The Saudi press and the Internet: How Saudi journalists and media decision makers at the Ministry of Culture and Information evaluate censorship in the presence of the Internet as a news and information medium

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Chapter Seven

Interviews with Journalists

Introduction:

Personal interviews were conducted face-to-face with Saudi journalists on the *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah* newspapers, from February 24, 2008 to March 10, 2008. The main aim of the interviews was to enquire about journalists' opinions on the effects of news published online on their news decisions, in the context of censorship. A second objective of the interviews was to evaluate the degree of censorship over the national press that currently exists. I interviewed 21 male journalists, reporters, editors and senior editors: 13 from *Alriyadh* newspaper and 8 from *Aleqtisadiah*. The interviews were conducted either in their offices or in the meeting room - wherever each journalist felt comfortable. The sample included part time and full time journalists (5 senior editors, 4 editors, 9 journalists and 3 reporters) in different departments. I wanted to interview more journalists from both papers but some of them refused either due to lack of time or without giving a reason. I understood that it would be hard for some journalists to find time for the 30 minutes to one hour-long interview. In addition, some journalists might find the topic of this study sensitive, due to its inclusion of the Ministry of Culture and Information's censorship. An experienced journalist in *Alriyadh* (over 40) when he read the questions, refused to participate in the study and started encouraging other journalists not to participate as well. He mentioned that such questions might cause him and other journalists some troubles. I understand the journalists' fears of talking about such a

sensitive issue which might get them in troubles. Thus, in order to protect the journalists from any consequences and also to encourage them to participate in the study I promised them that their names, job titles and any other information that might lead to their identification would not be revealed. Also I promised them that the interviews would not be recorded. Instead, I used a pen and a notebook to write their answers, taking advantage of my writing skills as a journalist which helped me to write fast and clear notes and quotes. When any of interviewees said something that I could not fully write, I asked the interviewee to repeat what he said slowly in order to record it precisely. As a result, all direct and indirect quotations in this chapter are taken from the personal interviews with the journalists. The 21 journalists whom I interviewed were those who agreed to participate in my study. Although I had hoped to interview more journalists, the sample was sufficient to obtain the data needed for this study.

The interviews focused on two dimensions: "the Internet and censorship" and how journalists evaluate the effects of these two forces on news decisions. The interview consisted of six questions. The first three focused on the Internet, the final two on censorship, while the fourth was a combination of the two dimensions. Question 1 focused on the use of the Internet as source of news and information in journalistic work, while Question 2 discussed stories known about by journalists which were published online but were avoided or only briefly mentioned by the paper. The third question explored the pressures online published stories put on journalists to follow stories of a type which used to be ignored. Question 4 was the key question, examining both the Internet and censorship. It focused on the avoidance of some stories by the national press due to official censorship and whether Internet websites are taking advantage of such censorship to attract Saudi readers. In this question, I mentioned censorship and thus paved the way for Questions 5 and 6, which deal with censorship. Question 5 focused on the effect on journalists of the Ministry of Culture and Information's censorship and also the censorship exercised by the Editor-in-Chief of the paper. The sixth question gave the journalists the chance to evaluate the censorship imposed on them and whether they had witnessed any changes in the degree of censorship.

The questions and answers in the interviews with Saudi journalists:

Question 1: What are the roles that Internet websites play in your work?

In this question, I examine how journalists in their work interact with Internet websites as a source of news and information. The role of news websites which focus on the Saudi national news, city websites, news agencies, personal websites and official websites that the Saudi journalists can use in their work are examined in this question. These websites play a variety of different roles in the work of journalists in the Saudi national press. According to the journalists' answers, these can be divided into three major roles:

A) Internet websites' role as a fertile source of ideas adaptable for publication in the paper:

Three journalists (14.2%) from the sample interviewed stated that they rely on Internet websites such as Alsaha and Elaph as a source of ideas which can be developed for features or news. A journalist in the features section of *Alriyadh* (over 30 worked previously in different national newspapers and has more than 10 years experience) mentioned that through browsing the Internet, he came across many issues that could be developed into published news, reports and articles. "An excellent example is the criticism of the Saudi Channel Two (an English/French-speaking channel that dubs Saudi programmes into English or French) which appeared on the Alsaha website," he said. He then followed the channel for a week and interviewed Saudi audiences, asking them about the channel and its programmes. He discovered that the interviewees did not watch the channel and did not know about its programmes. After that, he interviewed expatriate English and French speakers in Saudi Arabia, asking them about the channel, but they generally did not know that such a channel existed. He wrote a report under the title "For whom does Saudi Channel Two broadcast its programmes?"

A journalist and columnist (under 30, a part time journalist, three years in the national news department in *Alriyadh*) said:

> The Internet plays a vital role in journalism work; first as a vast source of information needed by every journalist and second, as a source of news where the public and private sectors publish their internal news and events. Third, it is considered an important source of new ideas that help journalists and columnists in writing reports and columns.

In addition, a reporter and weekly columnist (under 30, part time in the national news section of *Aleqtisadiah*) mentioned that he relied heavily on internet websites to find material and topics for his weekly articles. He added that there are hundreds of websites focusing on Saudi national affairs, which help journalists and reporters in different departments of the paper, especially those who work in the national affairs department. He continued that through browsing the Internet, he came across the websites of different tribes. Saudi society is a tribal one, as discussed in previous chapters, in which families are related to well known tribes in the Arabian Peninsula. He said:

> There is a surge in the tribal sites, each tribe has its own website and such sites are turning into places for exchanging swearwords and insults with other tribes as well as reviving old differences and hatreds. The spread of tribal sites led me to write a report on the disadvantages of such sites, which are breaking unity by excavating the old miseries using modern techniques.

He added that this topic is important because it is a new face of tribal sectarianism. He published a full report on online tribal sectarianism under the title "Contemporary means for ancient conflicts: Tribalism in the digital age."

The main role of internet websites, which the journalists mentioned, was as a source of new ideas that can be adapted for publication in the paper, support earlier findings suggesting that internet websites as an accessible source of news and information affects press performance in different ways. Websites such as Sabq, Alweeam, and Alsaha Arabia attract different segments of the Saudi public, whether as readers or as reporters, these websites become a rich and fertile platform for the exchange of ideas, news, opinions, personal stories and discussion as well as ideal places to understand what concerns Saudi people. Such a situation helps journalists to find stories

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and information which can be published in the paper after being developed by the journalist. Some issues may be minor and personal but others can be developed to become matters of public debate.

B) The Role of Internet websites as a Source of Information and news:

13 journalists (61.9%) of the journalists mentioned that Internet websites are their first source of information. An experienced senior editor (over 40, B.A. in journalism) in *Alriyadh* noted:

> The Internet is a vital source of information and photos. As I receive news on any political figure, I log onto the Internet, looking for information about that particular politician and hoping to find some information that deserves to be added to the initial story. One of the stories I am working on now is news on the withdrawal of the Democratic candidate for the American presidential election, John Edwards. I searched for information about him to add to the initial news, and I found that Edwards spends more on his hair than Hillary Clinton.

He mentioned that this information became part of the story which was printed the next day. Similarly, a famous sports journalist and columnist (over 30) from *Alriyadh* pointed out that the Internet has helped him to enrich and extend many sports news stories, particularly on international players, teams and federations. He added that when the Al-Hilal club declared that it would play a friendly match against the English team Manchester United in a testimonial for the captain of the Saudi national team, Sami Al-Jaber, on January 20, 2008, he searched online for the latest information about the English team, its stars and the preparation for the game to add to the story he was writing about the game. He learnt that Manchester United was on its best form after returning to the top of the English Premier League, as was Al-Hilal in the Saudi league. Moreover, he found out that the players and the manager, Sir Alex Ferguson, were excited and happy to be travelling to a warm country like Saudi Arabia in the middle of a harsh winter in Britain. He said, "The information I found about the team, its stars and their preparation for the game made the story more interesting and enjoyable."

An editor on *Aleqtisadiah* (over 30, part time, worked previously for *Alriyadh* paper) said:

> The Internet is considered a prime and easy resource of information and news. It has played a significant role in developing the performance of journalists and newspapers. It keeps the journalists constantly updated with the latest events as early as possible before any other media means.

Similarly, a journalist in the finance department of *Aleqtisadiah* (under 30, part time) mentioned that he used the Internet daily as a source of information. "When I receive a story, especially those including numbers and figures such as quarterly or annual financial reports and revenues, the first thing I do is to check the history of the company and its previous announcements, which are usually published on their websites," he said. Comparing the present to previous figures is salient in company announcements, and can be done with far greater ease than previously by visiting the companies' official websites.

A senior editor at *Alriyadh* (over 40) likewise stated that internet websites are an essential source of information and that journalists today cannot work without browsing them. He added that he considered the Internet a large electronic archive that he can log on to whenever he needs particular information. He said that the Editor-in-Chief asks him regularly to interview famous Saudi figures in different fields. "Sometimes I have to interview people I do not have enough information about, so I Google the name of the guest to know more about the person I am planning to interview." He added that the personal websites of interviewees are an important source of information which help to give a clear picture about them and their activities. He added, "Online information helps me to generate questions for the interview; it makes me more confident in meeting the guest."

The growing number of Internet users in Saudi Arabia is helping the Internet to carry out its role as a major source of information. Global Insight estimates that Saudis spent 20.4 billion dollars in 2007 on information and communications technology, the

highest amount in the Middle East (Global Insight, 2008). This number is expected to reach 26 billon dollars in the year 2011 (Global Insight, 2008). In its monthly ranking of the most popular sites among Saudis, Alexa's ranks the Saudi Google search engine first, followed by Microsoft's search engine "Windows Live" (Alexa, January, 2009). This confirms the journalists' view of the role that Internet websites play as a main source of information

Ten journalists (47.6%) of the journalists mentioned that Internet websites play a fundamental role in their work as a source of news. A journalist in the sports department of *Alriyadh* (under 30, part time) said, "The Internet is the first source of information and news in my work." Similarly, a journalist and columnist (under 30, part time, three years in the national news department in *Alriyadh*) pointed out that due to the enormous number of websites that specialize in national Saudi news, he relies on the Internet to catch up with the latest events, especially those which occur outside big Saudi cities where the paper has no reporters.

> City websites such as buraydahcity.net (Buraydah city website) are a great news source, especially for local news that happens outside big cities. When I find an online story that might interest the paper's readers I use my contacts to confirm the story and call anyone involved in the story. If the story involves any government or private institutions I call them to get their response, he said.

An editor in national news department on *Alriyadh* (under 30, part time) pointed out that he depends on Internet websites as a source of news, especially that which takes place in cities where there is no reporter from the paper. He stated that he read a story about a man lost with his family in the desert near Ha'el, in northern Saudi Arabia on 7ail.net. He added that a friend of the lost man stated that a search for him and his family was in progress. The editor contacted the Civil Defence in Ha'el, who confirmed the story. He published the story with an interview with the brother of the lost man, who begged people who knew the desert well to help find his brother and his family.

In a similar way, an experienced journalist in the national department at *Aleqtisadiah* (over 30) told me that through Internet websites he gets some personal

stories that can be published in the paper. He said, "Before the Internet, Saudi journalists and readers did not have the same access to the same huge number of personal stories as they have now." A sports reporter at *Alriyadh* (under 30, part time) mentioned that the Internet is a big threat to newspapers.

> As a reporter, I used to compete with other papers to get news first, however, now, the Internet precedes us in getting news. Club websites and sports websites have left a slim chance for newspapers to compete on the scoops, which make journalists become reactive rather than active. Websites sometimes steal news from papers, he said.

In a similar manner, a journalist at the financial department of *Aleqtisadiah* (under 30, part time) said, "The Internet has a huge advantage over the press because Internet websites have no deadline." He added:

> The official websites of companies are one of the main sources of news that not only readers can rely on but also journalists as well. Different institutions, public and private, have their own websites which become a primary source of news.

Furthermore, a journalist in the international news section of *Alriyadh* (over 30) commented, "The Internet is a crucial and major source of news, photos, and videos." He added that the Internet has contributed, along with satellite channels, to the end of the press scoop, which has become rare in newspapers. He continued, "Through my work, I use the official websites of news agencies continuously." Also, the official websites of various organizations have become major sources of news, publishing the most recent news related to the organizations. He added that in the past news agencies, press conferences, officials, the paper's correspondents and the paper's private sources were the main sources of news. However, now official websites are playing a major role as a news source.

Another reporter, (under 30, part time) in the national news section of *Alriyadh* who is doing a Master in journalism in Saudi Arabia, said, "The Internet is the first news source I rely on as a reporter." He mentioned that he won a prize for the best journalistic report last year after he followed a story about Saudi prisoners in Syria, and told me:

I knew about the case through the Alsaha website, then I followed the story and contacted the Saudi Embassy in Damascus. I ended up going to Damascus to interview the prisoners and published a full report about Saudi prisoners in Syria."

He argued that the Internet has only taken the scoop from the lazy journalist; the skillful ones can still *make* news and use what is published online as an advantage. He added:

The Internet cannot produce a report like the one I produced because only professional journalists can reach this high level and professional journalists are not keen to work for websites.

A journalist in international news on *Alriyadh* (over 30) pointed out:

The Internet is playing multiple roles as a source of news, through stealing and publishing the newspapers' stories and thus attracting more readers. The Saudi newspapers have gradually learned the lesson and started to make use of the Internet by establishing their own websites and publishing the latest news to maintain their readership even before printing time.

The massive growth in communications technology, coupled with the growth in the number of Internet users in Saudi Arabia, is helping some of the local news websites such as Sabq and Alweeam to gain currency amongst Saudis. In Alexa's ranking of the most popular websites browsed by Saudis, Sabq was ranked 19, ahead of all the Saudi national newspapers including *Alriyadh*, whose site was ranked 21 (Alexa, January, 2009). That compares with August 2008, when *Alriyadh* was ranked 15, leading the news websites, and Sabq at 25 (Alexa, August, 2008).

The existence of news websites which focus on Saudi national affairs such as Sabq, Alweeam and Kabar gives the Saudis in general and journalists in particular a new source of news which assists them in their work. What is more, the reliance of Saudi journalists on Internet websites as a source of news and information may free the press slightly from its former reliance on news agencies and the foreign media. As discussed in the literature review, Saudi media in general and the press in particular depend on foreign media and international news agencies even when covering news that takes place inside Saudi territory (see Al-Kahtani, 1999; Barayan, 2002). Websites such as Sabq, Alweeam

and Kabar have become major sources of news and information, as the journalists pointed out, helping them to follow stories that the Saudi news agency and international news agencies do not follow, especially the ones that relate to Saudi national affairs.

The growing role of news websites as a source of national news among Saudis goes back to the relative freedom that news websites such as Sabq and Alweeam enjoy compared to the Saudi national media. Saudi media (TV, radio and press) suffer from the Ministry of Culture and Information's censorship. Therefore, Saudi media avoid publishing stories that might irritate the Ministry. Flew sees local news websites such as the Malaysian (malaysiakini.com) and the Korean (ohmynews.com), on which any citizen can be a reporter, as an opportunity to use the Internet as a free and fair news medium in countries that suffer from state control over print and broadcast national media (September, 2007).

In addition, according to the journalists in this study, Internet websites is a rich source of news stories, especially those which take place outside big Saudi cities where there are no reporters for the paper. Saudi Arabia is a large country - approximately 1,150,000 square kilometers or equivalent to the size of Western Europe. Despite the country's huge size, there are only eight daily national newspapers, and those are situated in only five Saudi cities: Alriyadh, Jeddah, Makkah, Dammam and Abha. This makes it hard for them to cover the whole country. The other Saudi cities, however, have no daily papers, due to a decision by the Ministry of Culture and Information which limited the number of licences for establishing newspapers to eight journalistic institutions.

Consequently, this situation has allowed a new phenomenon to flourish, that of the "city websites" in which smaller Saudi cities focus on news, events and issues relating to their area. People from different Saudi cities launch websites on which local people can participate in reporting the latest news, events and incidents of their city. Websites such as ararcol.com (in Arar), buraydahcity.net (in Buraydah) and hrmla.com (in Harimla) have become a supplement for local papers, because the Ministry of Culture and Information refuses to issue any new licences in addition to those already granted to the eight daily papers. These websites have therefore become a platform on which the city

can discuss its local issues and news. One of the stories that the journalists mentioned was the family lost in the desert near Hail which the reporter read on that city's website, 7ail.net.

Similarly, the activity of the audience in news reporting completes the discussion raised in the literature review. This activity is seen not only in the way audiences consume news, but also in the way they have become part of that news reporting. As a result, they want the kind of news story that "communicates with them, rather than being designed to highlight the journalist's connections, intelligence and privileged world-view" (Stockwell, 2004, p.15). Herbert Gans (1980) points out that ordinary people are not a source of news gathering or reporting because news reflects the actions and statements of those in power. However, this is no longer the case; ordinary people have become an essential part of news gathering and reporting, which has led to the emergence of citizen journalism. Citizen journalism refers to the participation of citizens in news-making by playing a major role in gathering, reporting, analysing and commenting on news stories. Bowman and Willis define citizen journalism as: "The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information" (2003, p 9). The mass participation of people without journalistic experience in news reporting confirms the notion of an active audience. The Internet, coupled with a mobile phone camera, makes it easy for ordinary people who have no journalistic experience to participate in news reporting. Potter argues that:

> If it hadn't been for a cell phone camera, the world would never have seen video of Saddam Hussein's execution. The first video of the London subway bombings came in via cell phone, too, not from journalists but from commuters who saw it all happen. With so many camera phones in circulation, it's no wonder major news organizations are now actively soliciting video from ordinary citizens who might have captured something newsworthy (2007, p. 66)

As a result, any Saudi who has a mobile phone with a camera and access to the Internet can report a story from his/her area by posting video, audio and/or text which can be viewed by thousands of people.

In contradiction to this, 7 journalists (33.3%) raised the point of the news websites credibility as a news source. An experienced senior editor at *Aleqtisadiah* (over 40) who previously worked 10 years for *Aljazeera* paper stated:

> The source is the news. I cannot rely on the Internet as a source of news; the Internet does not have the credibility and the brand that papers have, hence professional journalists must bear this fact in mind before relying on the Internet.

He added that relying on Internet websites such as Alweeam and Kabar could be dangerous; it could cause trouble, owing to the many rumours and lies found on it. He continued, "I'm quite cautious with online news and I can never allow news to be printed unless it is confirmed by a credible source other than the Internet."

Likewise, a senior editor on *Alriyadh* (over 40) said:

> An excellent example of dangerous reliance on the Internet as a news source is the news story on a 30% rise in Saudi public sector workers' wages, which was published on different websites, including Alarabiya. net.

He added that *Alwatan* paper published the story on its front page after a week of rumours spread all over the Internet and mobile phones. He added that *Alriyadh* did not publish the story sooner because no reliable source had confirmed the story. He added that not all online news is suitable for the press.

An editor in the finance department at *Aleqtisadiah* (over 30, part time) also declared that the Internet cannot be considered a source of news. "It is a rich source of lies and rumours." As an editor specializing in the local stock market, he found that online websites which specialized in the Saudi stock market deceive and manipulate people. Websites such as hawamir.com, twsyat.net and moshr.com advise people to buy or sell certain shares for the private interests of the owners of these websites. He stated that he could not remember the number of times he had read false news that aimed to promote certain shares. He said:

News on mergers, the raising of the capital of certain companies and giving away of free shares are among the most popular news on these websites, and always without referring to the source.

In addition, a sports journalist on *Aleqtisadiah* (over 30, part time) argued that sports websites are a poor source of news. "Club websites are official websites representing the clubs, but unfortunately they are full of lies and false news." He continues that rivalries between Saudi clubs have turned their websites into an arena of false news to manipulate other teams, especially before important games. He added:

Club websites usually publish the names of the players who will participate in the coming match, but when the team is about to play an important game, the most common trick used by the websites is to mention that some of the key players in the team will not be able to play the game for different reasons, which most of the time is not true.

He claimed that clubs use their websites to deceive their opponents and imply that players are absent due to injury, and then suddenly those players run onto the pitch.

A senior editor on *Alriyadh* (20 years experience as a journalist and columnist) also stated that he rarely relies on the Internet as a source of news because of its poor credibility.

