Political Online Communities in Saudi Arabia

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INTRODUCTION: INTERNET IN SAUDI ARABIA

The Internet was introduced in Saudi Arabia in late January 1999 after a long period of discussions and consultations within the Saudi authorities. Finally, it was agreed that a tailored version would be made available to the public. To enable this, a huge filter system was set up in Riyadh in conjunction with an American company. The reason for having such a filter system was that the Saudi authorities had serious concerns about the arrival of undesirable material (for example, pornography) on home computer screens and also for other cultural, religious, and political reasons.

In 2003 there were 1.8 million Internet users in the country (Al-Watan, 2004), which is about 10% of the total population. According to a recent study, of this 1.8 million, 50.47% participate in online communities (JeddahNews.net, 2004). There are many types of online communities including social, religious, and medical. This article is concerned only with political online communities, which have become popular in the last three years as a result of the recent changes in the world following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S. and the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq.

This article presents findings that describe POCs in Saudi Arabia, particularly their role as media tools and as facilitators of freedom of expression. After a brief examination of online communities in the literature, the article discusses the conceptual framework of the study and explains how data were collected and analysed. A discussion of the findings of the study is then presented.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES IN THE LITERATURE

While there are many accounts in the literature of what an online community is (see, for example, Kollock a&Smith, 1999; Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Jones & Kucker, 2001), for the purpose of this article an online community is defined as consisting of:

(1) People who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles such as leading or moderating, (2) A shared purpose such as interest, need, information exchange or service that provides a reason for the community, (3) Policies in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and laws that guide people's interaction, (4) Computer systems to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness. (Preece, 2000, p.10)

The above definition shares most of the elements that can be found in an "off-line community," although the shared area in the case of an online community is a Web-based forum and the interaction is achieved through messages exchanged via computer screens. Additionally, Preece (2000) included in her definition the concepts of rituals, rules and policies which normally characterise "off-line communities" such as those in Saudi Arabia. This makes this definition appropriate for understating online communities in Saudi Arabia.

The online communities that are the focus of the present study are asynchronous online communities which are based on public discussion forums on the Web. Asynchronous communication means that the interaction among participants in these communities takes place in delayed time, that is, without everyone gathering at a particular time. Asynchronous communication also, unlike the synchronous type, eliminates the need for immediate feedback, which gives communicators more time for further thought and reflection (Mitchell, 1999). Web-based forums[1] are specific types of software that facilitate public discussions through the exchange of messages via computer networks (CSU, 2004). Forums on the web allow access to messages in the same way a Web page is accessed—by clicking a hyperlink.

The literature indicates that people online behave in ways that differ from their behaviour off-line. According to some Internet communication researchers, the degree of anonymity can cause people who communicate via computer screens to experience some reduction in the normal constraints on their behaviour (Joinson, 1998, p. 49). This reduction may hinder reflection about the consequences of actions, which in turn may lead to uninhib-

ited[2] behaviour. Additionally, public self-awareness, which is induced by situations in which an individual is aware of the possibility of being evaluated, is reduced as a result of interactions online and can also lead to uninhibited behaviour (Joinson, 1998, p. 51). Wallace (1999, p. 239) adds that people can act in uninhibited ways when they think no one can find out who they really are. The lack of public self-awareness is related in some way to the thinking that, because individuals may not encounter others in their off-line life, they tend not to worry about being evaluated and thus more easily vent negative feelings towards each other (Preece, 2000).

While the above-mentioned researchers studied online communities from social and communication contexts, others, such as Horrigan (2001), Elvin (2002), Bickel (2003) and Cammaerts and Audenhove (2003), studied them from a political context. Apparently, they were interested in finding out the effect of these communities on democracy and the political public sphere. Interestingly, their findings with respect to these issues appear to have a lot in common. One of the most important things that can be drawn from these studies is the conclusion that the Internet does foster a public sphere, despite the fact that this online public sphere does not meet all the requirements outlined by Jurgen Habermas[3]. Although, this online sphere facilitates civic engagement and public opinion formation, and promotes other democratic values, such as freedom of expression and open access, it does not facilitate rational-critical discussions or smooth the process of reaching consensus among communicators, and does not eliminate the domination of "educated" men, which are all requirements for a "true" public sphere (Habermas, 1989). Having said this, the above-mentioned authors like others (see Dahlberg, 2001; Underwood, 2003; and Ulrich, 2004) still, despite these limitations, value it as a unique sphere as it gives people the ability to organise themselves, communicate with government officials about their local affairs, and oppose dominant political discourses.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Conceptual Framework

This study was interpretive and naturalistic. The method was guided by a constructivist paradigm, which emphasises understanding the context and meanings that people make of the phenomenon under study. Social construct theory[4] provided the theoretical lens through which the method in this study was applied and the data were interpreted. Social constructivists recognise the effect of the social environment, culture and religion on how people construct their realities about their world and argue that meaning is developed through the interactions of these factors. Religion and culture in Saudi Arabia not only shape people's attitudes, practises, and behaviours, but also shape the way they see and do things and perceive their lives. This makes social construct theory appropriate for understanding online communities in that society. Similarly, the social environment, in the case of online communities, the "Web-based forum," may also exact some influence on people's behaviour online. This suggests that a Web-based forum can be considered another element through which people could socially construct their reality.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The method[5] used in this study was ethnography[6], which seeks to produce a written description of a people's way of life, beliefs and daily activities (Fetterman, 1989). The main ethnographic technique used to collect data in this study was silent observation[7] of three political Web-based forums[8] used mostly by Saudis. The forums selected for observation are Al-Saha[9] Al-Siyasia[10] located at www.alsaha.com, Al-Husn[11] Al-Siyasi located at www.qal3ah.net, and Al-Muntada Al-Siyasi located at www.islah.tv[12]. The Internet Domain Names associated with the first two sites are registered with U.S. companies (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2004) while the owners of these sites live in the United Arab Emirates[13] (Al Arabiya, 2004). The Internet Domain Names associated with the third site is registered with a UK company and its owner lives in the UK[14]. The three sites are not only popular in Saudi Arabia but in the whole Arab world. Hundreds of articles and stories from these sites have been reported in the Arab and international media and thousands of people visit these sites daily. Al-Saha Al-Siyasia, for example, receives 700,000 visitors each day (Al Arabiya, 2004). All of these factors and the fact that these forums supported various political currents made them interesting to study.

There are a number of reasons for choosing silent observation. First, the researcher lives in Australia and it is not feasible for him to travel to Saudi Arabia to conduct face-to-face interviews. Second, since the researcher's intent was not to disturb the online communities under study or change the natural behaviour of the participants being observed (Locke et al., 2000), silent observation appeared to be most appropriate. Third, being a silent observer of a number of online communities, instead of only one, means collecting data from multiple sites, which is a practice researchers are often encouraged to adopt to validate their research (Hine, 2000).

Silent observation was conducted over a period of one year from mid-July 2003 to mid-July 2004. For the whole

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