhere else, and are keen on maintaining a high degree of professionalism in dealing with published material in particular, as there are hundreds of unqualified papers and sites that are not serious and are not very professional ... We rely on correct and accurate information from known sources, and focus on objectivity, steering clear of exaggeration and hype. We are concerned not only about the ethics of journalism, but also that the margin of freedom available in the online newspapers should not mean waiving

these journalistic values and ethics. Therefore, I have made sure to write on the home page of our site the methods of online newspaper work, and we require those who want to work with us to apply them accurately and keenly (Ibrahim interview, 5 August, 2012).

Eventually, most of the editors reported that they would not ask their readers to pay to receive the news. But some wondered about needing to find a way to convince the reader to pay in the future for the survival of online newspapers. However, a number of editors insisted that they were keen to scoop and update news firsthand in order to attract more readers, and some also mentioned that winning the confidence of readers is a catalyst in the continuing competition with other media, as well as focusing on the issues that touch people's lives.

5.4 Conclusion

These interviews conducted with the editors and reporters of Saudi online newspapers suggest some differences across titles in their sources of news, how news is edited, and their understanding of constraints and obstacles that affect the work of journalism. It appears that there are differences between those working on 'moderate', 'conservative' and 'liberal' sites; perhaps also differences between the sites which are successful in terms of the number of users (readers) and thus also financially stable, and those which are not. On 'conservative' sites, like *Sabq*, the newsgathering and editorial processes are mostly similar to those of official newspapers. The most read also have the largest number of followers on social media. By contrast, 'moderate' online newspapers like *Anaween* have fewer readers and followers on social media. A dedicated headquarters for an online newspaper may indicate a site's success economically – associated with attracting more advertising, and with users; *Sabq* and *Alweeam* are the only titles this applies to (May 2015).

Four key but related issues for online news titles emerge from these interviews: credibility and trust, censorship and self-censorship, reader response and comment, and finance. All the editors-in-chief, editors and reporters who were interviewed

confirmed that the credibility of news is a significant matter for them. They wanted to show that they are working to professional standards and thereby gain the confidence of the public. There are certain important elements they pointed to in achieving credibility. Some editors believed that the 'editor' is a key element in establishing the credibility of the online newspaper. The training and qualifications of the editor/reporter leads to credibility, while a lack of qualifications and training or experience negatively affects this. They implied that when an editor is qualified and experienced, credibility, as perceived by readers, is more likely. And closely related to credibility, gaining 'trust' is also seen as important. A lack of trust in the online newspapers by readers, advertisers and Ministry officials is regarded as problematic and a factor limiting their credibility.

A second significant issue that emerges is that of censorship, both official and self-censorship. As for the tensions which face editors/journalists in online journalism during confrontation with the regulations and censorship, some interviewees stated that the regulations are not clear and are exercised post-publication, and that this uncertainty can lead to self-censorship or at least caution. Saudi online newspapers want to push the boundaries but in doing so they are never quite sure whether they will end up being blocked. If they are blocked they risk losing further trust (from Ministries/officials) and losing their readers who go elsewhere when a site is blocked. To manage this successfully, they require experienced staff (but they don't have enough of these, according to what most journalists reported above). Regarding the political line of Saudi online journalism (conservative, moderate and liberal) in terms of dealing with the tensions, some moderate online newspapers (such as *Anaween* and *Alwakad*) tend to comply with censorship rather than collide with it, while the other conservative (*Sabq*) and liberal (*Alweeam*) ones have many experiences of confrontation with censorship, and were blocked more than once, and thus this has led to the practice of self-censorship by editors and journalists in this latter group. With respect to reader response and comment in Saudi online newspapers, these titles (particularly the ones that have popularity among Saudis such as *Sabq*) are

keen on readers' responses and comments because those might cause problems for an online newspaper (as referred by *Sabq*'s editing manager above).

As regards the financing of Saudi online newspapers, the lack of financial support was considered to be one of the main obstacles that they face, probably because (according to interviewees) advertising companies still prefer traditional media to online newspapers.

Chapter 6

Perceptions of Saudi readers: the credibility of online newspapers and other media

6.1 Introduction

News media credibility is a keenly debated topic in Saudi Arabia. Online newspapers have become an important source of news for Saudis; the Internet and the new media that have emerged are held to empower individuals and groups. Many of the editors and journalists involved in the production of online news (see Chapter Five) have argued for the importance of credibility for their news in building a relationship of trust with readers. The process of evaluating credibility has sometimes been linked to the type of news story – the assumption being that news regarding the internal affairs of the Kingdom is less credible, whether in traditional press or online newspapers. But having said that, not all external news, whether about the region or foreign affairs, can be evaluated as entirely credible either.

This chapter particularly explores what criteria readers/users of online sites deploy to rate this news, compared to the official press. More broadly it investigates what news media Saudis rely on, and whether they do or do not regard Saudi online media as more ‘credible’ than other sources, and if so, in relation to what kind of news events, including whether domestic or external. This chapter first discusses the main findings of a survey (questionnaire)⁵² which was distributed to readers in Saudi Arabia. It then discusses the data from a sample of 23 interviewees⁵³, consisting of

⁵² For more details about the questions in the questionnaire, see Appendix I.

⁵³ Their ages ranged from 23 to 50. This sample consisted of 7 students, 8 employees (staff) and 8 university lecturers. In accordance with the ethical requirements of academic research, the names of the respondents in this research have been omitted, but their age, sex, qualifications, and work are given. In referring to the respondents during the discussion, the researcher classified them as Male 1, 2, 3 ... to 15 and Female from 1, 2, 3 ... to 8. (For more details, see the list of Interviewees (users) in Appendix III).

15 men and 8 women with a variety of educational qualifications.⁵⁴ (See Chapter Five for the adoption of these two methods of data collection).

6.2 The main findings of the survey

The questions in the questionnaire which explored the views of the respondents about the credibility of news on the online media and the other mass media fell into five sections: first, information about the respondents' reading of the mass media; second, a comparison of Saudi online journalism and that in the traditional mass media and how Saudi readers rated the credibility of the two; third, what aspects of serious news writing in Saudi online news sites were significant for the readers; fourth, whether Saudi readers were dissatisfied with the news coverage by Saudi online news sites, and what other news media readers would turn to; fifth, personal information. The main findings of the survey are reviewed below.

Saudi users who contributed to the survey⁵⁵ were explicitly asked about the impact of reading news online on their reading of news in the traditional media, i.e. broadcasting and print. While just under half indicated a decline in their use of TV channels and radio for news, over 60% indicated their reduced reading of newspapers. They also asserted that the introduction of Saudi online news had reduced their consumption of other, that is, foreign or international news sites (see Table 2).

⁵⁴These ranged from qualifications below degree level to Masters' degrees [4 below degree level, 6 at Bachelors level, 13 at Masters level].

⁵⁵The questionnaire was distributed to the Saudi respondents in June and July 2012 in Riyadh (for more details, see Chapter Three).

SN	Question	Yes		No	
		No.	%	No.	%
1	Has your consumption of Saudi online news reduced your watching of news on TV channels?	92	46.9	104	53.1
2	Has it reduced your reading of news in traditional newspapers?	120	61.2	76	38.8
3	Has it reduced your listening to news on the radio?	97	49.5	99	50.5
4	Has it reduced your consumption of other online news sites?	80	40.8	116	59.2

Table 2: Impact of the consumption of Saudi online news on the consumption of news from other sources (Survey findings, 2012).

When comparing the Saudi media to other Arabic or global media outlets, the respondents in the survey revealed some variation in viewpoints. However, the table below (Table 3) shows that more than one-third of Saudis (38%) believed that the media outside Saudi Arabia offered a more objective account. Almost two-thirds of the respondents (64%) stated that the TV channels in other countries were more objective with regard to the war in Syria, though only 3% highlighted online newspapers from outside.

		No.	%
Media outside Saudi Arabia	Yes	75	38.3
	Maybe	107	54.6
	No	14	7.1
Total		196	100.0
If you said 'yes', specify the media	TV	48	64.0
	Radio	12	16.0
	Newspapers	7	9.3
	Online sites	2	2.7
	Social media	6	8.0
Total		75	100.0

Table 3: Responses to whether the media outside Saudi Arabia, offline or online, offer the more objective account of what is happening in Syria.

The respondents' answers thus suggest that Saudis trust external media, specifically television channels, more than Saudi media in the reporting of events in Syria. The TV channels including Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and the BBC are noted for their experience and professionalism, whereas the Saudi media, including TV, are regarded as the government's tools for furthering its own interests. Subject to state censorship, self-censorship and tradition, they act as propaganda tools for the Saudi state. This situation indeed pushes readers to seek new sources that they believe give a different approach to issues, are more 'objective' and not censored.

However, on the particular issue of the online news coverage of events in Syria, around three-quarters of the respondents believed that online journalism in Saudi was at least more objective than the traditional news media (see Table 4).

S N	Media	No		Maybe		Yes		Mean	STD.	Rank
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%			
1	Online journalism	14	7.1	110	56.1	72	36.7	2.30	0.59	2
2	TV	31	15.8	88	44.9	77	39.3	2.23	0.71	4
3	Radio	43	21.9	100	51.0	53	27.0	2.05	0.70	5
4	Newspapers	27	13.8	97	49.5	72	36.7	2.23	0.67	3
5	Social networking websites	20	10.2	44	22.4	132	67.3	2.57	0.67	1

Table 4: Responses on whether the Saudi online media are more objective than other sources in reporting the crises and events in Syria (Survey findings, June and July 2012)

The balance of opinion among the respondents was that online journalism also gave a more objective account of other social and political issues in Saudi Arabia than mainstream news channels (see Table 5). The percentage of those believing this is to be the case is nearly double those who supported each of the traditional media (TV, radio or official newspapers). Yet it is the social networking sites, such as

Twitter, Facebook or YouTube, that score most highly (68.4% as opposed to 41.8% for online journalism).

SN	Media	No		Maybe		Yes		Mean	STD	Rank
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%			
1	Online journalism	35	17.9	79	40.3	82	41.8	2.24	0.74	2
2	TV	61	31.1	91	46.4	44	22.4	1.91	0.73	4
3	Radio	57	29.1	97	49.5	42	21.4	1.92	0.71	3
4	Newspapers	65	33.2	89	45.4	42	21.4	1.88	0.73	5
5	Social networking websites	16	8.2	46	23.5	134	68.4	2.60	0.64	1

Table 5: Do any of the Saudi media offer a more objective account of social and political issues in Saudi Arabia? (Survey findings, June and July 2012)

6.3 The main findings of the interviews

Interview questions (with Saudi users) were built on the findings of the survey, with respect to access to online news, investigating their opinions about Saudi online journalism and a comparison between Saudi media (online/offline) with other external media with respect to the issue of credibility. The respondents in the interviews were some of the people who had already filled in the questionnaire in the survey; the interviews were meant to capture deep and detailed answers and thus there were some respondents in the survey who had views worthy of further discussion through in-depth interviews.

There were six main areas of discussion in the interviews which together build up a complex view of the significance and meaning of 'credibility': first, issues about access to the news and what kind of news media Saudi readers felt they could depend on; second, issues concerning users' evaluation and comparison of the news in online newspapers compared to other news media, and their concerns or otherwise about censorship and publishing regulations in Saudi Arabia; third, investigation of what Saudi users liked/disliked in the online newspapers; fourth, their views on online debate and its contribution to freedom of the media; fifth, the views

of Saudi users on 'professional standards' in Saudi online newspapers; and finally, developments and improvements which Saudi users said they wanted to see in Saudi online newspapers in the future.

6.3.1 Accessing news

Most of the Saudi users mentioned that accessing news was important for them. Most of the respondents also indicated that they were interested in getting news from online newspapers. These views were not unexpected because the sample came from the educated class, who tend to be interested in watching news and have access to the Internet at home and at work where they study. However, a few respondents (all female) said that their interest in the news was limited, including one who said that it depended on the type of news and its importance:

I believe that important news nowadays comes to you without your looking for it, because it has become very easy to find. However, that is not always the case, as there are certain times and certain topics that may attract my attention, so I will go looking for news about them (interview, 28 August, 2012).⁵⁶

Among those interested in the news, the majority mentioned that they followed the news to learn about national and international events and to keep up with events in a changing world; others said that the events of the Arab Spring contributed to their intensively following up news stories. For instance, one user claimed:

News must be watched daily, and I am keen on the nine o'clock news specifically. Finding news is important because of so much happening in the Arab world, especially regarding the Arab Spring and the Arab revolutions (interview, 25 August, 2012).⁵⁷

Another echoed this view, adding 'I need to know what's going on around me, especially those issues that the people I meet are discussing. It is also important in my field of work.' (interview, 27 August, 2012)⁵⁸.

⁵⁶Female (1): Lecturer aged 47 with a Master's degree.

⁵⁷Male (1): Employee aged 27, below degree level.

⁵⁸Male (2): Student aged 37 with a Master's degree.

Other reasons that the Saudi users gave for following the news in online newspapers included developing their knowledge, in that online newspapers provided them with the latest news about technological and scientific inventions. Even if official media gave them the news sooner or later, the online newspapers would publish fresh news more quickly. One user emphasized the value of being informed about local events in Saudi Arabia and developing their knowledge:

I am a daily follower of local news via online newspapers ... following events daily allows me to stay informed about current events and how to deal with them ... besides the knowledge and culture that the reader may pick up through daily news (interview, 1 September, 2012).⁵⁹

It is significant that the three people who said they had limited interest in online newspapers were women. One said,⁶⁰ 'Not to a large extent' (interview, 28 August, 2012), and another asserted: 'I don't care much for sports, accidents nor detailed local news' (interview, 7 September, 2012). These comments suggest a preference for not watching the news, sometimes because it may include disturbing scenes of violence or killing. Women in Saudi Arabia are more likely to admit to such feelings because of the nature of their socialisation. This is also in line with the evidence mentioned in Chapter Four, that Saudi women tend not to like participating in discussions with men about news events that raise political issues. Cultural orientation thus tends to set limits for women.

The data roughly accords with what this study found, broadcast news (on news channels) and online newspapers topped the preferences list, each being mentioned 18 times. Twitter took second place with 16 users, Facebook and traditional newspapers both had 8 users and blogs came last, with only two users indicating that they accessed news through blogs. The data roughly accords with what this study found from the survey, where approximately two-thirds of the respondents

⁵⁹Male (3): Employee aged 36 with a Master's degree.

⁶⁰Female (1): Lecturer aged 47 with a Master's degree.

indicated a decline in their use of other mainstream media, such as TV, radio and official newspapers.

The respondents' answers make clear the importance of online newspapers. They are on a par with such well-known TV news channels as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, even though online newspapers in Saudi Arabia have only been available for 10 years. This may be an indication that the new types of news media have become strong competitors with regional television channels and traditional printed newspapers. The use of Twitter was only narrowly behind online newspapers and TV channels in popularity. This was to be expected, since Twitter, with more than 15 million users, has in the past few years become the most widely used new medium in Saudi Arabia (see Chapter Four above). Facebook ranked fourth, interestingly level with traditional newspapers, with more than a third of the respondents accessing news either through their pages on Facebook or via traditional newspapers. This gives some indication perhaps of the decline in reading newspapers but also of the lesser interest, in relation to accessing news. Blogs ranked last as a news option for users. This was also to be expected: since the emergence of online newspapers and social media blogs and bloggers have declined in significance on the news front. This is also consistent with the views expressed in the previous Chapter: all the editors/journalists who were interviewed reported that they were keen to be followed on social media, in particular Twitter and Facebook, but no-one referred to blogs.

With reference to the media preferred by Saudi users, the TV channels, mentioned by most users (20), occupied first place. Of those, 15 said that they preferred Al-Arabiya, and fewer than half (10) preferred the Al-Jazeera channel; the BBC channel was mentioned by seven, with CNN mentioned by only 2 users. Arguably, Saudis prefer Al Arabiya (Saudi owned) because the channel always publishes news from the standpoint of the Saudi Arabian government, although not officially state owned and despite being broadcast from Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. Saudis watch this channel more than they watch the official Saudi channel (Saudi Channel One),

tending to trust privately-owned channels more than government-owned ones. As Alotaibi (2007) found, news on private channels, such as Al-Arabiya, had more credibility among Saudis than news on official channels.

Online newspapers ranked second, with users mentioning that they read the news on *Sabq*; a few users (4) mentioned *Alweeam*, 2 referred to *Almarsad* and there was one each for *Elaph* and *Ajel*. (This result is again similar to that of the questionnaire, where *Sabq* was ranked first, followed by *Alweeam*). Official newspapers were mentioned by a quarter of the interviewees (6), Twitter by fewer than that (5). One of the latter also followed the news on TV news channels but then watched debates and read opinions about it on Twitter:

I run into satellite news by chance; in other words, I will be sitting in front of the TV and flick to Al Arabiya, and at other times to channels such as Al-Jazeera and Al-alam [the Iranian channel], or even others. Regarding Twitter, I receive comments from readers on the latest news through it. I have also subscribed to some news sites such as Al-Arabiya, *Sabq*, Skynews, and Al-Jazeera for the latest breaking news. I also receive news on face alerts from the Al-alamiah news site (interview, 27 August, 2012).⁶¹

In the interviews, users were also asked about news they had accessed on the previous day, or in the preceding five days. TV channels again ranked first, with a large proportion of those interviewed saying that the previous day they had watched the news on channels including Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, the BBC, CNN and the Saudi news channel. Some also watched MBC, which is considered a variety channel rather than a news one. According to some Arab researchers, for example, Alotaibi (2007) and Mesharqah (2008), MBC ranked -first among Arab viewers in popularity. However, one user mentioned that she preferred to watch the news on MBC, because it is 'light' and she does not like 'details':

I am interested in uncomplicated light news, and prefer watching the news without detail, something I find with MBC. Sometimes, when the item is important and I need more details,

⁶¹Male (2): Student aged 37 with a Master's degree.

I will switch over to Al-Arabiya or Al-Jazeera (interview, 4 September, 2012).⁶²

In saying that she is interested only in ‘uncomplicated light [soft] news’ she is implying that she is not interested in ‘complicated hard news’; that is, political news. Nevertheless, overall, in terms of the type of news that the Saudi user was interested in, political news came first, with 15 users. Local news had 9, and economic news 6, with social news, news about discoveries and scientific news having 5 users each. Given that most interviewees came from the educated class, this spread is not surprising. It is interesting, however, that with regard to participating in discussions about news, 16 users stated that they did not participate in political debates, either online or off, but 6 users did, some regularly, some more occasionally. As one interviewee recounted, she does sometimes give her opinion on an issue:

I have engaged in entering comments on the news in online newspapers and news sites, whether Arabic or international. I don’t do that regularly, but as time allows and depending on how important the topic is. Sometimes I find [that] a news item or one of the comments is a lie, misleading or biased and am aggravated into answering or participating (interview, 3 September, 2012).⁶³

After considering the range of news media preferred by those interviewed, the next section explores how they compared and evaluated online news in relation to other news media.

6.3.2 Evaluating and comparing

Characterizing online newspapers, 8 users commented on the rapid speed at which the news was communicated, considering this its most prominent characteristic. Six mentioned that online newspapers are easy to access by smart phones, which are extensively used by Saudis.

On the presentation of news in online newspapers, 6 users considered it ‘good’, 2 that it was ‘not bad’, since in their view, the news is brief but can be developed and

⁶²Female (2): Student aged 23 aged, below degree level.

⁶³Female (3): Lecturer aged 35 with a Master’s degree.

is less restricted than the news in other Saudi media. The news can also be responded to. As a user commented: 'They are more liberal and credible, as well as allowing comments on news items and the expression of different views' (interview, 6 September, 2012)⁶⁴ This view is supported by another user, who suggests: 'It goes without saying that electronic news has many advantages such as ... the limited constraints it has and its high level of interaction [reaction plus comments] with the respondent' (interview, 28 August, 2012).⁶⁵ Yet only 3 users noted that 'online newspapers were freer and more open than other media' (interview, 2 September, 2012; interview, 6 September, 2012; interview, 2 September, 2012). As discussed in Chapter 5, the editors and journalists made it clear that online newspapers are not immune from interference and censorship by the Saudi state. Indeed, most user interviewees were well aware of this. Even if the censorship was more limited, forms of self-censorship would still be evident, as tends to be the case in all news outlets related to ownership and management, business or political and national interests, which are inclined to constrain in some way what readers are allowed to know. It is certainly the case, however, that the regulatory regime for online media is, to some extent, less strict than for traditional news⁶⁶.

Surprisingly perhaps, only two users suggested that being able to comment on the news – to air their divergent opinions and views or even criticise the government or media owners – was important. This was particularly surprising, given that the journalists who were interviewed highlighted the importance of reader responses and that they benefited from readers' comments (see Chapter Five).

Notwithstanding largely positive evaluations of online journalism, however, those interviewed sometimes expressed more critical views. Seven users (rather less than

⁶⁴Male (4): Student aged 35 with a Master's degree.

⁶⁵Female (1): Lecturer aged 47 with a Master's degree.

⁶⁶As discussed in Chapter Four, only the Sixth Printing Law issued in 2011, refers to online publications, whereas the traditional media have been exposed to censorship and controls since the First Printing Law of 1929. (i.e. only one law has been issued to regulate the online media, while five publications laws have so far been issued to regulate the traditional media – radio, the official newspapers and TV).

a third of the total interviewed) mentioned that online newspapers in Saudi Arabia lacked credibility. Indeed, this was the main disadvantage raised. This is pertinent, given the emphasis on 'credibility' from online news producers (see Chapter Five). The one title excluded from this criticism by some users was the online newspaper *Sabq*. For one user:

Saudi online newspaper reports mostly lack professionalism, neutrality and credibility; also trusted sources and proper journalistic phrasing ... Many of their news items are very parochial or exaggerated, especially relating to crime and social problems (interview, 3 September, 2012).⁶⁷

Indeed, 3 users stated that online newspapers tend to use hyperbole in their reporting. They choose alluring headlines and may resort to exaggerating problems in order to give their title the biggest spotlight and so gain credit as the first to publish a news item. Therefore, according to the interviewees, online newspapers welcome accidents of various kinds, tragedies and incidents such as murder and robbery. One user commented:

Saudi online newspapers cause depression in their followers, they are the papers for tragedies and accidents and they don't lighten one's mood. Foreign papers are diversified and well presented, you get a feeling that they care for individuals and their lives (interview, 2 September, 2012).⁶⁸

Another woman interviewee felt similarly: 'The news in online newspapers is OK, but it resembles an accidents page, it's all just about deaths, disasters and sad news' (interview, 5 September, 2012).⁶⁹

Linked with the issue of 'credibility', three users stated that online newspapers lack neutrality. In their view, online newspapers publish news biased in favour of one party rather than another. This seems to be clearly the case with respect to sports news in particular. Some online newspapers are 'biased against certain clubs and support certain teams. Such bias undeniably affects the credibility of online

⁶⁷Female (3): Lecturer aged 35 with a Master's degree.

⁶⁸Male (5): Employee aged 43 with a Master's degree.