I refuse to publish news taken from the Internet, since online websites do not care about the source of the news, which for professional journalists is as important as the news itself. Unlike newspapers, Internet websites do not have a name and reputation which they try to protect.

He added that Internet websites lack professionalism and journalistic ethics and standards; this is clearly seen through the common lies and rumours included in Internet news. Moreover, websites' desperation for publicity and popularity lead them to publish news without examining the reliability of the sources, whereas, he said, "Newspapers are strict about not publishing news without reliable sources, because publishing false information might lead to litigation against the newspaper."

C) The Role of Newspapers' Website in Getting the Newspaper Close to its Readers

Both papers have their website through which the readers can give their opinions on published news and articles on the website. 3 journalists (14.2%) stated that their papers' website has deepened their understanding of their readership. Readers' comments on topics allow journalists to become familiar with readers' opinions and attitudes. A journalist in the features section of *Alriyadh* (over 30, worked previously in different national newspapers and has more than 10 years experience) noted that the Internet has given both journalists and writers a far increased ability to learn about their readers, saying:

> I know about the paper's readers more than I used to; I know the topics that interest them and the topics they do not care about. Understanding the readers helps me to focus on topics which I thought for a long time did not interest the readers.

Additionally, a senior editor on *Alriyadh* (more than 20 years experience as a journalist and columnist) stated that through reading readers' comments on the paper's website, journalists know the kind of news that attracts the reader. For example, high food prices attract much more reader attention than expected. He added that this led the newspaper to increase the number of stories that deal with high prices in general and food prices in particular. The newspaper also publishes daily comparisons between the food prices in different grocery stores in Riyadh City. Similarly, an international news journalist (over 30) on *Alriyadh* mentioned that he had not expected that Saudi readers would be interested in the American elections.

> The news about the democratic candidates, especially news about Obama seems to attract the paper's readers. The high interaction of the readers with news stories about the American elections makes the paper focus on these stories and pay them more attention then we usually do with other international news, he added.

The paper's websites has changed the relationship between journalists and their readers, as the latter are now able to comment via the websites of the newspapers about

the articles the journalists have written, and this has also helped senior editors to verify which issues most attract readers and to find who are the most popular columnists and writers, based on the number of hits and comments.

The huge flow of information and the interactivity provided by the Internet makes readers active and influential in affecting news decisions. The Internet offers two-way communication which challenges the notion of a passive audience. The interactivity provided by the Internet helps the paper's readers to participate and make their voices heard.

Readers have an easy means to communicate and convey their views. This increased activity on the part of the readers not only makes their voices heard but also affects the newspaper's content. Furthermore, readers' comments on newspaper websites become part of news stories which others can read and comment on as well.

According to the journalists interviewed, this interactivity brings newspapers closer to their readers. While journalists' decisions used to disregard the opinions of readers in the paper's news selection, now journalists increasingly have to take into account their readers consideration. Moreover, the journalists pointed out that readers' comments on particular topics have enabled newspapers to understand their readers more deeply and ascertain their views on different issues. From the number of website visits and comments by readers, the newspaper's editorial team can become familiar with its readership's opinions and attitudes. A high level of hits on one subject might give the newspaper a clear indicator of the readers' opinions about that subject or event.

Question 2: Has there been any news story published on the Internet which you thought was newsworthy but which was avoided or only lightly covered by the paper?

The answers to this question can be divided into two groups. The first group, which consisted of 17 journalists (80.9%), confirmed there are stories ignored or given

only light coverage by the paper, while websites covered them. The second group, of 19% of the journalists, stated that they had not noticed any stories of interest to the paper's readers that were ignored or only lightly covered by the paper.

A journalist in the international news section at *Aleqtisadiah* (under 30, part time) answered that, "Yes, some stories were published on the Internet and absolutely ignored by the paper." He gave an example of the protests that took place in Saudi cities in late 2006 and early 2007. These protests were encouraged by the London-based Saudi opposition figure Saad al-Faqih (the founder of the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia). He went on to say that the reason for the paper's avoidance of this story was that the Saudi media, whether TV, radio, or press, believed that focusing on this event would serve the interests of the opposition and increase its popularity. Moreover, the Saudi press does not publish stories that reflect public anger with the government. Despite the small number that went to the protests, which led to the failure of Al-Faqih's movement, the Saudi media absolutely ignored the news. "I personally followed the story on the Alsaha website, which covered the story showing photos and videos of the protests," he said.

In a similar vein, an editor in national news department on *Alriyadh* (under 30, part time) reported that stories on government corruption are ignored not only by *Alriyadh* but also by most Saudi newspapers. He added, "*Alwatan* was the only Saudi paper that published stories about corruption in the country, but now most papers do so." He gave an example of a story he was following about an anti-corruption proposal from the Ministry of Finance to measure corruption in government institutions. He said:

> I thought this was a positive story about a state initiative to establish transparency and accountability in the country. Unfortunately the Editor-in-Chief refused the story without giving any explanation, despite that fact that the story got published on the Internet and in *Alwatan* and *Alhyat* as well. I believe the editor feared that publication of the story might imply that corruption is common in the government.

In addition, a senior editor (over 30) at *Alriyadh* mentioned that news on the response of the Saudi government to external pressures is usually ignored by the paper,

despite the coverage of these stories either online or on satellite channels. For example, when the American President visited Saudi Arabia he pressed the Saudi government to increase oil production in order to ease high oil prices. "Although the story was published and aired by almost every international news outlet, the paper did not mention anything about American pressure and focused on the visit itself." He added that this news was avoided by all Saudi newspapers because publishing such a story might imply that the Saudi government is responding to American pressure.

> The issue of the "Alqatif Girl" is evidence of international pressure on the Saudi government, which responded by releasing the girl. In this regard some Internet sites such as Alsaha criticized King Abdullah for responding to the pressure from western countries. The story of the "Alqatif Girl" was only published two months after the incident occurred and it was reported in a brief and "shy" manner at the beginning, a national news reporter and columnist at *Aleqtisadiah* said.

A senior editor at *Alriyadh* (over 40, B.A. in journalism) agreed with this view, mentioning that stories about decisions taken by the government because of international pressure are usually ignored by the national press. He added:

> When King Abdullah granted a pardon to the Alqatif girl who was kidnapped and raped by seven men in 2006, the paper published the story without mentioning the huge international and national pressure that led to the King's decision. Although there were many international and national organizations who placed huge pressure on the Saudi government to interfere and quash the unjust conviction against the girl, Saudi newspapers avoided mentioning that side of the story.

He pointed out that Alsaha had criticized the decision to drop the sentence of flogging and imprisonment of the girl as a reaction to Western pressure. Despite the massive coverage of the Alqatif girl's story by many media, the editor claimed that the paper followed the story more than two months after the initial incident and dealt with it briefly, not giving it the coverage it deserved.

A reporter on national affairs at *Alriyadh* (under 30, part time) said, "The most frequently avoided stories by the paper I have witnessed are those which include Saudi women." He continued that the cases of girls escaping from their families which are covered by MBC FM radio and Elaph are among stories that the paper avoids. He mentioned that not only the Saudi press avoids these stories, but also Saudi TV channels and radio. He added that while the escape of girls has turned into a relatively common phenomenon, the Saudi media have kept avoiding this issue.

Furthermore, a journalist in the features department of *Alriyadh* (over 30, worked previously in different national newspapers and has more than 10 years experience) asserted that there is a common type of online news that can never be published in Saudi newspapers. He said that protests which took place outside Saudi embassies abroad are one type of story that the paper avoids publishing and added that Saudi Arabia is a politically active state on many different levels, and therefore Saudi embassies are sometimes targeted by protesters. He gave as an example the protest that happened outside the Saudi Embassy in Nouakchott against the extradition of a Mauritanian citizen, charged with terrorism, to Saudi Arabia. "Websites can cover this type of stories but the Saudi press cannot," he claimed.

Likewise, a sports journalist at *Alriyadh* (under 30, part time) said, "There are many stories that the paper avoids covering." He told me that he read a story on the Sabq website about the suspension of a TV presenter on the Saudi news channel Al-Ekhbariya. This was due to a phone call on live TV from a Saudi woman who strongly criticized the Saudi government for raising public workers' wages by only 5%. He added that the phone call had led to the suspension of all live programmes on Al-Ekhbariya. He pointed out that the woman's comment had become a famous clip posted on Youtube and other websites, but the paper followed neither the story of the woman's comment nor the suspension of the presenter.

In contrast, 3 journalists said that the only stories that are ignored by the paper are those which are unpublishable from a journalistic perspective. A sport reporter at

Alriyadh (under 30, part time) mentioned that sometimes stories are ignored because the paper cannot publish all the stories received. He added that news which goes against the policy of the newspaper or challenges Saudi society is usually avoided, and said:

> Some news stories could be ignored due to work pressure. There are also news stories which are not published, particularly if such stories have already appeared on other media or violate the general policy of the newspaper or the values and norms of Saudi culture.

A senior editor at *Aleqtisadiah* (over 40, previously worked for *Al-Jazirah* paper) pointed out that not all news published on the Internet can be published in the paper. He explained, "Each paper has a certain editorial policy and agenda which affect the type of news it publishes." For example, news about a female Yemeni writer who blasphemed against the holy Quran was not published in the paper, regardless of the enormous coverage of the story by the Internet. He added:

> I was asked by the Editor-in-Chief to follow the story and after I followed it up, I found that it had been fabricated by a man who apparently has personal problems with the Yemeni writer and there was no evidence whatsoever to back up his allegation.

He pointed out that the Yemeni woman is a novelist, and an Internet user had quoted her writings and interpreted them in this way, but none of the quotes blasphemed against the holy Quran. "I told the Editor-in-Chief that the story is an excellent news item for the Internet but not for a newspaper," he said.

On the other hand, 4 journalists mentioned that they have never witnessed any story that was ignored or given only brief coverage by the paper despite its attractiveness to the paper's readers. A senior editor on *Alriyadh* (over 40) said, "I have never witnessed any story that the paper ignored or covered briefly which I think might have attracted readers." He added, "The kind of stories covered by the Internet differ from the kind of stories that the paper cover". He explains, "The internet is full of rumours and false news which does not interest the press". Similarly, an editor at *Aleqtisadiah* (over 30) mentioned that he does not follow what is published on the Internet. For him, the Internet does not deserve to be called news medium due to its lack of credibility, and the amount

of lies and rumours it carries. These, he claims, make the Internet the right medium for only one type of news - "false news".

Four journalists raised the issues of the Internet's credibility as a source of news. 7 journalists (33.3% in the previous question and 19% in this question) when they were asked about the internet as a source of news or a pressure factor talked about credibility being one of the obstacles that the internet faces which prevents it from being a reliable source of news and information. Despite the reliance of Saudi journalists on the Internet as a source of information and news, journalists raised the issue of its lack of reliability and credibility, due to the high degree of exaggeration, rumours and lies on websites, as well as the lack of journalistic ethics and standards. Metzger points out that "Unlike most traditional (print) publishing, information posted on the Web may not be subject to filtering through professional gatekeepers, and it often lacks traditional authority indicators such as author identity or established reputation" (2005, p.2). Four (experienced and over 30) of the journalists I interviewed were cautious and suspicious of online news, and they do not publish news based on Internet sources or consider it as a pressure factor to follow stories. Instead, they use their sources to make thorough investigations and confirm or refute a story before deciding whether to publish it. Older journalists prefer to relay on reliable and traditional news source such as news agencies and the paper's reporters. They still consider the Internet as an unreliable source of news. An excellent example of the lack of credibility is the story of the Yemeni writer who was accused of insulting the holy Quran. The editor found out that the story was groundless and based on a personal vendetta against the writer. On the other hand, younger journalists (under 30) tend to rely on the Internet as a main source of news and information.

The fierce competition between news websites to have the lead and get the scoop is another reason that journalists are suspicious of online news. Local Saudi news websites such as Sabq, Alweeam, and Kabar are very keen to beat the press to news stories, even at the expense of reliability and credibility. Therefore, they publish some stories regardless of the reliability of the source, in order to get the scoop and beat other

news outlets. Some websites, according to one interviewee, need only to hear a small rumour to turn it into a big story.

Question 3: To what extent does the presence of the Internet place pressure on the Saudi national newspapers to cover news stories which used to be ignored?

The answers of the Saudi journalists can be divided into two groups. The first group comprised 13 journalists (61.9%), who admitted that the publication of news items online places pressure on Saudi national newspapers to follow the same stories. The second group, 8 journalists (38%) argued that the publication of stories online does not place any pressure on the Saudi papers to follow stories the papers used to ignore.

An experienced senior editor at *Alriyadh* (over 40, B.A. in journalism) stressed that online coverage of certain topics has given the national press an excuse to cover news that used to be avoided before the existence of websites that focus on Saudi affairs. "Stories published on the Internet are not only a pressure factor; but also an excuse the paper uses to follow stories," he said. He added that some stories have turned into the subjects of public debate as a result of the coverage of these stories online. "The story of the Alqatif girl is an excellent example of the pressure of the Internet on the Saudi newspapers," he said. He mentioned that the Saudi press had not followed the story until it became a well-known issue due to coverage online. He added that the paper's avoidance of the story caused the paper some embarrassment with its readers. He pointed out:

> The pressure to follow that story was hard to ignore, which made the paper take a decision to follow it, regardless of other forces which pressed the paper not to publish such a story.

A national news reporter and columnist (under 30) for *Aleqtisadiah* agreed that the Internet publishes different kinds of news which the national news department used to ignore. In particular, this includes crime stories with disturbing photos. "I have been working as a reporter for several years and I know that this type of local crime used not to

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be considered suitable for coverage by the paper." He added that, with the huge attention this kind of crime is getting from websites, especially Alweeam, the paper started to cover them and now does so frequently, along with photographs. He said:

> The Internet plays a major role in forcing the Saudi newspapers to follow stories which used to be ignored. I believe that the Saudi newspapers' fear of losing their readers to Internet websites forces them to extend the type of stories published.

A national news journalist and columnist for *Alriyadh* (under 30, part time) mentioned that news on unusual crimes in Saudi Arabia was always avoided in the past.

> Recently, the paper started to follow this type of news and it has become a part of our local news. In fact, I am now following a story about a young man who committed suicide by hanging himself from a tree, he said.

He added that similar stories would have been unpublishable in the past but the publication of these stories on websites such as Alarabiya, Sabq and Alweeam forces the paper to follow them. He pointed out that the publication of this type of news on the Internet regularly compels the police to provide newspapers with details about crimes.

An editor at *Aleqtisadiah* (over 30, part time, worked previously for *Alriyadh*) said:

> Now, previously taboo subjects are published in the paper with transparency. This move has been triggered by the spread of the Internet and satellite TV channels which transmit events on air, a matter that makes imposing constraints on the newspaper a useless action and only causes harm to the local papers, to the benefit of non-Saudi papers, the Internet and non-Saudi satellite TV channels.

Similarly, a reporter in the national news department at *Alriyadh* (under 30, part time, graduate student in journalism studies) said:

> The Internet is placing enormous pressure on the Saudi newspapers to follow stories which used to be taboo, especially in national affairs. Before the

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existence of the Internet the Saudi press was the only available source of local news to the Saudis. However, the presence of news websites that focus on stories about Saudi society, sports, markets and government clearly changes not only the type of news that the Saudi papers cover but also breaks the monopoly of the national papers over national news.

In a like manner, an editor at *Alriyadh* in national news department (under 30, part time) explained that many issues were known to the Saudis through the Internet and have turned into issues of public debate, which consequently led newspapers to follow them too. "Saudi newspapers were so late in covering many stories and did not follow them until they became known to the public through the Internet," he said. He explained that a video clip of a teacher hitting a fifth-grade student was one of the famous cases which newspapers published very late and only after that clip was distributed on the Internet and mobile phones. He said:

> The popularity of this video clip not only forced the newspaper to cover the topic but also obliged officials in the Ministry to Education to condemn the incident and punish the teacher.

An experienced journalist in the national news (over 30) at *Aleqtisadiah* said,

> It is obvious that the Internet has created pressure on the Saudi newspapers to follow up and publish certain sensitive events. For example, the rape story known as the "Bergis" case was not reported by any newspaper until it had already been widely circulated on the Internet and mobile phones.

A journalist in the financial department of *Aleqtisadiah* (under 30, part time) also felt that "undoubtedly, websites have created an impetus which encourages Saudi newspapers to raise topics that were previously hard to cover." On the other hand, a senior editor at *Alriyadh* (more than 20 years experience as a journalist and columnist) pointed out that not all of the stories published on the Internet can be published in the paper. He claimed:

> There are certain types of stories that cannot be published, no matter how enormous the online coverage devoted to them. The Internet has exerted pressure over some stories which forced the paper to follow them. I believe that publishing stories online also places pressure on some government bodies to provide the

national press with the latest news, in order to avoid rumours and false information that the Internet might distribute".

In addition, a journalist at the international news department of *Aleqtisadiah* (under 30, part time) said, "The freedom that the Internet enjoys gives it the ability to cover topics that the Saudi press cannot cover." He explained that stories about the opposition cannot be published even if the Internet covers them in depth. "Online coverage of issues such as crimes and food prices might pressure newspapers to follow these stories," however, when it comes to political issues the pressure of the Internet is weak; these stories are not publishable, regardless of coverage by the Internet or other media, he added.

With regard to the pressure of the Internet on news selection, journalists mentioned that the Internet is placing huge pressure on them to publish stories of the sort they used to ignore. In particular, a major factor in such decisions is the existence of websites that focus on Saudi affairs. The first example, which was mentioned by four journalists, was the Berjis case. A video of two men raping a girl was distributed on mobile phones and on the Internet in May 2004. *Alhyat* reported that the case provoked "angry reactions and a state of outrage that has never been witnessed among Saudis" (theage.com.au, July 18, 2004). The Berjis case was shocking because it was one of the first cases in which the rapist used a mobile phone to film the rape. He asked his driver to rape the girl while he videoed the incident, then distributed the video via the Internet and mobile phone. The journalists told me that the wide distribution of the video forced the national press to follow the story despite that fact that coverage of rape cases had previously been considered impermissible.

The second story that the journalists mentioned was the incident at Al-Hear prison, when a National Guard was caught on camera torturing prisoners. The journalists said that the wide circulation of that video forced the national press to follow the story, in spite of the fact that it involved the Saudi National Guard – a subject previously off-limits to Saudi journalists. The interviewees pointed out that this story was the first one that the press followed which included physical abuse by the police against Saudi people. Potter

points out that "It's no wonder major news organizations are now actively soliciting video from ordinary citizens who might have captured something newsworthy" (2007, p. 66).

The popularity of that clip not only forced the national press to follow the story, but also forced the Ministry of Interior to admit the incident and apologize to the victims. Before the existence of the Internet, publication of similar stories by a Saudi paper might have led to severe punishment from the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Ministry of Interior. However, Internet coverage of stories authorizes the national press to follow them because of the public's familiarity with the incident, which alleviates the sensitivity towards publishing such stories in the national papers. In addition, the newspapers have exploited the presence of impermissible issues on the Internet as a pretext and an excuse to disobey instructions from the Ministry of Culture and Information not to publish, on the grounds that such issues have already become known to the public.

The third story mentioned by the Saudi journalists as an example of the pressure of online publication on the national press was the clip of an elementary school teacher hitting a fifth-grade student. As the journalists explained, the wide transmission of the video via the Internet and mobile phone shows the strong effects of these new media means in pressuring newspapers to follow stories which used to be ignored before the popularity of alternative sources of news. Physical and psychological punishments in Saudi schools are now forbidden by the Ministry of Education.

These kinds of stories, which used to be ignored due to the pressure that the paper would have faced from the Ministry of Education, have now become publishable in the Saudi Press. The distribution of clips that show public workers abusing people whilst doing their job forces their organizations to take the initiative and issue official statements condemning such abuse, even if some papers do not publish the initial story. The Internet pressures the press as well as the government to react and comment on what is published online. This situation forces the various government institutions to hire

official spokesmen to deal with stories related to them which the Internet and the national press publish, as discussed in the observation chapter.

