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Exploring Political Online Forums in Saudi Arabia through Thematic Content Analysis

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1. Background

Saudi Arabia is the custodian of the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, where Islam emerged, and one of the richest countries in the world in its reserves of oil. These religious and economic factors earned Saudi Arabia a strong position in the Arab world and allowed it to play a leading role in the politics of the region. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy with a population, according to a latest survey, of 22,673,538 including 6,144,236 non-nationals (Al-Watan, 2005). The population is predominantly Arab who strictly adheres to Islam.

The 1991 Gulf war affected Saudi Arabia in many ways. The acceptance of the United States’ army to liberate Kuwait during Desert Storm upset the Islamic authorities and fundamentalists in the country1. To Islamic fundamentalists it was just wrong to use a non-Muslim country against a Muslim country. What made things worse was the government refusal of Bin Laden’s offer to protect the country at that time from a possible Iraqi invasion particularly after he came back from Afghanistan victorious in his war against the Soviet Union. The $65 billion US Dollars bill Saudi Arabia paid as its share of the cost of the war caused the Saudi economy to suffer massive losses (Stern, 2002). The national budget was reduced by 20% and government employee salaries were slashed some said by about 50%. In addition to making the people in Saudi Arabia uncomfortable in their lives, all of these factors also contributed in some way or another to the sudden emergence of reformists and terrorists in the country.

Saudi Arabia has always been a close ally of United States and the two countries have been good friends since 1940s. The events of September 11, 2001, however, complicated the relationship between them (Stern, 2002). The U.S. government, without producing convincing evidence, claimed that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudis. Some American officials argued that if fifteen hijackers were from Saudi Arabia alone it means the version of Islam that is practised in the country encourages terrorism. Other American officials have gone far to accuse even members of the Royal family themselves of supporting terrorism. As a result of all this, US, indirectly through their media, told the Saudi government either undertake major religious reforms and revise your educational system, which according to them lays the ground for extremism, or face serious consequences (Butt, 2005).

2. Introduction

Faced by strong pressure from the public, the government of Saudi Arabia in 1999 decided to allow its people access to a censored version of the Internet. The reason for the late introduction of the Internet to the country was the Saudi authority’s concerns

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1 The author was in the country at the time.
over the arrival of objectionable material, such as pornography, and sexually explicit material in the hands of the public (Baker, 2000).

What Internet users in Saudi Arabia see, however, is not the original page on a server outside the country, but a copy on the computer servers in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia filters all the web traffic that flows to the country by implementing country-level proxy servers. These proxy servers contain a massive database of banned sites (Whitaker, 2001).

Today, there are about two million Internet users in the country (Al-Watan, 2004) of which about half of these two millions spend their time on the Internet posting or reading messages in web-based forums (JeddahNews.net, 2004). Most individuals in these forums post topics to exchange ideas, discuss their public affairs, and analyse political events.

Political online forums (POFs) have become increasingly popular in recent years, particularly after the September 11 attacks on the US and the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. While freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia is limited and content disseminated from traditional media is censored, the decentralised nature of the POFs and their many-to-many communication nature make them effective in enabling people to express their views and reach others. This article will explore POFs in Saudi Arabia through thematic content analysis.

3. Online forums and politics in the literature

The relationship between the Internet and politics has been discussed extensively in the literature. In his often cited paper about this topic, Dahlberg (2001) discussed the possibility of a public sphere taking place on the Internet. In doing that he carried out comparisons between people’s general practices online and a normative model of the public sphere developed from Habermas’ theory of democratic communication. Dahlberg argues that the public sphere that is constituted whenever people enter into political discussions online does not meet all the requirements outlined in Jurgen Habermas’ model. This, according to him is because

First, the increasing commodification of cyberspace threatens the autonomy of public interaction online. Second, reflexivity is often a very minimal part of cyber-deliberations. Third, many online fora experience a lack of respectful listening to others and minimal commitment to working with difference. Fourth, there is difficulty verifying identity claims and information put forward. Fifth, extensive exclusions from online fora result from social inequalities. Finally, discourse tends to be quantitatively and qualitatively dominated by certain individuals and groups.

Despite these shortfalls Dahlberg, however, concludes that the Internet does in fact foster a public sphere because it facilitates rational-critical debates and public opinion formation.