⁶⁹Female (4): Student aged 25, below degree level.

newspapers' (interview, 4 September, 2012)⁷⁰. In the same vein, two users mentioned that online newspapers lacked professionalism; they believe that online newspapers sometime fail to capture the story adequately in terms of detail or they reflect personal feelings or bias rather than providing a comprehensive account of the main issues. This echoes the views of those working for online newspapers, who highlight that there are too few professional journalists and that such titles can lack professionalism (see Chapter Five).

6.3.3 What Saudi users liked or disliked in the online newspapers

Notwithstanding criticisms, however, some users liked the ease of access to online newspaper sites and sharing news with others. For example, one user points out:

It can be accessed anywhere through your mobile phone, and you don't need to stay at home to know the news ... it's easy to join in with others, and material can be copied or exchanged via social networking sites or chat programmes (interview, 3 September, 2012)⁷¹.

Saudi users also liked features relating to scoops and the rapid updating of news, which allowed them to keep up with events. They also mentioned the rising ceiling of freedom in the online newspapers, and were glad that online newspapers gave readers a new platform from which to participate in debates and that a reader could be given the chance to be a columnist. One user⁷² describes how the news 'can be interacted with or commented on ... allowing people to understand the thinking of society regarding different issues' (interview, 3 September, 2012). Another⁷³ adds that online 'is daring and has a wide margin of freedom' (interview, 2 September, 2012). Moreover, according to some users, 'online newspapers give non-famous writers a chance to publish and gain fame' (interview, 26 August, 2012). This remark corresponds with the view of some online editors who indicate that they are keen to attract unknown writers. For example, the editor-in-chief of *Alweeam*, Turki Alrougi, states:

⁷⁰ Male (10): Lecturer aged 36 with a Master's degree.

⁷¹ Female (3): Lecturer aged 35 with a Master's degree.

⁷² Female (3): Lecturer aged 35 with a Master's degree.

⁷³ Male (8): Employee aged 43 with a Master's degree.

We attract writers to *Alweeam*, and sometimes we put the headlines of their articles at the top of *Alweeam*'s site (to encourage readers to read these articles) ... because of this, we receive a lot of articles from writers for publication in *Alweeam*, which causes great pressure on our staff (Alrougi et al 2011, p.27).

As regards what Saudi users dislike about online newspapers, it mostly concerns credibility. The term is mentioned directly, with users referring to a lack of accuracy in information, to bias, or even to the publishing of lies. One user⁷⁴ describes his reasons for not trusting online newspapers: '[There is]...haste to transmit news before verifying it ... haste to publish an item merely for the sake of a scoop' (interview, 5 September, 2012). Another user²³ went further: 'It's the publishing of lies or misleading news with the sole intention of stirring up dissent and achieving popularity' (interview, 3 September, 2012). Another⁷⁵ agreed, adding: They publish unreliable news repeatedly and the 'anything goes' policy in online newspapers is something which may create bad feeling in some sectors of society' (interview, 2 September, 2012). Further, some users addressed the issue of journalistic ethics and accused some online newspapers of fabricating news, or publishing items without referring to their source. For instance, one user⁷⁶ argues: '[The treatment of] news in the online newspapers is good, to a certain extent, but it still lacks professionalism, and some online newspapers merely copy the item from other media outlets, and this contravenes journalistic or professional ethics' (interview, 2 September, 2012).

It is clear then that the users who were interviewed liked the speed of news publication, updates and scoops. They liked online news's greater 'freedoms', facilitating readers' comments and attracting young writers, who do not find the same opportunities in traditional newspapers. However, Saudi users did not like the rush to communicate news which could mean credibility was sacrificed. They believed that Saudi online newspapers were more interested in scoops than in being trusted.

⁷⁴ Female (7): Employee aged 29 with a Bachelor's degree.

⁷⁵ Male (5): Employee aged 43 with a Master's degree.

⁷⁶ Male (8): Employee aged 43 with a Master's degree.

In general, credibility was these users' greatest concern, echoing the opinion of editors and journalists who also considered that credibility was a key element for the success of any news (see Chapter Five).

In comparing Saudi online newspapers to other Arabic or English language outlets, the users tended to believe that Saudi online newspapers are generally good, but need more work and development in order to compete strongly with other media. Some were more outspoken in suggesting that Saudi online newspapers are far from reaching the standard of global newspapers. As one user⁷⁷ clarified, 'online newspapers need a lot of work in order to compete with newspapers and global websites' (interview, 26 August, 2012) Another⁷⁸ justifies his preference for global online newspapers over Saudi online newspapers: 'Foreign papers are diversified and well presented, you get a feeling that they care for the person and his life' (interview, 2 September, 2012). A few, however, indicated that the differences between Saudi online newspapers and global sites were limited, and some declared that Saudi online newspapers were at least better than local and Arabic newspapers.

6.3.4 On censorship and regulation

Users were aware of the continuing censorship in Saudi Arabia of news criticising government policy, the royal family and senior officials. As one user described it:

Online newspapers and also non-electronic ones are subject to strict censorship rules regarding news of the ruling royal family, some of the policies of the state, or some of the policies of the country and its handling of the opposition. There is also variable censorship on the arts or religious transgressions (interview, 3 September, 2012).⁷⁹

Nonetheless, the respondents expressed a wide range of views. For instance, some believe that censorship impinges on the credibility of the news media such that they doubt the credibility of any official news (interview, 1 September, 2012).⁸⁰ In terms of the definition of censorship provided above, all the major news media evidently

⁷⁷ Male (6): Employee aged 33 with a Bachelor's degree.

⁷⁸ Male (5): Employee aged 43 with a Master's degree.

⁷⁹ Female (3): Lecturer aged 35 with a Master's degree.

⁸⁰ Male (3): Employee aged 36 with a Master's degree.

face a certain amount of censorship or limitation when they seek to disseminate information. However, a few users believed that censorship was currently being relaxed, with conditions for news media changing for the better. One respondent commented:

The censor's scissors have been lowered slightly and there are now many topics discussed rationally and openly. We need this freedom as a way of serving the country and the interests of the citizen (interview, 27 August, 2012).⁸¹

On a different scenario another respondent argued:

I have generally noticed from looking at some of our online newspapers, that they are more inundated with local affairs that have a touch of excitement than aiming to build holistic intellectual stimulus, the sort of awareness that extricates readers from the realm of anguish and towards positivity and development. I also wish that the online newspapers were subject to practicable official regulations that would take the reader, whether small or big and highly intellectual, on a journey that has a healthy environment free of abuse and deliberate steering (interview, 28 August, 2012)⁸².

For some, one factor contributing to reduced censorship and raising the limits of freedom was the capacity of new media – social networking sites in particular – to evade censorship. One user noted that the official news media are still being monitored by the Ministry of Information, but censorship is on the wane because ‘social network sites have made each reader and user a media outlet in their own right’ (interview, 26 August, 2012).⁸³

Some of those interviewed, however, did not believe censorship was declining, whilst nine users agreed that censorship is important and in the readers’ interests. One user⁸⁴ pointed out: ‘Printing regulations in Saudi Arabia are stringent because the society is conservative; the media must respect the customs of the society and its traditions, and must not print what violates that’ (interview, 5 September, 2012).

⁸¹Female (5): Employee aged 31 with a Bachelor’s degree.

⁸²Male (2): Student aged 37 with a Master’s degree.

⁸³Male (6): Employee aged 33 with a Bachelor’s degree.

⁸⁴Female (4): Student aged 25, below degree level.

Thus for a conservative group in the society, censorship is legitimate in order to safeguard certain cultural orientations and norms. These must be reflected in the media and anything that deviates from this must be controlled. In Saudi Arabia, as discussed in Chapter One, the media developed historically to fulfill this role: in many ways the media was compelled to communicate messages that enhanced the status quo. Regarding censorship and regulation as also protecting individual rights and privacy, they believed that the dissemination of information should not infringe these rights and that news gathering and reporting should not intrude into their private lives. As one user suggested: 'No exposing of names and specific parties to be allowed; and there should be scrutiny and monitoring, but only when there has been abuse of persons or parties' (interview, 6 September, 2012).⁸⁵

Other users wanted regulations to limit the infringement of religious laws and to stop sacrilege, for example, the mockery of Holy Messengers or sacred texts such as the Holy *Qur'an* or criticism of religious figures. One user commented:

I believe very much that one of the most prominent features of a civil and modern society is having a system and laws that control and regulate it [publishing]. Publishing, one of the most dangerous elements that impact on society, dictates that censorship not only becomes permissible but even necessary and inevitable ...Regarding the nature of these regulations, I think what is most important is having red lines that define the 'non-negotiables' of any society, such as religious ones (interview, 28 August, 2012).⁸⁶

Another user suggested the kind of regulation he wanted: 'Justified regulations are those that maintain national unity, preserve the rights of all from insult or blasphemy, and oblige the media to apologize when they have published false news' (interview, 27 August, 2012)⁸⁷. 'Justified regulations' might be interpreted in different ways, and here it could be argued that a conservative view is being offered – regulation to maintain 'national unity' and a particular religious order⁸⁸. Other users supported

⁸⁵ Male (7): Lecturer aged 34 with a Master's degree.

⁸⁶ Female (1): Lecturer aged 47 with a Master's degree.

⁸⁷ Male (2): Student aged 37 with a Master's degree.

⁸⁸ The case of the Saudi journalist Hamza Kashgari illustrates the implementation of the latter by some religious groups in Saudi Arabia. Kashgari is a writer and newspaper columnist in the Saudi city of

censorship, but in a limited way, considering it a positive factor in producing credible, balanced and objective mass media which is ensuring only evidence-based information is provided, rather than personal opinions with no basis in fact.

Most of those interviewed, however, believed that whatever the need for the government to regulate and censor news media, there should be respect for the rights of individuals and the rights of the media, and that the laws needed be clearer so that everyone could know where they stood. Recognized by everyone to limit the freedom of the media, regardless of the form censorship took, some went further, not supporting censorship because they believed that it impedes media freedom. Indeed, two users suggested that regulations should respect freedom, the plurality of opinions and divided opinions:

I believe that the best solution for regulating publishing is to put in place a publication law that fits our modern times, does not obstruct the freedom of the press, respects the rights of individuals and contains clear and explicit laws that protect the journalist, the normal citizen, and the establishment or Ministry equally (interview, 2 September, 2012).⁸⁹

Such users did not want publishing regulations to hamper creativity and the evolution of the news media in Saudi Arabia. Others wanted publishing regulations to be under the control of non-governmental or civil institutions and to operate more freely.

6.3.5 Online debate and media ‘freedom’

Notwithstanding those who held to the importance of regulation and censorship, almost half the interviewees believed that online newspapers in Saudi Arabia were able to publish news, quote views and to participate in discussions and debates not

Jeddah, who in February 2011 tweeted a series of comments reflecting meditatively on the human side of the Prophet, and imagining a meeting between himself and the Prophet. His case illustrates the emphasis on religious order by the Saudi authorities. He was detained for having tweeted in regard to the Prophet Mohammed, which was regarded as blasphemy. Under the current Saudi law, blasphemy is punishable by death.

Male (8): Employee aged 43 with a Master's degree.

⁸⁹ Male (8): Employee aged 43 with a Master's degree.

available to the other media and saw this as a positive aspect. One user stated that the online media benefit from

... the ease with which one can interact and communicate electronically. These things are lacking in discussions on other forms of media which must abide by specific numbers and specific time limits (interview, 7 September, 2012)⁹⁰.

Another user strongly supported the idea that Saudi online newspapers should be able to publish important news and discussions which cannot be published in other media. He pointed out:

Online newspapers have a wider margin of freedom, and sometimes criticise more daringly. Examples of this include the strong criticism these online newspapers have levelled against the Saudi Football Association, in a manner that traditional papers and media would probably not have attempted, since the Saudi Football Association is under the leadership of a prince of the Saudi royal family, whose grandfather is the former king of Saudi Arabia, King Fahad bin Abdul Aziz. This is something that people may have been unfamiliar with until recently in Saudi Arabia, but with the presence of online newspapers the level of freedom in the Saudi media has generally increased (interview, 25 August, 2012).⁹¹

Eight users do believe that online newspapers are constrained, but offer no clear evidence of this, while others believe that online newspapers do not in fact differ much from other media in Saudi Arabia. One user commented: 'There is a contradiction because there is a media policy in place and so I do not find that there are issues that these new media (online newspapers) can discuss that other media cannot' (interview, 7 September, 2012).⁹²

Yet even if users do not see online publishing news or opinions that differ greatly from what is published in other media, they do regard online as different in giving readers more space for discussion and comment on the news. As one user

⁹⁰ Female (6): Employee aged 50 with a Bachelor's degree.

⁹¹ Male (1): Employee aged 27, below degree level.

⁹² Male (9): Lecturer aged 45 with a Master's degree.

described it: 'They give a chance to the reader than official newspapers do' (interview, 5 September, 2012)⁹³

Interestingly, four users thought that online newspapers might be able to communicate news and stimulate debates more easily if they could overcome legal difficulties, while another, importantly, noted the issue of combating 'fear':

Saudi online journalism could publish stories and give views and arguments that other news media cannot, if they rid themselves of the fear of certain things such as censorship, or legal enquiry. Also unnecessary things such as courtesies, favouritism and indiscriminate praise, things that the traditional Saudi media, including the printed press and TV channels, are famous for (interview, 3 September, 2012).⁹⁴

Another user also offered a mixed evaluation of the online news media:

They are capable of publishing news, but they do not play the required role of discussing issues in depth, as provided by the reports featured in some official newspapers. Nevertheless, they are characterised by their verification of material with visual footage, which increases the authenticity of the item, as well as their ability to give the reader a chance to comment and air their opinion' (interview, 4 September, 2012)⁹⁵

Nevertheless, some Saudi users gave examples of the news and debates published by online newspapers that were not offered in the traditional media. Most of the examples showed three main features: first, offering bolder reporting and details of financial and administrative corruption in the public sector; second, as the above user suggested, the online media provide photos and video clips illustrating controversial matters; for example, a clip of a Shi'a militia leader (in February, 2013) Watheq Albattat (later head of the Mukhtar Army⁹⁶), who threatened Saudi Arabia

⁹³ Female (7): Employee aged 29 with a Bachelor's degree.

⁹⁴ Female (3): Lecturer aged 35 with a Master's degree.

⁹⁵ Male (10): Lecturer aged 36 with a Master's degree.

⁹⁶The Mukhtar Army militia belongs to the Hezbollah in Iraq. Its leader is Watheq Albattat, who made threats targeted at Saudi Arabia, in addition to threatening to bomb workers in the port of Mubarak in Kuwait and making threats against the Kurds. Albattat claimed that his army had up to a million soldiers (*Al-Arabiya*, February 24, 2013). Later, he was killed in clashes with Isis at the end of 2014 in the city of Diyala, in northern Iraq. (*Alweeam*, December 21, 2014).

and was alleged to have fired rockets over the country's border. While all the Saudi media published this news briefly, they did not publish the video or highlight the threat. Thirdly, online newspapers were seen to engage with local or sensitive issues, such as those relating to terrorism.

6.3.6 Professional standards

From the interviewees' standpoint, it is clear that more than two-thirds of users were dissatisfied with the professional standards of online journalism in Saudi Arabia: 15 users reported that they did not believe that the professional standards of journalism are as high as in TV news and the press. One interviewee explains:

News channels and the more prestigious media choose their news extremely carefully, while online newspapers are centres for collecting information from other online newspapers or news channels ... They are similar to local newspapers, they depend for their news on incidents that have taken place and publish news tragedies, disasters and other sad news to attract the largest number of readers. This is contrary to professional standards, because the newspapers should have other interests; for example, they should try to increase community awareness of crucial issues, to develop education and direct attention to the issues of the citizens (interview, 2 September, 2012).⁹⁷

Another user also highlighted their 'weakness':

The Saudi online newspapers are still suffering from weakness in their professional standards; *Sabq* and *Alweeam* may be the exception, but they also suffer sometimes from a weakness in their professionalism compared to other, traditional, papers (interview, 2 September, 2012).⁹⁸

Users offered several reasons for their limited professionalism:

I don't think that the professional standards in online journalism are as high as in broadcast news and newspapers, unless it is committed to the regulations of publishing, as the other media channels are. This is connected to a large extent to many factors, the most important being the intellectual makeup of the publisher, and the extent of its commitment to regulations (interview, 28 August, 2012)⁹⁹.

⁹⁷ Male (5): Employee aged 43 with a Master's degree.

⁹⁸ Male (8): Employee aged 43 with a Master's degree.

⁹⁹ Female (1): Lecturer aged 47 with a Master's degree.

The above opinion seems to imply firstly that 'limited professionalism' concerns the background and training of those who are online journalists; secondly that online newspapers should be policed more in relation to regulation. Several users believed that the reason for lower professional standards was simply that these newspapers were at an early stage of development, with staff needing more experience before professional standards could be raised. 'Professional standards in online newspapers are still below what is required because the Saudi online newspapers are no more than 7 to 8 years old, and so they need more time to upgrade standards' (interview, 25 August, 2012).¹⁰⁰ Another reiterated the point:

I think standards in these online newspapers are lower than in other mass media, especially the way the items are phrased and edited, because online newspapers are still in their infancy and need more time to become professional (interview, 26 August, 2012).¹⁰¹

Only three users claimed that professional standards in the online newspapers were high. One of them indicated it was only in respect of accuracy and credibility where this did not apply; another that their standards were similar to those in other media, but that online newspapers just needed more development: 'I think professional standards are both very similar (in the online and other media), and there is still a need for more expansion and flexibility'¹⁰² (interview, 27 August, 2012). Finally, just one user unequivocally believed that professional standards in online newspapers were fairly good.

A further element of sound professional standards was seen to involve writing, with ten users believing this was important. As one user put it, quality of writing involved: '... phrasing and presentation; proper language; conveying a good, brief summary of the information' (interview, 6 September, 2012).¹⁰³ Others believed this might attract a reader to the news. In addition, 'accuracy' and 'neutrality' were singled out

¹⁰⁰ Male (1): Employee aged 27, below degree level.

¹⁰¹ Male (6): Employee aged 33 with a Bachelor's degree.

¹⁰² Female (5): Employee aged 31 with a Bachelor's degree.

¹⁰³ Male (7): Lecturer aged 34 with a Master's degree.

as contributing to professional standards; but only by two users each (perhaps because they were not mentioned in the questions, while other aspects were). The two who mentioned 'accuracy' understood it as meaning that the numbers and information which appeared in the news were fair and not exaggerated, and the other two interpreted 'neutrality' as meaning that the news included more than one point of view and was not biased against one viewpoint.

Nevertheless, even though there was criticism of professional standards, online news was largely recognized as having 'credibility', with users mostly clear that the use of sources was the most important aspect of a news story. Two-thirds (15 users) stated that the source was significant for verification. If the news report mentions its source, whether a journalist, a political party or a witness, this gives the report credibility. If the report gives no source, however, users find the report less credible because it may indicate inaccurate or unreliable information. However, although distinctive levels of trustworthiness and credibility were seen as critical elements that defined how far users preferred or relied on news sources, these terms meant different things to different users. For 14 users 'trustworthiness' was seen as an important aspect of a news story. For them, it meant the extent to which a given piece of news relayed correct information, while 'credibility' was the extent of reliability of that news. But for 11 users it was the addition of photographs or video clips to a news story that was relevant in this regard. As one user suggested, using video clips was a way of indicating the authenticity of a news item; and another explicitly pointed to the use of photography or videos as evidence of the credibility of a news item, whether the material was an audio or visual record¹⁰⁴.

Attaching photographs or audio or video clip files to a news story is a characteristic practice of the online media, including online newspapers, but some official newspapers in Saudi Arabia have also started to publish video clips in their electronic versions. The latter, however, are subject to the usual censorship and

¹⁰⁴This suggestion seems, to some extent, irrational, since if the report is untrue, the photographs do not affect its credibility either way – they could be of anyone or anything.

media regulation which means that official newspapers do not often publish video clips that fall foul of the regulations; for instance, in the case of Watheq Albattat (discussed above), they did not use a clip to support their story.

6.3.7 Developments and Improvements

In discussing professional standards, users pointed to various developments and improvements they wanted to see in online newspapers. These clustered around three overlapping main areas: the professionalism of journalists, including their training, the accuracy and comprehensiveness of articles, and writing style. As one user¹⁰⁵ commented: ‘a development which I hope to see in the online newspapers is having highly skilled and trained personnel who perform the tasks of online journalism with ability and knowledge’ (interview, 4 September, 2012). Another user¹⁰⁶ echoed this point: ‘I wish the online newspapers would improve performance, help in training editors and allow more time for verifying authenticity’ (interview, 2 September, 2012). Enhancing technology was also raised. A further user elaborated in more detail on the expertise required: ‘Attract a large number of reporters who are trusted, active, and professional ... using the expertise of skilled photographers, designers of electronic sites, writers, and legal advisors’ (interview, 3 September, 2012).

Users also referred to the ethics and values of the online press and to strengthening credibility and trustworthiness. As one user¹⁰⁷ described it: ‘I wish to see objectivity, neutrality, boldness, and not following the flock blindly’ (interview, 2 September, 2012). They also raised the issue of ‘freedom of speech’ by which readers/users seemed to be suggesting that online news should help contribute to discussion and debate in which journalists and users/readers both take part. One user¹⁰⁸ wished that online newspapers could ‘be the fourth power’ in Saudi Arabia (interview, 27 August, 2012). If they were regarded as the Fourth Estate (Fourth Power) in Saudi

¹⁰⁵ Female (2): Student aged 23, below degree level.

¹⁰⁶ Male (8): Employee aged 43 with a Master’s degree.

¹⁰⁷ Male (5): Employee aged 43 with a Master’s degree.

¹⁰⁸ Male (2): Student aged 37 with a Master’s degree.

Arabia their freedom would be more likely to be guaranteed, as in the developed democracies, where the news could report the Watergate scandal or the exposure of Enron's accounting irregularities, without the censorship or punishment that would be incurred in Saudi Arabia.

One user focused on readers, declaring that the reporting of the readers' views should 'be daring in discussing topics, and convey their response more broadly, not merely showing comments at the bottom' (interview, 4 September, 2012).¹⁰⁹ This respondent appears to suggest that the reader should be able to participate in drafting and editing the news and that online newspaper should try to encourage readers to play a greater part in the news industry, perhaps recommending the allocation of a special section to readers' discussions (as do some western online news, such as *The Guardian*). But certainly this respondent is suggesting that online newspapers should give a higher priority and status to readers' views.

One issue that users did not themselves raise as a means of improving online journalism was paying for it. There were several reasons articulated for why users (more than half of interviewees) disagreed with paying to read their favourite online newspaper when hitherto it and other internet services had been free. One user asserts: 'Of course not, and I don't think there is a Saudi reader who is willing to pay to read news on the Internet' (interview, 25 August, 2012).¹¹⁰

Nonetheless, ten users stated they would be willing to pay for their favourite online newspapers if they had to. A clear distinction is made between online news websites which are partially or fully funded by the users and those where users pay for online news which is regularly sent to them. With the latter, users pay to access news and become members. In paying a subscription, members receive alerts about urgent or up to the minute news (pre-paid messages via phone – the service provided by *Sabq* as discussed in Chapter Five). Whilst this service is accepted, paying for access to an online news website is largely not regarded as acceptable.

