



## Social media in Saudi Arabia: Exploring its use during two natural disasters



Yeslam Al-Saggaf<sup>a,\*</sup>, Peter Simmons<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Computing and Mathematics, Charles Sturt University, Australia

<sup>b</sup> School of Communication and Creative Industries, Institute for Land Water and Society (ILWS), Charles Sturt University, Australia

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### ABSTRACT

The study explored social media activity during two peacetime natural disasters in Saudi Arabia, a country where citizen participation in public matters is minimized and communication with government is characterised by restraint. A qualitative thematic analysis using concepts from public sphere, online public sphere and previous studies of social media was used with 5000 threads taken from YouTube, Facebook, Al-Saha Al-Siyasia and Al Arabiya. Social media helped users to communicate the gravity of the damage of the floods; discuss rationally what really happened, and why and who was responsible; criticize the government and call for action to be taken to remedy the situation; and express deep emotions of sadness over the loss of lives in a way that united people. Rational discussion was evident on Facebook and Al-Saha Al-Siyasia, but social media was more useful for reading the emotional state of the people than as a vehicle for communicating the deliberative and rational aspirations of the public sphere. Social media is unlikely to produce social change on its own, but is likely to facilitate social and political trends for change already occurring in countries, and this may be accelerated during times of disaster when heightened emotions embolden people. Governments may regard social media as a vehicle for undesirable pressure, or positively as a window on the emotional state of their people that helps them to respond more appropriately.

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### 1. Need for research

In most western countries citizens have access to many avenues for engaging in activism. In Arabian Gulf States however, there are very few permitted forms of expressing dissent and dissatisfaction. Therefore, unlike western societies where social media is used mainly to enhance the many traditional offline means to pressure government officials (Chu, 2009), in these Gulf States social media may be the only way to communicate to the government.

Previous work has shown that social media is capable of facilitating political participation and engagement in public

affairs (e.g. Chu, 2009; De Zúñiga et al., 2012; Zhang and Chia, 2006; Bers and Chau, 2006; Valenzuela et al., 2009; Harlow and Harp, 2012). But, in most of these studies the countries' governments are democratically elected, traditional media is independent and citizens are able to communicate with their governments using several methods including, taking the example of Australia, meeting a local member of the government in person, raising an issue during a talk-back radio show, discussing an issue in the opinion column of a newspaper and participating in peaceful protests.

In the Arab world there has been a focus on countries where an uprising took place, in what became known as the 'Arab Spring' countries (e.g. Örebro University and Media technology paved the way for revolution – the case of Egypt, News; Sheedy, 2011). There are few studies on how social media is used by citizens in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar, where revolutions did not erupt, where governments are

\* Corresponding author at: School of Computing and Mathematics, Boorooma Street, Wagga Wagga, NSW 2678, Australia. Tel./fax: +61 2 6933 2593.

E-mail address: yalsaggaf@csu.edu.au (Y. Al-Saggaf). URL: <http://csusap.csu.edu.au/yalsagga> (Y. Al-Saggaf).

not democratically elected, where traditional media is controlled, to a great extent, by governments, where civic engagement is not encouraged, and civil actions, like street protests, are not permitted.

There is a need to understand the role of social media in enabling citizens in these countries to communicate with their governments about public affairs. There is 'something different' about communication and social action in the digital era, but the role of online communication is determined by wider institutional and political contexts (Fung et al., 2013). The contrast between the political landscapes in western countries and these Gulf countries, and the differences in the societies and cultures, make the use and role of social media in these countries deserving of our attention. Systematic study of the use of new communication technologies by ordinary individuals in these countries may help us to understand the role of social media in facilitating communication, especially communication not readily accessible without the aid of these technologies.

