QATAR UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

THE ROLE OF TWITTER HASHTAGS IN GULF STATES

BY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

College of Arts and Science

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts in

Gulf Studies

June 2016

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ABSTRACT

Traditional and state-controlled media in the Arabian Gulf have always been censored and controlled. Therefore, social media, such as Twitter, have replaced the traditional media and the way media is handled. Twitter has become an important tool in many places worldwide because of the existing censorship on state-owned media, the ease of use, and the rapidity of publishing information on Twitter as opposed as to other media forms. Thus, with Twitter being one of the most widely used social media, the use of the hashtag symbol too became a crucial and important tool for many Twitter users.

This research aims to emphasize the use of Twitter hashtags, the implications it will have on a particular topic, how people on Twitter interact and communicate, and effectively make their voices heard. Thus, in many cases, hashtags have led to effective dialogues and responses. Furthermore, in this case, while individuals commonly use it, it is not limited to them. Organizations and different institutions use Twitter hashtags.

Examining Twitter hashtags draws attention towards a specific issue, which cannot be undermined or neglected. Because of its importance, the Twitter website itself, has designed a tool to show the most "trended" or most talked-about hashtags in a particular city/country. This is important because it tells us what people are interested in, and it draws attention towards certain issues and matters. Therefore, people debate and talk about the most trended topics and hopefully contribute to it and draw attention, or change the outcomes.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Background of the study

Social media have gained momentum during the socio-political events of the Arab Spring in 2011. People have become more engaged on both Facebook and Twitter, which they use to voice their sentiments and oppose the socio-political situations in their home countries. This would have been impossible on the state-controlled media because of stringent censorship. People took over social media for political reform and to change the status quo, hence, the Egyptians called their revolution during the uprising "Facebook revolution," although Facebook was just an enabler to mobilize people and not the driving factor behind the revolution (Harlow & Guo, 2014).

Stringent censorship on the traditional media is still in force in the Arab world and the GCC, despite the availability and the easiness for technology that people have access to today. Therefore, social media has became rapidly popular and widely used; Twitter, for example is one such social networking service. In fact, social media users in the Arab Gulf countries outnumbered those in North Africa region. According to one survey conducted by the Mohammed Bin Rashid Government school in Dubai, in the 22 Arab countries, there are more than 135 million Internet users and approximately 71 million users who are active on social media platforms. According to the survey, an estimated 91% of the Arab world Internet users are on Facebook, and approximately 57% of these are Twitter users. In the GCC, Saudi Arabia alone has an estimated 2.4 million Twitter

users, which consists of 40% of Arab users on Twitter, followed by the UAE, which has more than 400,000 users, as for Qatar, it has more than 70,000 active Twitter users (Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, 2014).

The rapid growth of Internet users are because of several factors, such as Internet accessibility, the ownership of electronic devices (such as laptops and mobile phones), and the ease of using social media. In one research, it was found that Saudi Arabia has a penetration rate of 33% on Twitter, which is the highest penetration rate globally (Abdurabb, 2014).

. The overall Twitter users in the Arab world are estimated to be 6.5 million users, with 3.7 million active users in the Gulf countries. Twitter users are usually below the age of 30 years, and the use of the social media in this age group is thriving because of high income levels that empower the youth to buy smart phones; in addition, there is a boom in broadband Internet connectivity (Kinninmont, 2013).

Even though there is a space for freedom of expression and lack of censorship on Twitter, it did not prevent some of the GCC governments from monitoring and cracking down on users who are heavily involved with the social media activism. Activism in the GCC is often perceived as opposition to the government and the governmental institutions, whether it is political or social. Recently, some countries cracked down on users who supported and endorsed terrorism and terrorists groups and even propagated their ideologies. This has been taken into consideration in Qatar's new cybercrime law, which was promulgated in 2014. Amnesty International stated that this law "endangers freedom of speech." (Allaban, 2015).

The importance of Twitter, comes from a small tool that Twitter introduced in 2009, which is the hashtag—a symbol that is prefixed by the pound symbol (#), it is used to highlight a word or a phrase and it is used in several social media websites, such as: Twitter and Facebook. The hashtags are given tremendous importance on Twitter. A section is designed for the most trended hashtags, and these are designed for worldwide users or specified geographic location. In the GCC alone, hashtag usage was very powerful; it influenced decisions, brought about action, and initiated debates. It has also been a tool for engagement with events. In addition, to highlight the importance of a hashtag, Twitter has a tab on the social media application where it highlights the most "trended topics," that is, the most hashtags people are using in one city or worldwide. Furthermore, to signify the importance for social media, the Arab media report in 2015 indicated that the main three pillars of social media are communication, entertainment, and knowledge—these are the reasons why social media is used in different regions of the Arab world. Thus, the use of social media goes beyond entertainment (Alta'rof Ala' Mwa'qea, 2015). This indicates the importance of social media in the individual's life, and the role it can play to bring about change, depending on how it is used, and the level of dependency where individual depended on a certain medium to achieve their desired goals.

The importance of the Twitter hashtag and social media can be understood by the theory of "media dependency," which helps rationalize this idea through the interaction between the audience, media, and society (Syallow, n.d.).

This study will explain the importance of the Twitter hashtag—how a hashtag is used to influence decisions and draw attention on issues in the GCC countries.

Research question

The main concern of this thesis is to examine Twitter hashtags in the Gulf states,

Therefore, I formulated my research question as follows:

 How do Twitter hashtags play an important role in the Gulf states?

Significance of the research

This research aims to fill a gap in the literature of social media in the Gulf countries, and the lack of literature on the use of Twitter hashtags as a social activism. The research aims to explore the importance of utilizing Twitter hashtags in GCC countries. Twitter hashtags have been proven to be widely effective in the Middle East and Gulf regions. They have helped influence and reverse decisions; they get people to talk about certain issues, and start debates about different topics.

The findings of the study will show the importance of social media activism. This shows a shift not only in the media landscape, but it also shows a new form of activism in the GCC, particularly in countries like Qatar and Saudi Arabia, where they lack any form of freedom of speech or democratic representation. Finally, by using several case studies from the Gulf states, the study will emphasize the fact that governments, institutions,

decisions, and perceptions can be influenced through the effective use of Twitter hashtags. In addition, a new phenomenon that needs to be studied is the use of Twitter hashtags by tweeps in the Gulf states.

This research is significant for understanding the use of social media in the Gulf and focusing on the Twitter hashtags, which are a relatively new phenomenon that started with the inception of Twitter in 2006. In addition, this research will help understand that in countries where they lack any democratic institutions, people can still make their voices heard through the use of social media, such as Twitter. The importance of this study in the field of social science and mass communication comes from the fact that Gulf states have been overlooked in this field. The countries of Arab Spring, such as Egypt, used the social media to spread their online activities and bring them to life; however, the Gulf states were neither a topic of discussion during the Arab Spring nor were they widely studied on the social media and through Twitter hashtags. To conclude, it is important to understand that people in the Gulf have tried to change matters concerning them and, in several cases, they have succeeded in doing so. This is because people were able to do social mobilization on Twitter and utilize the hashtags in their favor. At least, this hashtag started the discussion on various issues.

Problem statement

The purpose of this research is to address the gap in the existing literature about social media and Twitter, particularly in the Gulf countries. Through this research, I will focus

on Twitter hashtags that twitter users have used in the past to change the course of action or shed light on a specific issue whether in their country or worldwide. I will choose Qatar and Saudi Arabia from the GCC for two reasons, the absence of freedom of speech in these two countries. Secondly, Qatar is an example of how even small states without democratic institutions, such as the parliament, free press, and right of assembly, can make an impact on decisions made in the public sphere by the use of social media.

While Twitter users often use hashtags to change the course of action, this has not always been the case. The pattern of choosing what hashtag can lead to an action cannot be determined, and there is no way of finding when the concerned institution intervenes to take action. While this new phenomenon of using the Twitter hashtag is still new and Arab users grew only in recent years, this case is still worth examining because it is one of the fewest options available for many to express their views and bring about possible change in their societies.

Literature review

Different forms of media have been developing with time in the Arab world as new technologies and new developments emerge. The importance of news cable TV came about in the 1990s when the CNN news channel started reporting live from the war frontlines close to the Iraqi boarders during the Gulf War in Kuwait (Mahjoob & Murphy, 2010). In 1996, an Arab news channel, Al Jazeera, was started for the Arab-speaking audience. Al Jazeera gained wide viewership when it started broadcasting Bin

Laden's tapes in 2003. The success of Al Jazeera led the United States itself to counter the channel's editorial narratives by starting an Arabic channel based in the United States, Al-Hurra T.V. (Seib, 2008).

Social media, in particularly Twitter, gained momentum in the Arab world, as the Arab Spring was unfolding in late 2010. In the first half of 2012, after the Arab Spring, the social media too has grown rapidly in the GCC countries (Dubai School of Government, 2012). The Arab Spring did not affect Saudi Arabia, although it has the largest number of Twitter users in the Middle East. In addition to factors, such as the absence of a free-speech platform and the reachability of technology and Internet, one factor contributed to the rapid growth of Twitter in Saudi Arabia. Al-Walid Bin Talal Al-Saud, the nephew of former Saudi King Abdullah, is one of the most crucial investors at Twitter company (Dirioz, 2013). Bin Talal's company invested $300 million in 2011; this shows the importance of social media as a soft power tool and an investment opportunity.

In the GCC, Saudi Arabia alone has an estimated number of 2.4 million Twitter users, which consists of 40% of Arab users on Twitter, followed by the UAE, which has more than 400,000 users, as for Qatar, it has more than 70,000 active Twitter users. Several factors have contributed to the rapid growth of Internet users, such as easy Internet accessibility, the ownership of electronic devices (such as laptops and mobile phones), and the ease of using social media.