¹⁰⁹ Female (7): Employee aged 29 with a Bachelor's degree.

¹¹⁰ Male (1): Employee aged 27, below degree level.

Thus, based on issues such as credibility and trustworthiness, discussed above, there is a general feeling among respondents that online sources of information (news) should be free of charge, all the more when it is important news, whether domestic or international, as it is for Al-Jazeera or Al-Arabiya news channels. One user justifies why she does not wish to pay to read news online, 'No, because news is free everywhere, so why pay?' (interview, 4 September, 2012)¹¹¹. For some, their willingness to pay depended on 'quality'. As a second user stated, he would pay if he trusted the newspaper's credibility and accuracy. Another¹¹² went further:

If an online newspaper reaches a point in its bravery, credibility and scooping ability, where it challenges professional world news, then maybe I would pay an appropriate monthly or annual nominal subscription. However, in their current position, I would not (interview, 3 September, 2012).

6.4 Conclusion

Beginning with the key findings of the survey, approximately half of the Saudi users who responded to the survey referred to the impact of reading online news on their reading of news in other media such as newspapers, TV, radio and other online news sites. Moreover, more than one-third of the respondents believed that the media outside Saudi Arabia offered a more objective account regarding the war in Syria, and two-thirds of them stated that the TV channels in other countries were more objective with regard to the issue of the Syria crisis. This suggests that Saudis trust external media, (specifically TV channels such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and the BBC) because of their experience and professionalism. In contrast, they believe that the Saudi media are the government's tools for furthering its own interests and subject to state censorship, self-censorship and tradition. This situation indeed pushes readers to seek new sources that they believe have a different approach to issues, are more 'objective' and are not censored.

¹¹¹Female (2): Student aged 23, below degree-level.

¹¹² Female (3): Lecturer aged 35 with a Master's degree.

As to the interview findings, interviewees were asked about the ways they wanted online news in Saudi Arabia to develop and improve and whether these seemed to be factors which would give these titles greater credibility. Saudi users pointed to developments and improvements they wanted to see in online newspapers. They stated that these clustered around three overlapping main areas: the professionalism of journalists, including their training; the accuracy and comprehensiveness of articles; and writing style. As one user¹¹³ pointed out, 'I wish the online newspapers would improve performance, help in training editors and allow more time for verifying authenticity' (interview, 2 September, 2012).

Regarding the regulations and censorship imposed on the Saudi media, the interviews revealed differences of opinion about regulation and censorship. Some (less than a third of respondents) stated that they thought the controls imposed on the Saudi media were strict, while some of the respondents (more than one-third) believed that censorship was important and did readers a service, considering it a positive element which was aimed at producing balanced and objective mass media. However, a number of respondents (less than one-third) stated that they did not support media censorship, because they believed that censorship was an obstacle to freedom of speech.

Nevertheless, many users (more than two-thirds of respondents) were dissatisfied with the professional standards of Saudi online journalism. However, due to the fact that it emerged only at the beginning of the new millennium, it was perhaps unfair to expect its standards to have reached those of official newspapers or television. This corresponds with the answers of the journalists/editors working on Saudi online newspapers, who admitted that they suffered at work from a lack of professional journalists.

Regarding the question of credibility, some respondents mentioned that this was lacking in Saudi online newspapers. But some respondents (such as Female 3, Female 8 and others) exempted *Sabq* from the charge of not being credible. This

¹¹³ Male (8): Employee aged 43 with a Master's degree.

indicates that *Sabq* is trusted more than other Saudi online newspapers are. It should also be noted that most of the women interviewed mentioned that they read the news on *Sabq* more than on other sites, perhaps because this title is the closest to the 'conservative' line, and is also the most active with respect to comments on the news. One female user¹¹⁴ argues, 'Online newspapers are only at their beginning and I don't see that any of them have succeeded (except for *Sabq*); the others are of a much lower standard than their English counterparts' (interview, 3 September, 2012). However, many interviewees believed that online newspapers in Saudi Arabia were able to publish more news and views and to participate in more discussions and debates than the other media could. As mentioned, one user commented: 'they [online journalism] give a chance to the reader to respond 'than official newspapers do' (interview, 5 September, 2012).¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Female (3): Lecturer aged 35 with a Master's degree.

¹¹⁵ Female (7): Employee aged 29 with a Bachelor's degree.

Chapter 7

News Stories: Mainstream and Alternative, Offline and Online

7.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses two case studies: one internal to Saudi Arabia, dealing with the Corona disease outbreak, and the other external, focusing on the Egyptian elections of May 2014 in the aftermath of the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak, the election of Mohamad Morsi and the latter regime's overthrow by the military led by Abdel Fattah Al- Sisi. The assumption in selecting these case studies was that with regard to the internal issue, it was more likely that the Saudi authorities would manage the media accounts so that they represented the news, views and information the state held to. In this way it was probable that there would be a clear differentiation between the news stories offered by 'official' newspapers and the online news outlets and Twitter feeds. Regarding foreign events, however, the assumption was that the pressures would be different, media management of the story perhaps less significant and thus the differences between the official press and the online news media, including social media, would perhaps also be less. As well as exploring how the new media – notably online newspapers and Twitter – addressed the two issues, and how the coverage differed from that in traditional Saudi newspapers, the chapter also examines and evaluates the reception by readers and users of these different forms of news.

As discussed above (Chapter Three) this chapter focuses on two disputed and controversial news stories over a two-week period in May 2014, analysing a range of newspapers, online news titles and Twitter accounts (also detailed in Chapter 3). The analytical approach that is adopted, picking up on the discussion in Chapter 3, is that of 'framing', which relies on attention to the specifics of language use in news reporting in order to 'guide' interpretation of news events for readers. As Dijk (1990) and Bell (1991) argue, understanding the language used in media is a key step in analysing reports. Frames can guide readers' understanding of news events by

constructing certain patterns of discourse and providing groups of concepts to use in the process of interpreting events (Rhee 1997).

However, in the frame analysis in this present study, the researcher has followed some scholars who have studied framing, such as Entman (1993), Tankard (2001) and Alatefy (2015), as they refer to 'framing of the media message' and 'choose certain aspect of event' to interpret the issue to the audience in order to produce a 'powerful effect' and 'influence the opinions and trends' among audience (Entman 1993; Tankard 2001 and Alatefy 2015).

If frame analysis enables a comparison of the three media, the analysis is taken further by assessing the 'objectivity' of their coverage: examining the factuality, fairness, and non-partisanship in the gathering and presentation of news versus the often more individual voices offered by columnists and in most Twitter accounts. In this way the issue of 'credibility' for readers and consumers is considered.

In addressing media credibility, the researcher took into account what was discussed about the concept of 'credibility' in the media field and the dimensions related to credibility such as 'objective', and therefore this study has focused on this concept of 'credibility' through what were written by several scholars, such as: Meyer (1974) Gaziano & McGarth (1986) Newhagen & Nass (1989), Abdullah (1996). (For more details, see Chapter Two).

In this way, this chapter approaches 'credibility' not from the viewpoints of editors/journalists and readers but in terms of the construction of the news and the evidence provided in what is written and how, as well as in the degree to which readers/users take up this news (which may or may not follow the tenets of 'objective' journalism).

Thus concerned with whether online news journalism and social media (in particular Twitter accounts) offer more 'credibility' than official newspapers, the chapter also pays attention to whether the online/social media open up a digital news sphere that

encourages the sharing and exchange of news and the establishment of a collective viewpoint in the form of 'public opinion'. It analyses actual news output and actual responses/interaction from readers and users considering whether, especially in the case of Twitter users, there is a different quality to the ensuing debates and formation of public opinion than that engendered through official media.

For each of the case studies some background is provided to the unfolding events giving rise to the news stories. This is followed by analysis of the coverage: in a range of Saudi daily newspapers, in Saudi online journalism, and on Twitter and available to Saudi account holders.

7.2 Saudi media and the Corona disease

7.2.1 Background to the issue

The Corona disease was initially called 'Middle East Respiratory Syndrome' and is known for short as MERS-Co, though it has been called a number of different names, such as SARS, or a disease resembling SARS, or Saudi SARS, by some foreign newspapers. This virus was identified for the first time in Jeddah, Western Saudi Arabia, on September 24, 2012 by the Egyptian Dr Zakaria Mohammed Ali, a specialist in virology, after he managed to isolate the virus from a man who had died following severe shortness of breath and kidney failure (Zaki and et al 2012). In June 2012, the first patient had died due to a Corona infection of a different strain from that identified in Saudi Arabia (Zaki and et al 2012). In September 2012, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a global warning about the emergence of a new type of Corona virus in both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, where two people had been infected. The results indicated that in several laboratories abroad the new Corona virus was found to be somewhat similar to the SARS virus, but with a number of differences, notably a low rate of spread in the population, but a high mortality rate, as much as 50%, most of all in the elderly and chronically ill (*Al-Riyadh*, May 6, 2014). Following the warning by the World Health Organization, infections increased among Saudis, and dozens of people succumbed to the virus; it was worst in the cities of Jeddah and Al-Ahsa. By April 2013, the Ministry of Health had recorded 13

victims of Corona in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia, seven of whom, aged from 24-94 years, subsequently died (Al-Riyadh, May 6, 2014). Moreover, according to official statistics issued by the Saudi Ministry of Health, by mid-May 2013, 70 people had become infected with Corona and 38 of them had died (Ministry of Health 2013).

However, until May 2013, Saudi daily newspapers were still claiming that the Corona virus was nothing to worry about. For example, the *Al-Riyadh* newspaper in its edition of May 7, 2013, printed the headline 'Ministry of Health: the spread of the Corona virus is limited and under control' (*Al-Riyadh*, May 7, 2013). On May 9 it also published a report under the title: 'Efforts by the Ministry of Health have reduced the emergence of new cases of the Corona virus in Al-Ahsa' (*Al-Riyadh*, May 9, 2013), despite the death of seven people in the eastern region in April 2013, a month earlier.

The same kind of reports were observed in most of the Saudi daily newspapers, which published only new cases of the disease, news of deaths and official statements issued by the Ministry of Health. They also published awareness articles about Corona, interviews with specialists and doctors about the disease, and advice to the public about preventing its spread and complying with the advice of the Ministry of Health. However, new cases of the disease have since increased steadily, as have deaths, in particular in the coastal city of Jeddah and matters became more complicated when infections increased among the hospital staff. When a number of staff in the King Fahd Hospital in Jeddah became infected because of their contact with patients, the newspapers reported the deaths of several doctors and health-care workers in hospitals elsewhere in the country. The *Al-Hayat* newspaper reported the death of a doctor due to Corona and mentioned that two nurses at King Khalid Hospital in Al-Kharj (100 km south of Riyadh) had become infected (*Al-Hayat*, April 2, 2014).

According to the latest statistics published by the WHO and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Saudi Arabia is the country most affected by the Corona virus. Other countries that have identified cases of it are Britain, Qatar,

Jordan, France, UAE, Tunisia, the United States, Greece and Italy; but it is noticeable that all the cases that have occurred in Europe and Tunisia have been linked to a source in the Middle East and, directly or indirectly, to Saudi Arabia, where the disease has been detected in a number of different cities and regions (WHO 2014; CDC 2014; Ministry of Health 2013)¹¹⁶.

As a result of the increasing number of those falling sick and deaths from Corona disease (greatest in March 2014, according to the WHO statistics), and the increasing concern of Saudi nationals, both over the outbreak of the disease and also the slow procedures of the Saudi Ministry of Health, the Saudi government issued a decree in mid-April 2014 dismissing the Health Minister Dr. Abdullah Al-Rabiah and appointing Adel Faqih, the Minister of Labour, as Acting Minister (WHO 2014). This was the first time in many years that the Saudi government had sacked a minister because of an internal issue related to the performance of his Ministry. It is possible that online newspapers and Twitter played some part in inflaming public opinion against the Ministry of Health and against the Minister himself, in spite of his earlier success in organizing the operations on conjoined twins which had earned him fame among the Saudi public.

7.2.2 Saudi official newspapers

Since the first case of death from the disease in June 2012, the Saudi newspapers have dealt with the issue as an ordinary health problem which would probably disappear after weeks or a few months because the Ministry of Health was tackling it. At one point, Saudi newspapers reported the case as being 'under control'. This statement alone indicates that the media were 'framing' readers' interpretation of the disease, which might, in fact, have spread beyond ministry control. They did not want to suggest to the public that the situation had got out of hand but to convey mixed feelings to their readers/audience: the public should be worried that the Corona virus

¹¹⁶ The development of the disease until June 2016 suggests that the virus is still rampant in Saudi Arabia, according to the site of the World Health Organization on the Internet: 'Saudi Arabia has informed the WHO about 13 other cases of infection with Corona virus that causes AIDS/ Middle East respiratory disease, including one death' (WHO 2016).

was still present but could be assured that everything was under control. It was therefore for the audience to judge whether the government had done enough to curb the spread of the infection.

The first section below focuses on the *Al-Riyadh* and *Okaz* newspapers¹¹⁷ highlighting the news, reports and articles published from May 12 to May 18, 2014 on this topic and the related debates and reactions.

7.2.2.1 The ‘awareness and reassurance’ frame

In *Al-Riyadh*, the topic of the Corona virus was presented under three aspects: awareness, Ministry efforts and reassurance. Under ‘awareness’, it published advice and guidance about methods of preventing it from spreading, and guidance interviews with specialists and doctors.

For example, a newspaper interview was conducted with Dr. Mohammed Al-Ahdal, Head of Inflammation and Immunity at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center. He criticised the Ministry of Health and its advisory boards and wanted the Ministry to answer practical questions about the disease, such as whether people could transmit the infection if they had the disease but showed no symptoms. However, *Al-Riyadh*’s headline for this story was: ‘Dr Al-Ahdal refers to transparency... and stresses the importance of revealing the mystery... he demands that the Ministry of Health answer six questions about the reality of Corona’ (*Al-Riyadh*, May 12, 2014). This headline does criticise, but also highlights Dr Al-Ahdal’s praise of the transparency of the Ministry of Health, with particular regard to publishing the number of cases and deaths. The phrase ‘revealing the mystery’ attempts to explain the previous statement by Dr. Al-Ahdal but it can also be read as distorting what he had briefed members of public to believe. *Al-Riyadh* implies through this headline that there were indeed some mysteries that even the doctor could not solve and this is communicated to readers. It seems to keep the public

¹¹⁷ *Al-Riyadh* and *Okaz* were chosen because they are among the most widely-read newspapers and are considered the country’s official news organs (for more details, see Chapter Three).

guessing and creates a space for them to make up their own versions of what the mystery is. This is counter to what was a clear criticism of the Ministry and a direct request that a number of questions needed to be answered.

The efforts of the Ministry of Health – the second aspect developed by this newspaper – included statements by officials in the Ministry about the actions they took to reduce the spread of Corona. It highlighted the media campaigns carried out to make people aware of the virus, advising them to abide by the instructions and guidelines issued by specialists in disease prevention. For example, *Al-Riyadh* published reports with these headlines:

‘The Ministry of Health announced a package of new measures to contain the Corona virus’ (*Al-Riyadh*, May 14, 2014).

‘Minister of Health for Al-Riyadh newspaper: King Abdullah has commanded us to take all measures to face the Corona virus’ (*Al-Riyadh*, May 15, 2014).

‘Director of the Eastern Region Health provides reassurance on prevention measures against Corona’ (*Al-Riyadh*, May 13, 2014).

It is thus clear from the headlines and articles that *Al-Riyadh* emphasizes the efforts of the Ministry of Health to combat Corona. After rising popular resentment of the Ministry's performance under the former minister, the newspaper wants to reassure readers that the Ministry is doing its duty to fight the virus and that its efforts are continuing. But the comments on *Al-Riyadh*'s website show that there has still been dissatisfaction with the Ministry performance, in spite of personnel changes, and they claim that it needs to increase its efforts further. For example, the article headed ‘The Ministry of Health announces a package of new measures to contain the Corona virus’ attracted 10 comments. More than half of these were the efforts of the Ministry, which people thought were inadequate, some mocking both it and the Minister. One user, nicknamed ‘Arabi Aseel’ comments: ‘Impose a fine of 2400 Reals on the disease’ (*Al-Riyadh*, May 14, 2014). This refers to the actions of the new

Ministry of Health, formerly the Minister of Labour, which was always imposing fines on businesses and shops.

The third tactic that *Al-Riyadh* adopts is to offer reassurance in statements that dissipate concern about the virus. It does this by providing endorsements, from other countries and international bodies such as the World Health Organization or officials abroad, of the Saudi efforts to contain the disease. *Al-Riyadh* published these headlines:

‘Malaysian official confirms his confidence in the control of Corona’ by the Saudi government (May 15, 2014).

‘World Health Organization: No need to declare ‘comprehensive public health emergency’ for Corona disease’ (May 15, 2014).

In the first headline, the emphasis is on ‘control’ in which the Malaysian official has ‘confidence’. But by playing up these aspects such headlines arguably hide from public view the extent of the spread of the virus. If members of the public discover the discrepancy between this statement and events on the ground then it rests with them to construe the statement as best they may. The newspaper, however, can be assured that it has not flouted the official view of the disease. It is unquestionably an example of news framing, as *Al-Riyadh* focus on one aspect of news in the text (i.e. *Al-Riyadh* framed this news). This is consistent with Entman’s concept about framing, who justifies it thus: ‘[to] frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text’ (cited in Fogarty and Chapman 2012, p.3). These headlines reassure people, at the same time implying that the ‘exaggerations’ published in the online newspapers and social networking sites are incorrect. *Al-Riyah* followed the official view, despite the high number of deaths, the marked popular concern and the increasing rumours that the number of dead exceeded the number announced by the Ministry of Health.

Okaz covered the Corona issue more comprehensively than *Al-Riyadh* did and also published a wider range of articles about the disease, which were more critical of the performance of the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture and the prevention measures in Saudi hospitals. Yet *Okaz* adopted the same framing approach as *Al-Riyadh*, again focusing on issue-based framing and supporting the Ministry's line of 'awareness and reassurance'. It divided the topic into four aspects: the first three, perhaps unsurprisingly, were similar to those in *Al-Riyadh*, but the fourth, discussed below, was critical of the Ministry of Health and Saudi Arabian hospitals. On the one hand, *Okaz* published reports and interviewed doctors to reassure readers that the virus was set to decline, due to increased popular awareness. Headlines included:

'The decline of the virus: a rise in temperature is not serious' (*Okaz*, May 13, 2014).

'No cases of Corona in Al-Qassim'¹¹⁸ (*Okaz*, May 13, 2014).

'Ministry of Health announces package of new procedures to contain Corona' (*Okaz*, May 14, 2014).

On the other hand, columnists in *Okaz* were more critical, blaming the Ministry of Health and officials for the way that they had dealt with the issue. Khaled Alsuliman, under the heading 'Preventive medicine failure', criticised the failure by the Preventive Medicine Department in the Ministry of Health. He commented:

Clearly, negligence was shown by the Department of Preventive Medicine at the Ministry of Health, so this department should bear the responsibility for this failure and neglect. The responsibility should not be borne by the Minister alone, but also by those who betrayed their trust and failed to perform their duties through their preoccupation with themselves and their own interests (*Okaz*, May 14, 2014).

¹¹⁸ The headline means that there are no cases of Corona in the region where the largest camel market in Saudi Arabia operates, as if to reassure people that the disease had not reached this area in spite of the presence of a large number of camels (which some thought to be carriers of the virus).

On the day it was published, this article was more widely read than any other. It also attracted comments and debate among readers on the newspaper's website. Half of these comments were of the Ministry's performance and some said that every Ministry official, from the Department of Preventive Medicine in particular, and not just the former Minister, should bear the blame for the failure. Some mocked the Ministry, saying that the research conducted by the Ministry had not been of general benefit because the results of the research had not been applied on the ground and thus could not help patients. For example, 'Hani' comments: 'Funny thing how the dozens of researchers did not help one researcher to work with and help patients'. Another, 'Mohammed Alsharif' agrees with 'Hani': 'Well done, this is the right of free speech ... The minister does not bear the failure alone; it is shared by everyone who works with him, especially those in preventive medicine, who failed to carry out their responsibilities with regard to this virus' (*Okaz*, May 14, 2014).

In another column, under the heading 'Benefits of Corona', Abdullah Alharthi began by thanking the disease for making people aware and adhere to caution. However, he goes on:

It will be a disaster if we need a virus such as Corona every time the state of the hospitals and infection centres need remedying ... the Ministry of Health must consider fairness to doctors and technical staff and give them infection pay, to address the drastic need for this vitally important facility which has been directly linked to human health (*Okaz*, May 16, 2014).

This online column attracted comments, perhaps because of its provocative title, some agreeing with the writer, others offering health tips, including the guidance of the Prophet about sneezing. One commentator warns: 'I hope that the price of antibiotics for this disease will not rise and people's fears are not taken advantage of by raised prices' (*Okaz*, May 16, 2014).

A further column by Homoud Abu Talib wondered why the Ministry of Health had failed to find successful leadership among its staff to tackle the problem and had to attract managers from the Aramco Company to head the three hospitals in

Jeddah¹¹⁹. Abu Talib also explains the number of casualties and deaths in these hospitals (among nurses and doctors) by indicating that the procedures for the prevention and control of infection are below the desirable level. Most comments on the article agreed with the writer, some of them adding that Aramco had succeeded because of its management and a system that respects labour laws and favours no one (*Okaz*, May 17, 2014).

Finally, Mohammed Alehaidib, a journalist who has always castigated the performance of the Ministry of Health, particularly in the days of the dismissed official Abdullah Al-Rabiah, wrote a column ('Disappearance of Under-Secretary of the Ministry') demanding a separation between the health specialists and managerial workers. According to Alehaidib:

Being scientifically creative does not mean at all the same as being managerially proficient. Therefore, the former Minister of Health was to blame for taking charge of a branch of government, although he was a famous doctor... The spread of Corona is evidence that doctors should not be entrusted with management; those who were former doctors could not deal with a problem because they had no managerial qualifications (*Okaz*, May 18, 2014).

Alehaidib also criticises the Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Health for Preventive Medicine who completely disappeared from the scene 'as the outbreak intensified, because he was the one who had notoriously spoken with reassurance about Corona' (*Okaz*, May 18, 2014).

Okaz's coverage thus demonstrates that on the one hand the newspaper was committed to the official line in dealing with the issue, relying on government reports to reassure Saudis about the continued efforts of the government to combat it. But the Saudi columnists were more critical of how the problem had been tackled.

¹¹⁹ Attracting managers from Aramco (an oil company) to supervise projects or work in Saudi Ministries has become a phenomenon in Saudi Arabia in recent years, due to the failure or delay of some projects. The company has a good record of management and a good reputation among Saudis.