Interestingly, the conclusions drawn from two recent articles by Cammaerts and Audenhove (2003) and Ulrich (2004) coincide with those of Dahlberg. Cammaerts and Audenhove studied four online environments to answer questions related to the usage of the Internet among trans-national social movements from the context of organisation, mediation of participation and public opinion formation. As suggested, they too found that the Internet environments they studied foster public spaces that
facilitate online civic engagement despite a number of existing constraints such as those related to access, moderation of interactions and male dominance.

Ulrich (2004), who was also interested in understanding the impact of the Internet on democracy, discussed the various perspectives surrounding the argument about regarding the Internet as a public sphere. While he concludes that the Internet is capable of promoting democratic values, Ulrich also recognises some constraints on the Internet ability. Among the values the Internet is capable of facilitating he listed expression of opinion and generation of dialogue. Dialogue on the Internet, according to him, while not synchronic like face-to-face communication, it is not subjected to the editorial bottleneck that typically characterise the printed media. Dialogue on the Internet also, unlike face-to-face dialogue, provides opportunities for greater thought and comprehensive reflection on the matters discussed.

4. Methodology

This study builds on an earlier study whose aim was to explore POFs in Saudi Arabia from within the political and cultural contexts of Saudi society. The earlier study was an ethnographic study which took place between 2003 and 2004 (see Al-Saggaf and Weckert, 2005). Data for the ethnographic study were collected using silent observation of three political web-based forums used mostly by Saudis. Silent observation was conducted over a period of 14 months from mid-July 2003 to mid-September 2004 and involved recording observational field notes from these forums daily. Data were analysed using a grounded theory approach similar to that detailed by Strauss & Corbin (1998).

The ethnographic study took an interpretivist (or interpretive) approach, which is associated with qualitative research methods. Interpretivists believe that the social world is interpreted or constructed by people and is therefore different from the physical world. They emphasise natural settings and seek to gain deep understanding of the meanings of the actors involved in the social phenomenon under study (Glesne, 1999; Sudeweeks & Simoff, 1999; Williamson, 2002).

While the main idea of the present study is to take advantage of some of the features of quantitative content analysis, such as its ability to offer numeric values that will allow reflective inferences of the major themes about a certain topic to be made, the content analysis used in this study also takes an interpretivist approach and is inherently qualitative. Using content analysis in this way (i.e. emerging from an interpretivist framework) seemed to be most appropriate because as in the earlier study, the purpose is also to explore POFs in Saudi Arabia from within the political and cultural contexts of Saudi society and the emphasis is also on understanding the context and meanings that people make of the phenomenon under study.

This approach is also consistent with how content analysis is used in the literature and is often followed in descriptive studies such as the present study (see, for example, Neuman (1994); Aronson (1994); Neuendorf (2002) and Cammaerts and Audenhove (2003)). Conducting content analysis in this way will also allow the themes and patterns related to the studied online forum to emerge from the text and the final result will hopefully be an accurate picture of the characteristics of that forum.
4.1 Thematic content analysis

This study relied on thematic content analysis to examine 2000 topics posted to Al^2-Saha Al-Siyasia (a POF) during September 2004. The unit of analysis is each individual post. While many traditional (i.e. statistical) approaches to content analysis rely on fixed or stable units of analysis, for example, word counts, etc., the focus in this study is on the occurrence of selected themes within each topic. The broader nature and purpose of each topic posted was also taken into consideration during the process of analysis. The decisions of assigning selected themes to topics are made after gaining an idea about the context or contexts each topic fits.

Assigning selected themes to topics based on judgments about their context can no doubt be somewhat subjective. To limit this subjectivity and enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, the researcher triangulated the findings from content analysis with findings obtained from continuously observing the forum for 14 months. (For more information on how this other study was conducted see Al-Saggaf & Weckert, 2005.) In order also to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, the researcher explained the process of coding and analysis of data in great detail so as to make this study replicable as much as possible (Neuendorf, 2002).

4.2 Sampling and the studied forum

Al-Saha Al-Siyasia, which is by far the most widely spread POF in Saudi Arabia, receives 700,000 visitors each day (Al Arabiya, 2004). On average, each day there appears to be about 70 new topics posted to the forum. While the initial plan was to analyse three months worth of posts designated randomly, unfortunately at the time of collecting data, it was found that Al-Saha Al-Siyasia public archive has kept the posts of only the last two months; September and October 2004. Additionally, at the time of doing the analysis, it was found that the number of topics posted during these two months were huge (4200 topics). As a result, a decision was made to study only one month worth of posts (September 2004). Therefore the sample consisted of all topics posted during that period, which was found to be 2000 topics. The total number of replies to all of these topics was 15069. The total number of times the 2000 topics were read during the month of September was 6,041,002; with 3020 as the average number of times a topic was read.