Even with the freedom of expression and lack of censorship on Twitter, some GCC governments still cracked down on users who were heavily involved with the social

media activism. Activism is seen as a form of opposition to the government, and activists are accused of blasphemy. Recently, some countries cracked down on users who support and endorse terrorism and terrorists groups or even propagate their ideologies; this step has been taken in Qatar by the new cybercrime law (Qatar cybercrime law, 2014).

The importance of Twitter comes from a small tool that Twitter introduced in 2009, which is a hashtag—a symbol that is prefixed by the # symbol; it is used to highlight a word or a phrase. Hashtags are given much importance on Twitter; there is a section that's designed for the most popular hashtags, and these are designed for worldwide users or for specified geographic location. In the GCC alone, the hashtag usage was so powerful that it could influence decisions, bring about action, and initiate debates.

The importance of the Twitter hashtag can be understood with the theory of media dependency. This research will explain the power of the hashtag—how a hashtag is used to influence decisions, and draw attention on issues in the GCC countries. The theory of media dependency has a great impact when the individual's exposure to the media is higher. The stronger individual relies and needs the media to meet their goals; this is more prevalent during the time of crisis and natural disasters. In addition, although individuals rely on the social media, they do not neglect the traditional media, which is another supporting source for getting the news and seeking information (Sheldon, 2015).

Theoretical framework

The media dependency theory was first proposed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur (1976) in the communication discipline. The theory suggests that individuals will rely on the media to satisfy their needs, which means people will utilize the media for their own benefit. In this research, the medium that is being used is Twitter. The followers of the Twitter postings are called tweeps. They use Twitter to help their case to be heard and resolved. Furthermore, it lacks any form of censorship or state control. Tweeps rely only on Twitter for information and possible change.

Furthermore, the media dependency theory helps us understand the relationship between the medium (Twitter) and the audience (tweeps), and the effect it can have on the audience who depend on the medium for their needs. In other words, the media creates a platform for the audience to deliver the results they are seeking. In addition, in this theory we can identify the variables of this research, the independent variables being Twitter hashtags and the dependent variable being the tweeps.

Media dependency theory suggests that the level of dependency can be on both macro and micro levels. On the micro level, we study what motivates the tweeps. Dependency occurs on the macro level when governments and organizations rely on the media to reinforce messages or promote policies.

To summarize, the theory helps understand the relationship between the individual and the media. In this research, oftentimes through the use of Twitter hashtags, the motivations of tweeps would be to cause change and influence decisions. Therefore, they become heavily dependent on it as will be further explained in this research.

One of the studies that illustrated the importance of dependency theory and how it can be linked and utilized in social media was a study conducted in Japan. In this study, the researchers looked at three social media applications: Facebook, Twitter, and Mixi, during the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake and the Fukushima disaster. They studied how people used the social media during the time of crisis. The study found that people were dependent on social media to obtain the latest information and to check on friends and relatives. However, media dependency varies which is why people chose a specific social media over the other. For example, Facebook and Mixi, were used to ensure the safety of relatives and friends, whereas Twitter was used to get information on the developing event and its aftermath (Jung, 2012). In another study that used media dependency theory in India, it suggested that the youth under the age of 35 constitute up to 75% of those dependent on new media. Their reliance and dependency on the media falls into three categories: information, entertainment, and learning about a new culture (N, 2014). Furthermore, the study suggested that the media dependency theory helps explain why people rely on the media to fulfill their needs and thereby explains the relationship between individuals, institutions, and the media, at different societal levels. Additionally, we can understand that as people become heavily involved and dependent on one social media, they will dismiss or rely less on the traditional media, such as newspapers and TV. This is attributed to the fact that social media has an advantage over traditional media, such as the lack of government control over the content and the message (Skoric, Pan, & Poor, 2012).

Methodology

This research will gather information by studying tweets associated with hashtags. Samples are randomly selected. The nature of this research is qualitative because we are looking at a phenomena and the case study of some of the Gulf states. Because of the lack of a reliable hashtag tracking tool that supports both Arabic language and older hashtags, hashtags will be monitored through the trending topic section on Twitter and previously recorded hashtag cases in which action has been taken or attention has been drawn because of that hashtag. The other reason why the number of hashtags will not be considered is because some of the advertising and spamming tweets use the trended (or widely used) hashtags in tweets and topics, which are not related to the intended hashtag. Therefore, it is impossible to sort out the number of tweets in which the hashtag is used with correlation to the tweet content from those that are not related. However, Twitter indicates how certain tweets become "trends," which are determined by algorithm, and they are based on the location and the accounts an individual is following. In addition, according to the algorithm used, it identifies the topics that are popular when the hashtags are used. Hence, the Twitter algorithm and the hashtags that are popular do not depend on certain number of tweets to make the hashtag trend (FAQ's about trends, n.d.).

The selection of the hashtags was chosen by carefully monitoring the Trended topics tab on Twitter everyday. The hashtag(s) were recorded aside to see whether an action has been taken or not. In addition, reports of the traditional media, such as the local newspaper, were used to determine whether an action was taken as a result of the

hashtag. In general, several traditional media, tend to report on the most trended hashtags or the most widely used hashtags. This implies that the social media and the usage of Twitter hashtags are crucial.

The participants and the audience of this research will be collected anonymously and randomly. They are those who use and actively engage on Twitter, and these users are from the Middle East, and specifically from the Gulf countries. The reason why this sample is used is because these countries are engaged in social media and there is no alternative free speech and censorship-free platforms. Furthermore, the research will use Qatar and Saudi Arabia as main case examples because these two countries have been involved in social media activism in a big way.

Thesis outline

The first chapter of this thesis includes the introduction and the background to social media and the importance it has gained because of its recent usage. Furthermore, the chapter will also briefly indicate the number of users in the GCC States on Twitter and how these numbers are increasing because of easy Internet access and relatively high income levels, which allow the users to buy mobile phones and other electronic items to access the Internet and the social media platforms. This chapter explains the important terms that are used in this research and how the information will be gathered and analyzed.

In the second chapter, we will be looking at the traditional media history in the Gulf, how it has developed, and how it has gained momentum during certain times and events. The chapter then discuses the social media in the Gulf and elsewhere—why people used it and what advantages it has over traditional media.

In Chapter three, I will analyze Twitter activism by looking at how it is used internationally. Twitter activism is not only limited to individuals or governments. In the second part of the chapter, I look at case studies in the Gulf where Internet activism (in the field of socio-economic, religious, and cultural issues) has used Twitter hashtags

The fourth chapter explains the cybercrime laws in the GCC and how these laws mostly hinder the freedom of speech and any sort of online political activism. Furthermore, the cybercrime laws in the Gulf have resulted in some Twitter users being arrested and jailed. It has resulted in wide criticisms by the international organizations of human rights; however, even though these organizations condemned the laws and the practices of the GCC countries, their influence is limited. Therefore, the freedom of speech and cybercrime laws remain immune to change.

In the final chapter and the conclusion, I summarize the findings of the research, its implications for people using the social media and Twitter.

Limitation of the study

This research will focus only on Arabic-language hashtags and the tracking of these hashtags written on Twitter. After researching and trying many applications for this

purpose and asking for the help for social media experts, I have concluded that there is no application or software that can track long hashtags in Arabic or older hashtags. Most of the applications and softwares that support the Arabic language can only track and give a history of one or two words hashtags.

Therefore, the hashtags used in this study are monitored manually and checked constantly on Twitter through the search tab and recorded as an event resulting from a hashtag that has occurred.

In addition, because I am using case studies on the social media in the GCC, there is no literature review specifically designed for this specific region. Most of the research is done on the Middle East in general, particularly in countries that have undergone socio-political tension and clashes, such as Egypt and Tunisia.

Definition of Terms

These terms will be used throughout the thesis, hence; it is important to understand what do they mean, as these terms and concepts are essential to understand the subject of this thesis. All of the below terms are from Twitter glossary page, unless otherwise indicated:

Follow

"Subscribing to a Twitter account is called "following." To start following, click the Follow button next to the user name or on their profile page to see their Tweets as soon as

they post something new. Anyone on Twitter can follow or unfollow anyone else at any time, with the exception of blocked accounts".

Follow(s)

"A follow is the result of someone following your Twitter account. You can see how many follows (or followers) you have from your Twitter profile".

Follower

"A follower is another Twitter user who has followed you to receive your Tweets in their Home stream".

Hashtags

"The # symbol, called a hashtag, is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. Twitter users created it organically as a way to categorize messages".

Like (n.)

"Liking a Tweet indicates that you appreciate it. You can find all of your likes by clicking the likes tab on your profile".

Mention

"Mentioning other users in your Tweet by including the @ sign followed directly by their username is called a "mention." Also, it refers to Tweets in which your @username was included".

Retweet (n.), RT

"A tweet that you forward to your followers is known as a Retweet. Often used to pass along news or other valuable discoveries on Twitter, retweets always retain the original attribution".

Retweet (v.)

"The act of sharing another user's tweet to all of your followers by clicking on the Retweet button".

Social media

According to Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, this refers to: "forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which

users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (e.g., videos)". (Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, n.d.)

Traditional media

"This term refers to old (or traditional) mass media, such as television, books and magazines, that involve one-to-many communication, based on a one-way process of producers creating information that is transmitted to large numbers of consumers". (Livesey, 2011).

Trends

"A trend is a topic or hashtag determined algorithmically to be one of the most popular on Twitter at that moment. You can choose to tailor Trends based on your location and who you follow".

Tweeps

According to Merriam-Webster online dictionary: "a person who uses the Twitter online message service to send and receive tweets".

Tweet (n.)

"A tweet may contain photos, videos, links and up to 140 characters of text".

Tweet (v.)

"A tweet refers to the act of sending a short message on Twitter. Tweets get shown in Twitter timelines or are embedded in websites and blogs".

Twitter

"Twitter is a service for friends, family, and coworkers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent messages. People post Tweets, which may contain photos, videos, links, and up to 140 characters of text. These messages are posted to your profile, sent to your followers, and are searchable on Twitter search".

