INTERNET BULLETIN BOARDS IN SAUDI ARABIA: ANALOGUES OF CHANGE AND RESISTANCE*

Nadav Samin
Princeton University

Analysis of Saudi Internet use tends to appear in two guises: advocacy papers detailing Saudi curtailment of Internet use within the kingdom (Zittrain and Adelman 2002),¹ and analyses of the use of the Internet by Saudi opposition groups.² These approaches, however, overlook what is arguably an even more interesting and important phenomenon for Saudi watchers—the proliferation of Internet bulletin boards among Saudi youth, tribal groups and religious minorities. Internet bulletin boards provide Saudis with an opportunity to discuss and debate issues in a semi-public forum where norms of gender segregation and other social conventions can be called into question. Equally significant, Internet bulletin boards in Saudi Arabia function as arenas for reinforcing pre-existing values and expectations concerning the structure of Saudi society. Examining the discourses on two Saudi Internet bulletin boards, one representing a Najdi tribe, the other a Shiite community in eastern Saudi Arabia, it is possible to observe the complex and often competing ends toward which new media in the Middle East can be deployed.

Eickelman and Kraidy,³ among others, have identified the transformative impact of new media technologies in Middle Eastern societies, from fax machines and desktop publishing in the 1990s to text messaging

---

* An earlier version of this essay, entitled “Dynamics of internet use: Saudi youth, religious minorities and tribal communities” was published in 2008 in the Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication 1(2), pp. 197–215. I would like to thank Bernard Haykel for first encouraging and supporting this research, as well as Dina Matar and Tarik Sabry for their guidance in developing the framework for my inquiries.


² Fandy 1999; Teitelbaum 2002.

and reality television today. These technologies are said to produce a flattening of social hierarchies, greater personal autonomy and a capacity to circumvent moral and administrative strictures governing behavior and expression. The Internet is perhaps the most relevant of these leveling mechanisms, combining the speed and interactive quality of text messaging with the sophistication of television production and desktop publishing. Saudi Arabia, though slow to translate modern communication technologies (including television and the Internet) into public goods, has fast become one of the most active producers of Internet content in the Middle East⁴ (Warf and Vincent 2007). Though a carefully managed process, the growth in Saudi Internet use is another dimension of what Eickelman (2003) has termed the ‘incursions of small media,’⁵ describing a phenomenon in which personalized, decentralized media technologies are seized upon in order to challenge the boundaries of permissible discourse in Middle Eastern societies and the control of centralized states over these boundaries.

Saudi audiences have proven receptive to new media. In a study of Saudi youth media consumption habits in the pre-Internet era, Boyd and Asi (1991) observed that a sizeable percentage of Saudi university students tuned into transnational radio broadcasts by the BBC and Radio Monte Carlo Middle East.⁶ In another measure of the demand for new media in the kingdom, Boyd and Asi also noted that despite a government ban on public cinemas in 1987—still in place—80% of Saudi homes owned at least one videocassette recorder. In 2003, the United Nations Development Program’s Arab Human Development Report ranked Saudi Arabia 56th out of 109 countries in a series of knowledge capital indicators measuring (among other values) the extent and diversity of media penetration in the country. Though it lags behind other advanced economies, this ranking is further testament to a rapidly evolving media environment, as satellite television, mobile telephony, and the Internet now combine to open up alternative social spheres in the country.⁷

Since the Saudi government first made the Internet publicly available in 1999, its use has skyrocketed. According to Warf and Vincent (2007) the number of Saudi Internet users in the year 2000 totaled 200,000.⁸

---
⁴ Warf and Vincent 2007.
⁵ Eickelman 2003: 33–34.
⁷ Kraidy 2006.