The pressure of the Internet on the national press can be especially noticeable when the coverage of a story turns into a matter of public debate which the press can no longer ignore. An excellent example that the journalists mentioned is the case of the Al-Qatif girl, when the Saudi newspapers followed the story after it grew into such an issue. Despite the express instructions issued by the Ministry of Culture and Information prohibiting coverage of the case, as the deputy editor of *Alriyadh* told me, the national press followed the story. Although the publication of the story was late, the fact that it was published at all meant that the pressure of the Internet and other news media was stronger than the pressure from the Ministry of Culture and Information, the Ministry of Justice and religious groups. Its publication irritated and angered several sectors of the government and religious leaders, not only because of the case itself but also due to the fact that printing stories on it might lead to the publication in the future of stories that some government and religious bodies would not want to see in the national press.

The massive coverage of news stories online allows the national press to be more daring in its news selection, and works as an excuse for newspapers to challenge the instructions prohibiting publication. The Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* mentioned that he uses online publications as an excuse to cover stories the paper did not dream of covering in the past. He added that he has challenged the instructions of the Ministry of Culture and Information several times when he feels disconcerted by ignoring topics already circulating among the public.

The popularity of news websites that focus on Saudi affairs strengthens the pressure on the national papers to keep abreast of certain events that used to be ignored before the existence of such factors. This role for Internet websites as a news source is not noticeable in the West, due to the considerable freedom that the western news media enjoys, which enables them to follow stories that concern the western public regardless of different governmental, social and financial pressures. However, in countries where

censorship has been practised on news outlets, Internet websites are playing a crucial role in informing the public and providing them with the latest news. Internet websites in Saudi Arabia and other countries where the government controls the national media have become a popular news medium.

In contradiction to this, six journalists argued that news websites place no pressure on the newspapers when it comes to news selection. A senior editor at *Aleqtisadiah* (over 40, worked previously for *Al-Jazirah* paper) said that the Internet does not place any pressure on the Saudi national press to publish stories of a kind which used to be ignored. "We select the news that interests the readers, not the news published online." He added, "I believe that many websites get their news from Saudi newspapers, not the opposite." Similarly, a sports journalist on *Aleqtisadiah* (over 30, part time) considered that the Internet places no pressure on the paper to follow certain topics. "I cannot remember a single story the paper followed as a response to pressure from the Internet," he said. He added that when he receives a story he takes the decision whether to publish it or not based on journalistic standards, not on how the Internet covers the story.

However, two journalists argued that the pressure of the Internet and other news media on the paper differs from one department to another. They mentioned that departments such as sports and finance are less affected by internal pressures due to the kind of stories that they are dealing with. "Sports and financial stories are not as sensitive as political and social stories," an editor at *Alriyadh* paper (under 30, part time) said. He added that most stories that the paper avoids publishing are the ones that have political or social implications.

It is obvious that the pressure of the Internet does not affect all journalists to the same degree. Older journalists (40+) in both papers, as discussed in the observation chapter, tend to use the Internet less than other younger journalists. The limited use of the Internet from some journalists whether as a source of news or information makes these journalists less affected by the pressure of the Internet. Therefore, they select news as

they always have done regardless of the presence of the Internet. The department each journalist works in also affects the degree of Internet pressure. As discussed throughout this study, topics related to the government international policy and topics that involve the religious leaders are among the topics that are considered most sensitive and might cause problems when getting published. Therefore, journalists who work for international and national departments are more affected by the pressure of the government and the religious leaders than other departments. On the other hand, these departments face tremendous pressure from the Internet to follow such topics. The publication of topics related to the government and the religious leaders on the Internet places pressure on the journalists who work on international and national news to follow these topics. The journalists in these departments face two introductory pressures. First, they face pressure from the government and religious leaders to ignore stories that irritate them; second, the publication of these stories online place pressure on the journalists to follow them. Therefore, journalists in these departments are subject to external pressures on whether they decide to publish certain stories or not. On the other hand, journalists who work for sport and financial departments do not face the same pressure due to absence of the government and religious leaders' pressures which are considered the most influential factors affecting news decisions in the Saudi press as found in the previous chapter.

Question 4: To what extent does the avoidance of stories that you think might interest the paper's readers give the opportunity to Internet websites, which are not under official censorship, to attract local readers?

The answers to this question were divided into two groups. The first group, which consisted of eleven journalists (52.3%) of the sample, stressed that the newspapers' avoidance of important local news has given the chance to other media to cover this news and attract the local reader. A reporter in the sports section of *Alriyadh* (under 30, part time) said:

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The Saudi people have a lot of news sources such as the Internet and satellite channels. Therefore if the Saudi press ignores a story, other news sources have the chance to cover it and attract the Saudi audience.

He added the Saudi press is not free to publish all the available stories, while the Internet and some TV channels take advantage of the censorship that the press suffers from and follow domestic stories that should be published in the local papers.

A senior editor at *Alriyadh* (over 40, B.A. in journalism) pointed out that:

A large segment of the Saudi people look for alternative media when it comes to news, due to the censorship imposed on the Saudi media in general and the press in particular.

A journalist in the international affairs department of *Aleqtisadiah* (under 30, part time) asserted that "Saudi media outlets, especially newspapers, have lost many of their audiences due to the censorship." He added that there are many examples of stories that newspapers completely ignored, which made them lose not only their readers but also their credibility.

In addition, a journalist in the financial department of *Aleqtisadiah* (under 30, part time) pointed out that during the Saudi stock market crisis in 2006-2007, when the Saudi market lost more than 60% of its value, Saudis left the Saudi press for news channels such as CNBC and Alarabiya, and online websites saudistocks.com and ssmarket.net. He said,

We could not publish some of the horrifying facts about the market because some senior editors still think that the role of the paper is to reflect a positive view about the market.

An editor at *Aleqtisadiah* (over 30, part time, worked previously for *Alriyadh* paper) said:

I do not realize the limited freedom of the Saudi press until I find out about a surprising local Saudi issue from the Internet or from non-Saudi media. Websites publish stories the moment they receive them, while journalists have to

wait for the approval from the Editor-in-Chief, who prefers to wait and wait. The limited freedom in the Saudi newspapers is the main reason behind the popularity of Internet websites which cover stories the Saudi papers cannot cover.

An editor in national news department at *Alriyadh* (under 30, part time) said:

> Preventing the Saudi press from discussing a large number of local news topics has given a golden chance to satellite channels and websites to discuss even the smallest and most private local Saudi issues.

He added that the Saudi market is so big that outside media are keen to attract Saudi readers and viewers because this means attracting Saudi advertisers. A senior editor at *Alriyadh* (over 30) pointed out that both the Internet and satellite channels have gained the trust of local audiences due to their immediate coverage of stories for which the Saudi press has to wait – sometimes for several days - for approval from the Ministry of Culture and Information or the Editor-in-Chief. He gave an example of the Arab League summit in Syria. "Saudis followed the summit on Alarabiya or Aljazeera channels and websites, despite the fact that the Saudi press covered the event," he added. He explained that the reason is that the Saudi press is used to covering the meetings of Arab leaders positively, ignoring any conflicts that might happen between the leaders. On the other hand, other news media such as Alarabiya and Aljazeera covered the summit by focusing on the big discord between Saudi Arabia and Syria over Lebanon, he added.

In the same way, a journalist in international affairs on *Alriyadh* (over 30) argued that some national newspapers are losing their readers. He pointed out that three newspapers (*Al Nadwa*, *Al Bilad* and *Al Madina*) are facing financial problems due to low circulation figures. He said:

> The availability of a huge number of news media to the Saudi audience, especially those which focus on Saudi national affairs, affects the readership of the national press.

An experienced journalist in the national news section of *Aleqtisadiah* (over 30) made it clear that websites and TV channels are taking advantage of censorship practised over the Saudi media by focusing on the news that the Saudi media cannot tackle. He

gave an example of the popularity of some websites and TV programmes which focus on local Saudi affairs. He said:

> The weekly programme "Alhadath" on the Lebanese channel LBC, which focuses on local Saudi issues, is an excellent example of the advantage that can be gained from the inability of the Saudi media to cover some local news topics.

Regarding the possibility of the national press losing its readership to the Internet as a result of the restrictions the former faces in covering certain types of issues that might interest the Saudi public, the journalists are divided into two groups as mentioned earlier. The reason behind the division goes back to the way each group looks at the Internet as a news medium. On the one hand, journalists who believe that the Internet is a strong competitor to the press due to its ability to cover stories that the national press cannot cover, agree that there is a strong possibility of losing readers to news websites. On the other, journalists who believe that the Internet has helped them to improve their performance as journalists due to its ability to provide them with news and information that they use to enrich their news-making, support the idea of maintaining their readership regardless of competition from the Internet. They look at the Internet as an excuse to challenge official censorship and gain more latitude to publish stories that used to be ignored.

According to 11 journalists (52.3%) of the interviewed sample, the Internet and other news media which do not suffer from censorship are taking advantage of the inability of the national press to discuss certain issues. By discussing Saudi local issues which cannot be discussed in the national press, websites and satellite channels attract Saudi readers and viewers, and as a result, Saudi advertisers. Websites and satellite channels focusing on Saudi issues attract the readership of the biggest market in the Arab world, as shown in previous studies.

Although the Saudi national press is gaining more freedom to tackle and discuss issues compared to the period before King Abdullah assumed power, censorship is still considered tight when compared to satellite TV channels and websites, which are not

subject to the control of the Ministry of Culture and Information, as the sample mentioned. This situation allows satellite TV channels and Internet websites to cover stories that the national press cannot touch due to government censorship.

In addition, the long history of strict control and censorship inflicted on the local media in general and the press in particular is the main reason for the drop in readership of national newspapers in favour of websites. When alternative news media became available, Saudis turned to these means instead of the national media, who have lost their credibility (Al-Kahtani, 1999). Al-Kahtani adds that this is largely due to their avoidance of important incidents such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The history of the Saudi press includes ignoring other major events such as the Iranian nuclear programme and its threat to the region, a matter that forced Saudi viewers and readers to rely on other news outlets.

Marghalani, Palmgreen and Boyd (1998) argue that when satellite channels were established at the beginning of the 1990s, most Saudis abandoned their national channels in favour of other channels like MBC and ART. Later they were attracted to Aljazeera, Alarabiya and LBC, all channels which enjoy more freedom than the national media. Subsequently, the emergence of the Internet at the end of the last decade and its continued growth after the turn of the century has given Saudis a new medium through which they can discuss and express their concerns, interests and problems. The spread of vast numbers of websites and forums and the popularity they have gained is a direct consequence of long-standing censorship and the severe control policy imposed on local media.

The Saudis find in the Internet a supplement for the semi-governmental press, which represents the government point of view, as well as a supplement to the satellite channels owned by Saudi businessmen such as Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, Saleh Kamil and Alwaleed bin Ibrahim – all of whom are considered allies of the Saudi government. Saudis have found in the Internet a new medium which focuses on local issues without the interference of the government. As discussed in Chapter Five, the call for a boycott of

dairy products staged by Internet websites and mobile phones showed that Saudis have resorted to the new media, knowing that the national media cannot cover such issues. This argument confirms Al Qarni's findings, which stressed the role of the Internet in creating a public sphere in which Arabs in general and Saudis in particular can engage in free political and social dialogue (2004).

In addition, three Saudi national newspapers are facing financial problems due to the existence of alternative news media, especially the Internet. The existence of websites such as Sabq, Alweeam and Kabar, which focus on Saudi national affairs, enables Saudi readers to follow these websites for the latest national news instead of following the national press. This situation, as a journalist argued, is the main reason behind the financial problems that some Saudi national newspapers have been facing lately.

> The Internet has made print less profitable but has also made new forms of information-gathering and commentary possible. Bloggers get a bad press but low-cost publishing helps new sources to emerge (*Financial Times*, May 25, 2009).

Alweeam website published a story about editorial and financial problems at the *Al Madina* daily newspaper which led to a reduction in the numbers of its journalistic staff (October 10, 2008). It added that *Al Madina*'s struggle is not unique; *Al Nadwa* and *Al Bilad* newspapers also have been struggling for four years. Al-Rashed points out that the Saudi King donated 10 million riyals (1.5 million pounds) to *Al Nadwa* newspaper in 2006 when the paper faced a risk of bankruptcy (July 24, 2007).

On the other hand, 10 journalists (47.6%) argued that Internet coverage of certain issues that the national press cannot touch does not affect press readership. An editor in the international department at *Alriyadh* (over 30) argues that the adoption of a new style in news making which encourage journalists to deepen and extend news stories helps the paper to maintain its readership. A senior editor at *Aleqtisadiah* (over 40, worked previously for *Al-Jazirah* paper) pointed out that "*Aleqtisadiah* is more popular than it has even been". He added,

Internet websites cannot affect the readership of the paper for different reasons, such as they suffer from the lack of the journalistic experiences and the quality that the newspapers have. Also, they suffer from the lack of credibility which remains and will always be a problem that the Internet face.

A senior editor at *Alriyadh* (over 40) stated that the press differs from the Internet, and in many ways. One important difference is that newspapers are very selective as to the type of news they publish and do not publish news without reliable sources. He added that the lack of credibility that characterized Internet news is helping the paper to maintain its status as a main source of news. He commented:

> With the degree of freedom that the Saudi press has been enjoying recently, we rarely avoid publishing stories unless journalistically the news is not good enough to be published. Despite the presence of other news media, whether websites or TV channels, *Alriyadh*'s revenues in general and circulation in particular keep growing.

Similarly, an editor in the finance department on *Aleqtisadiah* (over 30, part time) argued that each news medium has its own audiences. He added:

> I believe that the Internet has helped to increase the circulation of newspapers because once the readers hear about a story; they want to have analytical and deep treatment of that story. That is where the newspapers play their role, filling the gap between hearing about the news and having a full picture of the story. Therefore, publishing stories in any news medium before the press does not affect the readership of newspapers, because readers need to know what experts, writers and journalists think about these stories.

Furthermore, a sports journalist in *Aleqtisadiah* (over 30, part time) mentioned that the audience for each medium is different from that of the others. "I do not see that avoiding certain types of stories has any effect on readership," he said. He added that "readers buy newspapers to know more about issues and read what analysts and writers think about these issues." A reporter in the national news department of *Alriyadh* (under 30, part time, graduate student) said, "If you had asked me this question five years ago, I would have answered that the effects of the Internet in attracting the Saudis were substantial." He added:

However, the situation is completely different now; Saudi newspapers can discuss issues which used to be avoided due to the official censorship. I find the Saudi newspapers very popular and followed by Saudi readers, which forces TV channels and websites to quote them regularly.

The national newspapers try to compete with the growing popularity of websites by adopting new styles other than their traditional methods in presenting and covering news events, as the journalists pointed out. Of the journalists interviewed, 10 believe that some Saudi newspapers are not only maintaining their readership, but also their revenues from circulation and advertising that are growing more than ever before. The journalists gave three different reasons behind the ability of some elements of the national press to maintain their readership.

The first reason is the adoption of new editing techniques such as deepening and extending news stories as well as wording headlines and titles to help newspapers maintain their readership. Also, a great deal of focus is now being directed by the newspapers on interpretation and analysis of news to keep their readerships and minimize the loss of readers to websites. This step by Saudi newspapers reflects an awareness and responsiveness on the part of Editors-in-Chief to the need to change their approach, to get involved in issues of public concern, to grade up editing methods and apply professional skills in press work to distinguish their coverage from that found on the Internet. Taking advantage of the lack of journalistic standards and ethics in Internet reportage, newspapers such as *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah* are minimizing the loss of their readers to news websites.

The second reason why some Saudi newspapers still attract Saudi readers, as the journalists pointed out, is the lack of credibility of Internet websites. The reliance of the Internet on poor sources, especially with regard to issues that the public is eager to know about, such as the rise in public workers' wages, makes it a secondary news source. The fierce competition among websites to get press scoops makes some of them sacrifice credibility for the sake of being first to publish the story. Unlike websites, newspapers respect their brand and try to protect their reputation by relying on trustworthy sources, as the Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* asserted.

Another aspect of this lack of credibility and reliability is the focus of some websites on personal stories which journalists believe the websites invent to defame the image of public figures. Alsaha's publication of the story about the Yemeni writer who was falsely accused of cursing the holy Quran is an example of untrue stories inspired by personal differences and transmitted to the public as the truth. The reliance of the Internet on personal sources makes some websites into arenas for rumours and lies that might harm the reputation of innocent people. The journalists mentioned websites such as Alsaha Alarabiya, which has become one of the main sources of rumours and lies about writers, officials, actors and singers due to the radical Islamic perspective of the website, which tries to harm any advocates of openness to other cultures and religions.

Similarly, a sports journalist (under 30, part time) stated that *Alriyadh* had been accused of being biased in favour of Al-Hilal football club (one of the major clubs in Saudi Arabia) for a long time. However, after the proliferation of Internet sports websites in general and the launch of official websites of the Saudi clubs in particular, readers have realized how fair and reliable the paper is. The irresponsible publication of issues and news makes these websites unreliable sources of news and information, he said, and therefore readers rely on newspapers for news because they respect their journalistic standards and ethics, and see them as making the papers trustworthier.

The third reason mentioned by the interviewees which helps some newspapers to maintain their readership is the easing of official censorship, which gives the Saudi press the opportunity to tackle issues which were formerly taboo. Websites and satellite channels have been taking advantage of the inability of the national press to cover many issues which interest the Saudi public, but after the easing of censorship, as the journalists mentioned, the Saudi press now can tackle issues that previously only the Internet and satellite channels were free to cover.

Question 5: To what extent does censorship by the Ministry of Culture and Information or by the Editor-in-Chief influence the performance of the Saudi press?

The answers to this question fall into two groups. The first group, which consisted 14 of the total sample (66.6%), confirmed the negative effects of censorship in all cases and saw it as the major reason for the weakness of the Saudi press and its credibility. This group complained about the effects of official censorship on the Saudi press in general and news decisions in particular. Six of the journalists in this group mentioned that the censorship imposed on them by their Editor-in-Chief, which is in turn an application of the instructions from the Ministry of Culture and Information, has negatively influenced their work.

A senior editor (over 40, B.A. in journalism) in *Alriyadh* acknowledged that censorship discourages many Saudi journalists, especially when they read the stories that they are prevented from following, published in another medium. "I admit that the paper follows stories which used to be taboo in the past, but still there are many topics the Saudi press cannot touch," he said.

"Censorship by the Ministry of Culture and Information undoubtedly influences the performance of journalists," a sports journalist on *Alriyadh* (under 30, part time) told me. A journalist in the international news section of *Alriyadh* (over 30) said, "I believe that there is a strong relationship between creativity and censorship; the stronger the censorship, the less creative the journalist." Similarly, an editor in the national affairs department of *Alriyadh* (under 30, part time) pointed out that he sometimes understands the reasons behind censorship, but at other times "I cannot find any logical reason for preventing newspapers from following some stories." A senior editor at *Alriyadh* (20 years experience as a journalist and columnist) commented:

> Censorship is a major depressing factor that generates negative impacts on the journalists and columnists. It prevents the newspaper from discussing some issues which are already known to the public. Editors-in-Chief play a remarkable

role in enforcing censorship concepts and their attitude is considered as an application and continuation of the control originally imposed by the Ministry of Information.

In addition, according to a reporter and weekly columnist (under 30, part time) in the national news section at *Aleqtisadiah*:

> I understand the reasons behind censorship because we live in a conservative society, but I feel that in many cases the Editor-in-Chief is being unreasonable in his decisions, and this discourages journalists. Unfortunately this is common. I believe that skillful journalists should not surrender to censorship; they should keep trying to bypass editorial censorship.

An editor at *Aleqtisadiah* (over 30, part time, worked previously for *Alriyadh* paper) argued that the Saudi journalist faces three phases of censorship which influence his work. The first is the Ministry of Culture and Information, which forbids publishing stories on some political and religious topics. The second agent of censorship is the religious authorities, which interfere and try to place pressure on the Saudi press not to publish certain types of stories. The third and strongest type of censorship is internal, and is practised by the Editor-in-Chief, who wants to stay in his position as long as he can. "So back to your question, I think all forms of censorship are extreme and negatively influence the Saudi press," he concluded.

However, an editor (over 30) in *Aleqtisadiah* was of the opinion that "The Saudi press is not suffering from censorship as it used to be; the most crucial form of censorship that has been widely practised is self-censorship." He added:

> Many journalists do not realize that the Saudi press is going through a transitional phase which gives the journalists more latitude to tackle issues that could not be tackled in the past. I think the problem is the journalists themselves, who keep practising the same journalism they have been practising for decades, regardless of the easing of official censorship and the latitude to tackle issues which the Saudi press has gained recently.