CHAPTER TWO

Media in the Gulf

Introduction

Since the establishment of media and mass communication, to developing and adapting to new media and technology, every country in the Gulf states or the Middle East has its unique characteristics. However, they all have one thing in common that is censorship and lack of freedom of speech.

In 2015, Kuwait was ahead of all the countries in the Middle East and the Gulf states on the index of Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom index; it ranked number 90 out of 180 countries. The next country was Qatar ranked in the 115th place. On the list of the GCC countries, Saudi Arabia ranked 164th, that is, the worst country in the GCC on the index. The criterion of this ranking varies; the organization considers some factors, such as media pluralism and independence, respect for the safety and freedom of journalists, and the legislative, institutional, and infrastructural situation in which the media operates. One way of looking at these numbers and indexes are through the nature of these countries. In more democratic governmental systems, media and freedom of speech is an essential component to these systems. Therefore, more democratic countries tend to have a higher freedom of speech.

Therefore, the Nordic and Scandinavian countries, such as Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, who top the list for the freedom of speech, are also at the top of the Democracy index by the Economist. However, all the six GCC states who performed poorly on the

Reporters Without Borders Freedom of Speech Index, were all listed at the bottom of the Democracy index as "Authoritarian regimes." This indicated that the connection between democracy and the freedom of speech in media always go hand in hand.

As technology advanced and Internet access and penetration became accessible and reachable, people have turned to the Internet to blog, publish, and even become active in citizen journalism. While this has come at a cost, it has not deterred people in the Middle East to become actively connected on the Internet, and to move away from the often state-controlled traditional media. In addition, there has been a rapid growth of citizen journalism, wherein individuals report and post news on different media applications without the need for approval or editing. The lack of censorship has enabled the Middle East to enter a new era of media, that is, the social media. In 2011, the social media gained momentum during the events leading to the Arab Uprising (Arab Spring). In Egypt and Tunisia in particular, when people started voicing their concerns and their sentiment towards their governments. These governments quickly cracked down on protesters. This ignited more activism on the social media and on different applications, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Even when protesters turned to the media, the government tried to shut them down; however, people found their way around censorship and used it for mobilization and large crowd protests events. The protests were organized and formed in Egypt through Facebook, hence, it was called by many "Facebook revolution."

Traditional media in the Gulf

At the time when satellite TV was not popular and Internet access was very limited or almost non-existent, the Arab Gulf states witnessed a wide range of transitions in the media industry. Each and every era of the media development was shaped by circumstances and different events that the region has undergone.

Before the oil era in the Gulf, news travelled mostly within cities in a country; men circulated the news at their *majlis* through their conversations.

According to the Bahraini newspaper Albilad (2012), the first radio was introduced in the Gulf State of Bahrain in 1940; this was during WWII. Back then, the approximately 68 people owned radios. This radio station was established to be used as a propaganda tactic during the war. The British helped the Bahrainis to establish this radio to counter the German propaganda during the time of war (Sarhan, 2013). This is an indication and early example where media was used as a foreign policy tool, a propaganda stand, and an instrument to shape the public sphere's opinions during the time of war or a crisis.

As with the radio station, TV was not introduced in a genuine move as well. The first local TV station was established in Saudi Arabia. In 1957, in the Eastern province of Al-Dhahran, the American oil company ARAMCO founded the very first black-and-white TV in English, then later in Arabic until the official Saudi TV started broadcasting in 1970 (Alsarami, 2007). Arab TV did not gain momentum until the broadcasting of Al Jazeera satellite TV in 1996. Moreover, Al Jazeera gained much popularity and courted controversy during two major events following the 9/11 attacks in the United States. The first event was their coverage of the U.S. war in Afghanistan and the broadcasting of

Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda tapes. The second and much larger event that gave the channel much popularity was reporting on the ground during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. These events have had consequences both politically and socially, and if it were not for the broadcasting and live-streaming, much of the information would have been censored or hidden from the public. Hence, came the term "Al Jazeera effect" coined by Philip Seib, which stands for how the media can influence politics by omitting governments control over the flow of information. This term also draws similarity with another term that came before the existence of the Arab news TV and the Internet: CNN effect. The CNN effect is defined as how 24 hours of cable TV has an effect on the economic and political climate, particularly during a time of conflict or crisis. The most notable event was the Gulf War in 1991, when CNN was reporting live from Baghdad as the war was unfolding; in fact, CNN was the only news channel reporting on the ground, many other channels around the world were using CNN coverage synchronized with their TV station. In the history of TV, this was the first time when the audience viewed the act of war live as it unfolded. This event was the first of its kind. It had a on the economy; sales dropped in many countries including the U.S., therefore, the term "CNN effect" was widely used with this event. Cases, such as CNN and the live coverage of the Gulf War in which audiences were heavily involved, are best explained by the media dependency theory. By applying this theory to that scenario, we can conclude that as the audiences mostly watched CNN to obtain war coverage, their needs were met, and they became dependent on the channel.

The advent of journalism including the publication of the first newspaper in the

Gulf was quite delayed compared to the first newspaper that was first published in the Middle East (in 1828 in Egypt). In 1908, when the first newspaper "Hijaz" was published in Saudi Arabia (Younis, n.d.). Some of the reasons for the delay in establishing publications and newspapers in the GCC were the lack of the basic technology for printing newspapers, the lack of expertise in journalism, and, most importantly, the lack of a literate population. Gulf countries did not have modern school systems then, and the only schools that existed in many parts of the Gulf states were Quranic schools where students learned Arabic for reading the Qur'an.

Therefore, by relying on the Arab foreign expats, particularly from Egypt and the Levant, not only the journalism industry started to grow, but also with that the modern education and schooling system also grew. Thus, the journalism industry was co-founded with the help of the outsiders. It did not come without a cost. In Qatar, there was a clash between the progressives and the traditionalists in the early 20th century. This is when some newly educated graduates wanted to preserve the right of becoming progressive and that included being able to read newspapers and magazines, something the traditionalist found as a threat to the culture and religion. The traditionalists even called those who read newspapers and magazines coming from other Arab countries as "infidels." However, the progressive supporters fought this traditionalist resistance, and they convinced them about the importance of reading and how it does not go against religion. This clash between the progressive and the traditionalists in Qatar can be seen as the first attempt to censor what people read and establish a form of restrictive authority by utilizing religion.

Social media

Social media, in particular Twitter and Facebook, has gained much attention and participation since the start of the Arab Spring and uprising in 2011. In that same year, activists in Egypt have used the Internet and social media to mobilize and to express their opinion as well as call for reform. This has come into existence because the traditional media is largely owned and control by the state; thus, the alternative was to use social media. This was true for Egypt in 2011, when activists utilized Facebook for mobilization and for reaching out to a large audience for the Tahrir Square protests. The number of protesters ranged between a hundred thousand and up to 300,000 protesters. So many people gathered at Tahrir Square because of the Facebook page, which gained much popularity over time. As the numbers grew, police control became almost impossible because the protesters outnumbered the police.

The case for the GCC was slightly different from that of Egypt and even the rest of the world. While the GCC has built a social contract between its citizens and their monarch governments, the World Bank suggests that this social contract is not enough to sustain the ongoing changes in the Middle East. Hence, the Gulf states will not be able to continue to provide free services, such as healthcare, education, public sector jobs, and supporting fuel and food. The inability of the Gulf states to sustain the free services it provided is because of the fall in oil prices, which means lower growth rates, and slower political reformation, according to the World Bank 2015 economic index (World Bank, 2015). This can explain the presence of Gulf citizens on the social media, especially on

Twitter, which uses hashtags concerned with social and economical issues.

The GCC reality is paved with many challenges that other parts of the Middle East might not share. For example, the lack of unions and non-governmental organizations, tribalism, and its negative implications, the lack of political parties, and the conservatism in social life that dominates some countries in the GCC, like Saudi Arabia and Qatar. These barriers that prevented people from coming together to discuss their concerns have came to an end on the social media. The lack of state-censorship and the ability of youth to use the social media have made the different social media platforms an open space for the youth voices to be heard and for people's problems to be addressed. They have opened a small window of change in many cases.

In the GCC, there is a high Internet penetration rate and Internet usage. According to the UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development, Qatar was the first developing country globally to have 91.5% Internet connectivity in 2014. According to the Arab Knowledge Economy Report (2014), the Internet penetration rates in the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) will increase from 54.99% in 2015 to 66.82% by 2017. The importance of Internet penetration comes from the impact it will have on individuals. A few of these impacts include access to information and online gatherings and communication. The rate of Internet penetration also indicates a correlation between Internet penetration and GDP. Therefore, the higher the GDP of a country, the higher the penetration rate will be, this is the case of the GCC. GCC has a reliable and good technology and ICT infrastructure on the governmental level. It also has affordable Internet access on the individual level. This has enabled the Gulf states to maintain a high

Internet penetration rate, and as the numbers indicate, it will continue to grow in the coming years.

GCC users, therefore, are also well represented and integrated on various social media platforms, in particular Twitter and Facebook, amongst other mediums. The Arab Social Media report (2015) listed the main reasons why people in the Arab world and the GCC are using social media. Only 12% said they were using social media to gain information, watch videos, and listen to music. The largest segment (approximately 55%) said they were using social media for networking and connecting with people.

The same report indicated that the most widely used social media applications are WhatsApp and Facebook, respectively. WhatsApp was the most preferred social media application in Bahrain, Saudi, and Kuwait. In the rest of the GCC, like Qatar, Oman, and UAE, the most widely used application was Facebook. The high number of users of these two applications indicated the reasons why people used the social media (Khamis, 2015). Furthermore, unlike what happened with other countries like Egypt, users in the Gulf used social media for networking and communicating as an alternative to face-to-face interaction; this is true for both Facebook and WhatsApp. The main purpose of these two applications is direct communication.