This study explored the nature of social media interaction in Saudi Arabia that concerned the 2009 and 2011 floods in Jeddah. The exploration focused on the ways that social media in Saudi Arabia was used as a public space during times of intense social media use and peacetime natural disasters. Soon after they occurred, the 2009 and 2011 floods in Jeddah became the number one political topic in Saudi social media. The reason for this was that these disasters resulted in the deaths of more than 120 people, the destruction of thousands of cars, and the displacement of thousands of families, causing the citizens and residents of the oil-rich country to lash out at the government in social media for not having solid infrastructure such as drainage and sewerage systems to contain rain water, not having any strategies for preventing natural disasters, not having any mechanisms for warning citizens before disasters strike, and not having the means to carry out effective rescue operations (Momani and Fadil, 2010).

Saudi Arabia is experiencing an exponential growth in the country with the number of daily YouTube video views reaching 190 million ("The emergence of Google", *Arab News Newspaper*), while the numbers of Twitter users and Facebook users have reached 2.9 million (*Saudis Cross Social Boundaries on Twitter, New York Times*) and 5.9 million (*Facebook Statistics by country, Socialbakers*) respectively.

Thematic analysis was used with data comprising a total of 100 consecutive threads, and the first 50 comments readers made on those threads ( $N = 5000$ ). The threads were taken from YouTube, Facebook, Al-Saha Al-Siyasia and Al Arabiya. The threads selected were all related to the Jeddah 2009 and 2011 floods.

To contextualize and aid our understanding of the data concerning the nature and outcomes of social media interaction between government and citizens in Saudi Arabia, the analysis draws on concepts of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989), the online public sphere (Poor, 2005), and previous research into social media and participation. The study did not seek to evaluate the extent to which the interactions are consistent with definitions of 'public sphere', however the concepts of the public sphere help us to articulate insights from the present case and reflect on the theory.

This study is significant because it contributes to our understanding of the role of social media in facilitating social

change by focusing on countries that discourage civil discourse and exercise control over traditional media, and where social media may be the only channel available to citizens to engage in the public affairs of their country.

Before the eruption of the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria, which were, to a large extent, orchestrated using social media, few would have imagined that social media was capable of facilitating changes to the political landscape of nations in the way they did in the so-called Arab Spring countries.

Previous work, as mentioned above, has shown that social media is capable of facilitating political participation and engagement in public affairs and the literature on social media is expanding (Chu, 2009). However there is little consensus on what social media can actually do. Chu (2009) notes that the optimism surrounding social media's ability to enhance democracy is often engulfed with a sense of skepticism. She suggests that this is due to a lack of concrete understanding of how social media is actually used in everyday life, highlighting the need for empirical research that takes into account the context in which social media is used. The study reported herein is intended to help fill this research gap.

## 2. Social media, online communities, and political participation

The Internet and social media have been viewed as holding the promise of greater social and political participation, however estimations of the likely influence on participation have varied. Some talk of the interactional affordances of Web 2.0 enabling governments to move beyond thinking of community interaction as intermittent, protected and selective, to conceptualising interaction with communities as continuous conversations, 'unexpected interpretations and re-uses, and dynamic emergence' (Majchrzak et al., 2012, p38). In the UK Ward et al. (2003) predicted that the Internet would make life more difficult for politicians because it would facilitate protests and campaigns, bring some new people into public debate (especially the young), and speed up and intensify expectations of government communication. Although they predicted opportunities of deeper and broader participation of citizens, they suggested that changes in participation would be incremental rather than rapid, and that the Internet was most likely to 'help accelerate some longer term trends in politics' (Ward et al., 2003, p667). A similar tone was used when Fung et al. (2013) predicted that the participatory affordances of the Internet were more likely to lead to incremental uptake of 'truth-based advocacy, constituent mobilisation, and crowd-sourced social monitoring' (p30) than more revolutionary possibilities such as the displacement of traditional organisations by self-organised groups and direct digital democracy. Although the potential increase in participation that comes with the capacity for crowd sourcing, egalitarian participation and co-creation is generally agreed, and often stressed by technologists (Fung et al., 2013), online communication is determined at least as much by cultural and political realities as technological capability. Access to technology is an important determinant of individuals' capacity to participate publicly online (Ward et al., 2003), but the wider political and cultural context will

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