He concluded, "Some journalists avoid following news that can be published, because they still have the mentality of the past." This opinion is confirmed by an experienced journalist (over 30) in the national department at *Aleqtisadiah*, who argued that self-censorship is the worst and most crucial form of censorship in Saudi newspapers. "Journalists who are accustomed to strict censorship are having difficulties adapting to the relative freedom that the Saudi press now enjoys," he said.

Similarly, an editor (over 30) in the international news section on *Alriyadh* mentioned that "Censorship has been a major factor which holds the Saudi press back in terms of competing with news sources that enjoy more freedom, but recently the effects of censorship have not been as strong as they used to be." a famous sports journalist and columnist (over 30) from *Alriyadh* said, "I think censorship differs from one department to another; journalists who work in international news suffer more than journalists who work in the sports or financial departments." He added:

> I do not suffer from official or editorial censorship, because sports sections in the Saudi press enjoy slightly more freedom than other departments. But generally speaking the censorship is very effective and definitely weakens the Saudi press' ability to compete with newspapers such as *Alhyat*.

Similarly, a sports reporter (under 30, part time) at *Alriyadh* echoed this:

> The impact of censorship is clear, especially censorship imposed by the Editor-in-Chief and the restriction by the Ministry, which negatively affects the newspapers' performance in general. Though I am working in a sports section which is not suffering from censorship as other departments in the paper do, I am well aware of the negative impacts of control and censorship which are considered major elements of the weakness of the Saudi press.

A national news reporter (under 30, part time and graduate student) in *Alriyadh* said:

> Censorship seriously affects my work. It is a frustrating, disappointing and depressing matter to expend effort and prepare a report and finally have it rejected by the senior editors or the Editor-in-Chief. Anyhow, I do not feel that there is

visible censorship by the Ministry of Culture and Information and the only apparent control for me is the one imposed by the Editor-in-Chief.

Although the Saudi national press has more latitude now than it had three years ago, as the journalists pointed out, when it comes to tackling certain issues which used to be ignored, this leeway is still limited. Censorship is not as severe as it used to be, but still some issues are off limits and cannot be covered. Additionally, official censorship was not the only form of censorship that the journalists complained about; the Editor-in-Chief of the paper was mentioned as another face of censorship. As mentioned in the chapter on Saudi gatekeepers, the Saudi Editor-in-Chief is responsible for the newspaper and attempts to avoid causing inconvenience to the Ministry and other officials, in order to stay in his position as long as possible. *Alriyadh*'s Editor-in-Chief meets ambassadors, ministers and other international dignitaries, in addition to accompanying the King and Crown Prince on official visits abroad. Editors-in-Chief are reluctant to risk losing these privileges and may avoid publishing stories that could cost them their positions. Jamal Khashoggi, the Editor-in-Chief of *Alwatan*, pointed out, "We are now seeing Saudi newspapers that follow the regulations of Saudi publications and those that do not" (April 25, 2007). Censorship by the Editor-in-Chief is the major constant obstacle they face in their work. Editors-in-Chief at both *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah* sometimes reject news without giving reasons, the journalists told me. This situation leads some journalists to practise self-censorship, which they considered the worst form of censorship.

A further point raised by the journalists is the effect of having their articles rejected by the Editor-in-Chief on journalists who work hard on these materials. Two journalists emphasized their intense frustration after the rejection of a report or story by the Editor-in-Chief or any other senior editor without apparently reasonable justification. The problem connected with censorship as practised in Saudi Arabia is that censorship rules are neither written nor clear to all journalists. Much depends on the personal judgment of the Editor-in-Chief, as discussed in the chapter on Saudi gatekeepers, and this causes confusion to journalists, as they cannot predict whether the Editor-in-Chief will approve or reject a story.

This situation tends to make journalists practise self-censorship, and results in their unwillingness to follow stories similar to the ones which the editor rejects. For example, a national news journalist on *Alriyadh* revealed that he wrote a piece about government corruption, in line with the government's announcement of a campaign to fight corruption, and after spending much time and effort producing a full report, he was disappointed when his report was rejected by the Editor-in-Chief. Other journalists might not want to take this kind of risk, and this leads them to follow stories that they are certain will be published and approved by the Editor-in-Chief, instead of following up issues which might be rejected.

In a similar way, three journalists argued that despite a relaxation of official and editorial censorship, journalists are still practising self-censorship. They attributed this practice to the long history of strict censorship imposed on Saudi newspapers. Previous studies referred to in Chapter Two discussed the dismissal and suspension of numerous journalists and columnists, including Editors-in-Chief. The severe treatment of journalists, editors and writers in the past is still remembered, making journalists especially older ones reluctant to take advantage of the new era where dismissals and suspensions are less common.

On the other hand, the second group which represents seven of the total sample emphasized that censorship has no effects on their work as journalists. A journalist (under 30, part time) in the financial department of *Aleqtisadiah* remarked that he is not conscious of the censorship of the Ministry of Culture and Information at all. He added, "I have never felt that the Editor-in-Chief is practising censorship; his decisions to publish a story or reject it are based on the importance of the story more than anything else." Similarly, a sports journalist on *Aleqtisadiah* (over 30, part time) said that he does not feel the effect of the Ministry's censorship and he has never followed a story that the Editor-in-Chief rejected. A journalist (over 30, worked previously in different national newspapers) at the features department of *Alriyadh* explained:

I hardly feel the effect of censorship in my work, because I have knowledge and background of the topics that might raise problems for the newspaper and me. Therefore, the influence of official and editorial censorship on my work is limited.

A journalist (under 30, a part time journalist, three years in the national news department) at *Alriyadh* stated:

I do not feel that there is direct censorship or restrictions by the Ministry of Culture and Information on the journalists particularly at the present time when the press is experiencing a great deal of freedom. I think the Saudi newspapers enjoy a wide margin to discuss what interests the Saudi readers. The margin of freedom in the Saudi newspapers has increased remarkably at the present time compared with the situation five years ago.

Another of the supporters of this idea is an editor (over 30, part time) in the financial department of *Aleqtisadiah*, who said:

My work is not affected by any form of censorship; I cover the stories that I believe are important to the paper's readers and the Editor-in-Chief and the head of the department understand and rarely intervene.

A journalist (under 30, part time) in the international news section at *Aleqtisadiah* pointed out that he does not suffer from any type of censorship. He added, "I cover the stories that I believe they interest the readers. As a result what I choose is not affected by censorship neither from the Editor-in-chief nor the Ministry".

The response of the journalists regarding the effects of censorship by the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Editors-in-Chief on their work came as a surprise to me. For my MA dissertation (2006), I interviewed Saudi columnists who described censorship (official and editorial) as very severe. Additionally, a review of the empirical literature provides a substantial amount of studies which emphasize the negative effects of censorship on the performance of the Saudi press (see Al-Kahtani, 1999; Al Kheraigi, 1990; Rugh, 2004). Therefore, I expected most of the journalists' responses to be complaints about the censorship imposed on them. However, on the contrary, seven journalists stated that they do not feel conscious of any type of censorship - either from the Ministry of Culture and Information or from the Editor-in-Chief or other editors. Moreover, these replies do not correspond with the historical suffering of journalists from

censorship discussed in Chapter Two. The journalists' answers reflect the alleviation and relaxation of censorship to the extent that some journalists are no longer feeling the effects of censorship on their performance.

Their answers could in some part be attributed to the easing of censorship which is allowing the national press to tackle issues that it used to ignore. Instructions from the Ministry are seen as unwritten, confidential matters restricted to the Editor-in-Chief, who in turn notifies senior editors and the head of the department that the story relates to. Some journalists are more likely to suffer from censorship than others. For example, the journalists argued that journalists in departments such as sports and financial affairs are not as vulnerable to the censorship imposed on "hot" departments such as national and international news. Sports and financial news are not considered sensitive matters and are unlikely to irritate the Ministry of Culture and Information. Therefore, the weaker pressure of political, religious and social factors on sports and finance means that these sections are less likely to be affected by both official and editorial censorship.

News, reports and articles which focus on foreign policy and public dissatisfaction, however, are considered to be sensitive issues that might anger the government or the religious leaders. Although the national press can discuss some topics that used to be taboo in the past, certain issues such as international policy, public dissatisfaction with political reforms, and the suspension of journalists and columnists remain untouchable in the Saudi press. Therefore, journalists who deal with these issues suffer from censorship more than others.

The long history of censorship makes some journalists accustomed to such censorship. With censorship and punishment practiced by the Ministry over the national press since the birth of the Saudi press, journalists develop their own mechanisms to protect themselves from the Ministry. Self-censorship is definately the main action that journalists take in order to avoid punishment and also succeed in publishing their materials. The problem with censorship is that it has different layers as Sakr argues (2003). It starts with the Ministry censorship which is the most obvious form of

censorship. The editor-in-chief is responsible for anything published in his paper, so becomes another layer of censorship. Then pressure factors such as government bodies and figures and their power are another layer of censorship. However, self-censorship, which is a response and reaction to the other layers of censorship, makes journalists tend to follow news that can make it through the layers of censorship because the multi-layer censorship will not let other items published. The main task of a journalist is to follow stories in order to publish them in the paper. Therefore, if the journalist fails to do so, he or she will try to choose the kind of stories that can pass the different layers of censorship rather than the newsworthy ones. In the long term, practicing self-censorship becomes part of their daily job. Such a situation makes these journalists not feel the presence of the other layers of censorship because they are practicing a harsher form of censorship on themselves. Amin says, "In such cases of self-censorship, journalists are no different from the authoritarians who take on the role of protectors of the state" (2002, p. 130). One of the journalists summarized this situation saying; "I hardly feel the effect of censorship in my work, because I have knowledge and background of the topics that might raise problems for the newspaper and me. Therefore, the influence of official and editorial censorship on my work is limited".

Question 6: To what extent has the censorship of the national press (official and editorial) changed over the last three years?

A total of 17 journalists (80.9%) of the sample stressed that the degree of censorship has changed in the past few years. They mentioned that the strict censorship which used to be practised over the Saudi press is changing, and this helps them to tackle issues that they were not able to tackle in the past. A journalist (over 30) in national news at *Aleqtisadiah* said that the difference between three years ago and now is enormous. He said, "I follow stories now that I have never imagined I would be able to cover." He gave the example of the attacks on people by the religious police, which had been ignored since the birth of the Saudi press. Now "it is one of my favorite type of stories." Similarly, an editor (over 30, part time) at *Aleqtisadiah* said:

During the past three years, the atmosphere of censorship has alleviated remarkably as newspapers started to follow up and cover topics that were not allowed in the past. I have never believed the day would come when I could write about the sort of stories which I am now able to follow up.

An editor (under 30, part time) on *Alriyadh* mentioned that the Saudi press now discusses many topics which used to be prohibited. He added:

In the past, criticizing a Saudi Minister could mean the suspension of the journalist and the Editor-in-Chief; now the paper is full of criticisms of ministries and officials at all levels.

He added:

Recently the Saudi press has begun to discuss and publish subjects considered in the near past as taboo topics, but I believe the margin given to the Saudi press is not enough and it needs to be widened further, to enable the newspapers to satisfy and attract more local readers who may seek other media means which enjoy more freedom.

An editor (over 30) in the international news section at *Alriyadh* mentioned that:

Despite the 'enforced changes' which have occurred in the Saudi media in general and the Saudi press in particular, there are still some types of issues being avoided by the press due to censorship.

He added:

It worth noting that the Saudi press has achieved noticeable and significant steps to obtain more space to discuss issues compared with the situation three years ago. But the space gained is still not adequate, especially in connection with local issues.

A reporter (under 30, part time) in the national news section of *Aleqtisadiah* stressed that the margin of freedom has become larger than it was in the 1990s. He added that this freedom is not increasing because of pressures and demands from the

newspapers; it is increasing due to the communications revolution, especially the Internet and satellite channels, which is forcing the Ministry of Culture and Information to ease its censorship. He argued that, "Aljazeera news channel was the first key to boosting the margin of press freedom, not only in the Saudi press but also in the Arab media in general." He added that, "Recently, the Internet has been contributing to enlarge that space of freedom".

Similarly, a senior editor at *Alriyadh* (more than 20 years experience as a journalist and columnist) believed that censorship is not as strict as it used to be and the Saudi press now enjoys a relatively wide margin to publish stories of a type which used to be prohibited. "Strict censorship becomes hard to practise when other media enjoy a greater margin of freedom." He went on, "Uncensored websites and satellite channels make the exercise of strict censorship seem illogical." He argued:

> What was acceptable five years ago is not acceptable now; it's hard to cover up stories with the presence of different news websites and channels. Newspapers cannot obey the Ministry of Culture and Information orders not to follow stories when Internet websites and satellite channels cover them freely.

Furthermore, a reporter (under 30, part time) in the national news department of *Alriyadh* remarked, "I believe that newspapers are getting more space to discuss issues than before, however, the Editors-in-Chief fear losing their positions and that limits the freedom that the Saudi press can have He added:

> Some Editors-in-Chief still practise strict censorship, regardless of the orientations of the Ministry of Culture and Information to extend the margin of freedom; on the other hand Editors-in-Chief such as *Alwatan*'s are taking advantage of such orientations. That is why *Alwatan* most of the time is the first paper that takes the initiative, then other papers follow.

Similarly, an editor (over 30, part time) in *Aleqtisadiah* said, "Some newspapers help each other to boost the amount of freedom permitted by the Ministry of Culture and Information, through competing with each other in following news that the Saudi press used to avoid following." He argued that *Alwatan* contributes to extending this freedom

through tackling issues that other papers are scared to tackle, which gives them the confidence to follow the same stories.

Similarly, a national news journalist (over 30) at *Aleqtisadiah* said:

> The margin of freedom in the Saudi press has increased in recent years, but to a limited extent. In my opinion some newspapers are helping each other in widening this freedom through getting involved in certain topics, For instance, if a newspaper publishes a certain topic which used to be considered taboo, the other papers find it a good excuse for publishing the same or similar reports.

A national affairs journalist (under 30, a part time) on *Alriyadh* also argued that the Saudi media have stepped forward to attain more freedom over the last three years. He pointed out that the Saudi national newspapers need more latitude, particularly in covering local matters that the readers care about. Censorship is not as severe as it used to be, however the degree of freedom is still limited compared to international newspapers and online newspapers, he insisted. He believed that easing censorship would rekindle the Saudi press and boost its ability to compete with international media.

In contradiction to this, however, four journalists mentioned that they had not noticed any changes in the censorship practiced over the Saudi press. As discussed earlier, the effect of censorship differs from one department to another and from a journalist to another depends on the type of news that each journalist deals with. As a result some journalists do not feel any changing in censorship over the last three years. For example, journalists who work for international news departments will not feel the easing of censorship if they cover Arab issues. As discussed earlier, the Saudi press still cannot tackle issues or news that might affect relations between Saudi Arabia and another Arab country. Thus, any easing of censorship does not include all types of news. Therefore, journalists who deal with stories which involve government international policy or public anger are more to the effects of censorship more than a journalist who deals with crime news in Saudi Arabia.

An experienced senior editor (over 40) on *Aleqtisadiah* argued that censorship has not changed over time, and that Saudi newspapers always suffer from strict censorship. He added:

> The space that the Saudi press has to discuss sensitive issues is still narrow due to journalists' self-censorship, which is a result of the former official censorship that has been practised for many years. Many journalists, especially older ones, find it difficult to forget the long historical experience of censorship.

Likewise, a senior editor (over 30) at the *Alriyadh* paper mentioned that censorship remains the same, despite the fact that the issues that the Saudi press is prohibited from tackling are openly covered by uncensored media. He said, "It is painful when the American TV channel Alhura discusses issues to do with Saudi affairs, taking advantage of the inability of the Saudi media to cover these issues." He added that when the Saudi media are banned from discussing Saudi issues, news outlets such as Al-Hurra will take the chance and cover Saudi affairs from an American perspective.

Similarly, a senior editor on *Alriyadh* mentioned that he has been working for the paper for more than twenty years but he has not noticed any change in either the official or the editorial censorship.

> The freedom that is given to the Saudi media in general and the press in particular is still limited, which prevents the Saudi media from discussing some of the basic issues that interest the Saudis. The power of religious groups is playing a major role in the continuity of the acute censorship that has been practised on the Saudi media, he argued.

While 66.6% of the journalists complained about the negative effects of official and editorial censorship, 80.9% of the journalists confirmed that censorship of the national press has changed over the past three years. According to the interviewees, censorship has been eased since King Abdullah assumed power. This confirms what the observation method found, and also confirms the easing of censorship of the Saudi national press detected in recent studies (see Ehteshami, January 2008: Kapiszewski, 2006; Ehteshami and Write, 2007). Kapiszewski argues that the Saudi press started to cover stories "nobody would have dared" to discuss before (2006, p. 472). In an interview

with *Alwatan*, Walter Cutler, the former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Ambassador, said:

> I read the Saudi press regularly and I'm very impressed with the issues it has been tackling lately, issues which it was impossible to tackle in the past (Cutler, November 1, 2008).

The relaxation of censorship, as the journalists mentioned, is quite obvious, especially in the type of stories and topics presently appearing in the newspapers, as discussed in the observation chapter. Moreover, as seen in the discussion of the observation method, Saudi newspapers now widely criticize the government's performance, particularly that of the Ministries of Agriculture, Trade, and Labour. Issues such as domestic crime, women's rights and police crimes, which in the past were not allowed to appear in the press, have now also become widely discussed.

The relaxation of restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Culture and Information is measurable by the considerably decreasing number of circulars and instructions issued by the Ministry. The Editors-in-Chief of both *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah* confirmed that Ministry prohibition of the coverage of certain events has been sharply reduced. The currently limited interference of the Ministry as the authority responsible for sanctions on journalists and newspapers gives the Editor-in-Chief the flexibility to follow stories that used to be prohibited from above. In addition, the power that the Editors-in-Chief have gained due to their close relations with the King and the Crown Princes gives them the courage to challenge the Ministry's decisions.

Furthermore, the fact that dismissals and suspensions of newspaper personnel have become rare since King Abdullah assumed power in the Kingdom, allows Saudi editors, journalists and writers openly to discuss issues they did not dare to discuss in the past due to fear of punishment. Prior to 2006, Saudi journalists witnessed several cases of dismissal and suspension from work, as discussed in Chapter Two. In this context, *Aleqtisadiah's* Editor-in-Chief confirmed that during the past three years, his newspaper has not witnessed a single case of suspension or firing of journalists and he had not heard

news stories on the Internet as an excuse to follow those same stories. Websites take the initiative to break news and have the lead, especially as regards stories that the national press avoids following. The leak of prohibited stories such as the police abuse of two prisoners in Al-Hear prison helped the national newspapers to follow the story, because it had already become known to the public and sensitivity towards the story had diminished. The appearance of prohibited stories on websites such as Sabq and Alweeam gives Editors-in-Chief the courage to challenge some of the Ministry's decisions and publish the stories.

Before the existence of websites that focus on Saudi national news, the national media (press, television and radio) used to be the main source of Saudi national news. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, most Arabic satellite channels such as MBC, LBC, ART and Orbit are owned by Saudi businessmen who are close to the Saudi government. Arabic satellite channels including Al Jazeera news channel are not very interested in covering Saudi national or local affairs unless a major incident occurs, due to their orientation to cover Arab and global news but not national and domestic news. Therefore, when the Ministry of Culture and Information prohibited the publication of a certain item, Saudis could rarely find another source interested in following a national Saudi news story.

Consequently, the presence of websites which focus on local issues that interest the Saudi public forces the national press to take the risk and publish such stories, even if such stories were classified in the past as non-publishable, in order not to lose readers. Newspapers are keen now, in view of the fierce competition, to endeavour to satisfy their readers through covering issues concerning the public and criticizing parties not working for the public interest. Newspapers are aware that any ignorance or delay in publishing issues of concern would result in their losing their readers to alternative media outlets.