In relation to the issue of ethics in human research, as can be seen from the figures above Al-Saha Al-Siyasia^3 is a hugely populated public space where anyone with an Internet connection can see its content. Recording, analysing and reporting of such public content, where individuals’ identities are shielded and no personal information not already available to the public is revealed, is not subject to “Human Subject” constraints as Eysenbach and Till (2001) and Ess, & AoIR Ethics Working Committee (2002) argue.

4.3 The process of coding

^2 ‘Al^2’ is the Arabic equivalent to ‘the’ in English.

^3 For a detailed description of the design of these forums see Al-Saggaf et al. (2002)
Analysing 2000 topics is no doubt a difficult task and very time consuming. While most posts were coded with only one category (see Figure 1 below), in a few cases topics were coded with an additional one or two categories. In thematic content analysis it is acceptable that items are code with more than one category at the same time (see, for example, Frankos, 2000). This is because the basis for categorisation is the context of the topic which makes it likely that a topic will belong to more than one category or a theme at the same time. Having said that, however, assigning a topic to more than one category occurred very seldom as in the majority of cases only a single theme was found to be representative of the topic. (This is shown in Table 1 below.)

Figure 1. The process of categorisation

4.4 The process of categorisation

First, topic’s titles in the form of clickable hyperlinks were copied and pasted into a Microsoft Excel sheet. The clickable hyperlinks titles, which represented links to topics, were copied in groups of 50 as they were located on one page on the forum. Altogether, there were about 40 pages. Next, and after titles were arranged in Excel, they were imported to Microsoft Access as a single table. In Access, three fields were added to that table and named category 1 to 3. The three added categories represented the three possible themes a topic could be assigned. In Access also another table with twenty-seven pre-determined categories was created. (See Figure 1 above for a list of the categories.) The source of the pre-determined categories was the information...
obtained from the 14 months silent observation of the same forum. It is important to note that additional categories were added as the analysis progressed. This meant that the study relied on both predefined and interactive categories. This introduced a level of coding flexibility as it allowed new and important material that could have significant bearings on the findings to be incorporated into the coding process.

To code data, the topic in Excel was first clicked and read from its location on the Internet. In many cases the replies to a topic were also read to be sure about the context the topic fitted. Second, the topic was assigned a category from a Microsoft Access form in which the researcher created. The form consisted of a textbox that contained the topic title, three empty textboxes to accept the assigning of categories, and three list boxes which had copies of the categories developed earlier (see Figure 1 above). When a topic was selected (after it was read) and upon selecting a category from one of the list boxes, the corresponding empty textbox was automatically filled with the selected category. This process of coding was carried out for all the 2000 topics in the main table.

After coding about 10% of the topics, the researcher stopped coding, reviewed what has been coded and in a separate document explained a number of the categories and made some comments on when to assign them. This process (Neuendorf, 2002) provided the researcher with guidelines that helped him in becoming consistent with his decisions about assigning the themes to topics. At the end of this process queries to count the frequency of each category were generated (see Figures 2 and 3 below). Once the coding is done, the researcher examined the findings in light of the earlier study and formed paragraphs that formulated the findings presented in the next few sections.

Figure 2. The generation of queries.
Figure 3. An example of the result of a query

5. Findings

The findings of this study are discussed in conjunction with the results of the ethnographic study which was briefly discussed in section 4. above. The interpretations and explanations of the findings below are also made in light of this earlier study. A summary of the findings obtained from thematic content analysis is shown in Table 1. below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>counts</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issues related to Religion</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>5.593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In favour of Religious Police</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1.625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of Religious Police</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of fundamentalism</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In favour of fundamentalism</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>5.975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of camera mobile</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics of the region</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>4.828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News about war in Iraq</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US and Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>3.728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News about conflict in Palestine</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>3.681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of Kuwait</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US election</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public affairs</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>18.117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues related Al-Saha Al-Syiasia</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of government and pro-government</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>3.442</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. A summary of the findings obtained from thematic content analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In favour of government</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>3.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct communication with government</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1.960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of terrorists</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>8.222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In favour of terrorists</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In favour of Bin Laden</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1.099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of Shi'a</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>3.728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of reformers</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2.581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism of modern liberals</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>7.122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In favour of modern liberals</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1.195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political analysis/opinion</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>3.107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News from Media</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>3.155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General knowledge</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2092</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.1 Islamic fundamentalism

Nearly 6% of all the topics posted during September 2004 were in favour of fundamentalism against only 1.3% of the topics that criticised this approach to practising the religion. Fundamentalism in the context of this study refers to an approach to practising the religion in which people adhere strictly to the teachings of Islam. The approach is based on a literal interpretation of Islam. People who belong to this category tend to take an uncompromising approach to applying the religion to their lives. The finding that 6% of all forum content was devoted to favouring fundamentalism suggest that people are still generally attached to the way they practise their religion.