Facebook is one of the most popular social media sites among Gulf users; it is the most important application used by youth between 15 and 29 years of age; it reached 67% usage in 2014. The advantage of using Facebook is the ability to control who sees what on one's Facebook page. In addition, there is the ease of sharing videos or photos with those who are permitted to view the material. It is also worth noting that Facebook in the

Gulf states is not limited for media sharing and keeping in touch with peers, nor is social mobilization and activism limited to the region outside the GCC, like what happened in the Arab Spring. Long before Tahrir Square and Arab Spring, a Saudi woman brought change through Facebook. In 2008, a Saudi activist named Reem Assad started a Facebook group called "Enough Embarrassment," which highlighted the embarrassment and the discomfort women were facing when shopping at lingerie and underwear stores because the sellers were all male. The campaign ended in 2012, when a royal decree was initiated to prohibit men from working at such stores (Block, 2012).

As for Twitter in the Gulf, while it is not widely used like the rest of the social media, it has created a stir during many world and national events in which people have taken over the social media to voice their opinions, initiate dialogues, and even start a "hashtag campaign" in some cases. Unlike other western countries, the GCC case in Twitter is unique for several reasons, one of which is the ability to have an anonymous name on Twitter and gain millions of followers. This has been true for @Mujtahed who has more than one million followers. This account whose identity has not been revealed has gained massive attention and Twitter followers because of the information tweeted. Mujtahed account usually leaks the Saudi royal family information and possible political shifts and movements in the Al-Saud house; in other words, Mujtahed can be considered the whistleblower of Saudi Arabia.

The advantage Twitter has over other means of social media communication tools is that it allows the users to produce messages of 140 characters hoping it will be viewed by virtually everyone on Twitter. In addition, the hashtags on Twitter are one of Twitter's

unique tools. A key word is used to see what everyone has written about, and longer hashtags were used in many ways; this will be discussed in the upcoming chapters. Furthermore, due to the importance of hashtags, the Twitter page has designed a geographical top twenty "most trended topics," this is to see what hashtags and topic are mostly being talked about worldwide or in a specific city. This is a way of helping people communicate easily and find out more about a trended topic. Additionally, the hashtags are not only used by individuals but by many news media and organizations.

Furthermore, social media (and Twitter in particular) have not only been used for good causes. It has been used to defame individuals, slandering activities, and for propagating terrorist groups and ideology, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS). The much larger threat to the GCC states comes from the fast-growing account of GCC citizens, who are either using Twitter to recruit people to join ISIS or simply propagating their ideologies and their political ends (Campbell, 2014). Therefore, the GCC alone cannot combat the growing number of ISIS-linked accounts on Twitter. In April 2015, in cooperation with the U.S. State Department and Twitter, the GCC authorities were able to shut down 10,000 ISIS-linked accounts (Moriarty, 2015; Gladstone, 2015).

Conclusion

Media in the Gulf has been developed and transformed dramatically since the inception of media and the technology, not to mention, globalization. (Alemadi, 2004). However, due to the ability to access Internet and information by the GCC citizens, they no longer

rely on print or state-control media, rather they have moved to the Internet and they use micro-blogging, Twitter, and Facebook. However, GCC governments were not happy with the growing activism on social media and the growing criticism of the governmental institutions in many GCC states. Therefore, they amended and introduced new laws and regulations not only to monitor the Internet users, but also to hold those who use it accountable "(GCC concerned", 2013). This was a step towards censorship and less freedom of speech. After all, the GCC states are not democracies, and even when people try to use the media as a "fourth estate" to help bring about a sense of democracy, the governments are too fast to crackdown on those who try to do so, and impose more control on the social media. The question remains whether or not the GCC will be able to keep up with the fast-developing technology, knowing that Internet users can bypass government restrictions in many ways.

CHAPTER THREE

Twitter hashtags campaigns

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, the media in the Gulf have developed in many stages. It started with the introduction of the traditional media, such as newspapers, radio, and T.V. Currently, the social media is gaining more access and participation. Since the early stages of media penetration in the GCC, the Gulf states have made some efforts to control the media through censorship, banning materials, and editing the content. (Alqudsi-ghabra, T., Al-Bannai, T., & Al-Bahrani, M., 2011). The Gulf states, much like the rest of the Arab states, have struggled with the concept of freedom of expression for very long. Thus, censorship became a part of the journalism and media industry. It is either imposed by law or practiced by self-censorship. Other ways of censorship and placing limits on the freedom of expression includes limiting the right of assembly, the right of forming political parties and professional unions, the right to start and own a publication.

Twitter and hashtag activism has been a tool used in the recent years not only by individuals, but also by governments and non-governmental institutions. Twitter diplomacy also known as "Twiplomacy," can be defined as "use of Twitter and other social media sites by government agencies and officials to engage with the public, disperse information and even leverage global influence. The term emerged from an August 2012 report from Geneva-based public relations firm Burson-Marsteller, which

studied world leaders on Twitter and attempted to illustrate how social media is closing the gap between these leaders and the public they serve." Furthermore, according to the public relations firm one-third of the 193 United Nations countries have Twitter accounts (Lüfkens, 2016).

The importance of governments using Twitter and other social media can be seen in different occasions and events, in particular, when governments want to convey a message, advocate for an issue, and inform the masses. All of these ways of using the social media have emerged in 140 characters of a tweet and a sound bite, which is an audio tweet. Thus, through Twitter, governments have provided accessibility and wide reach for a much larger audience in a short time with multiple languages. It is also worth noting that the government's presence on Twitter has nothing to do usually with the number of Tweets they send to their followers. To make this point clear, in 2015, Reuters published the most followed leaders and government institutions accounts on Twitter. It was clear that the accounts for the leaders and the institutions did not tweet much. For example, President Barack Obama has over 65 million followers, and on average he only tweets six tweets a day. Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic Church has over 7 million followers on his English account, and he tweets an average of only one tweet a day. In addition, the White House has over 7 million followers, and they tweet an average of 15 tweets per day ("Hashtag diplomacy, 2015). It is also worth mentioning that some of these leaders and government accounts have multiple accounts in multiple languages. Pope Francis has nine Twitter accounts in nine languages; the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the prime minster of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, and the Venezuelan

president, Nicolas Maduro, amongst many others have several accounts in multiple languages. They mostly use English and the official language of their country. This indicates that these leaders are not only using Twitter to address their constituencies, but they also use it for public diplomacy and a "soft" foreign policy tool for the outside world.

Because of the large presence of people from different age, social, and economical groups on Twitter, Internet accessibility, and easy availability of mobile phones and computers, certain terrorist groups sought to take advantage of Twitter. They use Twitter for propaganda and recruitment purposes.

When it comes to the GCC, Twitter activism and the use of hashtags have been slightly different and the outcomes were more obvious and easy to reach. In several Gulf states, the use of Twitter hashtags have resulted in bringing about the desired outcomes that the hashtags were intended to create.

This chapter will examine the usage of hashtags on Twitter as an activism tool, both on the international and domestic scale and on the individual and governmental level. The cases examined in this chapter emphasize the role social media can play and the success and failures it may have depending on the group that is using the Twitter platform in this case. The conclusion of this chapter indicates that while hashtags can be used internationally, they have not necessarily initiated change; rather, they have created awareness. This is unlike some of the hashtags used in the Gulf states, which were more likely to initiate a change and demand that an action be taken.

International use of Twitter hashtags

   Twitter diplomacy, also referred to as "Twiplomacy," has gained momentum only in the last three years, although Twitter came to existence in 2006. It took six years for governments and leaders to realize the importance of social media and Twitter and to utilize it for their own political ends as other traditional mediums. Thus, recently the Western governments and leaders, mostly use hashtag diplomacy and the organized use of Twitter hashtags. In the past year alone, governments have used hashtags actively in their different campaigns and events. The U.S initiated one of the most notable and widespread hashtag campaigns. First Lady, Michelle Obama, (Popkin, 2014) used the hashtag titled "#BringBackOurGirls" to help draw attention to the girls kidnapped by the Nigerian militia group Boko Haram (Cresci, 2014). This campaign gained much attention probably because of the high-ranking advocates who posted their photos on Twitter holding the sign of the hashtag. While this campaign went viral, it was faced with criticism because people have argued that an online campaign with a hashtag will not bring back the kidnapped girls. In another scenario, a hashtag was introduced to talk about the Iranian nuclear deal with the P5+1 countries. In a simple hashtag "#IranDeal," diplomats, news media, and tweeps were rushing to tweet their opinion on the Iranian deal and its finalization. According to a Twitter analytical website, within 24 hours, the hashtag generated more than 45,000 tweets (Jebril-Rogers, 2015). Furthermore, to stress Twiplomacy and the importance of hashtag diplomacy, the White House started a whole

new Twitter account along with this hashtag on Iran. This account was dedicated entirely to the Iranian nuclear deal, a move that can be interpreted as a foreign policy tool that the United States is using to persuade the world and its own North American audience on the importance of this deal. It clarifies the deal and puts out more information to the public. Thus, this move is seen as a way for the U.S. government to sell its own ideas and foreign policy views to the world. However, this move by the U.S. government was not completely successful, because it was attacked by the U.S. Republicans who felt that this deal and the Twitter and hashtag diplomacy efforts by the U.S. President were a bad move. In one tweet, the Republican member Bobby Jindal, who had been advocating against the deal, addressed the U.S. president and the Twitter account created to advocate the Iranian deal by tweeting: "@POTUS has taken hashtag diplomacy to a new low. @TheIranDeal is a bad deal for America. A Twitter account can't change that simple fact." (Jindal, 2015; Crisp, 2015).

Furthermore, the hashtag diplomacy did not always end up very well, in fact, it has caused a mild diplomatic crisis between different countries and their governments, and it was entirely because the use of a hashtag. In 2014, as the Russian federation annexed Crimea, a Twitter cold war broke out between the United States and Russia. In one hashtag, the two countries were using the hashtag "#UnitedForUkraine" to advocate their own policies and justifications for opposing or supporting the annexation of Crimea(Hughes, 2015).