The reliance of websites on poor sources, as the journalists pointed out, means that these websites are full of exaggerated news, rumours and allegations. This forces officials to provide the national press with the latest news in order not to prevent websites

having the opportunity to publish news before them. Before the advent of Internet websites that focus on Saudi national affairs, government bodies such as the Ministry of the Interior preferred to hide and prohibit the publication of stories such as police abuse of prisoners. However, various government bodies are now keen to provide the national press with their news, including negative stories, to curtail or pre-empt rumours and allegations that might be published online. The Saudi press used to wait for an official statement from senior officials before it would publish a negative story related to government bodies, but now, as discussed in the observation chapter, the growth in the number of official spokesmen gives the national press the opportunity to ask about the latest incidents and raise issues that the government now finds it hard to hide.

According to the interviewees, Saudi national newspapers help each other in breaking down barriers and challenging taboos. When a newspaper publishes a story which used to be taboo, such as those about women's rights, this gives other papers the pretext to cover the same or similar stories. *Alwatan* is an excellent example which helps to break the fear of tackling certain issues such as government corruption and the poor performance of some government Ministries.

Conclusion:

Although the Saudi press has started to tackle issues that used to be taboo, political issues such as foreign policy and the actions taken by some segments of the public to express their dissatisfaction can still not be published in the Saudi national press. Journalists described censorship and the control imposed on newspapers as "illogical" in the presence of several news outlets which are not subject to the same censorship. This situation causes frustration to journalists, particularly when they persistently follow news and write reports which are then rejected by the Editor-in-Chief.

Websites which focus on Saudi national affairs place pressure on the national newspapers to follow, cover and publish issues considered taboo before the existence of

such websites. Video clips posted on the Internet place major pressure on newspapers to follow issues of public concern. Notable among these have been the clips of the Berjis case, the Alqatif girl and Al-Hear prison. Such clips place pressure not only on the national press to follow the story, but also on the government bodies who are responsible for the incident to go public and comment on it.

Journalists at *Alriyadh* complained more about the editorial censorship than journalists who work for *Aleqtisadiah*. This mainly because *Alriyadh* is a semi-governmental paper, which means that its news coverage is seen as the government's view. Consequently, *Alriyadh's* Editor-in-Chief must ensure that what gets publish does not conflict with the government's view. Unlike *Alriyadh, Aleqtisadiah,* on the other hand, does not suffer from the same pressure, which gives the Editor-in-Chef a greater degree of flexibility to publish regardless of the government view. Incidentally, there is no noticeable difference in the level of censorship between part time and full time journalists.

The censorship imposed on national newspapers has nevertheless eased to the extent that newspapers can now discuss issues which were off limits even three years ago. But despite this relaxation, Saudi journalists have not demanded press freedom in Saudi Arabia. Although Saudi journalists complain about the effects of censorship, no journalist of those interviewed mentioned or demanded press freedom in order to help the national press to compete with the Internet, which enjoys a wider margin of freedom than the national press. Moreover, the journalists did not demand the independence of press from the government, or for the government to stop its interference in national press activities. This indicates that the concept of press freedom which spread as a seemingly universal concept in the era of globalization, is not yet well disseminated at national level in Saudi Arabia.

The long history of censorship imposed on the Saudi press makes Saudi journalists accustomed to such controls, and they consider control and censorship as a right for the government. Amin (2002) mentions that the long history of censorship

created what he termed a "censorial culture". The absence of a perception of press freedom among Saudi journalists gives the government and religious leaders the opportunity to violate such freedoms. Amin points out "Concerns over freedom of expression are genuine; the term "responsible freedom"—always associated with self-censorship—is often misused by journalists when they cover issues dealing with the image of the country or national concerns" (2002, p. 128). Saudi journalists are still intimidated by the government because of their long experiences with government controls, and therefore exert self-censorship. By experience they know what irritates the Editor-in-Chief or the Ministry of Culture and Information. This now leads on to the chapter of interviews with the decision makers in the Ministry of Culture and Information, which focuses on censorship in the presence of the Internet and how the decision makers evaluate the pressure of the Internet on their decisions.

Chapter Eight

Interviews with Decision Makers at the Ministry of Culture and Information

Introduction:

After conducting the eight-week observation at the offices of *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah*, along with the interviews with journalists, I composed questions for media decision makers at the Ministry of Culture and Information. I contacted Dr. Saleh Annamlah, the Deputy Minister, to arrange interviews with media decision makers at the Ministry, who are in charge of decision-making related to the national media. Dr. Annamlah pointed out that there are 15 media decision makers at the Ministry, including himself and the Minister. I had hoped to interview all of them, but four, including the Minister himself, were too busy to be interviewed. The sample I was able to interview encompassed deputy ministers and their assistants responsible for media decisions, from March 15, 2008 to March 26, 2008. I interviewed 11 officials identified by the deputy as media decision makers in the Ministry, and conducted personal interviews lasting 30 to 50 minutes with each of them. The interviews were carried out privately, in the office of each official, except for one official who was interviewed in the presence of one of his advisors, who did not interfere. I applied the same interview techniques used with the journalists in writing direct and indirect quotations using a pen and a notebook. Thus, all direct and indirect quotations in this chapter are taken from the personal interviews with the media decision makers in the Ministry.

The interview consisted of five questions. The first question concerned the reasons for censoring the national press while news media such as websites and satellite

channels are not subject to Ministry censorship. The second question explored the pressure of national news coverage by such websites on media decision-making in the Ministry regarding coverage of these stories in the national press. The third question dealt with the pressures of national newspapers on the Ministry to ease official censorship, especially in the presence of news media which are not subject to Ministry censorship. The fourth question examined the main factors behind the recent easing of the censorship the Ministry exercises. The fifth question focused on the effect on official censorship of the dismantling of the Supreme Council of the Media in 2003.

Questions and answers of decision makers at the Ministry of Culture and Information

Question 1:

What are the main reasons for preventing national media coverage of news stories which other media such as the Internet and satellite channels can cover?

Decision makers listed three reasons for official censorship of the national press: political, religious and social. They said that the influence of each factor is hard to distinguish from other factors because they overlap. Eight (72.7%) of the interviewed sample said that religious reasons are the most influential ones behind official censorship.

Saudi Arabia is a state based on Islam so it is not acceptable to publish anything that is against Islam or anything which might irritate Saudi Arabia's religious society, one decision maker (former academician in Media Studies) said.

Similarly, another decision maker (worked as the head of Department of Printing Matters Censorship) stated that criticism of Islam, its principles or Saudi religious leaders is not acceptable in Saudi Arabia. He added, "The strong connection between Saudi Arabia and Islam has led us to censor whatever conflicts with this connection."

In addition, a decision maker (worked in different departments in the Ministry including the Department of Printing Matters Censorship) explained:

> There are three major reasons behind censorship in Saudi Arabia: political, religious and social; the most influential of them is the religious factor. Without religious pressures, official censorship would be much lighter. Religion is part of people's daily life and it affects their basic decisions.

He continued that there are two different levels of religious pressure on media decision makers to practise official censorship. First, the government is keen for the national media to support Islam and not to publish anything conflicting with Islamic principles. Second, the influence of religious leaders is an important factor that decision makers have to bear in mind when making their decisions.

In the same vein, another decision maker (worked in different department in the Ministry including the news department in the Saudi national television) said:

> When the national media follow a story that annoys the religious leaders, they try to place pressure on the Ministry to forbid the coverage of such a story. The pressure takes different forms such as phone calls and visits to the Ministry and sometimes they issue Fatwa accusing the Ministry and the media of opposing Islam.

Another decision maker (PhD from France) argued that there are mixed reasons for censorship, which go back historically to the birth of the Saudi media. He argued that Saudi Arabia suffered from isolation and closure during the period 1950 to 1970, for political reasons. The Saudi government during that period was oriented toward protecting Saudi society from new anti-monarchist political movements, especially that led by the Egyptian president Jamal Abd al-Nasser. This led the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information to censor both national and international media in order to curtail the effects of any foreign political or religious ideologies. He added that this isolation led to a national religious movement in the 1980s and 1990s, and said, "Censorship had originally been exercised to isolate Saudi society from the outside world

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for fear of other religious and ideological currents." He went on to say that religious pressure continues to grow in Saudi Arabia, not only in the media but also in politics, arguing that, "It is difficult to study the Saudi media without examining the religious factor, since one of the purposes behind the Saudi media is to support Islam."

Five (45.4%) of the officials interviewed mentioned the growing role of Saudi Arabia's conservative society in censorship of the Saudi national media. A decision maker (M.A in journalism from the United States) noted that "the media reflect society; it is hard to follow news that might annoy the Saudi society." Similarly, an interviewee (former academician in Political Science) mentioned "Censorship is an important method of protecting Saudi society from foreign ideas, ideologies and habits." He added, "Drinking, drugs and adultery, for example, are among the foreign habits that Saudi society has to be protected from."

The Saudi media also avoid issues related to Saudi women, due to the sensitivity of the country's conservative society towards such issues, as two of the interviewed sample mentioned.

> It took the national media decades to discuss a simple issue like women driving cars. The Ministry cannot challenge the people; hence when the topic of women driving became acceptable to society, the Ministry didn't hesitate to allow coverage of the issue, one interviewee (former businessman) said.

Similarly, another interviewee (PhD from the United States) mentioned that Saudis do not accept the publication of news stories which include scandals and details of people's private lives. He added that news about crime was not acceptable for a long time due to social reluctance to permit the publication of news that might harm particular families or tribes. Another interviewee (worked in different department in the Ministry including the news department in the Saudi national television) mentioned that the sensitivity of some issues must be taken into account. He added that the family is the most important unit in the Saudi society, and thus the handling of sexual issues, for example, upsets Saudi families who usually watch TV and read newspapers together.

"Stories related to sex, especially prostitution and homosexuality are among the stories that Saudi families do not want to know about," he said.

Conversely, one interviewee (came with the Minister in 2004) was of the opinion that the social factor is not as influential as it used to be. He added:

> Covering issues related to Saudi women, whether women's rights or violence against women, has become common, in spite of families' objections to coverage of such issues. There is an acceptance of coverage of certain issues which were off-limits for decades; this acceptance allows the Ministry to overlook the coverage of these issues.

He continued that publishing photos of Saudi woman in the Saudi press is an excellent example. "It is not permitted to publish women's photos, but when that happens we overlook it," he said.

The third reason behind official censorship, mentioned by seven (63.6%) of the interviewees, is the political factor. Decision makers emphasized the role of political reasons for the Ministry's censorship. One interviewee (former Academician in Media Studies) stated that politics is one of the most important reasons for the existence and the practice of official censorship in Saudi Arabia. He added:

> The national media in the Arab world in general represent the government's view, meaning that criticism of any country or leader in the media is taken as the point of view of the government, not the media. The publication of a negative news story in the Saudi national media about any Arab country might create a conflict between the two countries; this is a risk the decision makers are not willing to take.

Another interviewee (M.A in journalism from the United States) confirmed that any story that might harm relations between Saudi Arabia and other Arab states is hard to publish. For example, "If the Yemeni president cheated on his wife, the Saudi national media could not follow the story," he said. He added that this type of news might cause

conflict between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, even if the story was published in other media.

In addition, any criticism of Saudi political leaders, especially the King or the Crown Prince, is still forbidden in Saudi Arabia, as an interviewee (worked in different department in the Ministry including the news department in the Saudi national television) pointed out. He said:

> There is no way to allow the publication of news that criticizes the King or the Crown Prince. The King and the Crown Prince are not only the leaders of the country, but also very respectable symbols of the country.

Two other interviewees also mentioned the pressure exerted by some political leaders in the country who have interests in the national media and are advocates of strict censorship. One (former academician in Political Science) said, "I don't want to go into detail, but not all senior political leaders support King Abdullah's orientation towards openness." He added that some senior officials place pressure on the Ministry to prohibit the publication of stories in the national media, regardless of the coverage of the same stories in other media.

One interviewee (worked as the head of Department of Printing Matters Censorship), however, said that while censorship used to be an important tool to ensure that the national media did not criticize senior government officials or their decisions, recently pressure from senior officials has lessened due to the inclination of the King and the Crown Prince to give the media more leeway to criticize the performance of the government, including senior officials. He said:

> Saudi leaders, especially the King, understand the role of the national press as an independent entity, which gives us the courage to allow the national press to criticize some senior officials - criticism which used to be prohibited in the past.

Question 2:

To what extent does the presence of news websites which focus on national and local news put pressure on media decision makers to allow the national press to cover these issues?

The answers to this question can be divided into two groups. Firstly, eight (72.7%) of the decision makers stressed that online coverage of some local issues has put them under strong pressure to allow the national press to follow these issues. Secondly, on the other hand, three (27.2%) decision makers noted that their decisions are influenced by different factors, especially the government's recent orientation toward openness, which allows the national media to discuss issues which used to be prohibited.

One interviewee (worked in different departments in the Ministry including the Department of Printing Matters Censorship) mentioned that the publication or broadcasting of certain local news on the Internet or by satellite channels prompts the Ministry to allow the publication of the same stories or similar stories by the national media. For example, "If the national press took the initiative in publishing a sensitive story such as that concerning the Alqatif girl, this would create a social and religious conflict in the conservative Saudi society, and in some cases force political leaders to punish those responsible for the publication." However, as this official mentioned, when the story is published on websites or satellite channels, the public loses its sensitivity towards it, and it therefore becomes more acceptable for the national press to publish it.

In the same way, an interviewee (M.A. in journalism from the United States) commented, "News about crime is the best example of the influence of websites on decision makers. The Alqatif girl is an example of how powerful the pressure of the Internet is." Another interviewee (worked in different department in the Ministry

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including the news department in the Saudi national television) said that news on terrorist incidents that took place in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s and at the turn of the century was not allowed to be published, but now the national media regularly cover these stories. He continued, "Now Saudi TV channels cover terrorist attacks live."

In addition, as one decision maker (worked as the head of Department of Printing Matters Censorship) pointed out, the spread of news stories online forces the Ministry to allow the national media to cover them in order not to lose local readers and audiences. He said:

> Saudi readers and audiences seek information and news either in the national or international media, therefore, we permitted the national press to follow stories which used to be prohibited in order to help the Saudi media to keep their readers and viewers. We try to balance Ministry censorship; on the one hand we allow the national press to cover stories in order to maintain its readership, on the other hand, we have to ensure that what gets published does not create a religious, social or political conflict.

Likewise, an interviewee (PhD from France) mentioned that nowadays the Saudi audience has access to a variety of news media from which they can choose. His view was that this makes the Ministry more flexible towards the national media, especially in the coverage of local news. He added:

> With hundreds of websites and TV channels that follow the local Saudi news, there are no secrets any more; it is hard to cover up stories. Therefore, strict censorship was quite acceptable in the past; however, now it causes the Saudi media to lose their audience. Saudi national TV channels have lost their viewership since the birth of satellite channels, therefore, we do not want the Saudi national press to lose its readership.

In addition, a decision maker (PhD from the United States) argued that allowing the publication of some stories has become necessary to correct false news and information published on the Internet. He added:

The silence of the national media on a number of issues has given other media the chance to cover these stories, most of the time in an exaggerated manner, full of lies and rumours.

Therefore, according to him, permitting the publication of some stories has become essential to correct these lies and rumours, because silence encourages more lies. He continued to say that the bird flu story was an issue that the Ministry preferred not to publish in order not to frighten people. However, the online coverage of that issue was accompanied by such exaggeration that the Ministry decided to allow publication in order to give the public the true picture of the epidemic.

Two of the sample pointed out that Internet pressure does not apply to all kinds of stories, due to other important factors, such as the religious angle. One of them (came with the Minister in 2004) asserted, "There are many issues that are still not acceptable for coverage, even if they are covered on the Internet." He pointed out that the coverage of the case of the Alqatif girl by the national media was the product of massive coverage of the story by the Internet and satellite channels. However, a story such as the Egyptian president's refusal of the Saudi proposal to build a bridge between the two countries was not published by the national media despite the coverage of the story on the Internet.

On the other hand, three (27.2%) of the decision makers were of the opinion that the Ministry allows the national press to follow stories which used to be prohibited because of the government's present orientation towards giving the media more freedom than in the past, rather than because of the pressure of other news media. One of them (worked with three different Ministers of Culture and Information) mentioned that King Abdullah's leaning towards openness has encouraged the Ministry to practise more relaxed censorship than in the past, and one argued that:

The mentality of the Saudi leadership has changed and the pressure on the Ministry by higher officials is less than before, which helps the decision makers to be more flexible with the national media. Suspensions of media decision makers in the Ministry, which was common in the past, used to make it difficult to allow some news to be published.

He said that 13 years ago he himself had been transferred from his department to another because he allowed the publication of a story. However, "These suspensions have disappeared recently and this has led decision makers to give the national media more latitude in news coverage," he claimed.

Question 3:

Elaph.com and Alarabiya.net reported that, at a meeting with the Minister of Information and Culture in 2007, the Editors-in-Chief of the eight national newspapers demanded that the Ministry of Culture and Information ease its censorship. To what extent do newspapers' demands pressure the Ministry to ease its censorship?

The answers to this question fall into two groups. First, eight (72.7%) of the decision makers acknowledged that the demands of newspapers do pressure them to permit publication, especially in the public interest, but on the other hand, three (27.2%) decision makers mentioned that demands from the national newspapers do not affect their decisions. An interviewee (former businessman) mentioned that the Editors-in-Chief are keen to cover stories, especially those known to the Saudi public through the Internet or satellite channels. He added, "When the Saudi public starts to talk about a certain issue, newspapers begin to negotiate with the Ministry to allow the publication of stories about the issue, which sometimes happens." Similarly, another interviewee (former academician in Media Studies) mentioned that Editors-in-Chief put pressure on the decision makers to allow them to cover certain type of stories. However, the response of the Ministry varies depending on the story, he added.

Three of the decision makers stated that some Editors-in-Chief do not wait for permission from the Ministry in order to publish. One of them (worked in different departments in the Ministry including the Department of Printing Matters Censorship) pointed out that some Editors-in-Chief take their decisions without getting back to the Ministry. He said:

Some Editors-in-Chief are more powerful than the Ministry decision makers, which means they not only take decisions without contacting the Ministry but also sometimes ignore the Ministry's decisions. The Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh*, for example, is more powerful than the Minister of Culture and Information himself.

Similarly, an interviewee (worked with four different Ministers of Culture and Information) mentioned:

Although the national newspapers are officially under the Ministry's authority, some editors are no longer waiting for the Ministry's permission on many topics. This situation creates a kind of an unwritten agreement between the Ministry and some powerful Editors-in-Chief; if the latter have obtained the approval of the political leaders, they can go ahead and publish the story without consulting the Ministry.

In addition, another interviewee (worked as the head of Department of Printing Matters Censorship) mentioned that the Saudi press has become more powerful than before, and this gives it the courage to ignore some of the Ministry's decisions. "I have been working for the Ministry for 20 years and I have never felt the power of the national press until recently," he said. He gave an example of the London-based Arabic language newspaper *Alhyat*, which was banned by the Ministry in August 2007 for a week. When the Ministry announced its decision, the Saudi national newspapers pressured the Ministry to lift the suspension. However, when the Ministry did not respond to their pressure, some editors complained directly to King Abdullah, who lifted the suspension himself.

Three interviewees claimed that the newspapers always demand relaxation of censorship, but the effect of their pressure is limited. One (came with the Minister in 2004) argued that the recent easing of censorship is not a response to any outside pressure, saying:

The reason behind the easing of censorship is that the Ministry believes that it is inappropriate to exercise rigorous censorship in the presence of accessible uncensored media.

Similarly, another interviewee (PhD from France) mentioned that the Ministry has given the press more latitude to discuss many issues which used to be prohibited in the past, but this is due to the orientation of the Ministry, not pressure from the newspapers. He continued, "Newspapers always demand more relaxed censorship but the recent boost of freedom given to them is a result of the Ministry's orientations towards easing censorship." One interviewee (former academician in Political Science) said that he knows nothing about the editors' wishes. He said:

> I do not know of the editors' demands but I think that the real reason behind the recent easing of censorship is the presence of other media, which the Ministry cannot control, and which are free to publish any type of stories and about which we can do nothing.

Question 4:

The Saudi journalists I interviewed claimed that the Ministry's censorship throughout the last three years has been eased and that the national press has been given more space to discuss issues which used to be prohibited. Is this a deliberate step by the Ministry itself or merely a response to outside pressure?