Whether such criticism in the official press was made more possible by the views expressed by the online-only news titles, is debatable.

Over the period the numbers catching the virus have grown, and the official media have become more conservative in debating the issue and in their dissemination of news regarding Corona: they are mostly committed to the official government line to reassure people that they (the official media) are capable of addressing this problem and protecting citizens, and they report the efforts the government is making to this end. Where appropriate, official newspapers select news items from International News agencies to help alleviate fears.

One such report pointed out that the outbreak of Corona had not persuaded the WHO to ban travel to Saudi Arabia. The use of language to settle concerns and suggest control of the situation runs through the report:

- Reassuring
- New procedures (to combat Corona)
- No need to declare a state of emergency
- Confidence
- Awareness
- Warning of rumours
- 'We will beat Corona by awareness'
- The decline of the virus
- 'Equipment is complete'
- Not to restrict travel to Saudi Arabia
- Corona under control
- Ministry of Health: 'we are ready for all eventualities'¹²⁰.

Thus, the Saudi official newspapers adopted a 'framing' that attempts to keep their readers satisfied with the performance of their government and its policy on the

¹²⁰ For examples of the use of reassuring language by traditional newspapers, see the evidence in the analysis of the news story and in the language used in the headlines of online newspapers (for more details about the method of analysing news stories, see Chapter 3).

disease. As Alatefy (2015) notes, the strategic role performed by frames ‘affects the reader’s behavior... this proves that the frame has a social power’ (p.52). Certainly frames may shape how a reader understands a situation.

7.2.3 Online newspapers

7.2.3.1 The ‘warning with some awareness’ frame

The emphasis in purely online newspapers is slightly different. Like *Al-Riyadh* and *Okaz*, the online title *Sabq* (tending to adopt a conservative line (see Chapter 5) has focused on news of the disease – the number of people who have been infected and the fatalities, and the efforts of the Ministry of Health and the hospitals. It has also offered interviews with specialists providing health advice. To a large extent the journalistic content was faithful to the official media line. Yet readers’ comments on the *Sabq* site were the most numerous, partly explained by *Sabq* having the most users of all online providers, but there was also a higher proportion engaging in strong criticism than on the *Al-Riyadh* and *Okaz* sites. Out of more than a hundred comments on *Sabq*, fewer than five were published in *Al-Riyadh* and *Okaz*. When *Sabq* published the headline: ‘The establishment of specialized units under the control of the disease control center ... The Ministry of Health has announced a package of new measures to control the Corona virus’ (*Sabq*, May 13, 2014), more than twenty readers commented on it. Some thanked the provisional Minister Adel Faqeh, others criticised the ministry's performance. One reader, Abu Saleh, notes:

All the procedures taken by the Ministry of Health to tackle Corona in order to satisfy the World Health Organization are useless since people continue to be inadequately treated in private and public hospitals. Even a royal command that someone should receive treatment is not worth the paper it is written on... but I thank WHO for its interest in the health of the Saudi citizens (*Sabq*, May 13, 2014).

There was also criticism from readers in relation to an interview with the Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Health. Most warn the Under-Secretary, ‘Stop this reassurance – the situation is dangerous’, with a reader from Riyadh, Abu Rakan, commenting: ‘Meetings, encounters, visits, workshops, studies and finally Corona itself are on the rise’ (*Sabq*, May 13, 2014). This is an example of coverage providing

a divergent approach, whereby the ‘awareness’ frame reminds us of *Sabq*’s coverage, while the ‘warning’ frame has emerged from its readers/commentators. In other words, there is a divergence between news coverage (by *Sabq*) and readers’ responses and comments on *Sabq*’s site, which, however, enhances the frame ‘warning with some awareness’ which has been adopted by Saudi online newspapers.

These comments indicate that readers have been mostly critical of the Ministry of Health or the Department of Preventive Medicine at the Ministry and are dissatisfied with how the government has dealt with this issue. Comments on news about the death of a patient from Corona in the city of Tabuk in the north of Saudi Arabia relate to the hospital’s delay in implementing procedures to tackle the disease and the limited methods for examining patients. Other writers wonder: ‘What is the secret of non-Saudis who become ill here and return to their own country... There they get medical treatment and return to normal life... Is there a vaccine in foreign countries that Saudi Arabia hasn’t got?’ (*Sabq*, May 14, 2014).

This discussion makes it clear that, although *Sabq* adhered to the official line in addressing the issue, and used frames that were consistent with those used by the Saudi official newspapers, the comments from the *Sabq* readers’ site attracted numerous comments, many making it clear that they did not accept the official line regarding the Corona issue. *Sabq* is thus able to have it both ways by opening up space for comment: toe the line in its content but through its readers, be critical.

The other online newspapers considered here, *Alweeam* and *Ajel*, addressed the Corona issue without necessarily adhering to the official media line observed by *Al-Riyadh*, *Okaz* and *Sabq*. They published news from international news agencies and foreign newspapers and provided news and reports not published in either the traditional newspapers or in *Sabq* online. However, it is apparent that *Alweeam* and *Ajel* focused more on the ‘warning frame’ than the ‘awareness frame’. For example, *Alweeam* online referred to a hospital in Najran (in southern Saudi Arabia) which

allowed a Corona patient to go home although he was still infectious, commenting: 'This patient's case sparked controversy in the community' (*Alweeam*, May 18, 2014). *Alweeam* also published news about the Health Department in Taif (a city in the western region) having investigated a doctor who put his patients at risk of contracting Corona¹²¹. This news story created such repercussions among *Alweeam* readers that some of the traditional newspapers also addressed the issue. A further story *Alweeam* carried was about camel herders who went on strike in the city of Afif (500 km west of Riyadh) because they were afraid of catching the disease. Rumours had spread that camels carried the virus causing Corona, leading to great disquiet among camel owners and herders. This news also prompted comments on *Alweeam's* site, which pointed out inconsistencies in the information from the Ministry of Health. One story accused the ministry of sometimes citing camels as the reason and sometimes finding something else to blame (*Alweeam*, May 16, 2014). As in the case of *Sabq* the comments mostly indicated that readers were dissatisfied with the performance of the Ministry of Health which, they believed, had not done its best in this crisis.

Similarly, *Ajel* online published a story quoting from the American website 'Medical News Today' under the title 'US doctors are sceptical about the World Health Organization's estimates of the risk of Corona' (*Ajel*, May 16, 2014). It reports that the American doctors have criticised what they describe as 'the weakness of the precautionary procedures' (*Ajel*, May 16, 2014). As noted above, such news items are absent in the official media, which continued to reassure readers that the disease was under control. Another story reported 'two million Saudi had asthma ... and Corona was a severe threat to them' (*Ajel*, May 14, 2014). *Ajel* also reported the following: 'After the total of infected people reached 551 and the fatalities reached 157 ... it was suspected that the system allowing Corona to be transmitted was the electronic footprint for checking in at work' (*Ajel*, May 15, 2014). This item refers to

¹²¹ The story was that the doctor assured a patient that the Medical Centre held many cases of the Corona virus, to justify his decision to reduce his visits to it. The doctor was aiming to force the patient to stay at home and left him [the patient] afraid of passing on the virus to the doctor (*Alweeam*, May 17, 2014).

the electronic signing-in method for staff used by most ministries and private companies. Following this news, in order to reduce fears among staff, some companies began to dispense with the system. (It has since been totally closed down).

These items published in *Ajel* and *Alweeam* seem, at first glance, like items in traditional newspapers. However, the latter use headlines that do not raise such fear and concern as those used by online newspapers. For example, *Ajel* referred to: 'severely threatened', 'death', 'doubts', 'the most serious', and 'question marks about ... Corona victims continue'. However, such language did not appear in the headlines of official newspapers on the subject of Corona (as discussed above) where the emphasis was on 'reassurance'. Although *Alweeam* and *Ajel* online did not publish as many comments as *Sabq* online, they were bolder in addressing the Corona issue, including reports from global newspapers and foreign agencies which raised further concerns that were difficult for the Saudi authorities to condemn, and this can be seen as an astute approach to presenting a 'warning frame'.

However, the online publications developed a variety of ways to frame and address the issue, working both in and against the constraints set by the official press. *Sabq* online stayed with the official line in its news, but aired many online comments and discussions on the issue, seeming to allow their readers to express their opinion freely. *Alweeam* and *Ajel*, in comparison, covered this issue more broadly, boldly providing readers with sometimes disturbing news about Corona that could not be found in the traditional newspapers. As indicated above, when *Alweeam* published a story about a hospital in Najran which allowed a Corona patient to go home although he was still infectious and another story about a doctor who put his patient at risk of contracting Corona in the city of Taif, it raised much debate and discussion in the community. Pertinently this boldness and consequent user discussion published by the online newspapers did not bring sanctions from the state.

Thus the online newspapers *Ajel* and *Alweeam* used language and frames which implied that this issue was more serious than suggested by official newspapers and *Sabq*. Their 'warning frame' adopted language conveying the seriousness of the health issue. Emphases below are added to make this point.

- The spread of the virus
- Increase in the number of deaths
- An emergency meeting because of Corona
- Sacking of the director of King Abdullah Hospital
- The inadequacy of precautionary procedures
- Corona 'threatened asthma patients'
- Continued deaths from Corona
- Camel herders on strike because of Corona

To sum up, official newspapers were committed to the official government line and did not publish everything about the issue, while the online newspapers (apart from *Sabq*) tended to publish more information and provided headlines that warned people of the threat and seriousness of the situation. *Sabq* stood out in making a clear distinction between editorially controlled news copy (largely following the 'awareness and reassurance' frame) and readers' comments. The latter were more numerous and bolder in their criticism in *Sabq* than they were in the other online providers. In contrast, *Alweeam* and *Ajel* were striking in their emphasis on the 'warning' frame in their news stories about Corona, even though readers' contributions were more limited.

7.2.4 Twitter

As discussed earlier (Chapter Three), four Saudi Twitter accounts were selected for analysis: Mohammed Alehaidib (@alehaidib), who writes on health issues and appears on television, often to discuss problems related to the Ministry of Health; Saad Aldousari (@saaddousari) who has worked for many years in hospitals, and writes a column in both the newspapers *Al-Riyadh* and *Al-Jazriah*, and continually criticises the Ministry of Health in dealing with issues; Saleh Alshehi (@SalehAlshehi), who is also a famous writer on the newspaper *Al-Watan* on health issues; and finally, Abdull Aziz Alsuwayed (@asuwayed) who consistently responds to mentions of Corona in tweets. Each of these Saudi writers has thousands of followers on Twitter.

7.2.4.1 The ‘criticism and scepticism’ frame

The Twitter statements, comments and discussions of Corona fall into three categories: first, general information and news about the disease, including the number of deaths or patients and news/information quoted from Saudi newspapers or other media. Such tweets often attaches a news link to their comment or includes a retweeting from another Twitter account. Second, direct tweeting about Corona, including comments about the Ministry of Health’s procedures to combat the spread of the disease. Third, responses to other Tweeters’ comments and discussions on the issue of Corona.

An example of a tweet that sparked a response was one by Mohamed Alehaidib: ‘Camel traders said that camel prices had fallen by half ... So, we ask the Ministry of Health to prove instead that it was land that caused Corona’ (@Alehaidib, May 24, 2014). He is mocking the Ministry of Health’s research, saying that he would prefer land to be found responsible so that the price of land could go down instead (elsewhere in the same tweet he refers to the high price of land in Saudi Arabia). This tweet was quoted (retweeted) 837 times (see Figure 4 below) and attracted dozens of responses, most of them ironic or sarcastic. They all wrote about the problems of Saudi society, some of them wishing the same as Mohamed Alehaidib.

This matter escalated via the satirical approach adopted on most social media platforms, including Twitter, where it served as a key frame for the issue of Corona.



Figure 4. Source: (@Alehaidib, May 24, 2014). [Twitter post].

The user 'Saad Aldawood' responded: 'How many Sahafs do we have?' He is referring to the Iraqi Minister of Information, Mohammed Alsahaf, who in 2003 gave out incorrect information about the situation in Iraq during the war. In this way he is indirectly implying that officials in the Ministry of Health are lying. Alehaidib went on to mount a strong attack on the Ministry of Health, and the Department of Preventive Medicine in particular. He stated:

All those who belittle the concerns about Corona and those who sacked the Egyptian researcher 'Ali Zaki' who discovered

Corona, and all the staff in the Preventive Medicine agency and the deputy health agents must be brought to justice, like those implicated in the flood disaster in Jeddah¹²² (@Alehaidib, May 7, 2014).

This tweet was retweeted 169 times, but most of the responses cynically pointed out that those responsible for the disaster in Jeddah had not been brought to justice. Some of them even said that a few of the guilty men had been appointed ministers.

Further comment on Corona was that the disease had spread dramatically and reports on it had been suppressed. The user nicknamed 'Asahra toraby Alrejal' commented on the above tweet: 'those are criminals not officials and no one brings them to justice, no law punishes the minister, the magistrates have absolute rule and no one monitors their autocracy' (@Alehaidib, May 7, 2014). A high degree of scepticism marks these tweets.

But a different viewpoint is manifest elsewhere. In his Twitter account, Saleh Alshehi (@SalehAlshehi) wrote: 'Since September 2012, 115 people have died in our country because of the Corona virus During the same period, nearly 9,000 people died because of road accidents ... See the reaction to these two cases (@SalehAlshehi, May 6, 2014). He is highlighting the bigger reaction to the relatively small number of victims of Corona than to the much larger number killed on the roads. This Tweet was re-tweeted 455 times. Many comments were made on this tweet, whether on Alshehi's original account or when quoted by other users who responded to each other. For example, the user 'Fahad Ayyad' claimed that this was an example of the West trying to exploit the issue and make a profit on it (via the cost of drugs) and that Saudi Arabia understood the game: he said 'We [the Saudis] will not agree'. Another user, Hamad Abdullah, said in response to the comment: 'But don't you think these accidents deserve similar attention?... Don't you think that

¹²² Floods occurred in the city of Jeddah on the Red Sea coast of western Saudi Arabia in November 2009. Civil defence officials described them as the worst in 27 years. The floods led to the deaths of 116 people, with more than 350 missing. After the disaster, a number of senior officials were brought to justice on charges of corruption and mismanagement (*Al-Riyadh*, December 5, 2009).

we should intensify the sanctions on violators of traffic regulations?’ (@SalehAlshehi, May 6, 2014). Fahad Ayyad’ replied: ‘I am totally against the system of traffic offences [called ‘Saher’ in Saudi Arabia] with the exception of speed cameras at traffic signals or fixed places’ (@SalehAlshehi, May 6, 2014). These responses and interactions highlight Twitter users engaging in discussion with each other on a range of issues sparked by a particular tweet but demonstrating some independence from it.

Adopting a cynical tone, Saad Aldousari (@saaddousari) wrote:

The Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, said: ‘There is no relationship between Corona and hot grilled meat and milk’. In the absence of accurate information about Corona, everyone is making statements; who will be making a statement tomorrow? (@saaddousari, May 23, 2014).

He is criticising the silence of the Ministry of Health, referring to it as the cause of the spread of incorrect information about Corona. In another tweet Aldousari also wondered: ‘Is there a mystery behind these ‘Corona’ viruses?’ (@saaddousari, May 8, 2014), again trying to make visible the absence of knowledge about how the virus might have originated. With this tweet Aldousari attached a link to his column in the *Al-Jazirah* newspaper, which was re-tweeted 63 times. Several people commented, some considering the Corona issue as a ‘conspiracy’ by pharmaceutical firms. For example, a user with the nickname of ‘Aien’ commented: ‘Do we consider it [Corona] part of germ warfare of unknown origin?’. Another user ‘Nebras Alharbi’ responded: ‘Ask the companies and pharmaceutical plants - they may answer or they may be silent!’ (@saaddousari, May 8, 2014). There is clearly both criticism of the Saudi authorities in these tweets and responses and also a wider cynicism in relation to those in power.

Abdul Aziz Alsuwayed’s often mocking tweets (@asuwayed) also stimulated a debate in which medical specialists joined in too. He wrote: ‘I have become wary of even looking at the image of a camel on the computer’ (@asuwayed, May 15, 2014). He was referring to the Ministry of Health’s research findings (above). In response, Fatima Omran wrote: ‘the camel was and still is a beautiful symbol of our heritage

and may our Lord keep it from Corona ...' (@asuwayed, May 15, 2014). The writer also indicates her scepticism of the Ministry of Health's statements about the origin of Corona. Another contributor to the debate, Ali Alsnaidi, argues: 'The poor camel has become a victim or a scapegoat, but the truth is that the virus is an administrative virus of the bureaucracy at the Ministry of Health' (@asuwayed, May 15, 2014). He implies that the spread of the Corona virus was caused by poor health care management. Dr Gwaiz, a specialist, interjected a tweet saying that connecting the Corona virus with camels is unscientific and he wanted to conduct a survey of patients to verify whether they had indeed been infected by camels which had immunity but were carrying the virus. Again questioning the Ministry of Health's research, a veterinarian writing under the name 'Ali' affirmed: 'Camels are the best animals and have greater immunity, I do not think they transmit [the infection] to humans' (@asuwayed, May 15, 2014), and with some sarcasm, Talal Alosaimi wrote to suggest that the camel may disclaim responsibility for the spread of Corona.

All these rejoinders were responses to Abdul Aziz Alsuwayed's tweets as a well-known journalist who currently writes a daily column in *Al-Hayat* and has also written for *Aleqtisadiah* and *Al-Riyadh*. He himself re-tweeted some of them in order to raise the profile of the virus and this also encouraged direct feedback from other Tweeters.

Perhaps because of the response to his 'camel' tweet, Alsuwayed wrote an article in *Al-Hayat* newspaper, 'The Battle of the Camel' (Alsuwayed 2014), tweeting about it and including a link. He wrote about the Minister of Health's advice to people to reduce their consumption of camel meat and camel milk, cynically remarking that the poor camel must be wondering what it will be blamed for next. He proposed that the minister should personally update information about the disease, on the ministry's website, in order to prevent newspapers from rushing to publish information from unreliable sources for the sake of getting a scoop. Whether or not this was justified, the issue attracted the attention of readers and users of social media in general and Twitter in particular.

Thus a well-known Twitter account holder by highlighting an issue contributed to its continuing presence for many Saudis. In this way the course of the epidemic became a matter of public interest and one on which the government was directly or indirectly being urged to be honest and transparent and provide accurate information. The process of communication was different from that adopted by official newspapers. Although the latter do have websites, their online responses to articles may take up to several hours before publication because the comments are first sent to their gatekeeper or the censor, who may suppress some parts of them.

Further, most Saudi newspapers stop comments on a particular news item or column 24 hours after publication in their online version, and then close down the comment facility. The degree of criticism evident in Twitter was also higher than in official newspapers and some online newspapers. Account holders on Twitter seemed to be very aware of the spread of the virus, the lack of significant progress in controlling it and the consequent great resentment of many Saudi readers/Twitter users. The frame adopted by the account holders and users was one of 'criticism and scepticism'. Based perhaps on knowledge of earlier issues and the authorities' handling of them, they were sceptical that the authorities would be transparent in their media communications or deal appropriately with the issue of Corona.

According to Bader (2005), 'Media studies which addressed framing agreed on the effect of the general conditions surrounding the event on the frames that formation of media news, where the nature of the event itself determines the nature of its framing' (p.59). Consequently, Saudi Twitter accounts were based on the poor performance by the authorities in their handling of the issue and thus they [Twitter accounts] adopted the particular frame of 'criticism and scepticism' to help keep the Corona issue in the minds of many Saudis and thus were able to embody their concerns. These exchanges on Twitter established a 'public opinion', making demands of the government/Ministry of Health through 'criticism and scepticism', which was a way of being critical and distancing oneself from those in power yet without really doing anything. Nevertheless, because of the anger of public opinion

on Twitter, the Saudi authorities forced the dismissal of a number of hospital managers; for example, the Director of the King Fahd Hospital in Jeddah and the Director of the Hospital in Tabuk (in the north of Saudi Arabia).

7.3 Saudi Media and the Egyptian Elections

7.3.1 Background

After the outbreak of the January 25 revolution in Egypt which toppled President Hosni Mubarak's regime, the military council in Egypt temporarily took over the government in order to determine the date of the first elections after the revolution. On June 24, 2012, President Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, won the presidential election by a narrow margin (51%) and became the first civilian president of Egypt since 1952.

However, at the end of April 2013, some of the youth movements, such as 'Harakat Tamaroud', demanded a withdrawal of confidence in President Morsi and called for early presidential elections. They believed that 'Morsi's regime was authoritarian and they demanded the establishment of a new regime based on democracy and a modern civil state' (BBC, December 12, 2013). These movements then called for demonstrations on June 30, 2013 to overthrow President Morsi and hold new elections (Aljazeera, June 29, 2013). After the June 30 protests, the Egyptian army sacked Islamist President Morsi on July 3, 2013. According to a declaration by the Minister of Defence General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi (who played a key role in the removal of President Morsi), Morsi 'failed to achieve the demands of the people' (BBC, July 4, 2013). After this the Egyptian army took several other actions – known as the 'road map'. This road map was announced by General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and in the presence of Sheik Ahmed Al-Tayeb, Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawdros II and some opposition figures such as Mohamed El Baradei. Temporarily suspending the current constitution, the road map outlined policy on the future government of Egypt and indicated that the head of Egypt's High Constitutional Court (HCC) would run the country until a new president was elected via early presidential polls (*Ahram Online*, July 3, 2013).

In mid-May 2014, the election campaign for a second President of Egypt in less than a year began. However, the election was boycotted by several political parties and youth movements such as the Anti-coup Alliance, the Misr Alqawia Party and the 6th April Youth Movement. These groups were not supporting Morsi or the Muslim Brotherhood, but opposed military rule. The Muslim Brotherhood also boycotted the elections because the army had overthrown President Morsi, their representative whose return they demanded, and thus the Muslim Brotherhood demanded his return. The candidates were Al-Sisi and Hamdeen Sabahi¹²³. On June 3, the Election Commission announced a landslide victory for Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who gained 96.94% of the vote.

The present study focuses on the way in which the Saudi media (again the official newspapers, online newspapers and Saudi users of Twitter) dealt with the Egyptian elections, considering whether and how online newspapers and Twitter differed from official newspapers, through an examination of their respective framing of these events.

The Saudi official media are here represented by the traditional newspapers *Al-Jazirah* and *Asharq Al-Awsat*, while the new media are represented by the online newspapers, *Alweeam*, *Lojainiat* and *Sabq* and the social medium of Twitter by @LoveLiberty- fahadjababbar, @alahmarim, @Dr_fahad_harhi, @alshaikhmhmd and @allahim. In analysing how the various media reported and responded to the

¹²³ Sabahi is an Egyptian politician and parliamentarian. Former head of the party 'Alkaramah', editor of the *Karama* newspaper, a former member of parliament and also a candidate for the presidency in the 2012 election. According to his personal website, he has a history of defending the rights of Egyptians, standing up for social justice and speaking on national issues. He is a socialist Nasserist (<http://www.hamdeensabahy.com/>). Some of those boycotting the election saw his candidacy as offering legitimacy to a bogus election <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/24/sisi-president-elections-hamdeen-sabahi>.

election exercise, it again attends to the frames adopted, and the factors that contributed to their formation.