Following the events of September 11 and a number of terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia, this approach came under fierce attack. The source of the attack or rather the openly ongoing criticism was US (for reasons mentioned in section 1.) and modern liberals in Saudi Arabia. From continuously observing Al-Saha Al-Siyasia, it was noted that the reason Islamic fundamentalists were active in the forum is because they felt a need to promote the image of Islamic fundamentalism, subjugate the attack and defend this way of practising the religion. They were also observed to constantly disparage others’ ways of practising the religion such as Shia.

It is worth mentioning that the version of the Islam practised in Saudi Arabia is often called Wahhabism’. The ‘Wahhabi’ movement emerged as an effort to wash out Islam of what Abd al-Wahhab, founder of movement, regarded as deviating aspects of modern religious practice. Since its beginning the movement targeted the worship of beings other than Allah it associated with Shiism, and the belief that Allah is everything it associated with Sufi Muslim followers. It banned portraits, gambling, music and dancing.

5.2 Shia

4 ‘A branch of Islam deriving authority from the prophet’s cousin and son-in-law Ali and his appointed successors, the Imams.’ (The Penguin English Dictionary, 2003, pp. 1288)
About 3.73% of all topics posted to Al-Saha Al-Siyasia criticised Shia Muslims. The figure seems a little large considering Shia Muslims are not welcomed to participate in this forum and their numbers in the Saudi society are small anyway. The people in Saudi Arabia and indeed in the rest of the Gulf States have always been sceptical about the Shia Muslims and the country Iran. The war in which Iraq staged and the Gulf States financed from 1980-1988 against Iran is evidence of this scepticism.

In Al-Saha Al-Siyasia, Shia were observed to receive continuous criticism from the forum members. In fact, it was observed in the forum that there are members who specialise only in posting topics that condemn Shia Muslims. Some of the topics posted, for example, provided links to movies and images that showed the problems with the Shia ideology and philosophy; others showed pictures of their torture of themselves in memory of the 4th Imam (Ali); yet others showed pictures of their attacks against the Sunni Muslims.

Apparently and since September 11 attacks on US and the ‘Wahhabi’ proponents are on the defensive. One of the reasons for this, in addition to the explicit and severe US criticism of the ‘Wahhabi’ doctrine (Butt, 2005), is the support the Shia and Sufi doctrines received from US and Europe. The reason the Sufi way, which has some links with the Shia approach, is favoured is because the approach itself encourages giving up the material world and dedicating oneself to worship of Allah. This implies that Sufi Muslims generally leave politics and Jihad aside and concentrate only on their worship of Allah, which is what US and Europe want.

5.3 Terrorism

While 6% of all the topics analysed favoured fundamentalism, 8.22% of all the topics posted by members during the sampled month were dedicated to criticising terrorists. These findings are not in conflict with each other because not all versions of fundamentalism encourage terrorism; possibly only one that does. So it quite possible that those who posted topics that favoured fundamentalism also posted topics that condemned terrorism and vice versa.

Terrorism has been a major problem for Saudi Arabia in recent years. Since Al-Kubar attack in 1995 and the country was the stage for more than 50 major attacks. People from ‘all walks of life’ in the forum were observed to hate terrorists for causing the death of many innocent people mainly their country men and women. Terrorists, according to forum members, took away the sense of security, safety and peace of mind they once enjoyed and that is also why they are hated.

It should be noted that there are many participants who sympathise with terrorists in Al-Saha Al-Siyasia. Since terrorists are struggling with establishing their credibility and the grounds for their activities, sympathisers often post topics that aim at improving the image of Bin-Laden’s and his followers and supporters in front of others. In their topics supporters try to promote the terrorists’ propaganda by releasing information about fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan and linking those fighters with them so that people perceive their acts in the same way they perceive those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

5.4 Modern liberals

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Modern liberals are another group of people who receive continuous criticism from Al-Saha Al-Siyasia members. Approximately 7.12% of the total forum content in September 2004 was derogatory and belittling of modern liberals. Modern liberals, in the context of this study, are those who adopt a moderate tone in terms of their perceptions of Islam and express this tone in the articles they write in the local newspapers and through their appearances in the local media. Modern liberals generally embrace a version of Islam that is less strict in nature and accommodating of others’ beliefs. Their aim from what they write or say is, perhaps, to manufacture the consent of people in society so that modernism or secularism is adopted as a way of life.