The answers to this question fall into three groups. The first group, which consisted of four of the interviewees, said that the easing of censorship is a result of the Ministry's belief that the censorship which used to be exercised over the national press in the past is not suitable for the present time. One interviewee (PhD from France) explained this as follows:

> The Ministry has the potential to give the national newspapers more freedom, and when we felt that the time was right we didn't hesitate in giving it to them. The time being right means that Saudi society, the political leaders and the Saudi press itself are ready to accept and practise responsible and partly free journalism.

Another interviewee (former academician in Political Science) argued:

The space that the Ministry has recently given to the national press is a deliberate step and will be followed by other steps. One of the issues we discussed with the Minister in the recent meeting is whether or not to give the national newspapers absolute independency from the Ministry in order to fulfil their responsibilities. Establishing an independent non-governmental council to deal with all issues related to the national press, from licensing to press laws, is one of the suggestions about which the Ministry is thinking seriously.

Another decision maker (former businessman) claimed that the wider margin of freedom given to the national press recently is a deliberate step by Iyad Madani, the Minister of Culture and Information. Since his appointment as Minister of Culture and Information in 2004, official censorship has been eased. The interviewee said, "Since the first meeting with the Minister four years ago, he has been very clear about giving the national media more space to discuss issues which used to be prohibited."

On the other hand, the second group, which consisted of five of the decision makers, argued that the easing of censorship is a response to the pressure of different parties. One of the advocates of this opinion (M.A. in journalism from the United States) mentioned that the main reason behind the easing of censorship is the existence of different media (online and satellite) that Saudis can view, over which the Ministry does not have the power of censorship, and added:

> Accessible international and national media have placed huge pressure on the Ministry to rethink the old methods of censorship, especially of the national press. The existence of websites discussing even small domestic issues does not directly put pressur on the Ministry, but they give the national press the courage to publish stories regardless of the Ministry's decisions.

Similarly, another interviewee (worked in different departments in the Ministry including the Department of Printing Matters Censorship) believed that the Ministry does not have the power to control news and information any more. He said:

> The massive development in communications is forcing the Ministry to change its censorship because the reason behind censorship is to prevent

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information from reaching people. The Saudi national media used to be the only source of information and news available to the Saudis, however, now hundreds of satellite channels and millions of websites are at their fingertips. Under the new circumstances, easing censorship is not an option, it is a necessity.

One interviewee (former Academician in Media Studies) argued that the government's orientation towards openness and giving more freedom both to the people and the media is a significant factor behind the easing of censorship. He added that the King's support of openness was seen in the launch of the King Abdulaziz Centre for National Dialogue, participated in by representatives of many different categories and minorities in Saudi society. The organization has guaranteed the right of Saudis to express their views transparently without facing any consequences. He said:

> An issue such as the right of the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia to join the Saudi army, which had never been discussed in public, is one of the basic issues discussed by the King Abdulaziz Centre for National Dialogue. In an environment which encourages people to discuss different issues that used to be very sensitive, the Ministry finds itself in a healthy position to increase the margin of freedom given to local media.

Likewise, an interviewee (worked with four different Ministers of Culture and Information) argued that the easing of censorship is a response to the pressure of the government's orientation towards openness, which gives national newspapers the courage to tackle issues that the Ministry prohibits. He added that such an orientation gives the national press the power to challenge the Ministry's decisions, saying:

> The support of political leaders towards boosting freedom on different levels, not only for the media but also for women and minorities, forces the Ministry as a part of the government to respond to such orientations and increase the margin of freedom in the national press.

The third group of interviewees, which consisted of two of the decision makers, thought that the easing of censorship is both a response to outside pressure and also a result of the willingness of the Ministry itself to ease such censorship. One of the two

(came with the Minister in 2004) argued that the easing of censorship is a deliberate step by the Ministry which would be hard to implement if the political leaders of the country did not have the same inclinations.

"One of the first decisions taken by King Abdullah when he assumed power in the Kingdom in 2005 was to release all political prisoners," he said. Such actions on the part of the government, coupled with the Ministry's willingness to ease censorship, had helped to accelerate the easing of censorship. Correspondingly, another interviewee (worked in different department in the Ministry including the news department in the Saudi national television) mentioned that the Ministry would not have the power to extend the margin of freedom if political leaders opposed such a step. Therefore, the easing of censorship is a deliberate step taken by the Ministry and supported by political leaders.

Question 5:

To what extent does the dissolution of the Supreme Council of the Media give the Ministry autonomy and independence to take decisions related to the national press and as a result help to ease the official censorship?

The answers to this question are divided into two groups. The first group, composed of eight (72.7%) of the interviewees, asserted that the abolition of the Supreme Council of the Media and the resulting freedom from its interference, have positively helped the Ministry to become more independent. They also pointed out the effect the abolition of the Council has had on limiting the suspensions of reporters, editors and writers.

One interviewee (worked in different departments in the Ministry including the Department of Printing Matters Censorship) said:

> The Ministry was definitely freed from a higher dominant power which used to take decisions that the Ministry should have taken by itself. With the Council in existence, we could not take any decision without seeking the Council's permission. However, now we are able to take decisions without any pressure from any party.

Another interviewee (PhD from the United States) confirmed that it had been hard for the Ministry to do its job in the presence of higher government bodies which had the authority and the power to take some of the basic decisions that the Ministry itself should have taken. Moreover, another decision maker (M.A. in journalism from the United States) mentioned that the Council does not fit with the present time. He explained:

> The continuation of the Council is not a realistic decision at the present time, which requires rapid decisions from the Ministry. The absence of the Supreme Council of the Media has given the Ministry and the Saudi media the chance to breathe. The dissolution of the Council not only gave the Ministry independence, but also took with it the unjustifiable suspension and firing of journalists and writers which used to be ordered by the Council."

One interviewee (former businessman) pointed out that the presence of a higher power that interferes with the Ministry's decisions is unreasonable. He added:

> It is illogical for the Ministry to wait for permission from the Ministry of the Interior, who used to control the Supreme Council of the Media. The police mentality which believed in the isolation of other points of view which did not agree with that mentality was an essential reason behind the suspension and the firing of journalists and writers, which used to be common when the Council was in charge of the Saudi media.

An interviewee (worked as the head of Department of Printing Matters Censorship) also argued that the removal of the Council has stressed the independence of the Ministry in decision-making. He explained this as follows:

> I'm now able to take decisions without thinking about what the Council would say about my decision. Decision makers used to practise self-censorship in order not to get suspended or transferred to another department in the Ministry.

He added that the threat of suspension was not limited to journalists and writers but also included some of the Ministry's employees. However, since the dissolution of the Council, suspensions of Ministry employees have disappeared, he claimed. Additionally, one interviewee (worked in different departments in the Ministry including news department in the Saudi national television) stated:

> Since the dissolution of the Council and the arrival of King Abdullah, suspension of newspapers and journalists has rarely been practised in the national press.

On the other hand, the second group of interviewees, which consisted of three (27.2%) of the decision makers, argued that the Council was established when there was a need for such a government body to set out and highlight the objectives and the agenda of the Saudi media and that when the necessity for its role was over, it was dissolved. One interviewee (PhD from France) said, "I cannot find any connection between the Saudi media and the dissolution of the Supreme Council of the Media." He added that the margin of freedom was increased due to new government orientations, rather than the dissolution of the Supreme Council of the Media and claimed that the dissolution of the Council had no effect on the freedom of the Saudi press.

Similarly, another decision maker (worked with three different Ministers of Culture and Information) mentioned that the easing of censorship is due to international and local changes and it is not related to the dissolution of the Council in any way. He said:

I was one of the members of the Supreme Council of the Media and I know its role very well. The Council's role was to plan the main policies of Saudi media and it did not interfere in the business of the Ministry.

He went on to say that the Council was dismantled because it was no longer needed, particularly in the context of the closure of other Supreme Councils in 2003. He said the Supreme Council of Labour, the Supreme Council of Environmental Protection, the Supreme Council of Youth and the Supreme Council of Science, Art and Literature had all been dissolved because they had fulfilled the needs for which they were established.

Reasons for Censorship:

The interviewees focused on three overlapping reasons behind the existence of censorship over the national media in Saudi Arabia: these were religious, social and political. Firstly, the decision makers cited religious reasons as the main factor behind censorship of the national media. An interviewee argued, "Without religious pressures, official censorship would be much easier." Similarly, as discussed throughout this study, the religious factor is seen as one of the most influential factors affecting the selection of news, and it also places pressure on the decision makers to practise strict censorship over the national media in general and the press in particular.

The decision makers' understanding of the power of religious factors as one of the main reasons behind the existence of official censorship makes them deal cautiously with issues that might annoy religious leaders. This explains why eight of the interviewees mentioned the vital influence of religious factors on the practice of official censorship.

The main reason for the salience of religious factors in censorship policy is the power of religious leaders. In a religious country like Saudi Arabia, religious leaders are very powerful due to their close relationship with the political leadership and also because they are respected in the religious Saudi society. Therefore, the religious leaders

not only exert huge influence on the national media and the Ministry but also on the political leaders of the country. As discussed in Chapter Three, religious leaders place enormous pressure on the Saudi King every time a new mass medium is introduced to the country.

The second reason behind strict censorship, as mentioned by 45.4% of the interviewees, is social factors. As discussed in Chapter One, Saudi Arabia's society fears losing its cultural identity as it becomes more open to other cultures. Therefore, some individuals support strict censorship in order to protect their culture. Klang argues, "The legitimizing motivations behind controlling flows of information often lie in paternalistic desires to protect weaker individuals, whether they are children or adults" (2005, p.1). Al-Bishr (1994) argues that official censorship is an important tool that the Saudi government uses to protect its people from the influence of foreign ideas. Similarly, Al Qarni (2004) argues that the Saudi public actually advocates strict censorship over the national media. As shown in Chapter One, Saudi Arabia has a conservative religious society, which means that the publication of stories that challenge Islamic principles or Saudi traditions might create a conflict not only between the religious leaders and the Ministry but also between the Saudi people and the Ministry. A decision maker argued, "The Ministry cannot challenge the conservative society."

A famous example of the effects of publishing material that offends conservative, religious societies was the publication of the Danish cartoons of prophet Mohammed. The cartoons, first published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September 2005, angered Muslims worldwide, stirring up fury which spilled over into violence (BBC, February 15, 2006). The BBC mentions that hundreds of thousands of Muslims burnt Danish flags outside Danish consulates in several different Islamic countries. In countries such as Indonesia, Syria and Iran, people boycotted Danish goods. The *Independent* newspaper mentioned that Saudi people called for a boycott of Danish goods (February 10, 2006) and added that Denmark had advised its citizens not to travel to Saudi Arabia due to the public anger that the cartoons had sparked.

Therefore, in a religious society like Saudi Arabia, the Ministry is very cautious not to anger the Saudi public by allowing the publication of materials that challenge Islamic principles or Saudi cultural values. The Danish cartoons are not a unique case which triggered the public anger towards the national and international media. As a matter of fact, the Ministry itself faced public anger every time a new mass medium was introduced to the Saudi public. For example, the introduction of a television service in Saudi Arabia was delayed until 1965, due to pressure from the conservative society (Rugh, 2004). "Conservative elements strongly resisted introduction of the new medium altogether, and the government hesitated to push because of unpredictable social consequences", (Rugh, p. 192). Al-Shebili points out that protests took place in several cities across the Kingdom, rejecting the introduction of a television service in the country (2002).

A third factor mentioned by 63.6% of the interviewees is the political one. The interviewees stated that negative stories about friendly countries, in particular Arab states, are extremely sensitive and that the Ministry is aware of their consequences for bilateral relations with the country in question. The decision makers understand that the sensitivity of such an issue makes it unpublishable either in the national press or on the national television and radio.

In addition, interviewees raised the issue of the punishment and suspension of Ministry employees due to the publication of material which annoys the government. They pointed out that punishment and suspension are not exclusive to journalists and writers in the national press, but also threaten some of the Ministry's employees. As a matter of fact, one of the decision makers mentioned that he was transferred from his position to another because of a decision he took regarding the publication of certain materials. Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, in January 2008, Jamal Almoagal, a TV presenter for the Al-Ekhbariya news channel was suspended after airing a phone call on the channel from a Saudi woman who criticized the Saudi government and accused it of corruption. Elaph mentions that the Ministry not only suspended the

presenter of the programme and stopped all live programmes on the channels, but also fired Mohammed Altunisay, the head of Al Ekhbariya (January 30, 2008).

Although a discussion with decision makers about the main reasons behind Ministry censorship over the Saudi national press may not present a justification for the imposition of strict censorship, understanding the main reasons gives us a clear picture of the complexity of the job these men do. Not only do they face pressure to practise strict censorship, there are also pressures to ease censorship, which will be discussed in the following two sections. The pressures exerted by religious leaders, society and the political leadership on the Ministry to impose strict censorship, on the one hand, and the presence of the Internet, the orientation of King Abdullah toward openness, the dismantling of the Supreme Council of the Media and the pressure of the national newspapers on the other, makes the Ministry's role very complex. This leads to the second part of the discussion, which focuses on the presence of news websites not subject to the Ministry's authority and the pressure that these websites place on decision makers to ease the Ministry's censorship.

The Pressure of the Internet:

Although religious, social and political factors place huge pressure on the Ministry to practise censorship over the national press, the presence of news websites applies a contrary pressure, towards easing censorship. This argument was cited by 72.7% of the interviewees, who stressed that the publication of stories online influences the likelihood of publication of the same stories in the national press. The powerful presence of websites as a key pressure to ease the Ministry's censorship derives from four different factors, according to the decision makers.

Firstly, the publication of stories online helps to ease sensitivity towards some issues, the decision makers said. The publication on websites of stories considered religiously, socially or politically sensitive, such as the Alqatif girl story, reduces the

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sensitivity of such a story. When a story becomes well known to the Saudi public, the Ministry finds it easier to allow the publication of that story in the press.

Secondly, the presence of websites which focus on Saudi domestic affairs makes the practice of strict censorship seem unreasonable. As discussed in Chapter One, the Ministry had been exercising heavy censorship not only on the national media, but also on foreign media. The Ministry used to censor heavily all printed media that entered the Saudi market, and to block some radio stations that Saudis could receive. An interviewee argued, "Censorship had originally been exercised to isolate Saudi society from the outside world for fear of other religious and ideological currents."

However, since the introduction of satellite channels in 1991, the Ministry's iron grip over what Saudis watch, listen and read, has began to loosen. Although the presence of satellite channels gives Saudis other alternatives besides the national media, the ownership of some of the most popular satellite channels such as MBC, Orbit and ART by Saudi businessmen allied to the Saudi government makes their content free from anything that might annoy the government, as discussed in Chapter Three. Moreover, channels such as Al Jazeera mostly do not follow any local and domestic Saudi news unless it becomes well-known to the Saudi public, because they are oriented to cover global and Arab news rather than local and domestic news. However, the introduction of the Internet in 1999 has given the Saudis a new medium through which they not only consume information and news but also make their voices heard. One interviewee said, "With hundreds of websites and TV channels that follow local Saudi news, there are no secrets any more. It is hard to cover up stories."

In addition, controlling information and news becomes a difficult task in the presence of advanced communication technology such as the Internet and mobile phones. Sussman argues, "The rapidly growing volume of news and information on the Internet poses immediate problems for governments intent on influencing or controlling the ideas accessible in cyberspace. Old methods of censoring news and information are being remodeled to cope with the new communication technologies" (September-October 2000,

p.537). Therefore, the Ministry found that the old form of censorship which they had been practised over the national press for decades was no longer effective at the present time.

A third reason which, according to decision makers, lies behind the strength of websites as a factor in the easing of censorship is that the Ministry fears that the national press will lose its readership. Decision makers mentioned the heavy competition that the national press faces from websites that focus on Saudi national affairs. This competition, the decision makers argued, affects the readership of the national press.

Three Saudi newspapers (*Al Nadwa*, *Al Bilad* and *Al Madina*) are facing financial problems due to a drop in their circulation and advertising revenue, as discussed in the previous chapter. Gunter argues that "hard copy newspapers risk losing a large segment of their readership that exhibits a particular preference" (2003, p. 23). He continues, "Internet technology, in the way it accesses and presents information, is changing the rules of publishing and news distribution in many ways" (2003, p. 23). Moreover, Orr points out that "News publishers are faced with an aging readership, declining revenues, sinking circulation figures, and a fragmented sense of mission" (cited in Gunter, 2003, p. 23). Killin points out that the *Washington Post*'s circulation continued to decline since March 2007 (November 5, 2007). He adds that the circulation fell by 3.2% to 635,000 on Sept. 30, according to a report released by the Audit Bureau of Circulations, an independent, third-party audit of print circulation, readership and website activity (November 5, 2007). The *Washington Post* is not the only American paper which faces declining circulation; the top 20 newspapers in the U.S., including the *Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times* are all facing falling circulation (Killin, November 5, 2007). Therefore, the Ministry sees the easing of censorship as essential in order to help the national press survive heavy competition. One interviewee said, "Strict censorship was quite acceptable in the past, however, now it leads the Saudi media to lose its audience."

Fourthly, the presence of websites that focus on Saudi national affairs forces the Ministry to ease censorship in order to correct some of the false news and information that these websites publish. The reliance of websites focusing on Saudi local affairs on unreliable sources makes them, in turn, unreliable. Website credibility is one of the critical issues that online news faces, due to a lack of journalistic standards. One interviewee argued that easing censorship over the national press has become necessary in order to correct false news and information published by websites.

Although "Censorship had originally been exercised to isolate the Saudi society from outside for fear of other religious and ideological currents", as one interviewee put it, this way of thinking is starting to vanish. In the past, the banning of certain types of stories in the national media meant that in many cases Saudis were unable to find out about them because the Saudi national media were the only media available to them. Now however, a ban on the publication of stories gives websites such as Sabq and Alweeam the opportunity to follow up these stories, relying on sources which have often proved untrustworthy. This situation has led several government bodies such as the Ministries of the Interior, Health and Justice to appoint a spokesman in order to clarify and respond to what websites publish, as discussed in Chapter Five.

Factors Stimulating the Easing of Censorship

Although the presence of news websites play a major role as a key factor which places pressure on the Ministry to ease its censorship, the decision makers mentioned four other factors besides the news websites which have prompted the Ministry to ease its censorship. These factor have contributed to the relaxation of the Ministry's censorship over the national press. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Saudi press enjoys more latitude now, compared to what it had even three years ago, to discuss issues which used to be taboo. Criticism of the government's performance, the crimes of the religious police and women's rights are among the issues which are now regularly covered by the national press due to the easing of Ministry censorship.

The first factor that the decision makers mentioned as helping to ease the Ministry's censorship is the government's orientation towards openness and reform. As discussed in the previous chapter, King Abdullah's orientation towards relative openness allows some individuals, groups and organizations to express their opinions without fear of the consequences. In his meeting with leading reformers in the country, King Abdullah told them, "Your project is my project" (*Washington Times*, October 10, 2007). The *Washington Times* reports that "In one of his first acts as king, he broke with tradition, pardoning three liberal dissidents jailed for their views." Moreover, the foundation of the King Abdulaziz Centre for National Dialogue allowed Saudi citizens to discuss some taboos. One of the purposes of founding this centre was to increase the participation of members of society in discussing issues that interest them in order to help achieve justice, equality, and respect for different points of view (see http://www.kacnd.org/). Doran argued that King Abdullah "has advocated relaxing restrictions on public debate, promoted democratic reform, and supported a reduction in the power of the clerics" (January/February, 2004).

With King Abdullah's ambitions for openness nationally and internationally, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is striving to build tolerance between different nations, religions and cultures. For example, King Abdullah called for international religious dialogue between different religions. Abu-Nasr and Shihri (March 26, 2008) point out that "the message from King Abdullah, which was welcomed by Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders, comes at a time of stalled peace initiatives and escalating tensions in the region." Religions for Peace (March 26, 2008) points out that "The world's largest and most representative multi-religious coalition today hailed Saudi King Abdullah's powerful plea for dialogue among Muslims, Christians, and Jews." Similarly, Heckler reports that "leaders of the World Jewish Congress have endorsed a call by King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia for more dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims worldwide to reinforce common values among the Abrahamic faiths" (April, 16, 2008).