7.3.2 Saudi official newspapers

As discussed in the first case study, the traditional media in Saudi Arabia tend to offer a 'political line' on events which supports the government position. The issue is whether this is also the mode of reporting for an external event and how Saudi online newspapers, which more generally adopt what might be described as moderate, Islamic, Liberal and conservative political positions, might differ from the traditional media.

7.3.2.1 The 'fair and democratic elections' frame

The daily newspaper *Al-Jazirah* reported a total of 26 items of news, with 7 opinion columns dealing with the elections held in Egypt. In this newspaper, it was clear that most of the items published were in support of the electoral process, focusing on news that supported the presidential election and cast no doubt on its fairness. For example, the first headline in *Al-Jazirah* dealing with the election was: 'The provisional President casts his vote in the elections, and stresses the importance of building Egypt's future'. *Al-Jazirah* emphasises that Adli Mansour had voted on the first day of the election (May 26) in Cairo. It is explained in the news report itself that this decision was influenced by the need to restore confidence among voters, as well as guaranteeing the transparency of the process (see Figure 5 below). The news story also reports the promise by the Prime Minister of Egypt that his government was committed to ensuring that the elections were neutral, transparent and fair.



Figure 5. Source: *Al-Jazirah* newspaper (May 27, 2014).

The headline (above) includes the words 'neutrality', 'transparency' and 'integrity'; and the news report itself draws on phrases and words such as 'building the future', 'the people's will', 'delight', 'proud'...etc. (*Al-Jazirah*, May 27, 2014). It seems that the newspaper wanted to emphasise, through the headline and the language of the report, the positive aspects of the Egyptian elections. It ruled out content and news stories that might point to the excesses and mistakes, such as the presence of banners in front of the headquarters of some of the polling stations calling to vote for Al-Sisi, or the distribution of electoral gifts as a way of urging citizens to vote for a particular candidate. These excesses and mistakes that occurred during the elections were hidden by Saudi official newspapers and not reported. The photo in Figure 5 demonstrates transparency but also orderly and peaceful voting as Adli Mansour votes, leading the way for the electorate. These meanings easily transfer to suggesting that the whole electoral process is orderly. Thus from the outset the frame of 'fair elections' is established by another headline, 'Intensive voter turnout in the second day of the vote ... Al-Sisi is heading for the presidency of Egypt with a comfortable majority ... and Sabahi compete', which was published in *Al-Jazirah* on

May 28, 2014. It reveals the high participation of voters on the second day, pointing to Al-Sisi as being likely to clinch the presidency, though under tough competition from Sabahi. In these reports, *Al-Jazirah* used the absences and hid some information and details in order to frame this event. This can be considered a practical application of the concept of 'framing', as Entman (1993) points out that 'one way of framing news is [to] hide or ignore certain information ... absence of keywords, stock phrases, stereotypical images, etc.' (p. 52).

The headline thus emphasises a 'healthy' competitive democratic election in process. To confirm this view, *Al-Jazirah* also reports that 'Arab and foreign organizations commend the progress of the electoral process' (*Al-Jazirah*, May 28, 2014), whilst Egypt itself was already celebrating Al-Sisi's success:

'Egypt celebrates the victory of Marshal Al-Sisi until morning' (*Al-Jazirah*, May 30, 2014).

'Welcome to the stabilization of Egypt' (*Al-Jazirah*, June 1, 2014).

It is clear from the language of the headlines and news content that *Al-Jazirah* focused on highlighting the positive aspects of the election and its alleged order and democracy, the enthusiasm of the populace and Al-Sisi as the appropriate candidate to take office. Spirited and optimistic phrases were used to suggest that the running of the Egyptian elections was faultless: 'intensive voter turnout', 'healthy competition', 'progress', 'celebrates', 'stabilization', etc.

The *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper devoted 28 news items and 10 opinion columns (throughout May 2014) to coverage of the elections. Overall, the newspaper suggested that the electoral process was one supported in the region internationally and by the electorate; it presented the competition between the two candidates as a fair, safe and conflict-free process. One headline reported that the turnout of Egyptian voters hit a tally of millions who had come out to vote for their new president: 'Millions of Egyptians flocking to elect a new president today' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 26, 2014). Another headline claimed that the atmosphere was festive and the security of the voters was guaranteed. The paper also reported that Al-Sisi

was close to claiming victory as president, although it also reported that Sabahi's campaign team had detected instances of election malpractice. *Asharq Al-Awsat* also claimed that there was an uneven voter turnout on the last day of elections even though the prime minister had said the results of the elections would greatly impress the world. Nevertheless, according to the newspaper, the observers were also satisfied that the elections were being conducted in a fair manner. Below are some of the headlines and column headings that were published in *Asharq Al-Awsat*:

'Millions of Egyptians flock to elect a new president today' (front page news) (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 26, 2014).

'Egypt ... good news' (column, written by Meshari Althaidy) (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 26, 2014).

'Egyptian officials racing with the masses to cast their ballots in the presidential election' (news report) (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 27, 2014).

'Egyptian security frustrates attempts to target polling stations' (news report) (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 27, 2014)

'Egyptians vote in the festive atmosphere and are heavily guarded' (news report) (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 27, 2014).

'The weakness of the turnout is a puzzle in presidential elections in Egypt ... Observers and politicians think that fasting, confidence and high temperatures are the most prominent reasons' (news report) (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 27, 2014).

A review of the above headlines shows that the most significant feature is the desire to show that the elections are going well and that the newspaper wanted to convince readers that turnout was high the first morning of the election¹²⁴, using the word

¹²⁴ The electoral process takes place over two consecutive days, from nine in the morning until nine at night, under full judicial supervision through 16 judges and members of the public on behalf of the Authority, in charge of overseeing the 13 thousand and 899 electoral commission subsets subject to the supervision of the 352-strong public committee following the presidential election commission. The total population with the right to vote in the election was nearly 54 million (*Al-Jazirah*, May 27, 2014).

'millions'. The newspaper also tried to show that the elections were conducted in secure conditions and that the atmosphere was festive, by its use of the words 'celebrate', 'festive' ... etc. Similar words were used by *Al-Jazirah* (as discussed above). These headings confirm that *Asharq Al-Awsat* tried to frame the issue by focusing on certain elements of the news story but not others, and use only those photos that supported the positive aspects of the election.

The last headline listed above seems to offer a contrary view, reporting that the turnout on the last day of the presidential election was low. However, there is a reassuring explanation to this 'puzzle': 'Observers and politicians saw that fasting, confidence and high temperature [were] the most prominent reasons' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 28, 2014). *Asharq Al-Awsat* also published the news that Sabahi complained about malpractice¹²⁵ in the election process, but it was not discussed extensively and later carried a response by an electoral observer working at the Egyptian Ministry of Justice: 'we investigated Sabahi's campaign complaints and we found that the reason was the accumulation of citizens in front of polling stations' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 28, 2014). He also pointed out that they had been provided with extra judges to overcome the obstacles (the latter comment refers to the violations raised by Sabahi), and thanked the Interior and Defence Ministries 'for securing the elections' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 28, 2014). *Asharq Al-Awsat* also reported that 'patriotic songs in the streets on the last day of the election and dances by young men and girls did not help to persuade Egyptians to come out to vote' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 28, 2014). It suggested, via the views of Egyptian voters they interviewed, that one reason for a poorer than hoped-for turnout was that 'most Egyptians knew that the result was a foregone conclusion' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 28, 2014).¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Sabahi's campaign spotted intrusion by the police and the army in the electoral process and the prevention of the entry of the candidate agents to the electoral commissions before checking their authorizations, which is contrary to the text of Articles 27 and 30 of the Egyptian Electoral Act (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 28, 2014).

¹²⁶ Furthermore, *Asharq Al-Awsat* claimed that the overall turnout over the two days (the second and last days of the election) was uneven (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 29, 2014).

It is apparent that these two Saudi official newspapers were in total support of Al-Sisi, the Field Marshal who had toppled the regime of the Muslim Brotherhood. What was scarcely mentioned were the claims of irregularities as 'alleged' by Sabahi's campaign team. In addition, the newspapers did not give equal coverage to the two candidates: for instance, Al-Sisi's name was mentioned in 19 headlines, Sabahi's in 14. *Al-Jazirah* published a photo of a voter putting a ballot paper in the box and a picture of the two candidates (Al-Sisi and Sabahi) but another where a voter is seen to choose Al-Sisi. A further news item, which includes a photo (Figure 6 below), also supports the frame of 'fair and democratic elections'. The headline and story for this news item include these phrases and words: 'Egyptians flock to the polling stations', 'the competition', 'securing the electoral process'. Naturally, using the word 'flow' in the headline refers to the large number of voters, and 'competition' indicates that there is a democratic atmosphere in the electoral process and thus there is intense competition between two candidates who have the same opportunity to win.



Figure 6. Source: *Al-Jazirah* newspaper (May 27, 2014).

The paper also did not refer to the reports of international organizations (such as Human Rights Monitor and Human Rights Watch) and international news agencies

(such as Reuters) which were critical of the election process and reported that the turnout was low (unlike the online newspapers discussed below). It is clear, therefore, that these newspapers had resorted to framing, which features the practice of highlighting one part of the truth and hiding others. According to Entman (1993), one way of framing news is to 'hide or ignore certain information and [make a] decision to avoid keywords' (p.52). In contrast, they selectively published news from Arab and international organizations that praised the election process, as well as briefly and selectively referring to reports by some organizations (such as international news agencies and global newspapers) on the reasons for the poor voter turnout.

Thus, the Saudi official newspapers (*Al-Jazirah* and *Asharq Al-Awsat*) adopted the frame 'fair and democratic elections' to reflect their attitude toward these elections. They used news stories and headlines that highlighted specific words and ignored others. According to Entman (1993), the text is considered one of the elements of media framing. He states: the 'text includes frames that stand out through the presence or absence of key words, certain structures, stereotypes, and sources of information, sentences that include facts and certain provisions' (cited in Alatefy 2015, p.54). For example, the language used by these two newspapers is the language of optimism, admiration and satisfaction, to describe all the events of the elections and the electoral process. So one can observe the selection of such words and phrases in the headlines as follows: turnout intensively, integrity, transparency, strict security measures, the future, Egypt celebrates, neutrality, democracy, festive atmosphere, stability, non-influential mistakes, delight.

It is also worth noting that readers' comments on the election news were few and all praised the elections, commending the victory of Al-Sisi. Whether this was the upshot of editorial policy suppressing other comments or was the reluctance of those with alternative views to post them is not clear. Responding to Tareq Alhumaied's column, 'Egypt ... Numbers and Illusions', in which Alhumaied criticised Sabahi, because the latter doubted the credibility of the number of voters which announced by the committee Egyptian elections, user 'Akram Alkateeb' commented critically

that the Muslim Brotherhood used digital cameras cleverly to portray the headquarters of the elections in the slack periods to show that the turnout for the election was weak and then sent these videos to social networking sites and the Al-Jazeera channel. User 'Fouad Mohammed', who also supported the result of the election, interestingly, praised Sabahi because 'he did not withdraw ... despite dwindling chances of winning' (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, May 31, 2014). The inference he was making was that the election was not corrupt or rigged and that Sabahi's candidacy legitimated the process.

Most photos also offer a positive view of the elections: voters coming out of the polling station, making the 'two fingers' sign of victory, as in the photo in Figure 7 below: a family snapshot being taken, the family group represented as smiling and happy.



Figure 7. Source: *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper (May 29, 2014).

Such photos are common in the wider official Saudi newspaper coverage of elections. In the context of this Egyptian election, this family photograph may

suggest the importance of these elections – history in the making – and the proposition that going to vote is a safe, secure process that any family can and should take part in. The photo above shows a situation where a family group is glad to be voting, but does not mention that the polling station behind them is empty of people, suggesting the low turnout of voters. This is again consistent with Entman's view of framing in news: including some aspects while avoiding others. As mentioned earlier, he writes of the 'presence or absence of keywords, stock phrases, stereotypical images ...etc.' (1993, p. 52).

To sum up, the general coverage of the elections by the Saudi newspapers was clearly in favour of the election practice and the results. The official newspapers also showed strong support for Al-Sisi, partly because they have to conform to government policies. Fowler (2013) and Yin (2009) say that compulsion and lack of freedom present the media in agreement with government policies, meaning that in non-democratic countries the press often simply reflect government policy because they have no alternative. The frames used by Saudi newspapers to communicate election events show that they interpret events through the particular framing of 'fair and democratic elections'. This is necessary because the papers are dependent on funding from the Saudi government. According to Alatefy (2015), 'there is pressure on the journalist who edits the news, for example: [from] control [censorship], ownership and funding, which determine the editorial policy and selection of appropriate frames' (p.53).

7.3.3 Online newspapers

7.3.3.1 The 'disputed scene' frame

The *Alweeam* online newspaper featured 12 items of news and, to some extent, offered more 'objective' reporting of the elections, often citing wider foreign sources such as Reuters, whilst some of its news is not copied from the official source but does in fact simply report the same story independently (including the prediction of Al-Sisi as the winner). The more 'objective' reporting included the detection of

irregularities in the voting process and the rejection of an appeal by the Sabahi team. On the latter, *Alweeam* published a news report – quoting Reuters – which stated that Sabahi’s campaign presented a legal challenge to the election commission by its objection to the presence of election propaganda inside and outside polling stations by the supporters of the rival candidate (Al-Sisi’s supporters) in a manner completely contrary to the law of the Egyptian election ... in addition to other irregularities’ (*Alweeam*, June 1, 2014).

Regarding the readers' comments in *Alweeam*, there were fewer¹²⁷ than in *Sabq* (see below) and the comments were divided, some supporting the elections and some not. However, there are those who supported Sabahi and some the Muslim Brotherhood, who probably did not vote for either candidate. One response to Al-Sisi winning the election was hostile, commenting on bias in the news and suggesting that the real percentage of participation in the Egyptian elections did not exceed 10%. In contrast, another, as a supporter of Al-Sisi was against the Muslim Brotherhood and other movements that boycotted the elections. This commentator referred to General Haftar (in Libya) as a model for Al-Sisi: ‘if you want the establishment of security in Libya, you must get rid of the Muslim Brotherhood’ (*Alweeam*, May 30, 2015).

For its part, *Lojainiat* published much more criticism about the elections than *Alweeam* did, focusing on demonstrations by the opposition and obstacles to the smooth running of the election process. It framed this (the elections) as a disturbing event, with unclear implications. The headlines reported action against protestors who rejected the election results: ‘Two people killed by security to prevent a demonstration in Cairo’ (*Lojainiat*, May 31, 2014). It is striking that Saudi official newspapers such as *Al-Jazirah* and *Asharq Al-awsat* did not publish any news about this event. Further, *Lojainiat* referred to a report by an international organization (the

¹²⁷ For instance, some of the news items do not attract more than six comments: for example, only five on the following headline: ‘Sabahi appeals against the result of presidency of Egypt elections’ (*Alweeam*, May 31, 2014).

Human Rights Monitor): 'Egypt's elections took place under massive violations' (*Lojainiat*, May 29, 2014). Human Rights Watch also commented on the elections, citing the violation of people's political rights to question the integrity of Egyptian elections. In this way *Lojainiat* indicates that there is evidence to suggest that the elections did not take place according to protocol, or as the Saudi official press reported. This gives a clear indication that the frames used by this online newspaper differ from those used by official organs.

Through reference to news coverage by *Lojainiat*, this title used and selected news stories that support the frame 'a disputed scene'. And thus, *Lojainiat* adopted this frame through using these words and phrases in its headlines and news stories: widespread abuse, lack of integrity and lack of neutrality, political repression, district people, protests, etc. In sum, *Lojainiat* tried to highlight certain events and news and then indicate to the elections were conducted in the atmosphere of a disputed, as well as to highlight the conflict between the authority and the anti-election groups. Accordingly, this online newspaper used one way of news framing where it 'highlighted certain aspects of reality and ruled out other aspects' (Alatefy 2015, p.51). Actually, the media (offline/online) resort to 'news frames' to assist their readers in building perceptions about certain issues 'by providing them [with] a set of concepts that they use in the process of interpretation of events and issues' (Rhee 1997, cited in Alatefy 2015, p.51).

Sabq online carried eight items on the election and arguably offered the most 'objective' reporting of the online newspapers considered. It reported criticisms of the elections as well as representing views in support in a similar way to what the official newspapers were doing. In terms of criticism, one headline read: 'It is considered that 'black cynicism' will surround Al-Sisi's regime. Western newspapers describe the Egyptian elections as 'a farce' (*Sabq*, May 30, 2014). On the same day it used a headline that also appeared in traditional newspapers: 'Preliminary indicators suggest that Al-Sisi is heading for a landslide victory in Egypt's election with 93%' (*Sabq*, May 30, 2014). However, this report was more tempered: it did not suggest that the competition between Al-Sisi and Sabahi was 'fierce', as the official

newspapers did (due to the boycotting of the elections, Al-Sisi in fact won 93% of the vote, while Sabahi gained only 3%).

Other headlines hinted that voters' apparent satisfaction with the election in other news reports was a media lie, and that Sabahi voters were not content with the results. *Sabq* reported a Western view that the election was 'a farce' and opposition protests which demanded an extension of the voting period.

But on the whole the Saudi online newspapers (*Alweeam*, *Lojainiat*, and *Sabq*) adopted what might be referred to as the 'disputed scene' frame, suggesting no simple, clear view of the election process. They switched between a more critical account – the low turnout and the presence of some irregularities in the electoral process – and one reproducing the Egyptian government's standpoint. To this extent it could be argued that the coverage by both *Alweeam* and *Sabq* was more balanced in describing and interpreting what was unfolding.

But *Lojainiat*, (the online newspaper that inclines towards the Islamic line, and whose readers have mainly religious sympathies), published news that favoured the religious trend. They clearly opposed the elections, and supported the Muslim Brotherhood. According to Chong (1996), 'Frames are chosen with an audience in mind, so the preferences of the audience will have a bearing on the position-taking of elites' (cited in Chong & Druckman 2007, p.117).

7.3.4 Twitter

The selected Twitter accounts had all supported the 'democratic' (however defined) aspirations of the Arab Spring. Yet on the Egyptian crisis some were Islamist and stood by Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood who boycotted the election, while others were liberal, supporting the election and opposing the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, there are other liberal accounts who also supported the boycott of the election and opposed the idea of military rule in Egypt.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, Twitter was selected as the social media through which to explore how the Egyptian elections were taken up because it was clear that it was followed by many Saudis and believed to be more reliable (See Chapter Three above).

7.3.4.1 The ‘farcical and undemocratic elections’ frame

Ahmed bin Saeid’s (@LoveLiberty)¹²⁸ account had fifty-seven tweets about the elections held in Egypt. Most tweets criticised Al-Sisi as a presidential candidate and the election process in general. For example, he retweeted this tweet: ‘The disappointment of liberals who welcomed the return of the military rather than the cowardly journalists who provided propaganda for military rule’ (@LoveLiberty, May 27, 2014). He retweeted in an effort to discredit the electoral process and the coverage of the elections by the Saudi press, implying through the reference to ‘propaganda’ that the newspapers had not published the truth. His cynicism was one of his major strengths for readers. His contribution was marked by the hashtags #Scandal_elections_in_Egypt and #Egypt_elections. (@LoveLiberty). Bin Saeid was an active participant throughout the election process in Egypt.

His tweets included concern about the claims that Egyptians had refrained from voting due to high temperatures, only to protest against the election results when they emerged, as was reported in the ‘propaganda’ in other news channels. Accompanied by photos of demonstrators, this tweet was received differently by his supporters and opponents. In the expectation that protests would grow even stronger, he also cited a tweet saying that the elections worked against Al-Sisi by weakening him and reducing his prestige. Another tweet concerned ‘a 500 [Egyptian pound] fine on citizens who did not participate in the elections, as was reported by the *Al-hyah* TV’ (an Egyptian TV channel) (@LoveLiberty, May 27, 2014) in order to explain the weak election turnout. This re-tweet led to some newspapers also

¹²⁸ He tended towards the Islamist line, about news events in the past, as according to his tweets, he supported the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt when they received the mandate in 2012.

publishing this suggestion¹²⁹. A further tweet also referred to the low turnout of voters at the election, even though cars bearing Egyptian flags were patrolling the streets in Cairo in an attempt to persuade citizens to vote (@LoveLiberty, May 27, 2014). The tweet below (Figure 8) indeed mocks the official Egyptian story, which says that ‘hot weather’ was the reason for the low turnout. Bin Saeid wonders ‘how the weather prevented voters when this weather did not prevent protesters from demonstrating against the election result’ (see Figure 8 below).



Figure 8. Source: (@LoveLiberty, May 30, 2014). [Twitter post].

The tweet attracted dozens of responses and 383 re-tweets. Some responses were cynical: user ‘Abu Almas’ remarked sarcastically: ‘today the winter came and this is why most of the people are coming out to demonstrate’ (@LoveLiberty, May 30, 2014). This user’s words point to the frame of ‘farcical elections’. He included a photo which was very different from the photos of joy and gladness in *Tahrir* Square

¹²⁹ This item about fines was handed down on Twitter from one user’s account to another, but had not been published in the official press or mainstream media (i.e. it had not been verifiable whether it was the case or not). So no evidence as to whether this was true or had in fact been implemented.

used by the mainstream/official press which also suggests the frame of ‘farcical elections and an undemocratic atmosphere’. Where what elements of the photo refers to this frame, for example this demonstration, which came out onto the street against the elections results belie the official statement which says ‘that the reason for low turnout in elections is due to hot weather’. Moreover, comments (tweets) associated with this photo mocked the official statement, and thus Bin Saeid (@LoveLiberty) framed this event as ‘farcical elections’. Again this frame ‘involves inclusions and omissions in the news’ (Entman 1993, cited in Alatefy 2015).

In his Twitter account @Dr_fahad_harhi (Fahad Alharhti)¹³⁰ has 37 tweets concerning the Egyptian elections. Although less sharply voiced than those of Bin Saeid, he offers a criticism of military regimes more generally. In #Scandal_elections_in_Egypt, he claims that the military are not effective rulers and the right to absolute control over the state is not in their mandate: ‘I think that the military should not interfere in politics’ (@Dr_fahad_harhi, May 28, 2014). He suggests that they have sole responsibility for providing protection, and safety ought to be their main objective. He criticises the return of the military to power in Egypt and some Egyptians journalists who support the military rule, saying that they [Egyptian journalists] forcefully demanded a turnout of 40 million voters. He states ‘Egyptian journalists may cry to urge people to vote’ (@Dr_fahad_harhi, May 28, 2014). Clearly, he makes a mockery of the Egyptian journalists who are surprised by the weak turnout, and began begging people to vote.