Aside from the governmental use of Twitter hashtags, there have been a serious of hashtags during time of crisis or even wars, when two sides uses two different hashtags,

usually with two different sides of the story, or completely different views. For example, two hashtags went viral beyond its intended geographical areas in 2014 during Israel's war on Gaza. During that time, many people turned to Twitter to support the Palestinian cause or the Israeli cause, with images, words, videos, and messages under two different hashtags. Depending on who you ask during this time, it was either Gaza or Israel under attack. Thus, two separate hashtags created by tweeps, "#GazaUnderAttack" and "#IsraelUnderFire", were used by the pro-Palestine or pro-Israel groups, respectively. These two hashtags left the battle on the ground between Gaza and Israel to the Twitter platforms; from a war of weapons it became a war of information and hashtags. The pro-Palestine hashtag generated over 4 million tweets as opposed to nearly 200,000 tweets for the pro-Israel's hashtag. ("Gaza and Israel: War of the hashtags", 2014)

 Comparing the two numbers, one could argue that there is a winner and a loser in this "hashtag battle"; however, the numbers alone cannot determine the winning or the losing side because the two hashtags were not aimed to change the status quo. These were rather about changing the hearts and minds of people, and this is almost impossible to measure.

As noted earlier, even non-governmental organizations, such as terror groups, use the social media for their own propaganda. In addition, to recruit people to join the group, Twitter and other social media had facilities for recruiting new members, despite the global efforts to counter and prevent such things from happening. The terrorist group ISIS has taken over the social media and Twitter to spread their message and their own interpretation of Islam and the ideologies they see as "Islamic." To counter this, Muslims around the world started a hashtag called "#NotInMyName;" the supporters of this

hashtag intended to condemn the atrocities committed by ISIS and to show the distinction between actual Islam and ISIS misinterpretation of it. The Young Australian activists who started this campaign against ISIS on Twitter have also created a website and a YouTube account to counter ISIS messages, using their own message with this same hashtag. Eventually, Australian-Muslims amongst other Muslims used the hashtag to speak up against ISIS and to stand against the anti-Islam speech that has been growing since the rise of ISIS. An extensive study conducted by Brookings Institute in 2015, showed that the group has tens of thousands of Twitter accounts for their members and their sympathizers. ("#NotInMyName", 2014)

To respond to the ongoing and increased ISIS presence on Twitter, the Twitter company has closed down thousands of accounts affiliated with ISIS or promoting ISIS propaganda. Furthermore, because of the inability to take control over the thousands of ISIS-linked account, the U.S. government launched other Twitter accounts in both Arabic and English to counter ISIS propaganda. This is also what the United Arab Emirates did by launching a Twitter account affiliated with the "Sawab" center to counter ISIS and extremism. This latest efforts to counter ISIS from the United States and UAE governments not only militarily, but also on social media and Twitter, show the importance of the social media—the war on the ground is no different from the war on the social media for the same target, that is, ISIS.

Finally, it is also important to mention the role social media played in delivering the messages during the Arab Spring of 2011, especially, the Twitter hashtags. For example, the most popular hashtags in the Arab region between January and March 2011 were

#Egypt (1.4 million tweets), #jan25 (1.2 million tweets; it referred to January 25th, 2011 when the Egyptian protests broke off) (Storck, 2011).

Thus, the use of hashtags on Twitter has attracted events and figures on the international scale, this is important to look at because it shows the importance of social media and how people use it and use the different aspects of it, i.e., hashtags, particularly during crises and huge events. Hence, the use of "dependency theory" is important here, because it highlights how individuals are relying on Twitter, to achieve their desired objectives.

Activism through hashtags in The Gulf states - case studies

In the Twitter and hashtag activism and diplomacy on the global scale, there is no immediate action taken and no outcome resulting from a hashtag; however, the case for the GCC states is different. Because the GCC lacks free and independent journalism and there are no democratic institutions allowing people to become directly involved in the democratic process, social media (Twitter in particular) replaced these two components of democracy and free press.

The hashtags created on Twitter by tweeps have served the purpose of not only informing the masses and drawing attention towards an issue or concern, they have also served the purpose of taking actions or reversing policies and stands. Hashtags quickly gain support from people on Twitter, and even in the absence of democracy and free press, people can still make a change and get their voices heard. This is true even in the countries where they have small populations, such as Qatar, Bahrain, and the rest of the GCC states.

It is important to note that these hashtags have commonalities and that not all of them led to action. All of them are not influential; however, they are mostly concerned with specific issues, which may be the reason why social activism on Twitter by using hashtags has led to action. Furthermore, we can categorize the hashtags according to topics that deal with society, such as socioeconomic issues and religious/culture issues. In both these topics, tweeps have started hashtags. Additionally, these two categories are also going to be broken down into subcategories.

- Some of the hashtags that deal with socio-economical problems, such as salaries, and unemployment amongst other social issues, have led to action in several cases, particularly in Saudi Arabia. This will be noted in the following hashtags discussion.

o **Educational issues**

In 2014, female Saudi college students voiced their concerns over how they were being treated by the university administration. ("Hashtagh soua' ta'moul", 2014) Citing the stringent dress code for students and the poor university amenities, they voiced their concern by attaching photos and posted under the hashtag "The mistreatment of Albaha University with its students"

#سوء_تعامل_جامعة_الباحه_مع_طالبتها

As the hashtag grew, it gained the school administration's attention; consequently, the Dean of the Students Affairs at the university, Dr. Hizam Alghamedi, announced through

Twitter that the university president would hold meetings with the students in each college to hear their concerns and their suggestions.

In another incident in Saudi Arabia, Twitter users initiated hashtags in June 2015, to dismiss the minister of education. The tweets cited the reasons for the demand to dismiss the minister. Most reasons concerned the Saudi students studying abroad on their personal expense who were unable to get a scholarship from the government. Conversations were taking place under one of the hashtags translated as "Dismissal of Azzam Aldakhil is a public demand". ("Asbab eqalt wazeer altaleem", 2015)

<div dir="rtl">

#اقالة_عزام_الدخيل_مطلب_شعبي

</div>

In addition, the call to dismiss the minister was for other reasons including educational problems. In December 2015, a Saudi royal decree was issued to dismiss the minister from office (Alsherif, 2015).

While there is no direct relation between the hashtags and the royal decree to dismiss the minister, the move to dismiss him could be interpreted as the result of the Twitter debate.

    o **Economical issues**

Another hashtag in Saudi Arabia that gained much attention since it was created in 2013, was "Salaries are not enough" #الراتب_ما_يكفي_الحاجة

In this hashtag, Saudi tweeps complained about the high cost of living in Saudi Arabia and about their salaries not being sufficient to cover their expenses. Within two weeks only, the hashtag attracted 17 million tweets; it became the 16th-most trended hashtag in any language with an average of 1,214,000 tweets per day (Alsahli, 2013).

Although, the hashtag did not initiate any change, it has gotten people to talk about their country's economy and job market. For example, it came to light that Saudis are paid the least in the private sector when compared to the rest of the GCC States.

o **Gender/women issues**

One of the most noted hashtags that even gained international support and attention from activists and international media was the campaign to allow women to drive. Through the hashtag "women driving cars," or #قيادة_المرأة_للسيارة

The hashtag gained support from those who wanted to allow women to drive cars in Saudi. It also criticized the religious voices who dismissed these calls. Unfortunately, the Saudi authorities jailed the two female activists and public figures, Loujain Alhathloul and Maisa Alamoudi, who challenged the ban on women drivers and drove with their valid driving license ID's from UAE. The license stated that the holder could drive in any GCC country. The issue of women driving evoked some bizarre opinions. One religious figure said that women who drive cannot conceive. Another Saudi historian said in a TV show that vehicle driving by women can lead to their being raped (Malaf qiadat almara', 2015). Until today, this issue is still being debated; however, there is a major paradigm shift when arguing about women's rights. This has been brought about by the online campaign and the Twitter hashtag.

o **Humanatrian issues**

In 2014 in Saudi Arabia, a man named Ibrahim tweeted through his personal account, a photo of him while he was in the hospital stating that he had no relatives to visit him and he could not afford his medication costs, which required him to travel to Germany. In few hours, many people flooded his hospital room to support him and sent him flowers. ("Rajol amal yotleq mubadara", 2014) In addition, a hashtag campaign started with "Ibrahim treatment," #علاج_ابراهيم

Within a few days, many people including the Saudi multimillionaire Alwaleed Bin Talal donated for his medical expenses and bills. Many people offered to help Ibrahim as his story grew bigger and other media outlets started to pay attention to his story after it went viral on Twitter.

- The hashtags that deal with religious and cultural issues are the most common. They usually deal with individuals who were thought to defame and insult Islam, and individuals who might have a political stand that people widely disagree with. In short, people have objected and denounced anything that they think goes against religion and culture.

- **Atheism/Blasphemy issues**

In Bahrain, a hashtag gained momentum, attention, and outrage on Twitter and other media. It forced the Bahraini government to take action. In 2015, the Lebanese writer and author, Joumana Haddad, known for her opinion on religious and sexual freedom was banned from Bahrain. She supported and advocated homosexuality and atheism was banned from Bahrain. She was scheduled to give a lecture during a cultural festival; however, when the news spread on Twitter people started a hashtag in Arabic "Bahrain doesn't welcome atheists"البحرين_لاترحب_بالملحدين#

After much online debate on the author's views and opinions on sexuality and atheism that were seen as a contradiction to the religious and Islamic cultural of Bahrain, a royal decree was issued to ban the writer from entering Bahrain and thus denying her visit (Hussein,2015).