Al-Saha Al-Siyasia members’ criticism of modern liberals makes sense given that many of these forum members are fundamentalists who fear a change to the approach to their life and their religion. This is evident also from the fact that only 1.20% of topics posted were in favour of modern liberals as opposed to 7.12% against them.

5.5 Reformers

Reformers are also heavily criticised in the studied forum. While quantitatively only 2.6% of the topics criticised them, qualitatively the criticisms were quite harsh. Unlike in the case of modern liberals in which 1.20% of topics in Al-Saha Al-Siyasia were supportive, reformers, particularly Dr Saad Al-Fagih (the most renowned reformist in Saudi Arabia (Mclaughlin, 2003)) hardly had any topics that were supportive.

Dr Al-Fagih, who operates from London, is the director and spokesperson of the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) which officially began its operations in 11 March 1996. In the beginning the aim of the movement was to educate the public about, what they believe to be, ‘prevalent malpractices of the government’. MIRA communicated with the public through a high-tech website⁵ and a state-of-the-art web-based forum. Today MIRA has judged that it is time to move beyond merely informing the public about their rights and start getting them to demand these rights. One of their biggest achievements so far was getting people in 2003 (BBC, 2003) and 2004⁶ to protest in masses in most cities of the country to demand political, economic and social reforms. People for the first time in the history of this country broke the law that bans demonstrations and marched in most cities of the country to protest against the government handling of the country.

5.6 Iraq and Palestine

Around 15.249% of all topics posted to Al-Saha Al-Siyasia during September 2004 were devoted to discussions about the war in Iraq and the conflict in Palestine, with the war in Iraq being discussed more frequently (11.568%). In these topics, forum members posted news about these issues from Satellite television stations, such as Al Arabiya⁷, and from websites in which news were reported by the people who witnessed the events themselves. Members also regularly posted images and video

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⁵ http://www.islahi.net/
⁶ The author was in the country when this took place.
⁷ http://www.alarabiya.net/
clips of fighting they obtained from non-media sources. In addition, members regularly posted topics to update others about news that were not covered in the media.

In their coverage of the events in Iraq and Palestine members described the events as they were unfolded. Most of the time members also offered commentaries on these events. In these commentaries they synergised ideas and analysed events and frequently provided predictions of what might happen in the future.

5.7 Government

While about 3% of the topics posted to the forum were in favour of the Saudi government, about 3.4% were critical of it. This indicates that the government and its supporters are quite active in Al-Saha Al-Siyasia. This could be true even in the case of senior government officials and Royal family members many of whom are said to daily follow this forum. The following excerpt from one of the messages posted to Al-Saha Al-Siyasia shows this:

This is not strange. What is strange is the minister who does not follow Al-Saha Al-Siyasia. From my point of view, the minister (or the decision maker in general) whose morning program does not include skimming Al-Saha Al-Siyasia and following their links, still lives in the age of King Faisal.

The above message was posted after a member reported that a member of the royal family has responded to a demand discussed in the forum.

The aim of the government officials from participating in Al-Saha Al-Siyasia discussions is to maintain their positive image in front of the public in which anti-government members try to shake. Being present in this forum allows the government to balance things up in terms of clearing away the accusations against them and at the same time promote their political plan, which may include disparaging reformers, terrorists and extremists. Being present in this forum also allows them to keep an eye on what is being said in the forum about them and about the country. Given the vast number of people who operate in this forum, monitoring its content gives the government a chance to gain insight on what is happening in the country.

5.8 Public affairs

The findings of this study show that about 18.117% of all the messages sent to the forum during the sampled month were dedicated to discussing people’s public affairs. Some members specialised in sharing information about senior government officials whom they accused of corruption. Other members posted topics to complain about things in their country. An example of this was the topic about foreign workers in the country who take jobs from locals causing an increase in unemployment rates. In this sense, the forum is seen as a medium in which people directly communicate with government officials. This is evidenced by the fact that 1.96% of all topics were of this nature. Of course, members use the forum in this way because they know that government officials are present in the forum as mentioned above.