He also noted that the elections were largely boycotted by Egyptians so the voter turnout was generally low. Alharthy also mentioned: ‘We should not oppress the Egyptians, since they have proved that they had their own attitudes and principles [rejecting injustice] although the media are hypocritical liars’ (@Dr_fahad_harhi, May 30, 2014). Clearly, he meant that many Egyptians reject injustice; they saw these elections as ‘farcical’ and for this reason they boycotted them.

¹³⁰ Former member of the Shura Council (parliament) in Saudi Arabia. He tends towards a liberal line, and according to his tweets during the Egyptian elections, he opposed the return of military rule in Egypt.

Below are some tweets from @Dr_fahad_harthi which attracted re-tweeting: 'Frustration with the weakness of the liberals' attitude to the election, who welcomed the return of the military; and surpassed the cowardice of the journalists who publicized them' (@Dr_fahad_harthi, May 28, 2014). This Tweet was re-tweeted 248 times and attracted a number of responses, some in support and others attacking it. For example, the user 'Ahmed Abu Fatilah' (a pseudonym) wrote: 'Gamal Abdel Nasser was a military man and you supported him, why did you change your mind?' (@Dr_fahad_harthi, May 28, 2014). This user is suggesting that Fahd Alharthy is contradicting himself because, according to the user, in the past Alharthy was a supporter of Abdel Nasser's military regime, now he was opposing military rule. Nasser was, however, a socialist.

Through the use of words such as crying, laughing, lie, hypocrisy, falsity, dancing elections, and scandal, Fahd Alharthy (@Dr_fahad_harthi) framed the election as a 'farcical' affair. His use of such words as chaos, boycott, destroy, kill, burn, and prisoners, also suggest that it is 'undemocratic'.

The third account on Twitter is that of Fahad Abdul Jabbar (@fahadjabbar1)¹³¹. This account had a total of 18 tweets about the Egyptian elections. Most of his tweets were critical of the elections and of some of the Saudi official newspapers. He provided instances of the lack of credibility of the latter and framed this event according to his attitude. In #Egyptian_elections_scandal, he retweeted this tweet: 'Egyptian elections scandal; *Financial Times*: turnout is very low and the poor people have boycotted it ...Eyewitness: mosques calling for people to vote' (@fahadjabbar1, May 29, 2014). He implies that the Saudi papers simply ignored these events. He re-tweeted a tweet saying that the elections had two main contenders, Sabahi and Al-Sisi, 'although Morsi was the winner' (@fahadjabbar1, May 28, 2014). The implication is that the low turnout in the elections is evidence that Egyptians object to former president Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood being ousted from power. It is an indication that some Egyptians, largely the Muslim Brotherhood, were not content with the outcome and wanted their former president,

¹³¹ According to his tweets, he tends towards the Islamic line and thus opposed this election.

who had been democratically elected, to be reinstated. He makes the further point that it is inappropriate to claim that the people were surprised: the winner and the loser were already known before the results were announced:

Laugh: The President votes for the President, the candidate enters the election and knows that he is the winner and another candidate knows that he is the loser and the people claim to be surprised by the results (@fahadjabbar1, May 26, 2014).

Attached to the tweet is a photo of the provisional President Adli Mansour entering the voting centre (@fahadjabbar1, May 26, 2014). Fahad Jabbar is mocking the provisional president, claiming that Adli Mansour had participated in a theatrical scene (echoing the theme of 'farcical' election) and knows he will ultimately win. Generally, most of his tweets were written or retweeted by using this hash tag: #Egyptian_elections_scandal. Moreover, most of the responses to his tweets were sympathetic and implicitly adopted the same frame of 'farcical and undemocratic'. This would seem to indicate the acceptance of this frame among Saudi users of Twitter.

In Mohammed Alahmari's (@alahmarim)¹³² account there were 27 tweets on the Egyptian elections. He provided photos which commented on and substantiated low voter turnout as well as the fact that some voters had participated in the elections because of their fear of a military regime.

In relation to the photo below (Figure 9) he sums up the situation in Egypt: the woman represented had voted under compulsion; he picks up on as suggesting that the woman in the photo is scared (even though she make a gesture of victory), while her young son is making a 'fourth' sign, which symbolizes 'Raba'ah', the name of a square in Cairo where people protected the Muslim Brotherhood before being obliged to abandon them. He maintained that the above photo reveals fright (the mother) and the future (the son).

¹³² He is an Islamist writer, who always criticises military regimes.



Figure 9. Source: (@alahmarim, May 28, 2014). [Twitter post].

He implied that the future generation will not be afraid (unlike the woman in the photo), but will challenge the regime.

He critically notes too that the election is the first in which voters are threatened with a 500 (Egyptian pound) fine if they do not participate (but as discussed above, there is no evidence that anyone was in fact fined). He also criticises the election as the legal inauguration of the de facto leader, comparing Al-Sisi to Bashar Al-Assad (the Syrian president). He mocks them, saying that people came to the polls eagerly out of a sense of justice. The Egyptian people detected treachery and thus saw no need to participate in fraudulent elections. The tweet ironically congratulates Al-Sisi for extending the voting period and providing more ballot boxes for the crowds of voters longing to cast their votes.

Alahmari's tweets, then, framed this event as a 'farcical election'. Through his use of language, such as: fear, murder, a coup, a scandal, farcical scene, he indicates the non-democratic process and mocks the pretence of democracy. For example, retweeted from another account, he offers: 'This is the first election in the history of

democracy where the regime threatens citizens with a fine of 500 pound for not participating in it' (@alahmarim, May 27, 2014).

Another retweet from the Egyptian opposition politician 'Ayman Nour' reads: 'Ayman Nour: What is happening today is not the election, but the inauguration of a de facto ruler legally'. He criticises the elections and even the naming of them as such.

With 8 tweets about the Egyptian election, Mohammed Alshaikh (@alshaikhmhmd)¹³³ stands against the rest of the Twitter users, since he supports the elections. He is a liberal writer opposed to the Islamist parties, critical of the accounts on Twitter by Islamists such as Bin Saied and Alahmari, but not averse to a military leader and government. He favourably compares Al-Sisi to the South Korean president, General Park Chung Hee, who served in the military before he was elected: 'He [General Park Chung] could by his firmness and resolve make South Korea a star in the skies of excellence. Why should Al-Sisi not be a copy of him?' (@alshaikhmhmd, May 30, 2014). He argues that if the Korean president made his state's star shine, Al-Sisi could do the same. He is aware that demonstrations against Al-Sisi's election are inevitable and Al-Sisi's 'softness' will let them succeed. In his opinion Al-Sisi will not allow the same relationships with Iran as Morsi did¹³⁴.

Mohammed Alshaikh (@alshaikhmhmd) confirmed this by a link to comments from the Al-Arabiya TV station, indicating where it broadcast a statement by Al-Sisi who stressed the need to establish a close relationship with the Arab Gulf States and to stand with them against Iran.

¹³³ A liberal writer, according to his tweets, he supported the elections and was against Islamic groups and organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas and others.

¹³⁴ Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran (the country's historic enemy) has worsened dramatically since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 because of the situation in Syria and Yemen, and Iran's interference in the affairs of the Arab Gulf states. Hence any rapprochement between the countries of the region and Iran is problematic for Saudi Arabia.

Alshaikh's tweets thus oppose demonstrations carried out by opponents of the elections. He writes:

I expect that there will be similar attempts at demonstrations, like those that brought down Mubarak. If he deals leniently with them due to fear of the West, he will fall because Egypt needs long-term solutions (@alshaikhmhmd, May 29, 2014).

This tweet is a response to the user 'Ahmed Alsharief', who asked him whether demonstrations against Al-Sisi should be expected.

Alshaikh also attacked the former president Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood: 'Whilst Morsi opens the doors of Egypt to Iran, Marshal Al-Sisi says that our relationship with Iran will pass the gate to the Arab Gulf states' (@alshaikhmhmd, May 26, 2014). This tweet raised many comments: some of them said that President Al-Sisi would sell the Arab Gulf states to Iran if Iran paid him more, and some of them had a different opinion, saying: 'You [Arab Gulf states] prevent others from establishing a relationship with Iran, although you did so yourselves'. Some commentators supported Alshaikh's point of view, saying that America overthrew Iraq and they would do same with Egypt and that Egypt was suffering a conspiracy to weaken. The tweet also sparked debate among observers for the election, with supporters saying that the number of voters was large and opponents saying the number was low and citing scraps of Egyptian newspapers to prove the weak turnout.

It is clear that in this tweet Alshaikh wanted to praise Al-Sisi, who was keen to establish a close relationship with the Gulf States and to stand with them against Iranian interference. Saudi liberal writers always criticise relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran (as Saudi Arabia's arch enemy) and claim that if the Brotherhood remained in power in Egypt, this would be in Iran's not Saudi interests¹³⁵.

¹³⁵ Some Saudi liberal writers always accuse Iran of supporting the Arab groups and parties which are Islamic-oriented, such as Hamas or the Muslim Brotherhood.

The last account is that of Abdulrahman Allahim (@allahim)¹³⁶ who has 10 tweets all in favour of the Egyptian election and says that Islamic and Arab countries ought to side with Egypt. He writes in praise of the Egyptian people and says that Al-Sisi is the most appropriate candidate for president. In his opinion, Saudi users should not be angry nor interfere in Egyptian affairs (@allahim, May 27, 2014). He makes a mockery of the Saudi users' intervention in Egyptian affairs via Twitter and argues that the Egyptians do at least hold elections and the Saudis should not tell the Egyptians whom they should elect.

He also writes tweets criticising Saudi accounts on Twitter, such as those of Fahd Alharthy (@Dr_fahad_harhi) and Bin Saied (@LoveLiberty) and criticises their attitude to Egyptian elections. For example, he hints that because Fahd Alharthy lost hope of becoming a minister in the Saudi government¹³⁷, he adopted this public gesture of contempt for the Saudi government (@allahim, May 28, 2014). Allahim finally comments that the election was entirely an Egyptian affair and the vitality of Egypt would rise with the election of Al-Sisi (@allahim, May 28, 2014). However, the researcher chose these two accounts of supporters of the Egyptian elections (@allahim and @alshaikhmhmd) in order to illustrate the frames used by supporters. The overall picture is that all the Saudi account holders on Twitter (whether in support of the elections or not) tried to frame the issue in order to support their political positions. However, these two accounts (@allahim and @alshaikhmhmd) have adopted this frame 'fair and democratic elections' which had already been adopted by Saudi official newspapers (*Al-Jazirah* and *Asharq Al-Awsat*).

Finally, a review of all the tweets in hashtags that addressed the Egyptian election suggests that most of the users of Twitter in Saudi Arabia did not agree that the result had been fair. @LoveLiberty- fahadjababbar- @alahmarim- @Dr_fahad_harhi were critical of the elections and demonstrations, and so

¹³⁶ He is a lawyer, who tends to adopt the liberal line and always s political Islamist groups in the Arab world.

¹³⁷ Fahd Alharthy was a member of the Shura Council in Saudi Arabia, and was close to some prominent figures in the government. The choice of ministers in Saudi Arabia is sometimes made by the Shura Council.

expressions like ‘propaganda’, ‘scandal’, ‘farce’ and ‘injustice’ were common themes in their tweets. All these Twitter users were considered Islamist, except @Dr_fahad_harthi, who is considered a liberal, and also hostile to the military regimes in general. In contrast, two other account users also labelled as liberal, @allahim and @alshaikhmhmd, supported the election, using ‘integrity’, ‘congratulations’, ‘safe hands’, ‘stand with Egypt’, ‘happy’ and ‘President Al-Sisi’ as common themes and words in their accounts.

Twitter was not ‘objective’ in relation to this news event, since the tweets largely took sides, opposing or supporting. Whereas most Saudi account holders in Twitter adopted this frame ‘farcical and undemocratic elections’ which focused on election faults and abuses that occurred and negative news, in contrast, some Saudi accounts holders adopted the frame already used by Saudi official newspapers, ‘fair and democratic elections’, and thus it seems that they were affected by the official point of view of the Egyptian elections. However, in relation to official organizational pressures were not a contributory factor but clearly many Saudi users in Twitter who adopted the ‘farcical and undemocratic elections’ frame were not supporting the Saudi official point of view on the Egyptian elections. This gives an indication that the debates by the Saudis on Twitter produced a public opinion that was different from the official position of the Saudi government about the Egyptian elections and frames ‘were adopted according to ideological and political positions’ (Scheufele 1999).

7.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, the news reporting and comment on two social and political events of concern in the Saudi news media in 2014 which attracted many discussions were analysed. One of these events was internal (Corona disease) and the other external (the Egyptian elections). The analysis drew on ‘framing’, paying particular attention to language and to absences as well as presences in reporting. On the first issue, it can be said that the official newspapers largely adhered to government policy and dealt with the news of the Corona disease with some reservation, in order to reassure people. The key frame was raising awareness and reassuring people about

the disease through adopting the 'awareness and reassurance' frame. Thus, news tended to praise the government's actions and the steps it has taken to confront the virus. But it omitted or downplayed aspects of news that might raise Saudis' concerns about Corona. There was some – though limited – reader response to the official press reports and it took the form of simple criticism of the procedures taken by the Ministry of Health in dealing with the virus.

While the online newspapers did not differ significantly from their conventional counterparts, they published some news from foreign sources which was critical of the management of the disease. Their coverage adopted some of the principles of 'objective' reporting, such as (apart from *Sabq*) publishing more information on Corona and focusing on all aspects of the issue, as well as providing headlines and news reports that warned people of the threat and seriousness of the situation. Therefore, they adopted the 'warning with some awareness' frame which paid attention to spreading awareness, and at the same time warned people of the dangers of the situation.

Sabq, however, stayed with the official line in its news, and thus adopted the 'awareness and reassurance' frame, but also allowed readers more opportunity to comment on this issue.

In both the online press and Twitter, the informational content reported became less significant than the interpretative commentary. The online newspapers tried to grab the stick from the middle by sensitizing people and warning them at the same time, which Saudi official newspapers had failed to do. Twitter, which largely adopted the frame of 'criticism and scepticism', contributed to raising public opinion against the Ministry of Health and against the procedures taken by Saudi hospitals. Tweets and retweets significantly affected the issue and thus the authorities were forced to dismiss a number of officials and managers who were running Saudi hospitals (as discussed above).

The second case study engaged with news coverage of an external issue, the Egypt election. The official newspapers were in total support of the elections, and the

military action to ensure the security of the state during the election process. The news adopted the frame of 'fair and democratic elections'. The official press emphasised that the election was held in a democratic atmosphere but omitted news related to opposition parties and youth groups that boycotted the elections, and provided readers with a limited account of events. This framing echoed the views of the Saudi government.

Online newspapers offered a more objective account in their coverage of the election process in Egypt. The Saudi online newspapers made visible/articulated their ongoing dispute over describing and interpreting the election process.

The key frame adopted was 'A disputed scene', where conflicting accounts were offered, drawn from various sources, including the provisional Egyptian government, international organisations and protests by some parties that boycotted the elections. These accounts showed that what was going on in Egypt was subject to dispute. There was no one simple and 'accurate' story. The online press reported both points of view: in other words, news of protests and boycotters, and news that supported the electoral process and the position of the Egyptian government.

The third media form was Saudi Twitter accounts which had supported the Arab spring but adopted different positions in relation to the Egyptian election. A variety of frames were deployed in different Twitter accounts depending on their ideological/political/religious position. Whereas most Saudi Twitter accounts that addressed in this study adopted the frame 'farcical and undemocratic elections' which criticised the elections and focused on election faults and abuses, some Saudi account holders (who tended towards a liberal line, such as @allahim and @alshaikhmhmd), adopted a frame already used by Saudi official newspapers: 'fair and democratic elections'.

Finally, on the basis of the discussion in this chapter, official newspapers are committed to the Saudi government's position, whether the issue is internal or external, and thus probably these news stories were managed/censored by the Saudi authorities to reflect their position. Therefore, the official newspapers framed

these issues (both internal and external) according to the Saudi government's point of view. In contrast, the Saudi online newspapers (except for *Sabq*) did not adhere to the official position of the Saudi government in dealing with these issues, as their coverage was more objective, through focusing on different points of view on these issues and citing news from wider foreign sources and therefore they were not dependent on the official story of the events. For Twitter, some Saudi users/consumers in Twitter followed a range of accounts that articulated very different views from the Saudi government's one, and this gave the sense that the digital news sphere was really opening up a 'public sphere' in Habermas's sense, as different groups were arguing with each other in digital spaces through comments, responses on Twitter posts and retweets. Although the content of the tweets were saying things that the official media were not, and debates by the Saudis on Twitter were opening up a sphere for people's concerns, the material raised the issue that 'credibility' for users/participants via Twitter sphere, where the tweets largely took sides, opposing or supporting and the degree of criticism evident in Twitter was also higher than other media, and this was illustrated in the discussion above, on the Corona virus and the Egyptian elections. However, these discussions and exchanges on Twitter have established a 'public opinion' and urged the government (directly or indirectly) to be honest and transparent and provide accurate information.

Conclusion

Introduction

The starting point for this thesis was the issue of credibility, given that the Saudi media are among the most censored in the world (Awad 2010; Almaghlooth 2014). The Saudi government imposes restrictions on the press such that Freedom House has classified the Saudi press as 'not free', ranking it 175th out of 195 countries in the global press freedom rankings table (Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders Reports 2008, cited in Awad 2010, p.33). Hence, the first objective of the thesis was to explore whether online news in Saudi Arabia had greater credibility than official newspapers and mainstream TV news, partly because the former was less easily regulated. In using the term 'credibility', this thesis was concerned with the different understandings of this term in both Western (American and European) and Arab studies. The research sought to explore extensively what Arab and Western scholars had argued about in defining this term (see Chapter Two). Alongside the idea of 'credibility', the second objective of the thesis was to explore the construction of 'public opinion' and whether its development was more evident and likely via online news (variously referred to as 'alternative' or 'new media') than via traditional or 'official' news media. In raising this question the research turned to the concept of 'public sphere' as elaborated by Jürgen Habermas (see Chapter Two).

The thesis approached its enquiry into 'new media' by grounding the discussion in the context of the rise of news media in Saudi, with newspapers, radio and television considered in relation to the historical development of the country. Exploring economic, social, cultural and political developments, which shaped news media in certain ways, it also paid attention to regulatory frameworks imposed by the Saudi authorities.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the research adopted several approaches to explore 'credibility' in relation to Saudi news and to examine whether online news was able to stimulate the exchange of views and the formation of 'public opinion'. This Conclusion first establishes and discusses the key findings and the degree to which online and social media enable a 'freeing up' of news in Saudi Arabia. It then reflects on the methodological approaches adopted and the degree to which the terms 'credibility', 'public opinion' and 'public sphere' are useful as a means to evaluate 'new media' and highlight some of its differences from traditional/mainstream and official news media in the Saudi context and consider whether it can be seen as 'alternative'.

Finally the Conclusion addresses further research that could usefully be carried out and raises some policy issues.

Broadly in this thesis it is argued that, firstly, online news is an 'alternative' medium in the Saudi context and that many people in Saudi Arabia (especially the more educated and the young) prefer online news to the news from mainstream outlets: it is more easily accessed, relatively independent from official media, and less under government control. Secondly, it is argued that 'credibility', whilst it can refer to different aspects of news, is regarded as important in evaluating the worth or 'quality' of news for both producers and consumers. In addition, for some criteria and for some consumers/users online news was regarded as having greater 'credibility' than official news media. Thirdly, it is suggested that there is some evidence that online and social media do encourage a greater number of viewpoints to be expressed and do voice some criticism of the Saudi authorities (unlike in official news media). Further in providing a digital media space for response and discussion by users, online news and Twitter feeds have begun to establish the possibility of 'public opinion' being formed. Although it is argued that there are real limits to this, it can

also be argued that to some extent an ‘alternative’ form of news media does operate as a mediated public sphere with some of the Habermas attributes to it, and there are signs of ‘public opinion’ in action. These arguments will be expanded on below.

Findings and discussion

Regulation

Chapter One of this thesis reviewed historical developments before the emergence of online news in Saudi. It suggests that contrary to most scholars’ demarcation of the development of (news) media in terms of two or three phases, it can more usefully be thought of in terms of four distinct phases. The fourth phase, 2000 to 2014 (discussed in Chapter Four)¹³⁸, focuses on the Saudi media in the new millennium, and is characterised by the emergence of the Internet and fresh news forms such as discussion forums, blogging, online news outlets and social media, all of which have made an impact on the ‘old’ news media – press, radio and television. The primary research conducted concentrates on this fourth phase. However the research also suggests that this fourth phase should itself be thought of in terms of several phases: for example, the emergence of Saudi online journalism in 2001, and a significant date (2004) when control shifted to the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC), as well as the emergence of social media (such as Twitter) in 2006, and finally, the sixth printing law which was issued in 2011 and deals with electronic publishing and Internet services.

The boundaries of the four phases are partly marked by shifts in the regulation of the press (see Chapter One and Chapter Four), the history of which set the context for the emergence for online news in Saudi Arabia. What the historical developments

¹³⁸ Although discussion forums started in 1999, the researcher addressed this media within new media in the fourth phase, because this media spread among Saudis more in the beginning of the new millennium, and it coincided with a rise in the number of Internet users in Saudi Arabia at the beginning of the new Millennium.

of the press from 1924 reveal is that successive media policies involving printing laws and regulations are clearly the outcome of tensions in Saudi Arabia and an attempt to manage them. In particular, such tensions are between the modernizing forces (often represented by elements of the royal family – the al-Saud family – and sections of the educated cultural elite) and conservative Islamic forces (the Al-Shaykh family – represented by the leading Islamic clerics). The relationship and tension between these two groups have shaped the nature of the Saudi state and its development, including, via press laws and other means, the development of online journalism and news. From the outset, religious leaders have exercised their influence on the cultural content of the media and most of the sanctions imposed on newspapers or journalists have come from the religious leaders. Thus journalism and news have developed within and against the parameters set by the six sets of press laws.

Second, Saudi media policy has historically demonstrated an impetus towards managing internal relations, thereby creating a sense of national unity and avoiding challenges to the state, whilst also attempting to impact and manage external relations (and threats) in the Arab world and more widely.

Credibility

The literature review included an exploration of how the term ‘credibility’ was defined and understood in relation to news output. It revealed no simple definition but very different emphases by scholars and journalists. The thesis was set up to explore this area, looking across from traditional media to online news forms including Twitter accounts. It considered ‘credibility’ from the point of view of editors and journalists on the one hand, and consumers and users of news on the other. It was concerned with how producers and consumers used the term to evaluate different news items and news forms and what that might mean to them. But it also examined what might constitute credibility in reported news events, by close analysis of news texts.

From the interviews with editors and journalists (Chapter Five) ‘credibility’ largely implied ‘professionalisation’ and ‘objectivity’, as most of the editors-in-chief, editors and reporters who were interviewed confirmed that the credibility of news is a significant issue for them. They wanted to show that they were working to professional standards and thereby gaining the confidence of the public, as well as trying to keep up with journalistic professionalism and ethics to reach an ‘objective’ coverage of news. However, most of these interviewees mentioned the lack of Saudi professional journalists and lack of experience of some reporters in Saudi online journalism.