In another event in 2012 scheduled by the Qatar University, the Saudi writer Bedriah Albeshr was scheduled to speak at the university; however, the students stormed Twitter with the hashtag "No to Bedriah," لا_لبدرية#citing her written work that goes against the faith and the blasphemy in her novel "Hend and the soldiers." In her work, she says that "God can be as cruel as the people who oppressed her when she was a child." These reasons cited in the tweet associated with the hashtag were convincing enough for the university administration to cancel Albeshr's lecture. This shows how influential hashtag use can be when utilized to voice concerns and demands (Bander, 2012).

o **Sectarian/Religious issues**

The government not only responds to people who promote ideas and views that are seen as "un-Islamic," but it can respond to Muslim individuals who have opinions that can be seen and interpreted as insulting and demeaning to other religious groups. In Kuwait during Ramadan in 2015, an online campaign against a Shia religious figure led to his expulsion from Kuwait. Ja'far AlIbrahimi, an Iraqi religious figure was expelled from Kuwait based on a request from the Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior after people criticize the religious figures for his views. The man, who was notorious for insulting Muslim prophets and other Muslim figures, was expected to stay in Kuwait for the last 15 days of

Ramadan; however, the hashtag #اطردوا_الإبراهيمي_من_الكويت

or "Expel AlIbrahimi from Kuwait" gained the attention of the Kuwaiti government, including some members of the parliament, who stood with the Twitter campaign until finally the order was formally passed to expel him. ("Baad mutalabat men alnushataa",

2015).

o **Religious issues**

In 2013, a huge Twitter campaign in Qatar called for the removal of the famous French soccer player Zinedin Zidane. After sparking controversy over the display of "Zidane headbutt" statue on the Corniche, which was bought by Qatar Museums Authority,("Qatar removes Zidane status") Qatar authorities decided to remove the statue

after growing criticism on Twitter and the growing demand for the removal of the statue with the hashtag #تمثال_زيدان "zidane's status"

In that hashtag, people voiced their concern over why this statue must be removed. Some quoted religious reasons saying that it promoted idolatry; others said it was in bad taste. Some others were concerned that the statue was teaching violence, thus, as a result that the status was removed (Ibrahim, 2013).

Several Twitter hashtags have illustrated how celebrities could be influenced by their religious or political opinions, which can lead to their cancelations of visits and seminars.

o **Religious/political issues**

In 2015, the Kuwaiti religious figure, Mishari Alafasy was invited to Qatar to attend a poetry event for Prophet Mohammed; however, this move was opposed on Twitter by a hashtag called "Alafasy out of Qatar". #العفاسي_برا_قطر

The Qatari tweeps started this hashtag to oppose Alafasy's political stand on Egypt. Alafasy had openly supported the then General Sisi in 2013, and had made claims against the pro-Morsi sit-in protesters of Rabaa Square in Egypt. Thus, the tweeps saw him "unfit" to be at an event concerned with the prophet. Finally, this resulted in cancelation of his invite ("Alafasi barra Qatar", 2015).

Another incident led to the cancelation of an event for a public figure, and this also happened in Qatar.

In January 2015, when the Qatari Ministry of Culture invited the Egyptian writer, Fatima Naoot, a hashtag worded "Fatima Naoot in Doha" فاطمة_ناعوت_في_الدوحة#. According to some tweeps this Egyptian writer had widely criticized Qatar online, and she was considered pro-Sisi, the current Egyptian President, who led a military coup in Egypt in 2013 that led to the deposition of the former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi. The Qataris made it clear on Twitter that they disagreed with this coup. Consequently, as the opposition to the hosting of Naoot grew amongst the Qataris, the scheduled event was canceled. ("Mughredoon Qatarioon yanteqedoon", 2015)

o **Religious/women issues**

Another hashtag activism related to the phone company Vodafone sponsoring a charity trip to the Amazon for Qatari girls and boys.

The company and only in three days withdrew its sponsorship from the charity trip,

"because of a hashtag called فودافون_تسيء_لأهل_قطر#

which can be translated as "Vodafone insults the people of Qatar." This hashtag referred to the fact that the girls were not wearing hijab, they were traveling without male companion, and mixing freely with boys. This went against the Qatari culture and the conservative traits of the Qatari society. In an official statement, Vodafone, Qatar, responded to their withdrawal of the campaign by saying, "This decision to completely withdraw from this project and cease all kinds of support to it reflects our Chairman H.E Sheikh Dr. Khalid Bin Thani Al Thani's commitment to seeing Vodafone Qatar

providing the best services and initiatives that are suitable to the norms and values of the Qatari culture." This statement by itself is very vague because who can say and identify the norms and values of any society (Windrum, 2014). It seems that the company felt like they were under pressure from Twitter hashtags about continuing to promote and support the participants in the charity trip. ("Vodafone Qatar cease", 2014). This also raises the question of discrimination and bias in companies.

o **Social/Political issues**

Although most examples of hashtags were from Saudi Arabia and Qatar; however, Twitter users in UAE have also used hashtags to demand action against two famous public figures. In 2012, Saad bin Tefla Al-Ajmi, the former minister for information of Kuwait published his weekly article in Etihad Emirati newspaper. One article had been criticized by some UAE readers because he spoke against the Kuwaiti government. They demanded that the newspaper stop publishing his article under the hashtag "Etihad newspaper, stop Ben Tefla":

#جريدة_الاتحاد_اوقفو_بن_طفله Within a day of initiating the hashtag, the newspaper responded to the readers' demands. They stopped publishing the articles of the former minister of information in Kuwait.

In another incident, the UAE tweeps started another hashtag to condemn the Saudi cleric Mohammed Al-Arefe and his remarks on Twitter. The remarks were seen by the tweeps as insulting and defaming to the Kuwaiti Emir. Al-Arefe had made it clear that the

Kuwaiti Emir was not completely fit to govern. The tweeps cited the hashtag "Stop Al-Arefe from Dubai TV," in which they demanded that Dubai TV stop hosting him: اوقفوا_العريفي_عن_تلفزيون_دبي#. The UAE responded to the hashtag when different news media reported it. They denied the Saudi cleric from appearing on any of their national TV or from issuing Fatwas through any UAE mediums. (Alawadhi, 2012)

Conclusion

In the Gulf region, Internet activism using Twitter hashtags both globally and locally have given rise to successful, moderately successful, and failed hashtag campaigns. In the rest of the world, hashtags are often used to draw attention to an issue hoping for a change to be implemented; for example, the hashtag "#BringBackOurGirls" did not free the kidnapped girls, but it did highlight the problem. However, when it comes to the GCC states, the hashtags used are more of a demand for action rather than a means only for drawing attention and promoting awareness for a specific issue or topic. The reason why hashtags are effective in the GCC but not the rest of the world is because of the lack of democratic institutions in the Gulf and the availability of technology and the Internet. Furthermore, by using the theory of media dependency, we can claim that people rely on the media to propose changes or influence a current situation. The medium of Twitter satisfies the needs of the individual; therefore, they will rely on it until the desired outcomes are met. The more people get involved in it, the more likely they are to depend on the media to carry out their message. This is true for Twitter hashtags; people rely on

the hashtags to have their voices heard. Often times, they try to make the hashtag "trend," by using a special tab on Twitter that shows the most topics that people are talking about and the number of tweets. By making the hashtag trend, Twitter users ensure that the hashtags generated will be more popular and gain more attention.

Finally, from the findings of the hashtags cases both on international level and on the GCC level, it is clear that the outcome and influence of the hashtags starts with the micro level (individuals); then it has an effect on the macro level (governments and institutions).

While there is no way of predicting the success or failure of the hashtag, it is certainly an important tool to influence decisions and attract people's attention on various matters, particularly in countries where there is no democratic system, such as the GCC.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cybercrime laws in the Gulf states

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, although individuals used Twitter hashtags effectively, both on international level and GCC level, the problem remains for GCC tweeps, as it will be discussed in this chapter.

In the recent years, the Internet is also being censored. Moreover, after the Arab Spring and the resulting unrest in Bahrain, the youth in some of the Gulf states became more prone to repression. The cybercrime laws further undermined youth activism, particularly political activism (Alsayed, 2014). Hence, implementing cybercrime laws can be interpreted as an attempt by the government to prosecute online activists based on presumptions and preconceptions. It is assumed by the government that the activists' sole goal is to undermine the state and its institutions, which creates a state of fear for activists and Internet users who are calling for any form of reform or change.

Internet censorship in the GCC and in the rest of the Arab world has started with the censoring of specific Internet content as was done earlier for the online media. These content-specific censorship covers websites that could be religiously, politically, or sexually offensive. The government uses imported western software and technology to censor the Internet and block the websites based on the content. It is ironical to see the

United States call out for freedom of speech and liberating the Internet from censorship, while they themselves provide the technology and software in the Middle East. According to information acquired by some news media, McAfee Inc. and Blue Coat Systems Inc. of Sunnyvale, California, are both U.S. companies used by the GCC governments to censor the web. Furthermore, the Bahraini government has obtained a new system from the U.S. company Palo Alto Network Inc., which provides the government with various censorship options. This would make it harder for users to bypass the censorship in any way. In fact, the technology for censorship and the filtering of Internet content started in the United States in the 1990s (Sonne & Stecklow, 2011). Schools and libraries started using filtering systems to prevent students from accessing pornographic materials, amongst other things.

Furthermore, as the Internet became widely used in the Gulf states and the social media programs and applications started to flourish, the Gulf states sought to regulate these applications, just like the traditional and traditional media. Thus, the different Gulf states introduced new media laws to adapt to the fast and rapid technological advancement and changes on the Internet. These laws are issued separately in every GCC country, and they are called Cybercrime laws. These laws regulate the activities of the citizens on the Internet. However, there are only two GCC states, Qatar and Oman, which have fully implemented the technical, legal, and organizational measures to address cybercrimes (Alazab, & Chon 2015). The rest of the GCC states still lack the capacity to address cybercrimes and Internet-related issues. In addition, even those GCC states that

do not have a clearly formulated cybercrime law, ways have been found to restrain Internet users when the content goes against the state's politics and policies.