In a number of occasions Al-Saha Al-Siyasia members were observed organising themselves around a political matter that could affect them, and taking a common stand about it in a way not previously possible. An example of this is Crown Prince
Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz’s initiative to send Muslim troops to Iraq in an attempt to restore peace in the country (CNN, 2004). His plan was heavily criticised by members of the forum from all political currents, who argued that a Muslim nation should not support the enemies of another Muslim nation. According to Al-Quds Al-Arabi (2004), this led the government to ‘practically’ withdraw their initiative. This example clearly illustrates that Al-Saha Al-Siyasia has enabled people to rationally criticise a crucial political decision, reach a consensus regarding it among themselves, and communicate their opposing views about it to government officials. This example also, and others below, suggest that Al-Saha Al-Siyasia may constitute a public sphere which includes some of the elements of the ‘true’ public sphere advocated by Jurgen Habermas (1989) (see a brief discussion about the public sphere in section 3.).

6. Political online forums and the media in Saudi Arabia

As can be seen from the findings of this study, the widespread use of Al-Saha Al-Siyasia and its popularity in Saudi Arabia, has made it an effective media channel. Even traditional media, such as local television stations and newspapers, have been observed to take some of their news from them. For example, during the capture of Saddam Hussein most international media showed the hole in the ground at the farm where he was hiding. One author in Al-Saha Al-Syiasia, who posted a topic that included that picture, wondered why the colour of dates (brown sweet edible fruit of a palm tree) that appeared in the picture were yellow in a time of the year (December) when the colour of the dates in the trees should look otherwise. His article received a great deal of attention from the readers, as it shed doubts about the truthfulness of the story of the capture of Saddam Hussein. The next day, Al-Watan daily newspaper discussed this article on the front pages.

There is another interesting example that shows the interactions between traditional media and political online forums. The government released, on national television and one of the daily newspapers (AlRiyadh), information about a body of one of the terrorists which they found buried in the desert. In their story, they said that his friends chose not to take him to hospital from fear they would be identified and captured. As a result, they let him die of his wounds. In their story, they also showed the face of the dead person and his body. Obviously, this was an attempt to condemn the acts of terrorists and belittle them in the eyes of their supporters and those who think terrorists acts are legitimate. Terrorists, who operated in Al-Saha Al-Siyasia, were not happy with that coverage and as a result they responded by posting a topic in the forum which caused a sensation. In their topic, they asked why the body of the deceased person did not decompose after two months of burial. Muslims believe that those killed in a battlefield defending their country are martyrs. They also believe that the bodies of martyrs are kept intact in the graves. According to terrorists, if this man’s body did not change or decompose after so long, it means he is a martyr. The next day, the government released in Al-Jazirah daily newspaper the medical certificate of the deceased person and some images which showed a lot of deformity from decomposition to his body. This interaction between traditional media and the forum clearly shows that the public regards the latter as a valuable media tool. One of the reasons that made information that appear in forums worth reading was the inclusion of images, audio files and video recordings with most of the topics posted to serve as supporting evidence.
7. Conclusion

POFs in Saudi Arabia are becoming increasingly popular and important in people’s lives in Saudi Arabia. Al-Saha Al-Siyasia, which is by far the most widely spread POF in Saudi Arabia, is just one of hundreds of similar forums. One of the reasons these POFs are receiving unprecedented attention in Saudi Arabia is because they serve a specific purpose for people from all backgrounds.

POFs gave average individuals the chance to let their voices heard and get their messages across to others. They offered the public as a whole a medium that is not only widely spread among people and effective in reaching the decision makers in the country, but also not subject to government’s control. In addition, reformists found in POFs a channel to communicate with the public and advocate their plans for reform. Terrorists found in them a medium to establish their credibility and the grounds for their actions. The government officials and supporters used them as a medium to maintain their image in front of the public and advocate their plans. Islamic fundamentalists used them as a medium to promote their image and defend their way of practising the religion. Finally, the moderate liberals used POFs to invite people to adopt a less strict version of Islam and adopt secularism as a way of life.

Television, radio and press are, to some extent, in the hands of the government and content broadcasted from these sources has always been geared towards government’s plans. The findings of this study show that POFs are the new media which people now have in their hands. Reformists, terrorists, Islamic fundamentalists, moderate liberals and government supporters, are all using POFs to communicate their ideas and plans to others. Their use of POFs is not only making them authors of media content instead of being a passive audience, but also making these tools a valuable source for information about politics and a perfect medium for people to express themselves and influence the political public sphere in their country.

8. References