The interviews with consumers and users (Chapter Six) suggested that their understanding and description of certain news as ‘credible’ could also refer to news that was professionally presented and reported with some objectivity. But ‘credibility’ could also be attributed to news that could not be said to be ‘objective’. More important sometimes was whether consumers could trust it or believe it; in other words, whether it was ‘authentic’. If the online news media was seen by users as having more ‘credibility’ than the official news press, then it tended to be more on account of greater ‘objectivity’: not simply being aligned with the views of the Saudi authorities but also providing other viewpoints or some criticism. Yet, the engagement with Twitter accounts suggests that ‘credibility’ for readers is linked to ‘trust’ in a version of events, or in a viewpoint. Thus ‘credibility’ can also arise when a voice or opinion is distinctive (sometimes subjective and opinionated) but authentic, implying it is not tied to any ‘official’ view. This is consistent with the results of the latest study conducted in relation to the credibility of Twitter in Saudi Arabi, by Alghamdy and Alhedaithy (2015), where they found that ‘the degree of credibility of Twitter rises [among Saudi universities’ students] when opinion leaders [on Twitter] tweet or re-tweet any information or news about any of the cases’ (2015, p.29).

Debating issues, 'public opinion'

The second issue engaged with in the thesis was not only whether the rise of online news provided more 'credible' news for readers but also whether news reporting could facilitate the debating of issues in Saudi Arabia and be thought of – following Jürgen Habermas (Chapter Two) – as helping to create 'public opinion', independently of 'official' views. Here it is worth emphasizing that even when news media has been heavily regulated, there have been attempts in Saudi Arabia to raise issues and encourage debate, even though often such 'outspokenness' has been quickly stopped and the 'perpetrators' punished. In the 1950s there were attempts by Abdul Karim Al Ghuhiman, the editor of *Al-Dhahran News*, who tried to report enlightened ideas which were considered a taboo in Saudi society at that time, such as female education.

Similarly, the radio programme 'Seminar of the Week' in 1965 was closed down and journalists who took part in this programme fined. The episode title was 'Women and their role in the Muslim community'. In the aftermath of this episode, the group who participated in the programme, favouring 'advancement' and supporting women's liberation (Al-Sibaie, Al-Mubarak and Manna) were forbidden to write or talk in the media, as a punishment for their explicitly 'progressive' views and enlightenment ideas.

Online it was the early discussion forums from 1999 (Chapter Four) which first offered more distinctive voices and an opportunity to discuss news events. These forums were to be a space in which to express opinion and apparently an attempt to form a new public sphere through debates on issues of concern to Saudis. Discussion forums can give ordinary people a platform to express their views in a way that the terrestrial media do not. Because of the importance of these forums

among Saudis, topics discussed in these forums sometimes then move back into the Saudi traditional media who also take them up¹³⁹ (Almohareb 2011, p.109).

Over the last ten years, the decrease in popular discussion forums has benefited online journalism (which emerged in 2001, but witnessed a big increase in readership and popularity in 2006), giving it a strong impetus to meet the needs of readers and develop possibilities for interaction and participation by users, as well as a greater concern for 'objectivity'/ 'professionalization'.

Since the emergence of online newspapers in 2001, several changes have taken place in the Saudi news media environment. Some Saudi online newspapers (such as *Sabq* and *Alweeam*) are visited by a million users per day and attract a great number of readers in Saudi society. Through new platforms and encouraging debate between Saudis, these online newspapers contributed to raising the ceiling of freedom for other Saudi media and lowering the level of censorship. This statement is supported by Turki Al-Sudairy (a veteran journalists and editor of one of the most famous Saudi daily newspapers, *Al-Riyadh*), as he 'had to change his policy on reviewing stories to decide which should be published' (Almaghlooth 2014, p.66) because of competition with online newspapers.

By 2001, users were able to respond to news in online news titles, as the online newspaper *Bab* gave Saudi readers the opportunity to comment on the news it published or to ask questions. Since then, all Saudi media, both online and offline have developed websites, and provide their readers with the possibility of response and comment on news items, although most official Saudi newspapers stop comments on a particular news item or column 24 hours after publication. Social

¹³⁹ For example, the issue of female high school students in the city of Dammam (eastern Saudi Arabia). (See Chapter Four).

media, however – and what is focused on in this thesis, Twitter – offers greater possibilities in the Saudi context, for both distinctive voices to speak and for users to respond. Via hash tags and retweeting, ‘public opinion’ in relation to issues could more easily be formed, though public opinion could also be managed by key tweeters.

Self/regulation, credibility and professionalization

In the ongoing development and status of online news, these three factors, regulation and self-regulation, credibility and professionalization are related. Through heavy censorship, the monarchy in Saudi has forbidden any information to be reported that questions Islamic law or that concerns issues of national security, foreign affairs, religious leaders, the Saudi government or royal family (FreedomHouse.org 2012). Journalists can be silenced or even dismissed if they cross this line. Penalties for violating the press laws can include fines and imprisonment. In December 2007, a Saudi blogger, Fouad Alfarhan, was arrested in Jeddah (in the west of the country), for the offence of listing ‘in his blog the ten Saudis whom he most disliked and least wished to meet’ (Lacey 2009, cited in Almaghlooth 2014, p.12). Subsequently there have been many other journalists detained and/or punished. By June 2016, ten professional and non-professional journalists (including young Bloggers) had been detained in Saudi Arabia (Reporters Without Borders 2016).

Chapter Five was based on interviews with editors and journalists working for online titles. Unlike an editor-in-chief of an official newspaper who has to be appointed by the government, these editors were independently appointed. Less bound by censorship, nevertheless some online editors and journalists did regard censorship as an obstacle. But what emerged from what they had to say was that in order to avoid being judged as breaking the press laws, they learnt to self-regulate or self-censor. This was perhaps less the case with the most senior editors than with those

slightly lower down the hierarchy. One editor declared: 'I had no problems with censorship; but most of the problems I did face were with the editing managers who present the first line of censorship for the editor or reporter' (unnamed interview, 26 July, 2012).

Regarding differences between Saudi online newspapers according to their 'political' position (such as liberal, conservative and moderate) in terms of confrontation with censorship, a liberal title such as *Alweeam* has suffered from censorship, probably due to censorship and publication laws being unclear. Almarshady from *Alweeam* justifies the paper's position by saying that 'censorship is sometimes subject to the preferences of certain officials' (Almarshady interview, 4 August, 2012). In contrast, a conservative title such as *Sabq* was less bothered by censorship, though the editing manager of *Sabq* qualified this: 'We have had no problems with censorship, but there might be a misunderstanding with the reporter of an item when another party is involved'¹⁴⁰ (Abdullatiff interview, 26 July, 2012). For moderate ones (such as *Anaween* and *Alwakad*), they tend towards consistency with censorship, to avoid collision with it. However, the most popular online newspapers among Saudis, whether conservative (*Sabq*) or liberal (*Alweeam*) have had many experiences of confrontation with censorship, and have been blocked more than once, hence the practice of self-censorship by their editors and journalists.

Clearly the issue of censorship and self-censoring can impact on the breadth of news events and viewpoints that a title might publish, and on their 'objectivity' and 'credibility'. The *Sabq* online newspaper, according to the survey, is the most read in Saudi Arabia. Perhaps another factor helped this title to be in the lead. According to Almaghlooth (2014), 'the selected material in *Sabq* was compatible with an Islamic approach. The editor-in-chief of *Sabq*, Mohammed Alshehri, 'admitted that his team of editors used religion to market their news product and did not want to abandon this privilege, despite its incompatibility with professional standards' (Almaghlooth

¹⁴⁰ This statement by *Sabq*'s editing manager 'Abdullatiff' does not mean that they had not been subjected to blocking, as *Sabq* according to its editor in chief 'Mohammed Alshehri' – has been censored/blocked more than once (Alshehri interview, 24 July). (For more details, see Chapter Five).

2014, p.251). Its Islamic and thus conservative stance is also likely to mean that it is less likely to breach the press laws or need to self-regulate.

In terms of 'credibility', as already raised in this chapter, editors and journalists tended to understand 'credibility' as requiring 'objectivity' and it was their ultimate aim to provide news for their readers that was more credible than the official press. Editors and journalists who were interviewed determined some important elements they were seeking in achieving credibility. Some editors believed that the 'editor' is a key element in establishing the credibility of their online newspaper. And thus, the training and qualifications of the editor/reporter leads to credibility; while a lack of qualifications and training or experience negatively affects the credibility of the online newspaper. They imply that when an editor is qualified and experienced, credibility – as perceived by readers – is more likely. With a close relationship to credibility, gaining 'trust' is also seen as important. The lack of trust in the Saudi online newspapers by readers, advertisers and officials (Ministries) is regarded as problematic and a factor limiting these newspapers' credibility.

To some extent, the question of credibility was also linked to other factors raised by those working online. They pointed to 'professionalisation' and 'commercialisation', which also acted as barriers to the expansion of online news titles: lack of finance, low status, lack of adequate training and a shortage of specialists.

Half the journalists interviewed reported that limited finance was the most serious obstacle they faced, and was the cause of many online newspapers closing and subsequently disappearing. Editors indicated that this situation had partly arisen because companies, ministries and major advertisers do not recognize the online media as credible (Almaghlooth 2014). It perhaps indicates that advertisers think their money will be better spent elsewhere – where they know who the

audience/readers are – and that most of these sites do not provide adequate data about the nature of their readers/users. Such information and its communication to potential advertisers is still not sufficiently reliable. Salem Alshibani from *Alweeam* suggests that ‘perhaps they [advertisers] believe that these online newspapers are still of unknown ownership; and [that] information about them and their editors is inaccurate. It is therefore difficult for them to be trusted by advertisers (Alshibani interview, 1 August, 2012).

They are unwilling to invest in these organizations and do not place advertising on those sites. Advertising space is available online, though less available than in other media, but is under-used. This situation is made worse by there being no organization independently auditing and measuring user hits. It has also led to a few online newspapers being run by young journalists, who tend to have other jobs to subsidize their online activities.

Clearly, the situation editors and journalists described does not lead to strengthening the viability or status of online titles. On the other hand, professional standards of design, for example, presumably also suffer from lack of finance, as a shortage of funds in Saudi online newspapers also exacerbates the shortage of journalists qualified to work on the design of websites in online newspapers. Some editors/journalists suggested that this shortage resulted from a lack of Saudi specialists in certain areas of technological expertise and in the design of websites. *Sabq*’s editor in chief, Mohammed Alshehri, supports this argument: ‘Unfortunately, there are now no journalists of this kind in Saudi Arabia, who can deal with modern technology’ (Alshehri interview, 24 July, 2012).

According to those interviewed, training and expertise is a further issue and a challenge facing online news production. At both senior and more junior levels, the

interviewees highlighted the lack of specialized and trained journalists in Saudi Arabia as a major obstacle to the growth of online newspapers. In their view this also contributed to audiences (and the same could be said of ministries, companies and advertisers) not considering online newspapers credible.

Given this range of challenges, it is perhaps not surprising that editors place so much emphasis on the importance of strengthening journalistic 'credibility'.

Users: Contradictory views?

The data gathered through the survey and interviews (Chapter Six) suggests that to some extent users' views align with those of producers. But some views were highly critical of online as well as traditional news media. For many, the Saudi titles they read were part of a wider range of regional and international news media that they could access. Thus Saudi online titles were sometimes compared unfavourably with these. More than one-third of the respondents to the survey (38.3%) believed that the media outside Saudi Arabia offered a more objective account regarding the war in Syria and this rose to two-thirds believing this about international TV channels. The implication was that they trusted such media (Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and the BBC) more. In contrast they believed that the Saudi media were the government's tools for furthering its own interests and were subject to state censorship combined with following tradition. In the interviews many respondents revealed that they were well aware that most editors-in-chief of official newspapers were state or government appointees and thus would not publish news that discredited the government.

However, the survey findings indicate that nearly twice as many readers (41.8%) believe that Saudi online journalism at least offers a 'more objective account' than

the traditional media (TV, radio and official newspapers)¹⁴¹ in news reporting of Saudi social and political issues. Social networking sites (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) scored highest (68.4% as opposed to 41.8% for online journalism).

Yet surprisingly perhaps, fewer than a third of respondents (in interviews) stated that they thought the controls imposed on the Saudi media were strict, whereas other respondents (more than one-third) believed that censorship was important and did readers a service. The latter considered it a positive element aimed at producing balanced and objective mass media. A further group (again fewer than a third) stated that they did not support media censorship, believing it was an obstacle to freedom of speech. Though point/judgements were made by the interviewees above about the controls imposed on the Saudi media, it is possible to attribute these views to their political positions, as the latter are presumably liberals. As for those who believed that 'censorship was important and did readers a service', they probably tend towards an Islamic position, as they used phrases such as 'having consideration for traditions and religions' and '[what is] most important is having red lines that define the non-negotiables of any society such as religious ones' (see Chapter Six).

What was perhaps emphasized more by users (over two-thirds) was their dissatisfaction with the 'professional' standards of Saudi online journalism. When asked about how they wanted online news in Saudi Arabia to develop and improve, they pointed to three main and overlapping areas in particular: the professionalism of journalists, including their training; the accuracy and comprehensiveness of articles; and writing style. As one user (cited in Chapter Six) pointed out: 'I wish the online newspapers would improve performance, help in training editors and allow more time for verifying authenticity' (interview, 2 September, 2012).

It would appear that it was these factors as much as any notion of 'objectivity' that led one-third of users in the survey to view online news as not being credible and not wholly trustworthy. In contrast, it was the professionalism of external TV channels such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and the BBC that made them more appealing as well as more credible. It was significant, however, that some of those interviewed, particularly women, exempted *Sabq* from this charge of not being credible. One female user argues: 'Online newspapers are only at their beginning and I don't see that any of them have succeeded (except for *Sabq*); the others are of a much lower standard than their English counterparts' (interview, 3 September, 2012). Interestingly, the women interviewed also indicated that they read the news on *Sabq* more than on other sites, perhaps because this title is the closest to the 'conservative' line. Whilst publishing more news and views, it is also the most active with respect to comments on the news (See Chapters Five and Seven), enabling more participation in discussion and debates than other news media. As another female user expressed it: 'they [online journalism] give a chance to the reader to respond with more daring than traditional newspapers do' (interview, 5 September, 2012). This strong platform for comment on the news, at least in the case of *Sabq*, has given the title more credibility. This is in contrast to 'official' news media, which according to Alrakaf:

Saudi people are not satisfied with...the simple reason being 'trustworthiness', or the lack of it. The Saudi establishments and their associates have used their deep pockets to influence the media. Therefore, the media are not obliged to report news that can cause a stir in the society (2012, p.69).

Upholding the status quo, 'objectivity', and 'causing a stir'

The research in Chapter Seven extended beyond the official press and online news titles to include news and commentary in social media; in particular, well known

Saudi Twitter accounts. The analysis of news output in relation to the two news events (one internal, one external) substantiates many of the points made by editors and journalists of the online news titles and by consumers and users of news. Broadly, across both news stories, the official newspapers adopted frames which echoed the authorities' line or policy while the online titles often attempted some 'objectivity'. If comment in relation to the former was extremely limited, online news facilitated and encouraged responses. On the other hand, interpretive commentary (there was little informational reporting) in Twitter was popular amongst users, but did not adopt an 'objective' stance. Those writing tweets were more subjective and sometimes not afraid of 'causing a stir'. It was the Twitter accounts that facilitated and encouraged the most comment and engagement by users.

One internal and one external news event were selected in order to consider whether there was any evidence that the Saudi authorities were more concerned to 'manage' the news in the case of internal affairs than in relation to external affairs. What the frame analysis revealed in the two cases was that Saudi media both offline and online adopted particular frames to present and interpret events (internal and one external) to the Saudi audience, as well as raising discussion as to whether the online/social media open up a digital news sphere that encourages the sharing and exchange of news and the establishment of a collective viewpoint in the form of 'public opinion' among Saudis.

Regarding the internal issue selected (the Corona virus), the Saudi official newspapers (*Al-Riyadh* and *Okaz*) adopted the 'awareness and reassurance' frame, which attempts to keep their readers satisfied with the performance of their government and its policy on the disease. These two newspapers focused on one aspect of news in the text, and thus this is consistent with Entman's concept about framing: '[to] frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text' (cited in Fogarty and Chapman 2012, p.3).

For their part, Saudi online newspapers (*Alweeam*, *Ajel* and *Sabq*) adopted this frame: 'warning with some awareness'. The frame adopted raised further concerns, which it would be difficult for the Saudi authorities to condemn, so this can be seen as an astute approach to presenting a 'warning frame'. Although *Sabq* stayed with the official line in its news coverage regarding Corona, it aired many online comments and discussions on the issue, seeming to allow its readers to express their opinion freely. However, *Ajel* and *Alweeam* used language and frames which implied that this issue was more serious than suggested by Saudi official newspapers and *Sabq*, by publishing more information (from international sources in particular) and providing headlines that warned people of the threat and seriousness of the situation.

Saudi Twitter accounts holders adopted the 'criticism and scepticism' frame. They highlighted the issue in order to maintain awareness of it for many Saudis and so were able to embody their concerns. Account holders on Twitter were sceptical that the authorities would be transparent in their media communications or deal appropriately with the issue of Corona. But the degree of criticism evident in Twitter was also higher than in official newspapers and some online newspapers, and the arguments and exchanges of views on the Corona issue on Twitter contributed to raising public opinion against the procedures taken by Saudi hospitals and the Ministry of Health.

With respect to the external issue chosen (Egyptian elections), the Saudi official newspapers (*Al-Jazirah* and *Asharq Al-Awsat*) were in total support of the elections, and thus adhered to the official line on this election. They adopted the frame of 'fair elections and democratic'. The official press emphasised that the election was held in a democratic atmosphere but omitted news reporting on opposition parties and

youth groups that boycotted the Egyptian elections; and so it provided Saudi readers with a limited account of events.

Saudi online newspapers (*Sabq*, *Alweeam* and *Lojainiat*) adopted the 'disputed scene' frame, which offered a more objective account in their coverage of the election process in Egypt. The online newspapers made visible or articulated the ongoing dispute over describing and interpreting the election process and showed that what was going on in Egypt was subject to dispute. Conflicting accounts were offered, drawn from various sources, including the provisional Egyptian government, international organisations (global media and international news agency) and protests by some parties that boycotted the elections. In fact, they (*Sabq* and *Alweeam*) switched between a more critical account – the low turnout and the presence of some irregularities in the electoral process – and one reproducing the Egyptian official standpoint, while *Lojainiat* (which adopted the Islamic line and whose readers have mainly religious sympathies) was opposed to the elections, and supported the Muslim Brotherhood who boycotted them. Thus, it seems that *Lojainiat* has taken its readers into account. According to Chong (1996), 'Frames are chosen with an audience in mind, so the preferences of the audience will have a bearing on the position taking of elites' (cited in Chong & Druckman 2007, p.117).

Saudi Twitter accounts adopted the 'farcical elections and undemocratic' frame, which focused on the Egyptian election faults and abuses that occurred, and negative news. In contrast, some Saudi accounts holders (liberal accounts) adopted the frame already used by Saudi official newspapers, 'fair elections and democratic', and thus it seems that they were affected by the official attitude toward the Egyptian elections. An interesting point to consider is that many Saudi users on Twitter who adopted the 'farcical elections and undemocratic' frame were not supporting the Saudi official point of view on the Egyptian elections. This means that the debates by Saudis on Twitter produced a public opinion that was different from the official position of the Saudi government about these elections. Furthermore, this also gave a sense of the digital news sphere really opening up a 'public sphere' in Habermas's

sense, as different groups were arguing with each other in digital spaces through comments, responses on Twitter posts and retweets.

Further research and policy implications

Given the current steady rise in the popularity of social media, some future research could focus on movements towards 'democracy' in non-democratic countries through political discussions in hash tags on Twitter and look more widely across social media in relation to news. Furthermore, it would be a useful area of professionalisation – not only training but also improving the status of journalism as a career. The tightly controlled nature of the news media does not contribute to its being the preferred profession for many graduates in Saudi Arabia. Relaxing censorship and regulation would improve the quality of news as well as leading to journalism being a more respected career choice. Journalists would be able to research more fully and report on stories in a way that audiences would see as more credible and trustworthy, without risk of imprisonment or fines or losing their job. Further research should therefore focus on the need for the protection of journalists and for a more liberal Code of Journalistic Practice. Finally, for the commercial viability of online media: there is a need to set up an independent system and a set of practices by which online titles all measure their reach and classify their users so that advertising is provided with reliable data.

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Appendix I

Questionnaire

Dear Sir / Madam

This questionnaire is a part of my PhD degree thesis in Saudi online journalism, which I am doing at the University of Sussex in the UK. I would like to explore the views of Saudi people on their use of online journalism and the news in other mass media.

I should be grateful if you could respond to the questionnaire and express your opinions about journalism.

Please note that your answers will be used for research purposes only; your responses will be anonymised and all information you give will remain strictly confidential.

Thank you in advance for your help. Your views will really contribute to my study and hopefully to a better understanding of online journalism in Saudi Arabia.

Yours faithfully,

Naif Alotaibi

Phd candidate, University of Sussex

E-mail: N.Alotaibi@sussex.ac.uk

*** Part One: Information about your reading of mass media**

1. What range of news media would you access in a typical week?

Traditional media:

- Print newspapers

List titles

- Radio

List stations

- T.V.

List stations

Online sites:

- TV online sites

List titles

List titles

- Newspapers online sites

- Other online sites

List titles

- Social media
(Blogs, Facebook, Twitter)

List which media

2. Which of the above are the most important for you? (List three)

1. _____

2. _____
3. _____

3. How often do you access online journalism sites?

Daily () Weekly () Monthly () Never ()

4. How often do you access social media (Blogs, Facebook, Twitter)?

Daily () Weekly () Monthly () Never ()

5. How often do you access Saudi online journalism sites?

Daily () Weekly () Monthly () Never ()

6. Have the time you spend and your interest in online journalism increased over the last 5 years?

Yes () No ()

7. In general, what is the extent of your interest in following news through Saudi online journalism?

I am very interested () I am interested ()

I have little interest () I have no interest ()

8. What are the Saudi online journalism sites that you are keen to follow?

(List in order of importance)

1- 2- 3-
4- 5- 6-

9. What kinds of news story and topics do you like reading on Saudi online journalism sites?

Kind of news/ opinion	always	often	sometimes	rarely	Don't watch it
Home politics					
International politics					
Economics					
Sports					
Arts					
Funny and strange news					
Editorials, comments and columns					
Caricatures / Cartoons					

Part Two: Comparison of Saudi online journalism and traditional mass Media

1. How has your use of Saudi online journalism sites impacted on your consumption of other news?

- Has it decreased your watching of news on TV channels
Yes () No ()
- Has it decreased your reading of news in traditional newspapers
Yes () No ()
- Has it decreased your listening to news on the radio
Yes () No ()
- Has it decreased your consumption of other online news sites
Yes () No ()

2. Saudi online journalism : As an observer of news on Saudi online journalism sites, how would you rate digital journalism compared to traditional media?