Finally, in this chapter, we discuss how the GCC attempts to impose cybercrime laws that resulted in revoking the individual's freedom of expression. This has been noted through different cases in the Gulf states in which people were prosecuted for using social media. This chapter will also consider the efforts made by international organizations to tackle this issue and to provide "non-binding" sets of recommendations to the GCC for promoting individual freedom to use the Internet and to express their views. In the end, this chapter shows that since the GCC states have taken measures for collective security, such as enacting cybercrime laws, the GCC has excessive powers of securitization.

Cybercrime laws limiting freedom of expression

There are several articles in the cybercrime laws to protect Internet users and individuals with numerous cybercrime problems, such as defamation, hacking, leaking personal information, and support to terror groups. Support refers to writing content that explicitly or implicitly bolsters these views. On Twitter, it could be punishable by law to "retweet" or "like" someone else's tweet that contains affiliation and endorsement of terrorist groups in any way. Several articles, such as Article 6, in the Saudi Anti-cybercrime laws have vague wordings:

> "Any person who commits one of the following cyber crimes shall be subject
>
> to imprisonment for a period not exceeding five years and a fine not

exceeding three million riyals or to either punishment: 1. Production, preparation, transmission, or storage of material impinging on public order, religious values, public morals, and privacy, through the information network or computers"**.**

In addition, Article 8 from the same law states that the "freedom of expression is guaranteed "within the limits of Sharia rules and law"[*], but these limits are not defined. The interpretation of Sharia laws is often vague (Anti-Cyber Crime law, 2007).

Furthermore, the GCC states have tightened their grip on the social media users through a series of measures, which will be mentioned later in this chapter. Twitter, in particular, has been censored especially when users talk about ISIS. In October 2015, a Saudi court sentenced a Twitter user who used an anonymous name on Twitter. The user was accused of promoting ISIS, embracing "Tikffiri creed," retweeting tweets that incited users to disobey the Saudi Arabian ruler, and defaming the state and its figures. These charges carried a punishment of 17 years in jail for the Twitter user. This sentence was considered one of the harshest sentences in Saudi Arabia's history for online and Twitter cases.

During the GCC annual meeting in Bahrain in 2012 and as part of the Security Pact ("Nass alitfaqia alamnia", 2013), the GCC states agreed to have a unified Cybercrime law, which was drafted by the Qatari Shura Council in 2014. Qatar is the last country amongst the Gulf states to implement this law and abide by the Security Pact that was signed in 2012. Qatar faced criticism from international organizations during the final

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[*] Official Saudi government text

implementation of the cybercrime law. Amnesty International called the law "a major setback for freedom of expression in Qatar" (Amnesty International, 2014). The implication of this law and any consequences is dangerous for Qatar in particular because Qatar has became a hub for many international events ever since it won the bid for the 2022 World Cup. The fact that Qatar has responded positively to international pressure is seen from the way it changed its *Kafala* (sponsorship) system, which was heavily criticized by international media and organizations.

In many GCC states, it is very common for the governments to censor software and applications, to coerce people from accessing banned websites, or to communicate anonymously. For example, Saudi Arabia banned the use of Viber and Skype, which are both communication tools; Oman too banned the use of Skype. UAE banned Viber, WhatsApp free calls, and VPN (Virtual Private Network), which is a technology used to bypass Internet providers website restrictions; trying to use VPN in UAE is a punishable crime. (AlWasmi, 2014)

The GCC states have tightened their grip on other social media and their users not only for its own citizens but also for the citizens of other GCC state citizens. There have been several examples in which GCC governments prosecuted citizens for using Twitter and other social media applications. For example, in 2015, the UAE sentenced five Qataris to different jail times and fined them up to one million Dirhams. One Qatari was sentenced to 10 years in jail, and the other four were sentenced to lifetime imprisonment with the same amount of fine. They were all charged with allegations like tarnishing the UAE

government image, insulting the UAE family, and spreading insulting images of the country symbols on both Twitter and Instagram (Kovessy & Fahmy, 2015). This is the first time in which things between the Gulf states have escalated to this level because of the social media. The Qataris who were tried in UAE were under the cybercrime law that the country implemented in 2012. This law was widely criticized because it has been greatly abused against activists and Internet users.

Furthermore, just recently in October 2015, Qatar arrested a Kuwaiti man and extradited him to the Kuwaiti authorities. The man who lives in Qatar had used Twitter to post "insulting tweets" to some of the Kuwaiti royal family members (Qatar salamat alkuwait, 2015). He "defamed the Kuwaiti citizenship," and discussed topics that breached the national unity of Kuwait. The suspect posted several tweets that contained videos and audios that resulted in his arrest and extradition. The recent security pact that was signed in 2012 between the GCC countries led to the extradition of a Gulf citizen to his home country and the UAE charging Qatari men for using the social media. It has caused lots of controversies for citizens, activists, and lawmakers.

The GCC security pact has drawn lots of attention and escalation of tension between the Gulf states. UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar in 2014 over Qatar's handling of the security pact that was signed during the GCC meeting in 2012 (Alredadi, 2015). The Gulf states indicated that Qatar did not abide by the pact and did not uphold its promise. The controversy in the security pact comes from some of its articles in which Gulf citizens can be extradited or prosecuted for criticizing a Gulf state

online. Some speculated that this is the reason why Qatar did not sign the security pact or abide by it (Alajmi, 2014).

According to a 2015 report issued by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, the GCC states have showed that they have the toughest laws and the severest implications when it comes to tweeps using Twitter. According to the report, Saudi Arabia is the only country to punish Twitter users who "like" a tweet, i.e., someone archiving a tweet sent by someone else to read it later. In addition, it is also the only country that punishes tweeps for retweeting a tweet (sending it again to the users on Twitter). A dangerous assumption underlies this punishment that the users agree with the content of the retweet. However, a retweet could simply mean that the intention of the tweet user is simply to show sarcasm or astonishment over the content of the tweet; they need not be endorsing the content. People can be tried only for their intentions, which are not based on explicit opinions. In addition, according to the same report, Kuwait is the first country in the world to try and track down Twitter users who are guilty of insulting and offending the Emir and the royal family members. To support this claim about Kuwait, in the last two years, Kuwait filed 300 suits against the users of Twitter; of this 160 suits were only for insulting and offending the Emir. Many of the Twitter users have been sentenced to several years in prison and were heavily fined. Finally, the report notes that the only two Arab countries which enjoy relatively some freedom when it comes to using Twitter and the Internet in general are Palestine and Tunisia; the worst countries are

Saudi Arabia and Sudan. According to the Index on Censorship, Bahrain is amongst ten countries worldwide who have jailed people for participating on the social media.

International organizations response

Different human rights organizations have heavily criticized the Gulf states for their lack of freedom of expression and the introduction of cybercrime laws that violate people's rights to free speech and expression on the Internet and social media.

All the GCC states have been criticized by international organizations either because of their proposed laws that places restrictions on their freedom of expression or the implications of these laws that ultimately ends in prosecution and imprisonment of people. For example, Amnesty International has published a report criticizing the Qatari cybercrimes law that was introduced in 2014 saying that it "endangers freedom of speech." While the report has not mentioned any arrests made for using Twitter in Qatar, it has criticized the wording and the phrasing of different cybercrime laws. These include wordings like "undermines social values," and "public order" in Qatar; this applies to any online materials that people may circulate and share. The problem of this wording is that it leaves big gaps in interpreting. This is true because there is no agreed definition of what these social values are. In this context, Human Rights Organizations have published a report on Qatar criticizing the same aspect that Amnesty criticized in their report, that is, the vagueness and ambiguity of the cybercrime law and the media law that has not been signed by the Emir. The other main criticism was fining journalists who publish

content that could "harm Qatar relations with another Arab state." This too, has no definition because how could words harm the bilateral relations between two countries, and there is no definition of the nature of the harm or the implications of the harmful content.

Kuwait too has been criticized by international organizations because of the crackdown on users of social media. Human Rights Watch reported that the Kuwaiti government escalated its power against dissidents and Twitter users, that is, those accused are no longer only jailed and fined, but they have been stripped of their Kuwaiti citizenship ("Kuwait: Crackdown", 2015). In addition, the Kuwaiti government has expanded its power to suspend communication services on national security grounds. Again, just like many other laws and articles, these articles are vague, which allows the authorities to use their power and to charge those who in the eyes of the governments have been charged with breaching the laws. (In 2015, Kuwait charged four Kuwaiti citizens, including a woman, with defaming Saudi Arabian image and "endangering the bilateral relations" between the two countries ("Estmrar Muhakamat Almoghredeen", 2015).

Different human rights organizations and press and journalism organizations have one thing in common when it comes to reporting about the laws in Gulf states on cybercrime and media. They almost all raise the concern of vagueness of wording in the GCC laws. This leaves the interpretation to the legal and judicial authorities and the political climate in the Gulf region and the state. These organizations do not have any legal provisions to make these states reverse their laws or release those in jail for tweeting and practicing

their rights to criticize. Most often, the Gulf states see this criticism as a direct criticism of their own governments.

Conclusion

International organizations play a major role in controlling unjust cybercrime laws that lead to the arrest of bloggers and Internet users; this is seen in their issuing of reports. However, these organizations have limited authority over governments and are almost always non-effective. The role of these organizations is to report on different issues, to give recommendations, and condemn the severity of sentences or laws; however, it is up to the governments whether to respond to their criticisms, amend their laws, and release those imprisoned. The governments can just ignore the calls of international organizations, dismiss their claims, and even accuse them for meddling and interfering with the country's internal issues and cases. It is also alarming that these organizations cannot always have access to information about the cases and individuals. There is no independent journalism or domestic and local organizations in the GCC that could help the international organization. This is because of the restrictions and censorship of the press in the Gulf. The existing laws are also vague and can lead to people getting arrested and jailed.