This orientation has encouraged the Ministry of Culture and Information to ease its censorship over the national press without fearing punishment. As discussed earlier,

the punishment is not exclusive to journalists and writers, but could also include Ministry employees, and as one official pointed out, through banning coverage of controversial issues such as sex and women's rights, decision makers were protecting themselves. However, since King Abdullah came to power, the suspension of Ministry employees has ceased. An interviewee pointed out that "These suspensions have disappeared recently and this led decision makers to extend the leeway that the national media have in news coverage."

A second factor that has stimulated the easing of censorship was the abolition of the Supreme Council of the Media. 72.7% of the decision makers argued for the positive impact on the Ministry's performance of the dismantling of the Supreme Council of the Media, saying that since the Council was dismantled, the Ministry has become more independent because it is now free of the Council's authority over the Ministry, which used to allow the Council to interfere with the Ministry's work. An interviewee argued, "The absence of the Supreme Council of the Media gave the Ministry and the Saudi media the chance to breathe." Although the Supreme Council of the Media was abolished two years before King Abdullah's accession to the throne, he had been leading reforms in the country since 1995, when King Fahd suffered a heart attack and could not perform his full duties as King. Therefore, the dismissal of the Supreme Council of the Media can be seen as evidence of King Abdullah's orientation towards openness, as discussed above.

In addition, one of the positive impacts of the dismissal of the Council, according to some of the interviewees, is that it has reduced the pressure of senior political leaders on the Ministry. It is worth mentioning that the head of the Supreme Council of the Media was the Minister of the Interior, Prince Naif ben Abdulaziz, a towering political figure in Saudi Arabia. The authority which the Minister of the Interior used to have over the Council and as a result over the Ministry of Culture and Information and the national media meant that some media decisions came directly from the Ministry of the Interior rather than the Ministry of Culture and Information. One of the decision makers argued, "It is illogical for the Ministry of Culture and Information to wait for permission from the Ministry of the Interior, which used to control the Supreme Council of the Media." A

further positive impact of the Council's dissolution, according to decision makers, has been a reduction in punitive measures against journalists.

A third factor which, as 45.4% of the decision makers mentioned, has stimulated the easing of Ministry censorship is the newspapers' demands for more relaxed censorship. The demands of newspapers to be allowed to follow stories covered by uncensored media has forced decision makers to respond. An interviewee pointed out that, "When the Saudi public starts to talk about a certain issue, newspapers begin to negotiate with the Ministry to allow the publication of stories about that issue, and this sometimes happens." These demands arise from the competition that newspapers face from websites which are not subject to Ministry censorship. As discussed in the observation chapter, the Internet has become a strong competitor to national newspapers because of its ability to cover stories that the national press cannot cover due to Ministry censorship. The pressure of websites on the national press to cover stories has been transferred upwards by the newspapers, who seek the easing of Ministry censorship in order to help the national press survive the heavy competition.

In addition, the decision makers mentioned the increasing power of the newspapers' Editors-in-Chief as one of the factors pressing for a relaxation of censorship. As discussed in the Saudi gatekeeping chapter, Saudi Editors-in-Chief gain their power from their close relationships with the King and the Crown Prince. The strong relationship of media leaders with political leaders has encouraged some newspapers to ignore some Ministry decisions, as discussed in Chapter Six.

The fourth factor mentioned by the interviewees as being important in the easing of censorship was a deliberate policy within the Ministry towards such easing, in the belief that practising strict censorship is inappropriate in the present era. According to the decision makers, the Ministry itself believes in the need to ease censorship because strict censorship is now unreasonable. Although the easing of censorship can be seen as a result of outside pressures, the willingness of the Ministry's decision makers to ease censorship helps to implement relatively relaxed censorship. One of the interviewees thought that "Saudi society, the political leaders and the Saudi press itself are ready to accept and

practise responsible and partly free journalism." Since Iyad Madani was appointed as the Minister of Culture and Information in 2005, he has been very eager to relax censorship. An interviewee pointed out that "Since the first meeting with the Minister four years ago, he has been very clear about giving the national media more latitude to discuss issues which used to be prohibited." One of the decision makers said, "The Ministry has the potential to give national newspapers more freedom and when we felt that the time was right we didn't hesitate in giving it to them." Another argued that "The reason behind the easing of censorship is that the Ministry believes that strict censorship is inappropriate given the accessibility of uncensored media." Another argued, "The space the Ministry has recently given to the national press is a deliberate step and will be followed by other steps." He added that "Establishing an independent non-governmental council to deal with all issues related to the national press from licensing to press laws is one of the suggestions about which the Ministry is thinking seriously."

Conclusion:

Interviews with decision makers at the Ministry of Culture and Information revealed that the Ministry has a desire to ease the censorship imposed on the national press. However, it is obvious that the Ministry is not willing to abandon censorship and interference in press activities. Despite the presence of informational and communication technologies that the Ministry cannot control, the Ministry still interferes in the national press. As a result, the Ministry only alleviated censorship on newspapers to help them compete with other news media which are not subject to the same censorship. Fear in the Ministry that newspapers may lose their readership forced it to ease censorship imposed on the national newspapers. The Ministry's keenness to control and censor the national press is a main obstacle and threat to the existence of the press freedom in Saudi Arabia. Although easing of censorship is no doubt considered a positive change for the Saudi press, it is not enough to make the national press capable of competing with global media. What is needed is a press which Saudis can rely on and which enjoys great freedom in publishing and broadcasting news and information. The Ministry still insists on interfering in press activities because it believes that the role of the press must lean

towards supporting the government not representing the public. Such insistence gives a clear indication that the Saudi government is not moving quickly to offer press freedom. Therefore, the maximum that the national press can hope for is easing censorship regardless of the freedom that global media enjoy. Such a situation is seriously affecting the national press which needs more than easing censorship to survive such heavy competition.

Findings, Recommendations and Conclusion

This study has examined censorship in Saudi Arabia and how Saudi journalists and decision makers in the Ministry of Culture and Information evaluate such censorship in the presence of the Internet. Through observing the operations of two Saudi newspapers and conducting interviews with 21 Saudi journalists and 11 decision makers in the Ministry, I developed a deep understanding of the complexity of censorship in the national press. My examination of censorship of the national press in the presence of the Internet has resulted in the following findings:

1-The Internet:

- News websites have become a significant competitor to the national press as a source of news, especially of Saudi national news. The inability of the Ministry of Culture and Information to censor the Internet gives news websites such as Sabq and Alweeam the chance to tackle issues that the national press cannot tackle due to the Ministry's censorship. Consequently they have become a major source of news for Saudis. For example, the Sabq website, which was founded in 2007, has become a major local news provider; its visitors exceed the visitors to the websites of Saudi national newspapers. Sabq, Alweeam, Kabar and other Saudi news websites have flourished, taking advantage of the censorship imposed on newspapers. This finding agrees with the argument developed in Chapter Two, which focuses on the growing role of Internet websites as a source of news not only in Saudi Arabia but also all over the world.

- The publication of politically, religiously and socially sensitive stories by news websites, particularly those relating to women's rights and the crimes of the religious police, enables the Saudi government, religious leaders and people

gradually to become accustomed to such coverage. The national press takes advantage of online publication and follows stories that it used to ignore due to their sensitivity. For instance, women's rights used to be considered a sensitive issue, and was not allowed to be discussed in the national newspapers. However, the coverage of Internet websites has eased the sensitivity of such issues, giving an opportunity for the national press to get involved and start tackling them too.

- The Saudis use the Internet as a public sphere in which they can make their voices heard. They have resorted to the Internet as a means to discuss issues that the national media cannot tackle. Saudis have exploited the Internet to discuss their issues of concern, using it to convey their opinions and viewpoints to the government and other national and international organizations. This finding agrees with the argument of Al Qarni, who finds that the Internet has creates a public sphere for Arabs to discuss political and social issues that the national media do not discuss (2004).

- Newspapers' websites have enabled newspapers to interact more with their readers, helping them understand their readership's opinions and attitudes. This interactivity gives readers an opportunity to comment on news, articles and other materials published on the paper's website. These websites give journalists valuable information about their readers' likes and dislikes. Readers' comments on the paper's websites make journalists very keen to read these comments, in order to know whether the readers like or dislike what the paper publishes. The number of comments on each story, article and report is considered a criterion for measuring the most attractive topics for readers.

- City websites such as those of Arar and Huraymila are becoming major sources of news not only for residents of these cities but also for journalists, particularly when a major event or story takes place in cities where there are no correspondents for the newspapers to cover the story or the event. City websites play a similar role to local papers published in both big and small cities in other countries, which are mainly concerned with the local and domestic news of their respective cities. In Saudi Arabia there are no local newspapers, as the government is satisfied with the nine press organizations that operate eight daily

newspapers. These nine press organizations are distributed in the five main cities of the Kingdom, causing them to focus mainly on news that takes place in those cities. Therefore, city websites emerged to fill this gap by publishing news of events taking place in smaller cities that have no newspapers.

- The official home pages of public and private organizations have become an important provider of news for journalists. Ministries, big companies, sports clubs and international organizations are considered reliable sources of news for newspapers. These websites have not only become major providers of news to the national press but also pose competition and steal scoops from the national press.

- During the course of this study, mobile telephones have been used as an effective way of distributing news (both gathering and reporting it). The new generations of mobile phones, which give easy access to the Internet including transmission and receiving of pictures and video, ensure that these phones will play a growing role as a pressure factor in news-making. The remarkable and ongoing increase in the number of mobile phones in Saudi Arabia constitutes a further pressure on newspapers to give due consideration to the news circulated through mobile phones. Citizen journalism is playing a major role, especially in news reporting, in Saudi Arabia, and is putting pressure on the Saudi national press to follow stories which used to be ignored. Journalists interviewed for this study commented that the circulation of this video and similar clips constituted visible evidence, which forced the newspapers to cover the event and the parties concerned to confess and to express regret for it.

- Furthermore, mobile phones are now used for "news services" which have been adopted by several media means and were recently introduced by Saudi sports clubs for transmitting their latest news. The phenomenon of high-speed news services in Saudi Arabia has extended to include some news websites such as Sabq and Alweeam, in addition to websites specializing in the Saudi stockmarket such as Hawamir, which provides its subscribers with the latest economics news. Local newspapers have also introduced this service, to facilitate communications with their readers and to compete in achieving press scoops. Newspapers, the hard copies of which are governed by the constraints of printing schedules, depend on

high-speed news services to transmit breaking news to their subscribers before such news is published on websites which are not governed by printing timetables. Both *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah* have established mobile news services and they are very keen to provide their subscribers with the latest news. This service is growing as a new field for competition and a powerful method of generating revenue. Now *Aleqtisadiah* has developed a new transmission system allowing any journalist on the paper to send the latest news as soon as they receive it by using his/her mobile phone and prior to writing up the news for the paper, in order to avoid any delay that may cause them to lose the scoop.

2- Government:

- Decision makers in the Ministry confirmed that the easing of control is inevitable as it is in accordance with the government's trend towards openness. Conversely, the government is also one of the main factors behind the exercise of strict censorship. Consequently, the Saudi press is still unable to publish certain type of news due to government pressure.
- The Ministry of Culture and Information is not keen to let go of its authority over the national press. Such interference makes the Ministry the main obstacle to the existence of press freedom in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the authority of the Ministry over the national press makes censorship tolerated and expected by journalists.
- The spread of Internet websites such as Sabq and Alweeam with extensive coverage of Saudi national news has compelled the Ministry to revise its censorship of the national press to avoid the eventuality that Saudi readers abandon newspapers in favour of news websites that enjoy more space to discuss issues that the national press is prohibited from discussing. This finding contradicts with the findings of Al-Kahtani, who describes decision makers in the Ministry as unaware of the negative effects of censorship on the national press (1999).
- The dissolution of the Supreme Council of the Media in 2003 was a turning point in the history of censorship in Saudi Arabia. The Council was established in 1982

to draw up media policies in Saudi Arabia. However, gradually it became the supreme authority, interfering with decisions issued by the Ministry of Culture and Information and degrading the role of the Ministry as an independent institution. Since the dismantling of the Council, the Ministry has resumed its role as the sole party responsible for the national media issuing enforceable decisions that cannot be revoked except by the King himself. Decision makers at the Ministry praised the dismantling of the Council as a major step towards ensuring the independent authority of the former and eliminating the enormous pressure that used to be imposed by the latter. The consequences are reflected in the easing of censorship in national newspapers and the reduction in suspensions of editors and journalists, which had been frequent during the Council's existence, as discussed in Chapter One.

- The extensive coverage of local and national issues by news websites places pressure on the Ministry to allow the publication of stories about the same issues in national newspapers. In this connection, decision makers at the Ministry have pinpointed the following four reasons why the Internet has had such a remarkable influence on government decisions:

First, the extensive publication and discussion of national affairs online is gradually helping to reduce the sensitivity of some issues which used to be taboo due to pressure from the government and the religious leaders. This situation compels the Ministry to permit coverage of these issues by the national press. Second, the main reason for censorship is to cover up some stories from being known publicly. However, the publication of issues such as women's rights and crimes committed by the religious police online makes these issues known to the public which makes the censorship loses its purpose. Third, the spread of news websites specializing in national and local news, which rely on unreliable news sources, means that these websites are full of rumours and false information. Such a situation forces the Ministry to give permission to the national press to publish certain stories in order to provide people with a more reliable source of news, in order to correct false information. The Ministry realizes the importance of

combating rumours and unreliable reports issued by websites through allowing the national press to tackle and discuss the latest national news, which used to be banned before the existence of news websites. Fourth, the Ministry has eased its censorship in order to help the national newspapers maintain their readership. The Ministry is aware of the negative effect of censorship on national newspapers, which weakens their ability to compete with news websites that are not subjected to the Ministry's censorship. The decision makers believe that the strict censorship which was exercised over the national press for decades needs to be eased if the national press is to compete with other news media.

- The Saudi Press Agency (SPA), a government-owned agency, represents another form of government control over the national press. Although the SPA is considered in previous studies connected with news providers in Saudi Arabia (Baryan, 2002; Rugh 2004; Al-Kahtaini, 1999), none of these studies mentions the influence of the SPA as a tool of censorship imposed on national newspapers. The SPA affects the publication of government news in the national press, and the patterns of published news and news items ignored by the SPA constitute guidelines for newspapers about which news is permitted and which prohibited. The SPA provides national newspapers with news about the government, particularly that concerned with decisions issued by the Council of Ministers, official visits of the King and the Crown Prince to foreign countries, and visits of foreign political leaders to the Kingdom. The newspapers are not allowed to make any changes to the wording of the news provided by the SPA; they have to publish it exactly as it is received from the agency. This wording guides the national newspapers not to get involved in the actual reasons for the visit but rather to publish what is transmitted by the SPA, which reflects the "irrevocable" viewpoint of the government. Moreover, the SPA is considered by the national press as an indicator as to which news should not be published at all, especially that relating to foreign affairs. When no comments or news are published by the SPA regarding a certain foreign affairs issue, this is understood to mean that the national press must refrain from publishing any news connected with that issue.

For example, the refusal of the Saudi government to allow the French President to be accompanied by his fiancée during his visit to Saudi Arabia in 2008 did not appear in the national newspapers because the story was not covered by the SPA and consequently the senior editors understood that the government did not want such news to be published, even if the national newspapers received no instructions from the Ministry of Culture and Information regarding this issue.

- Religious leaders use three methods to place pressure on the Ministry. Firstly, direct pressure through calls or visits to the Ministry to meet with decision makers and press for a ban on publishing certain issues such as the case of the girl from Alqatif. Secondly, they issue Fatwas declaring publication of certain issues to be "haram" (taboo). Religious leaders use this method continually especially if the first method fails to stop the national press from following "undesirable" stories. The third method is directed towards both the Ministry and the newspapers by using media means to criticize any coverage which in the view of religious leaders is undesirable. Religious leaders, especially the Mufti and the Minister of Justice, but also the spokesmen of the religious police and the Ministry of Justice, have accused the national press of being biased in their negative coverage of those bodies.

- Senior officials have started to criticize coverage by the national press of certain issues related to the government, in order to persuade the press to avoid following such issues. Direct press criticism of government bodies has irritated some senior officials, who have expressed their dissatisfaction. Similarly, the angry responses by spokesmen for the different government sectors reflect clearly the dissatisfaction of these bodies with press coverage. Although the aim of having a spokesman is to provide national and international media with the latest information and news about the organization, spokesmen in Saudi Arabia play another role. The main aim, as this study finds, is to pressure the national press not to cover certain issues. Different government bodies use official spokesman as a way of preventing negative press coverage of issues related to these bodies.

3-The Press:

- Relations between the Saudi press and government are entering a new stage. The press, which has been loyal to the government in all national and international issues, as previous studies have shown, is no longer showing the same loyalty, particularly as regards coverage of domestic affairs. Al Kheraigi (1990) describes the Saudi press as a government institution. Similarly, Rugh (2004) describes the Saudi press as loyalist press. However, this study finds that this notion has been challenged, especially in the national news sphere. Although the national press still backs the government on issues related to foreign policy, in national affairs the press is playing a new role. The Saudi press has criticized the government openly in connection with several national issues, in a hitherto unprecedented manner. Criticism has been leveled by the press at the Ministries of Education, Health, the Interior and Agriculture. However, the most noticeable criticism this study has witnessed was directed at the Ministry of Trade and its Minister, resulting in his dismissal and the appointment of a new Minister. Elaph described this incident as a new era in the Saudi press, which has never been witnessed before. Elaph mentioned that the dismissal of the Minister of Trade after severe criticism from the national press signaled the start of a new phase in press-government relations.

- Despite the remarkable relaxation of censorship by the Ministry, as discussed in Chapters Five to Eight, journalists are still practising self-censorship, which has become a habit as a result of the long history of censorship in Saudi Arabia. Saudi journalists, especially old and experienced ones who suffered from strict censorship for decades, have not adapted to the changes taking place in the Saudi national press in terms of the easing of censorship.

- Editors-in-Chief of national newspapers are enjoying increasing influence in the era of King Abdullah. Since he assumed power in 2005, King Abdullah has been

keen to have a close relationship with the Editors-in-Chief of the national newspapers. Senior editors accompany the King on his national and international trips. This close relationship between the King and the Editors-in-Chief gives the latter the power to challenge decisions issued by the Ministry of Culture and Information, especially on national affairs. On the other hand, such close relations force the Editors-in-Chief to act as representatives of the government in the newspaper. Accordingly, Editors-in-Chief, besides their editing duties, are entitled to act as censors, to guarantee the banning of materials that might annoy the government, especially in international affairs.

- The factors that affect Saudi gatekeepers' news decisions differ from the factors that affect Western gatekeepers. The factors which are most influential in western gatekeeper's news decisions, as discussed in Chapter Three, are personal, organizational and routine factors. However, for the Saudi gatekeeper it is political and religious factors which are the most pressing. Although Saudi national newspapers have started tackling previously taboo issues connected with religious and political matters, the Saudi gatekeeper still considers those two factors as the most influential factors in news decisions.

- Economic factors are increasingly important in determining the Saudi gatekeeper's news decisions. This finding contradicts previous studies, which estimated that the influence of this factor on news decisions as minimal. In fact, none of the studies that focus on the Saudi national press mentions economic factors as exerting any influence on news decisions. The increasing impact of economic factors is attributed to fierce competition among national newspapers themselves and between the national press and other accessible media, especially news websites. As discussed throughout this study, news websites which discuss Saudi national issues have become a strong competitor to the national press, and this heavy competition affects the national press financially. As a matter of fact, three of the eight Saudi daily papers are suffering from sharply falling circulation and advertising revenue. This situation gives advertisers the upper hand and forces the national newspapers to try to keep up their circulation and satisfy the advertisers. This study found that major advertisers impose pressure on the two

newspapers to publish their news and announcements free of charge, as well as granting them large amounts of space in distinctive positions in the paper as compared with news from other companies which are not considered major advertisers. The pressure of advertisers is not confined to publishing favourable news but also extends to banning news of negative events.