Element	Strongly agree	agree	I don't know	I don't agree	Strongly disagree
Updates the news more quickly					
Provides sufficient detail about the event					
News provided independently					
Spreads news quickly					
Is responsible towards the public					
Provides news with high professional values					
Is trustworthy					

Provides better entertainment					
Strong sport and cultural coverage					
Human interests / celebrities stories					

3. Are there any aspects of Saudi online journalism that you feel are better than traditional media? If so, name the most important.

4. What is the one aspect (characteristic) that Saudi online journalism has missed?

5. From your point of view: do you believe that the following Saudi media offer a more objective account of the crisis and events in Syria?

Saudi Media	YES	MAYBE	NO
Online journalism			
TV			
Radio			
Newspapers			
Social networking websites			

6. Do you think that the media outside of Saudi Arabia, offline or online offer a more objective account of what is happening in Syria?

Yes () No () Maybe ()

7. If you said 'yes', specify the media?

.....

8. From your point of view: Do you believe that the news in Saudi mass media offers an objective account of social and political issues in Saudi Arabia?

Saudi Media	YES	MAYBE	NO
Saudi online journalism			
TV			
Radio			
Newspapers			
Social networking websites			

***Part Three: Online news**

From your point of view: What aspects of serious news writing are significant to you in Saudi online news sites?

Element / extent of agreement	Strongly agree	agree	I don't know	I don't agree	Strongly disagree
Timeliness (quick response to a news event)					
Ongoing news coverage of an issue					
Provides detailed information					
Provides different points of view					
Provides sources for information and views					
Respects the journalist(s) who is writing the story					

Writing style					
It seems to be objective					
It offers a clear opinion of the news event					
Links to other stories on the same page					
The readers can respond to the story and have their say online					

*** Part Four: Other news sources**

If you are dissatisfied with the news coverage on Saudi online news sites, what other news media would you turn to?

Tick and provide titles as appropriate.(you can choose more than one answer)

Saudi traditional newspapers () Titles:.....

Saudi radio () Station (s):.....

Saudi TV news () Channel(s):.....

Newspapers from other countries () Title(s):.....

Radio from other countries () Station(s):

TV news from other countries () Channel(s):.....

Online sites based in other countries () Titles:.....

Other sources (Blogs, Facebook, Twitter) () List :.....

Do you have any other comments?

.....

Students

* Part Five: Personal information

1. Age: ()
2. Sex: Male () Female ()
3. Marital status: Single () Married () Divorced () Widowed ()
4. Average monthly income for your family: Less than 5000 Riyals ()
From 5000 to 10,000 Riyals ()
From 10,000 to 15,000 Riyals ()
From 15,000 to 20,000 Riyals ()
More than 20,000 Riyals ()
5. Type of college: Literary college () Science college ()
6. Academic year: first year () second year () third year ()
fourth year () fifth year or over ()
7. The level of your English: Excellent () Good ()
Satisfactory () Weak ()

Professors

* Part Five: Personal information

1. Age: ()
2. Sex: Male () Female ()
3. Marital status: Single () Married () Divorced () Widowed ()
4. Average monthly income: From 5000 to 10,000 Riyals ()
From 10,000 to 15,000 Riyals ()
From 15,000 to 20,000 Riyals ()
More than 20,000 Riyals ()
5. Type of college: literary college () science college ()
6. Position: Professor () Associate Professor ()
Assistant Professor () Lecturer ()
7. The level of your English: Excellent () Good ()
Satisfactory () Weak ()

Thank you for spending time completing this questionnaire

Appendix II

List of interviewees (Journalists)

Mohammed Alshehri, from *Sabq* (24 July, 2012).

An anonymous editor (26 July, 2012).

Lotfi Abdullatiff, from *Sabq* (26 July, 2012).

Salem Alshibani, from *Alweeam* (1 August, 2012).

Khaled Alrougi, from *Ajel* (2 August, 2012).

Meshal Aldalbahi, from *Alweeam* (2 August, 2012).

Mohammed Alasmari, from *Alwakad* (2 August, 2012).

Naif Almosheet, from *Alweeam* (3 August, 2012).

Mutlaq Almarshady, from *Alweeam* (4 August, 2012).

Turki Alrougi, from *Alweeam* (4 August, 2012).

Tareq Ibrahim, from *Anaween* (5 August, 2012).

An anonymous editor (7 August, 2012).

Fahad Alsalem from *Sada* (8 August, 2012).

Appendix III

List of interviewees (Users)

Female:

- Female (1): Lecturer aged 47 with Master's degree. (28 August, 2012).
- Female (2): Student aged 23, below degree-level. (4 September, 2012).
- Female (3): Lecturer aged 35 with Master's degree. (3 September, 2012).
- Female (4): Student aged 25, below degree-level. (5 September, 2012).
- Female (5): Employee aged 31 with Bachelor's degree. (27 August, 2012).
- Female (6): Employee aged 50 with Bachelor's degree. (7 September, 2012).
- Female (7): Employee aged 29 with Bachelor's degree. (5 September, 2012).
- Female (8): Lecturer aged 36 with Bachelor's degree. (6 September, 2012).

Male:

- Male (1): Employee aged 27, below degree-level. (25 August, 2012).
- Male (2): Student aged 37 with Master's degree. (27 August, 2012).
- Male (3): Employee aged 36 with Master's degree. (1 September, 2012).
- Male (4): Student aged 35 with Master's degree. (6 September, 2012).
- Male (5): Employee aged 43 with Master's degree. (2 September, 2012).
- Male (6): Employee aged 33 with Bachelor's degree. (26 August, 2012).
- Male (7): Lecturer aged 34 with Master's degree. (6 September, 2012).
- Male (8): Employee aged 43 with Master's degree. (2 September, 2012).
- Male (9): Lecturer aged 45 with Master's degree. (7 September, 2012).
- Male (10): Lecturer aged 36 with Master's degree. (4 September, 2012).
- Male (11): Lecturer aged 30 with Master's degree. (26 August, 2012).
- Male (12): Lecturer aged 31 with Master's degree. (29 August, 2012).
- Male (13): Student aged 29 with Master's degree. (4 September, 2012).
- Male (14): Student aged 34 with Bachelor's degree. (3 September, 2012).
- Male (15): Student aged 29, below degree-level. (3 September, 2012).

Appendix IV

Interview questions with Journalists in Saudi online journalism

1. How do you gather the news?

- Do you rely on news agencies to obtain local and international news? Do you rely on your correspondents?

2. Tell me how you became an online editor?

- Do you think an online editor shouldn't have experience in other traditional media?

3. What methods does your online news site employ when checking the reliability of the news articles you publish?

- How many members of staff check the news prior to its publication?

4. What are the constraints and obstacles that may limit the work of your online journalism? (Internal or external factors)

- How do/would you convince Saudi readers to pay to read the news on your sites?

5. During your work in online journalism, have you had to engage with censorship?

- Has your site ever been blocked in the past?
- If your online newspaper was censored for publishing an article or news on a particular subject, would you avoid that subject in future?

6. Is gaining Saudi readers trust important to you?

- How do you gain Saudi readers' trust?

7. Is competing with the new social media, such as 'Face book' and 'Twitter' an issue for you?

- How do you intend to compete with new media in the future?

8. What methods do you use to attract new Saudi readers?

- What methods do you use to ensure that current Saudi readers stay faithful to your site?

Appendix V

Interview questions with Saudi users

1. Tell me about your attitude to news.
 - Does accessing news matter to you?
 - Why?

2. What news media do you rely on? (newspapers, broadcast news, online, including blogs, Twitter etc)

3. What are your preferred channels/titles/sites/bloggers etc?
 - Tell me about your access to news yesterday? (or in the last few days)
 - What news stories were you particularly interested in? What news stories/sections did you not bother with?
 - Did you take part in any online or offline discussions of any of the news stories? (Would you do that on a regular basis?)

4. How do you find online news compares to other news media?
 - What do you like/not like about online news compared to other news media?
 - How do you find the Saudi online news outlets compared to other Arabic or English language outlets?

5. How do you view censorship or regulation of news stories and news outlets in Saudi Arabia?
 - What kind of regulation do you think is legitimate or necessary?

6. Do you find that Saudi online journalism is able to publish stories and give viewpoints, engage in debates and arguments that other news media cannot?
 - Can you give me any recent examples of where this has been the case?

7. Do you think the professional standards of journalism are as high in online news as in broadcast news and newspapers?
8. What aspects of journalism matter to you (use of sources, quality of writing, or photography/video clips, journalists' viewpoint and trustworthiness etc)?
9. What one improvement in Saudi online news would you like to see?
10. Would you agree to pay for your favourite online newspaper if you had to?

Appendix VI

Consent Form (Journalists)

Study Title: Online news: A study of 'credibility' in the context of the Saudi news media

I agree to take part in the above study that conducted in University of Sussex in UK, by Saudi PhD candidate 'Naif Alotaibi' who is exploring the credibility of online news and the other news media in Saudi Arabia.

I have read and understood the letter for participation in this study, and I understand that agreeing to take part and to be interviewed by the researcher mentioned above. I also agree to the interview being recorded (Cross this point out, if you do not wish your interview to be recorded).

I understand that:

- I agree for my real name to be used in this study. (If you do not want your real name to appear, cross this point out, and a pseudonym will be used instead).

-That my answers will be used for research purposes only; and my responses will be anonymised and all information I give will remain strictly confidential.

- I will be given a transcript of data concerning me for my approval before its being included in the write up of the research.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Consent Form (Users)

Study Title: Online news: A study of 'credibility' in the context of the Saudi news media

I agree to take part in the above study that conducted in University of Sussex in UK, by Saudi PhD candidate 'Naif Alotaibi' who is exploring the credibility of online news and the other news media in Saudi Arabia.

I have read and understood the letter for participation in this study, and I understand that agreeing to take part and to be interviewed by the researcher mentioned above. I also agree to the interview being recorded (Cross this point out, if you do not wish your interview to be recorded).

I understand that:

- Pseudonyms will be used instead my real name to prevent my identity from being made public.

- That my answers will be used for research purposes only; and my responses will be anonymised and all information I give will remain strictly confidential.

- I will be given a transcript of data concerning me for my approval before its being included in the write up of the research.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix VII

References of research materials¹⁴²

First: Internal issue (Corona issue)

1. Traditional newspapers

A) *Al-Riyadh* newspaper

Al-Riyadh (May 6, 2014). 'Corona virus ... his injuries are not limited to adults'. Available at: <http://www.alriyadh.com/933207>
(Accessed: 15/ 02/ 2015)

Al-Riyadh (May 7, 2013). Ministry of Health: the spread of the Corona virus is limited and under control. Available at: <http://www.alriyadh.com/832928>

(Accessed: 15/ 02/ 2015)

Al-Riyadh (May 9, 2013). Ministry of Health procedures limited the emergence of new cases of HIV Corona in Al-Ahsa. Available at: <http://www.alriyadh.com/833700>

(Accessed: 12/ 02/ 2015)

Al-Riyadh (May 12, 2014). Noting transparent ... and stressing the importance unravel the mystery. Dr. Alahdal to *Alriyadh*: Ministry of Health claim to answer six questions about the reality of «Corona». Available at: <http://www.alriyadh.com/934891>
(Accessed: 11/ 02/ 2015)

Al-Riyadh (May 14, 2014). The Ministry of Health announced a package of new measures to counter the «Corona» virus. Available at: <http://www.alriyadh.com/935740>
(Accessed: 10/ 02/ 2015)

Al-Riyadh (May 15, 2014). Minister of Health for Al-Riyadh newspaper: King Abdullah commanded us to take all measures to face the Corona virus. Available at: <http://www.alriyadh.com/936044>
(Accessed: 11/ 02/ 2015)

Al-Riyadh (May 13, 2014). Director of the Eastern Region Health reassures on prevention measures against Corona. Available at: <http://www.alriyadh.com/935254>
(Accessed: 11/ 02/ 2015)

¹⁴² Chapter Seven.

B) Okaz newspaper

Okaz (May 13, 2014). The decline of the virus: a rise in temperature is not serious. Available at: <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20140513/Con20140513698925.htm>
(Accessed: 12/ 02/ 2015)

Okaz (May 14, 2014). Corona ... Preventive Medicine failure. Available at: <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/mobile/20140514/Con20140514699219.htm>
(Accessed: 03/ 02/ 2015)

Okaz (16 May 2014). Benefits of Corona. Available at: <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/issues/20140516/Con20140516699658.htm>
(Accessed: 03/ 02/ 2015)

Okaz (May 17, 2014). Changing the Ministry of Health to be as Aramco. Available at: <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20140517/Con20140517699806.htm>
(Accessed: 04/ 02/ 2015)

Okaz (May 18, 2014). Disappearance of the Undersecretary of the Ministry. Available at: <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/mobile/20140518/Con20140518699999.htm>
(Accessed: 04/ 02/ 2015)

2. Online newspapers

A) Sabq online newspaper

Sabq (May 13, 2014). The Ministry of Health has announced a package of new measures to control the Corona virus. Available at: <http://sabq.org/Maagde>
(Accessed: 06/ 02/ 2015)

Sabq (May 14, 2014). Netherlands discover the first case of 'Corona'. Available at: <http://sabq.org/iiagde>
(Accessed: 06/ 02/ 2015)

B) Alweeam online newspaper

Alweeam (May 18, 2014). Hospital in Najran allow patient infected with «Corona» get out of hospital. Available at: <http://www.alweeam.com.sa/270964/%D8%B5%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D9%80-%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7/>
(Accessed: 09/ 02/ 2015)

Alweeam (May 16, 2014). Camel herders went on strike because they were afraid of catching the disease. Available at: <http://www.alweeam.com.sa/270718/%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D8%A5%D8%A8%D9%84-%D9%8A%D9%8F%D9%80%D8%B6%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%AE%D9%88%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%83/>
(Accessed: 09/ 02/ 2015)

C) *Ajel* online newspaper

Ajel (May 16, 2014). American doctors are skeptical about the World Health Organization estimates of the risk of 'Corona. Available at: <http://www.burnews.com/local/1273996> (Accessed: 15/ 02/ 2015)

Ajel (May 15, 2014). After the total of infected people reached 551 and the fatalities reached 157 ... it was suspected that the system allowing Corona to be transmitted was the electronic footprint for checking in at work. Available at: <http://www.burnews.com/local/1273516> (Accessed: 15/ 02/ 2015)

Ajel (May 14, 2014). Two million Saudi had asthma ... and Corona was a severely threat to them. Available at: <http://www.burnews.com/local/1273251> (Accessed: 15/ 02/ 2015)

3. Saudi Twitter Accounts

Alehaidib, M. (May 24, 2014). 'Camel traders said that camel prices had fallen by half ... So, we ask the Ministry of Health to prove instead that it was land that caused Corona' (@Alehaidib)

Alehaidib, M. (May 15, 2014). 'All those who belittle the concerns about Corona and those who sacked the Egyptian researcher 'Ali Zaki' who discovered Corona, and all the staff in the Preventive Medicine agency and the deputy health agents must be brought to justice, like those implicated in the flood disaster in Jeddah' (@Alehaidib)

Alshehi, S. (May 6, 2014). 'Since September 2012, 115 people have died in our country because of the Corona virus ... During the same period, nearly 9,000 people died because of road accidents ... See the reaction to these two cases' (@SalehAlshehi)

Aldousari, S. (May 23, 2014). 'There is no relationship between Corona and hot grilled meat and milk'. In the absence of accurate information about Corona, everyone is making statements; who will be making a statement tomorrow?' (@saaddousari)

Aldousari, S. (May 8, 2014). 'Is there a mystery behind these 'Corona' viruses?' (@saaddousari)

Alsawayed, A. (May 15, 2014). 'I have become wary of even looking at the image of a camel on the computer' (@asuwayed)

Alsawayed, A. (May 15, 2014). 'Camels are the best animals and have greater immunity, I do not think they transmit [the infection] to humans' (@asuwayed)

Second: External issue (Egyptian Elections)

1. Traditional newspapers

A) *Al-Jazirah* newspaper

Al-Jazirah (May 27, 2014). President Adli Mansour had voted in the election and emphasized the future development of the state. Available at: <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2014/20140527/du10.htm> (Accessed: 19/01/2015)

Al-Jazirah (May 27, 2014). Egyptians flock to the polling stations to choose a new president. Available at: <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2014/20140527/du2.htm> (Accessed: 14/06/2016)

Al-Jazirah (May 28, 2014). Intensive voter turnout in the second day of the vote ... Al-Sisi is heading for the presidency of Egypt with a comfortable majority ... and Sabahi compete fiercely. Available at:

<http://www.al-jazirah.com/2014/20140528/du1.htm>
(Accessed: 20/01/2015)

Al-Jazirah (May 28, 2014). Arab and foreign organizations commend the progress of the electoral process. Available at: <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2014/20140528/du11.htm> (Accessed: 20/01/2015)

Al-Jazirah (May 30, 2014). Egypt celebrates the victory of Marshal Al-Sisi until morning. Available at: <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2014/20140530/du4.htm> (Accessed: 21/01/2015)

Alqouaie, S. (2014). Welcome to the stabilization of Egypt. *Al-Jazirah* newspaper, June 1, 2014. Available at: <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2014/20140601/ar5.htm> (Accessed: 21/01/2015)

B) *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper

Asharq Al-awsat (May 26, 2014). Millions of Egyptians flock to elect a new president today. Available at: <http://aawsat.com/home/article/104326> (Accessed: 22/01/2015)

Althaidy, M. (2014). Egypt ... good news. *Asharq Al-awsat* newspaper, May 26, 2014. Available at: <http://archive.aawsat.com/leader.asp?article=773368&issueno=12963> (Accessed: 22/01/2015)

Asharq Al-awsat (May 27, 2014). Egyptian officials racing with the masses to cast their ballots in the presidential election. Available at: <http://aawsat.com/home/declassified/105261> (Accessed: 22/01/2015)

Asharq Al-awsat (May 27, 2014). Egyptian security frustrates attempts to target polling stations. Available at: http://aawsat.com/home/declassified/105251?archive=1&date=12/25/2014&qt-news_statistic=2 (Accessed: 23/01/2015)

Asharq Al-awsat (May 27, 2014). Egyptians vote in the festive atmosphere and are heavily guarded Available at: <http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=773470&issueno=12964> (Accessed: 23/01/2015)

Asharq Al-awsat (May 28, 2014). The weakness of the turnout is a puzzle in presidential elections in Egypt ... Observers and politicians think that fasting, confidence and high temperatures are the most prominent reasons. Available at: <http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12965&article=773596> (Accessed: 23/01/2015)

Alhumaied, T. (2014). Egypt ... Numbers and Illusions. Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, May 31, 2014 written by columnist Available at: <http://archive.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issueno=12968&article=773857>

(Accessed: 23/01/2015)

2. Online Newspapers

A) *Alweeam* online newspaper

Alweeam (June 1, 2014). Sabahi's campaign presented a legal challenge to the election commission; and objecting to the presence of electoral propaganda in the committees by the supporters of Al-Sisi. Available at:

<http://www.alweeam.com.sa/273435/%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%B6-%D8%B7%D8%B9/> (Accessed: 23/01/2015)

Alweeam (May 30). General Haftar: we are happy for Al-Sisi's won and we follow him. Available at:

<http://www.alweeam.com.sa/273095/%D8%AD%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A8%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AE%D8%B7/> (Accessed: 23/01/2015)

B) *Lojainiat* online newspaper

Lojainiat (May 31, 2014). Two people killed by security to prevent a demonstration in Cairo.

Available at: <http://lojainiat.com/c-114439/>

(Accessed: 24/01/2015)

Lojainiat (May 29, 2014). International organization: Egypt elections took place under massive violations. Available at:

<http://lojainiat.net/main/Content/%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B8%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%B9%D8%A9> (Accessed: 24/01/2015)

C) Sabq online newspaper

Sabq (May 30, 2014). It is considered that 'black cynicism' will surround Al-Sisi's regime. Western newspapers describe the Egyptian elections as 'a farce'. Available at: <http://sabq.org/GObgde>
(Accessed: 24/01/2015)

Sabq (May 30, 2014). Preliminary indicators suggest that Al-Sisi is heading for a landslide victory in Egypt's election with 93%. Available at: <http://sabq.org/qDbgde>
(Accessed: 25/01/2015)

3. Saudi Twitter Accounts

Bin Saeid, A. (May 27, 2014). 'a £500 fine on citizens who did not participate in the elections, as was reported by the Al-hyah TV'. (@LoveLiberty)

Bin Saeid, A. (May 27, 2014). The low turnout of voters at the election, although cars bearing Egyptian flags were patrolling the streets in Cairo in an attempt to persuade citizens to take part in the voting process. (@LoveLiberty)

Bin Saeid, A. (May 30, 2014). How the weather prevents voters when this weather did not prevent protesters from demonstrating against the election result. (@LoveLiberty)

Alharthy, F. (May 28, 2014). I think that the military should not interfere in politics. (@Dr_fahad_harhi)

Alharthy, F. (May 28, 2014). Frustration with the weakness of the liberals' attitude to the election who welcomed the return of the military; and surpassed the cowardice of the journalists who publicized them. (@Dr_fahad_harhi)

Abdul Jabbar, F. (May 28, 2014). The elections had two main contenders, Sabahi and Al-Sisi, 'although Morsi was the winner'. (@fahadjabbar1)

Abdul Jabbar, F. (May 26, 2014). Laugh: the President votes for the President, the candidate enters the election and knows that he is the winner and another candidate knows that he is the loser and the people claim to be surprised by the results' (@fahadjabbar1)

Alahmari, M. (May 27, 2014). This is the first election in the history of democracy where the regime threatens citizens with a fine of £500 for not participating in it. (@alahmarim)

Alahmari, M. (May 27, 2014). Ayman Nour: What is happening today is not the election, but the inauguration of a de facto ruler legally. (@alahmarim)

Alshaikh, M. (May 30, 2014). If the Korean president made his state's star shine, Al-Sisi could do the same. (@alshaikhmhmd)

Alshaikh, M. (May 29, 2014). I expect that there will be similar attempts at demonstrations, like those that brought down Mubarak. If he deals leniently with them due to fear of the West, he will fall because Egypt needs long-term solutions. (@alshaikhmhmd)

Alshaikh, M. (May 26, 2014). Whilst Morsi opens the doors of Egypt to Iran, Marshal Al-Sisi says that our relationship with Iran will pass the gate to the Arab Gulf states' (@alshaikhmhmd)

Allahim, A. (May 27, 2014). Saudi users should not be angry nor interfere with Egyptian affairs (**@allahim**)

Allahim, A. (May 28, 2014). The election was entirely an Egyptian affair and the vitality of Egypt will rise with the election of Al-Sisi. (**@allahim**)