Moreover, while the cybercrime laws are crucial for protecting the individual and the state, it has been proved that these laws have been violated over and over again to serve the interest of the state rather than to create a system of checks and balances between the

individuals and the state. It is not possible for individuals to hold the governments accountable for spying and hacking into their personal lives and information; of course, there is no way of knowing whether the government is doing so until an Internet user is arrested.

Looking at the cybercrime laws in the GCC that were unified as a result of the Security Pact that was signed in 2012, it seems like the freedom of individuals and their rights to express their views will be compromised for the notion of "security." This is dangerous because Twitter and other social media websites have introduced the concept of "citizen journalists." This means anyone can participate in reporting events; for example by uploading a photo or writing about an event and uploading it on the Internet. This concept has gained popularity in many countries; unfortunately, because of the existing laws in the Gulf, the practice of an active "citizen journalist" could lead to the user being arrested under any premise for writing or tweeting information. This is true for the cybercrime article in Qatar, which states that people can be arrested for "spreading false news and rumors that could endanger national security." (Kovessy, 2014), this law was criticized and many organizations have asked for its reverse and amendment.

It is expected that Gulf states will continue to trail when it comes to freedom of speech and expression. As people gain access to information and are able to obtain information that their states prevented them from doing, the government's grip will grow stronger and it will crackdown on those who criticize their ruling system and institutions. To conclude, it is evident according to different statistics that the freedom of speech goes hand in hand

with democracy. The GCC states lack democratic institutions; therefore, there will always be restrictions on the freedom of expression and speech, unless the governments initiate a reform from within and move away from the current theocracies and absolute monarch systems to a more of a constitutional monarchy, in which there is a role for the parliament, other democratic bodies, and non-governmental actors.

Finally, from the previous examples and laws drawn from the GCC, we can see that the Gulf states have managed to successfully enforce the securitization of the GCC states through cybercrime laws, and that security comes before human rights and democracy.

CHAPTER FIVE

Summary and conclusion

In the previous chapter, we examined how the cybercrime laws in the Gulf could hinder freedom of speech, and how citizens in the Gulf states were arrested and penalized according to the law. These same laws tend to be vaguely worded and open for any interpretation, putting people who practice their freedom of speech at risk of being arrested, and penalized. Furthermore, the GCC security pact and the different agreements between the Gulf states would put more pressure on the Internet users, and more specifically on social media users. Despite of these laws, people continue to utilize Twitter for their causes and to get their voices heard. In fact, it is not only individuals in the Gulf who utilized Twitter and the hashtags for their cause, but it is also utilized internationally.

This research aimed to study the importance of Twitter hashtags and how tweeps use it to demand a change, revert decisions, or simply draw attention towards a specific topic or an issue. In the Arab Spring, Facebook, and to a certain extent Twitter, were used for political reasons, such as mobilizing people, setting up organized protests, and calling for the start of a revolution. However, the case for the Gulf states is different. Due to the

nature of the political and economical climate of the Gulf, social media have a role different from the Arab Spring countries. Thus, overall, users in the Gulf states used Twitter and other related social media to demand change on the societal level, not on the political or the economical level.

To answer the research question, we find that Twitter hashtags can indeed be a change agent when it gains popularity, particularly when it is used for social issues. Hashtags that are used on an international scale also need not necessarily bring or cause any change. However, it draws attention towards a specific issue, more like a publicity tool, especially where it is used by public figures and famous individuals (see Chapter Four). This is could indicate that hashtags on a larger and macro-international scale are hard to implement but draw attention to a specific issue.

- We can conclude that through the development of media, whether it is traditional media (such as radio, TV, and newspapers) or it is social media (such as Twitter and Facebook), individuals' dependency develops over time. This depends on what outcome they are hoping to accomplish. In the past, traditional media served the purpose of informing and entertaining; however, with social media, the outcomes were not only limited to these two. Hence, social media, created a new outcome, which in this case was to demand a change, overturn a decision, and shed light on an issue. One of the reasons why this happened was the lack of

censorship and the absence of any censoring channels. Hence, media dependency theory can be applied to traditional and social media outlets.

- Another finding of this research was how traditional media, such as newspapers, became reliant on Twitter. Furthermore, in this research and in many cases, the newspapers wrote about the Twitter hashtags and how tweeps interacted regarding an issue, and what kind of opinions they have had. This indicates that the social media has become an alternative to traditional media; however, we still cannot omit the role of the traditional media, particularly newspapers.

- The use of Twitter hashtags for social issues helped implement morally conservative course of actions to change the existing status quo, particularly in Qatar.

- According to the collective action theory and the dependency theory, when people use a particular hashtag, they become dependent on it, regardless of whether it demands a change or calls to get people's attention on an issue. People on Twitter work in groups, and the larger the group is, the larger would be its effective outcomes.

- Additionally, the theory of media dependency can help us understand why people use Twitter in particular and why they use Twitter hashtags. The use of Twitter hashtags in an online campaign is often done to demand action and obtain results and outcomes. Hence, people relay on Twitter in many cases, until they either reach an outcome, or make their voices heard on a particular issue.

- Although governments cannot censor and control Twitter, it seems obvious that people are either going to impose their own self-censoring when writing Tweets; otherwise, under the cybercrime laws which tend to be vaguely-worded, people can face legal consequences. However, despite the uncertainty of whether or not people can be prosecuted based on what they tweet or write, this did not deter people from speaking their opinions and in some cases even opposing certain governmental institution's steps.

- The hashtags that were asking for demands and change were mainly concerned with religion, morals, or ethics, such as "banning atheists figures from public speaking, imposing a dress code for women, cancelation of music concerts, amongst other issues." These issues can be interpreted as both religiously and culturally conservative, rather than liberal or progressive.

- Although the use of hashtags can be seen as positive in terms of finding an alternative means to express points of views or even demand change, it has had some negative outcomes. For example, some lectures were canceled; women were defamed for not wearing the *hijab*, amongst other issues that were concerned with personal freedoms and freedom of expressions. This indicates that although the governments or the authorities responded to the hashtags positively, it did not bring about any positive outcomes.

- Despite the lack of censorship on Twitter, the GCC states were fast to implement unified cybercrime laws in the GCC. In addition, the Security Pact that was signed in 2014, also allowed GCC states, to set trails for other GCC citizens in

cases of defamation and slandering against other GCC state's figures and royal family members. This security pact influenced Twitter users negatively and made them prone to prosecution if they decided to criticize the royal family members, for example.

- Because of the Gulf unity and the legal ties that unify the Gulf, the GCC were able to go after the tweeps and take them to court for the tweets they wrote. This is because of the Gulf security and the notion of "securitization" extending to the social media, thus limiting the freedom of speech on a GCC level.

- We see different outcomes for the hashtag examples used both on the international scale and domestic scale. It is most likely for hashtags to work as a change tool on the micro-level, which largely deals with individuals or certain group as opposed to the macro-level where it deals with governments or much larger problems.

- While hashtags do not always result in achieving what they are calling for, it most certainly does help shed light on the topic and the nature of the hashtag.

The importance of this research comes from the popularity and the wide access of social media in today's world, particularly as the traditional media in all of the Gulf states are still state-controlled and heavily censored. This did not stop the governments from cracking down on Twitter users when they voiced political demands or in the cases of defamation. However, this did not deter people from voicing their concerns on social

media. For the Twitter hashtags, it takes more people to make an effective and influential impact (the "collective action" theory). In addition, there is a gap in literature when it comes to the Gulf states and media, more specifically, in the social media.

It can be predicted that people will continue to use the social media, such as Twitter, as an effective method to inform, interact, and propose possible social change (Agarwal, Lim, & Wigand, 2014). This is because of the nature of the Gulf states and the existing laws on media and cybercrime laws, §which some people might be able to get around through the use of Virtual Private Network (VPN) to fake their location and the original country from which they are using the social media at. Furthermore, it is not likely for social media, or Twitter hashtags in this case, to impose any sort of political change in the Gulf states, after all, during the Arab Spring the Gulf was resilient from having any political change whether that change was horizontal (ministerial level), or vertical (change of the head of the state), this is due to the social contract that connects both the citizens and the ruler and the government, in addition, there's a stability in the socio-economic and the socio-political scene in the Gulf States, which was not the case in which the social media was used for during the Arab Spring. As mentioned earlier, in most cases of using hashtags, Twitter users in the Gulf States used it to enforce and reinforce the societal conservative views, on issues such as women, religion, culture-appropriation, or societal issues. There haven't been cases for hashtag usage in which Twitter users called for any political reformation or suggest a change of government, knowing that the implications of even calling for such demands could severely cause

backlashes on them, and they could be at the risk of being sentenced to jail. Thus, the role of social media will remain to be limited to certain issues and certain and narrowed power to impose any sort of change.

Finally, unless GCC governments won't initiate democratic tools, such as allowing free speech and freedom of expression, left censorship and introduce a parliamentary system that's elected and chosen by the people, Twitter and other social media will continue to replace these state-implemented institutions, and it could be predicated as the number of people voice their opinions and take actions collectively on social media, it will be almost impossible for governments to try and imprison masses of people based on their views. This is true for countries that care about their image in the international media and the international organizations, as they will prone to more pressure from the international community, and they will face hardships, if they want to host international events. In conclusion, to what people on Twitter have been voicing they were successful to be influential on Twitter, by making their voice heard whether on national or international level, as well as, bringing about change to what they are calling for through them using Twitter hashtags. It is still early to determine the future of the Twitter hashtags, and social media in general, as this area is new and still developing, not to mention that Twitter hashtags weren't introduced until the recent years It is almost certain, that individuals will continue to use social media, such as Twitter, for many purposes, amongst them to voice their demands and change course of actions on certain issues, through Twitter hashtags campaigns.

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