- Internet websites such as national news websites, official websites and international news websites play a significant role in the news decisions of Saudi gatekeepers. They have become a prime provider of news for newspapers, which used to rely only on news agencies and correspondents, as was seen in Chapter Two. The number of stories that the gatekeeper receives each day has increased since these websites became a major source of news. Such a situation makes news selection more complicated than in the past, when the Saudi gatekeeper relied heavily on news agencies. Also, Internet websites contribute to news-making by enabling the addition of more information to the news stories instead of publishing only brief news items received from news agencies and correspondents. Furthermore, the use of the latest communication technologies, especially at *Aleqtisadiah*, reduces the number of gates that each news story goes through on its journey from the moment of receipt through to publication. By using the Internet, a single journalist can handle each news story from start to finish. The journalist receives the news story by e-mail, rewrites it and sends it for publication without its passing through the hands of other journalists or editors. The same journalist may also send the news story from his computer to subscribers of the paper's mobile services. This supports Brazilai-Nahon's argument (2005), mentioned in Chapter Three, that the traditional gatekeeping model has started to lose most of its core elements due to the increasing usage of the Internet and mobile phones.

- There is fierce competition between news websites focusing on national news and national newspapers. Such heavy competition has forced two papers (*Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah*) to adopt two main changes in order to reduce the impact of these news websites. Firstly, the papers have changed the way they cover news. Instead of publishing a large number of short news stories, the papers have started

to publish smaller number of stories characterized by in-depth analysis. The papers use their journalistic experience and their financial capabilities to hire analysts and experts in different fields and to add their opinions to the stories. As a result, the stories that get published in the papers are not merely news but also investigate the reasons behind and the effects of these stories, both in the short term and the long term. Secondly, the two papers have established mobile news services and their own websites to provide the latest news even before it appears in the paper.

4-Censorship:

- Censorship over the national press in Saudi Arabia has been eased over the past three years. Interviews with Saudi journalists and decision makers at the Ministry of Culture and Information, coupled with an eight-week observation at two newspapers, provided plentiful evidence of the easing of censorship over the national press. This has allowed, as one interviewee mentioned, the Saudi national press to discuss issues they had never dreamed of discussing. The national press is now able to discuss issues such as the poor performance of government bodies, including the Ministries of Trade and Justice. In addition the press is able to cover stories about the crimes of the religious police, coverage strongly opposed by the religious leaders of the country. Even news stories such as women's rights and human rights are starting to be regularly discussed in the Saudi press. Such findings support what is discussed in Chapter Two about signs of change.

- The courage of some Editors-in-Chief has helped newspapers such as *Alwatan* to take the initiative in tackling issues that other newspapers do not dare to tackle. The coverage of stories by one of the national newspapers gives other papers the courage to follow the same story. One of the journalists interviewed pointed out that "*Alwatan* is often the first paper to take the initiative, then other papers follow." *Alwatan's* coverage of sensitive stories such as government corruption gives other newspapers the courage to follow the same stories. One of the journalists interviewed said, "*Alwatan* was the only Saudi paper that published stories about corruption in the country, but now most papers do so." The Editor-

in-Chief of *Alwatan* said "Issues previously raised by *Alwatan* that had provoked criticism are now openly and audaciously discussed by all Saudi newspapers" *(Asharq Al-Awsat*, April 25, 2007).

- Although censorship over the national press is weaker than it was three years ago, such censorship is still relatively strict. Censorship negatively affects the performance of the national press and constitutes a major obstacle of press freedom. It also weakens the capacity of the newspapers to compete with other media. Three Saudi daily newspapers are facing financial problems due to falling circulation and lack of advertising as a consequence of unbalanced competition with other media outlets, which are not subject to the Ministry's censorship.

Recommendations:

- There is an urgent need for a new printing law for the national press which takes in to account the presence of global communication technology. The present law contains only 11 articles dealing with the national press, as was seen in Chapter One. These articles are vague and general, which creates uncertainty among journalists concerning issues that can be covered and issues which are prohibited. The ambiguity of the current printing law allows the Ministry to allow or prohibit the publication of issues based on its interpretation of the law. Therefore it is essential to bring in a new printing law that precisely and clearly points out the prohibited issues.

- Newspapers should not act as mouthpieces of the government but should reflect and express the concerns of the people. Accordingly, selection of news stories and issues tackled by newspapers should focus on matters of concern for the readers, not for the government.

- Regarding future studies, research in this field should focus on the role of the mobile phone as a source of news and its effect on news-making in the Saudi press. In this study, I noticed the extensive use of the mobile phone as a new means for covering events and news among Saudis. This emerging phenomenon needs deeper study to evaluate its feasibility and reliability. In addition, future studies should examine the influence of economic factors on the Saudi press. It

was noticed during this study that the economic pressure on news decisions is increasing and impacting on the Saudi gatekeeper's decisions. Therefore it would be worth devoting a full study to the effects of economic factors on news-making in the national press in Saudi Arabia. It would also be beneficial to study the impact of censorship on female Saudi journalists. The separation between men and women on the press premises at the two newspapers (*Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah*) prevented me from conducting face-to-face interviews with female journalists. A female researcher who is interested in studying censorship in the Saudi national press would be far more able to investigate such issues. She could reflect genuinely the effect of censorship on female journalists in Saudi Arabia. A female researcher would be more effective in portraying the actual difficulties facing female Saudi journalists.

Conclusion:

Censorship in Saudi Arabia gets its complexity from the existence of multiple contradictory and overlapping factors. Each factor affects other factor and as a result affects censorship. Censorship is not merely what the Ministry of Culture and Information practices over the national media; it is rather a product of overlapping factors which interact and counteract to give censorship over the national press in Saudi Arabia a distinctive character. The Ministry of Culture and Information and the national press face different pressures from two contradictory directions: in one direction there are factors pressing for the easing of censorship and from the other direction there are factors opposing the easing of censorship. The first factor which plays the most effective role in censorship is the Saudi government. The role of the Saudi government in censorship derives its complexity from the contradictory pressures that the government places on the national press.

On one hand, the government advocates the easing of censorship. However, the government is also one of the main reasons behind strict censorship. This situation reflects the conflict between among senior officials in the country. As discussed throughout this study, King Abdullah supports giving the public and the national media

more space to openly discuss issues which used to be taboo. On the other hand, some senior officials oppose such orientation. The second factor is the religious leaders. Religious leaders apply continuous pressure on the Ministry to prohibit the publication of news or reports criticizing or degrading any religious body or figure. Religious leaders do not accept any criticism that harms the prestige of the religious police, the judiciary or any religious fingers. Neither do they allow discussion of religiously sensitive issues such as women's rights.

The third factor which affects censorship is presence of news websites which focus on the Saudi national affairs. The spread of news websites which focus on local affairs has placed palpable pressure on national newspapers in Saudi Arabia, forcing them to get involved and publish stories which were previously prohibited. Such pressure not only forces the national press to challenge the Ministry of Culture and Information's decisions, but also forces the government to react to the publication of online stories that related to the government. Moreover, Internet not only plays a major role as a news and information source, but also Saudis use the Internet to express their opinions and their points of view on national and international issues. In a country like Saudi Arabia, where the government controls the national media, people's voices were not previously heard. However, since the introduction of the Internet in 1999, Saudis use personal websites, news websites and blogs to challenge the decisions of the government and the religious leaders as discussed in chapter five.

The fourth factor affects censorship is the Ministry of Culture and Information tendency toward easing censorship. Decision makers in the Ministry are well aware of the importance of easing the censorship imposed on the national newspapers as a "necessity not a luxury," as one of the decision makers put it. Decision makers realize that the degree of censorship imposed on the national newspapers in the past is no longer practical in view of the fact that preventing national newspapers from publishing certain local issues will only weaken the ability of the national press to compete with news websites which are not subject to the Ministry's censorship. The fifth factor which affects censorship is the frequent requests by newspapers for permission to publish stories about

certain prohibited issues (especially when these issues are already published online). Such factor is considered one of the factors pressuring the Ministry to ease its censorship. When news websites follow a story that a paper believes will interest its readers, the paper and the Ministry enter into negotiations regarding publication of the story. Such pressure enables the national press to follow stories that the journalists never previously dreamed of following, as one of the interviewed journalists pointed out.

Global information and communication technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones increase the pressure on non-democratic countries to change the way they control and censor their national media. The accessibility of global media affects the national media in these countries as well as the ability of the governments to control what the public watch, listen and read. As a result, the Saudi press has been in a transitional stage for the last three years. Although it has been characterized by its loyalty to the government since its birth, that loyalty has recently been challenged. Saudi newspapers have been able to criticize the performance of the government, and criticism of Ministries, the religious police and other government bodies, which used to be forbidden in the national press, has become a regular feature of it. The Ministries of Justice, Labour and Agriculture were among the ministries whose performance was criticized by newspapers during the term of this study. Moreover, heavy criticism of the performance of the Ministry of Trade supports the argument that the Saudi press has reached a new stage.

News websites are playing a major and increasingly influential role as a provider of news and information to the Saudi public. The Internet provide a cheap means of communication, is a means of transferring information, and gives the user the capacity to transfer documents and information not previously available in any other print or broadcast mass media (TV, radio and newspapers). More importantly, interactivity makes the Internet not only a multi-way mass and personal communication medium, but also a means to globally exchange ideas and information. Web 2.0, iPhone, BlackBerry and iPod are only the tip of the interactivity iceberg. They enable the audience to be more active in the media industry, which has been dominated by professional journalists, media corporations and governments.

The role of the government as a gatekeeper over news and information, which has lasted for a long time in Saudi Arabia because of the government's tight control over the national media, has been challenged. In the age of globalization, digital media is challenging the government's domination of information and news, due to the ability of the public to participate in news and information overcoming the government mechanisms of filtering and censorship. The high degree of interactivity offered by the Internet turns some web users in Saudi Arabia into publishers who can publish materials on the Internet about subjects which used to be censored.

The inability of the Ministry of Culture and Information to censor the Internet makes the Internet a major source of news and information for Saudis. The popularity of news websites such as Sabq, Alweeam and Kabar is mainly due to their ability to cover news stories that the national press cannot follow due to censorship. The Internet is not only a strong competitor to national newspapers but has also started to pose a real threat to the existence of Saudi daily newspapers. In fact, three of the oldest newspapers in Saudi Arabia are facing financial problems, which has led to the temporary discontinuation of two of them, forcing them to rely on government subsidies to stay afloat.

This problem is expected to be aggravated in the future due to the continuously increasing number of Internet users, which is estimated by the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) to be growing at the rate of 30% annually. CITC estimated the number of Internet users in 2008 as 7.7 million (CITC, March 2009). Atkins and Kruger argue that the number of Internet users in the Gulf countries has increased rapidly because of the cheap cost of Internet access and the fact that many of their citizens have a good level of English (2006). In addition, the Saudi Telecom Company reports that there are five million mobile phone users in Saudi Arabia, 25% of the population in 2004 (Abanumy and Mayhew, 2005). The CITC gives an estimate of 14 million mobile phones by 2008 (CITC, March 2009). It is worth mentioning that roughly 65% of the Saudi population is under the age of 18 and 43% of the population is 14 or under (Pharaon, 2004: Zuhur, 2005: *Alriyadh*, August 17, 2007). Zuhur points out that

"the Saudi population is quite young; the median age is 21 years" (2005, p. 9). As a result, the Saudi press, which is already facing financial problems, is expected to face more difficulties in the future, especially if censorship continues to be applied to the same degree.

Globally, Saudi Arabia is passing through a transitional stage at both political and economic levels. This stage began when King Abdullah assumed power in 2005. In the economic arena, Saudi Arabia is witnessing unprecedented foreign investment incentives, which give easy access for international companies to invest directly in different business fields in Saudi Arabia. The peak years of oil revenues made the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia one of the fastest growing economies in the world and qualified it to be among the group of twenty (G-20) largest economies in the world.

Although the Saudi government has made many political and economic reforms, in the area of press freedom it has made only modest reforms. The Saudi press is still classified as "not free" in the Freedom House classification of the press around the world. Moreover, journalists as well as newspapers are still subject to suspensions. This interference and the censorship imposed by the government on newspapers are considered major reasons for such limited press freedom in Saudi Arabia. The Ministry's censorship weakens the national press's ability to compete with news media which publish news and information the national press cannot publish due to such censorship

The absence of a perception of press freedom among journalists makes it easy for different influential groups, especially the government and religious leaders, to interfere in the press activity. Additionally, the lack of a democratic political culture in Saudi Arabia makes the interference of the government in the national press seem legitimate. Saudi journalists still considers the role of the press is to support government decisions. This misunderstanding of the concept of press freedom as well as a long history of censorship makes Saudi journalists deal with censorship as a right the government has. This explains why none of the interviewed journalists demanded press freedom or the independence of the national press from the government. The lack of clear understanding of this concept is not only prevalent among journalists, but also includes the public and

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the government as well. Although individuals and groups in Saudi use the Internet as a public sphere to complain and discuss issues such women's rights, human rights and the poor performance of the government, such discussion and complaints hardly ever include press freedom as a legitimate right. Similarly, due to the fear of abusing freedom, the government is not keen to give up its authority in controlling and censoring the national press.

The Ministry of Culture and Information has eased the censorship imposed on the national press. Meanwhile, newspapers have made several changes to adapt in the face of competition from the Internet. However, all these changes are not adequate to help the Saudi press compete with media enjoying great deal of freedom in disseminating news and information. Also, these changes are not enough to transform the national press to a free or partly free press according to the standards adopted by Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House. The Saudi press needs more than eased censorship in order to play its role as the "Fourth Estate" dedicated to monitoring government performance and reflecting public trends and opinions. Press freedom cannot be achieved in the absence of a law enacted for defending such freedom. Therefore the first step to be taken for supporting press freedom is enacting legislation protecting the press from the government or any other party's interference in order to guarantee the independence of the press. Governmental interference is considered the prime hindrance to press freedom. Therefore, the existence of a press law would protect the press and journalists, consequently guaranteeing the non-suspension of newspapers and journalists. Moreover, a non-governmental organization must be established to safeguard press freedom in Saudi Arabia. The significant role played by the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) in Saudi Arabia in defending human rights shows the potential of establishing a similar organization to protect press freedom in the Kingdom. This new organization must be dedicated to defending newspapers and journalists from any interference or censorship imposed by the government or any other authority.

This organization could also undertake to disseminate the concept of press freedom in Saudi Arabia. Misunderstanding of this idea and linkage of the concept with

civil and political strife is one of the factors hindering the existence of press freedom in Saudi Arabia. Introducing press freedom as a universal value that can be understood and welcomed globally ignores the cultural differences between nations. As a result, there is a need to plant the seed of the foundation of the concept of press freedom among journalists, individuals and the government as well. Such an organization could enlighten journalists, individuals and the government with the fundamental principles of the concept of press freedom in order to gradually replace what Amin (2002) calls "censorial culture" with a clear understanding of press freedom.

There is some optimism that the appointment of Dr. Abdulaziz Khoja in February 2009 as Minister of Culture and Information will boost press freedom in Saudi Arabia. The Minister has already established a personal page for himself on the social networking site "Facebook" in order to communicate directly with individuals and journalists. He has written the expression "Press freedom is inevitable" as a motto on his page. Moreover, he is a poet, writer and intellectual who is well aware of the impacts of censorship on the national press. *Asharq Al-Awsat* daily newspaper states that Saudi journalists are very optimistic about his appointment (February 15, 2009). Dr. Khoja announced in an exclusive interview with the paper after his appointment that he is "determined to ease censorship and allow the national media in general and the national press in particular to discuss national issues openly" (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, February 15, 2009).

He has pledged to journalists that he will continue to consider himself as their colleague and will never hang up his telephone or close his door in their faces. He further confirmed that "openness to others cultures and ideas and freedom of opinion are the prominent characteristics during this stage." He adds, "I intend to bring great openness based on respect for different point of views... the Saudi media are facing different challenges in the globalization era which bring us face-to-face with a reality with which we must deal with courage, acumen, and a clear vision." (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, February 15, 2009).

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Saudi Arabia Kingdom
Press & Prints Regulation
And the relevant Executive Bill

Royal Decree N°32/M
Date: 3/9/1421H
With the Help of God:
We, Fahed Ben Abdul AZIZ AL SAUD, King of the Saudi Arab Kingdom,
Pursuant to article 70 of the Rule Constitution issued by virtue of the Royal Order
N°A/90 on 27/8/1412H; Pursuant to Article 20 of the Council of Ministers Regulation
issued by virtue of the Royal Order N°A/13on 3/3/1414H; Pursuant to articles 17 and 18
of the Council of State Regulation issued by Royal Order N°A/91 on 27/8/1412H; Upon
review of the Prints and Press Regulation issued by Royal Decree
N°17 on 13/4/1403H; Upon review of the Council of State decision N°10/13/17 dated
21/2/1417H
Upon review of the Council of Ministers' Decision N°211 on 1/9/1421H
DECREE as follows:
1- To approve the Prints and Press Regulation as per the enclosed form.
2- His Excellency Vice-Prime Minister and the Ministers, each one as per
that what it concerns him, are requested to implement our present decree.

Fahed Ben Abdul Aziz

DECISION N° 211 dated 1/9/1421H
The Council of Ministers,
Upon review of the Formality received from the Cabinet of the Council of
Ministers Presidency under N°7/4898/R dated 4/4/1417H, containing the letter
of His Royal Excellency the president do the Supreme Council of Information
N°196/S/13 dated 7/9/1413H related to the Prints and Press Regulation bill;
Upon review of the Prints and Press Regulation issued by the royal decree
N°17 on 13/4/1402H;

Upon review of the Council of State Decision N°10/13/17 dated 21/2/1417H;
Upon review the reports prepared by the Experts Commission under N°370 on
21/12/1420H and N°121 on 21/4/1421H;
Upon review of the recommendation of the general Commission of the Council of
Ministers under N°307 on 10/8/1421H
DECIDES
To approve the Prints and Press Regulation as per the enclosed form.
A Royal Decree Bill is prepared in this concern in the form hereby enclosed.
The Prime-Ministers
Press & Publication Regulation
Article 1:
Definitions:
The following terms, wherever they appear in the present regulations shall have the
meaning shown on the side of each one:
1- Circulation:
The action of rendering the print at the disposal of some people through distributing it
free of charge, offering it to sale, sticking it on walls or exhibiting it on store windows,
luminous billboards, road billboards, or otherwise.
2- Journalism:
shall mean the vocation of editing and releasing prints press.
3- Journalist:
Any one choosing the press as vocation, whether should it be principal or additional.
4- Journal:
Any periodic, regular or irregular scheduled print of fixed address, such as newspapers,
magazines and circulars.
5- Printer man:
The responsible of the Printing house, whether he is the owner or the representative.
6- Printer house:
*Any plant designed for printing words, audio, drawings, or photos in the purpose of their
circulation.*
7- Print:
*Any means of expressing , printed for circulation, should it be a word , a drawing, photos
or audio*
8- Library:
The store designed for exhibiting books, magazines, or any relevant items for sale or rent.
9- Distribution:
The intermediary, individual or group, between the compositor or the editor and the
distribution points and beneficiary
10- The Compositor
Any person preparing a scientific, cultural or technical item for circulation.
11- Publisher:
The one in charge of publishing any scientific cultural or technical product for
circulation.
12- Ministry
The Ministry of Culture and Information*
13- The Minister: The Minister of Culture and Information*

Article 2:

Shall be subject to the provisions of the present regulation the following activities:

1- The Prints
2- The preparation services before printing
3- Printer houses
4- Libraries
5- Drawing and calligraphy
6- Photography
7- Import, sale or rent of films and video tapes
8- Audio recordings and discs
9- Technical Radio, TV, cinema or theater production
10-Television and Radio Studios
11-Foreign Information Media offices and their correspondents
• It was named Ministry of Information. Tame modification was made by virtue of the Royal Decree No.A/2 on 28/2/1424H
12-Advertising and publicity
13-Public relations
14-Publishing
15-Distribution
16-Press services
17-Production, sale or rent of Computer programs
18-Information studies and consultations
19-Copying and transcription
20-Any activity to be added under the Ministry proposal and approved by the prime minister.

Article 3:

Among the prints and press purposes the call for the true religion and the venerable, the directive to the uprightness and good and the diffusion of culture
and knowledge.

Article 4:

1- It is prohibited to exercise any of the activities mentioned above without the authorization of the ministry, taking into consideration that the license holder shall not be exempted from obtaining any other required authorization by the other regulations.
2- The executive rule shall determine the authorization duration of each activity. It shall also determine the appropriate period for the renewal of the license before its expiry date after being ascertained of the vocation exercising.

Article 5:

1- Subject to the provisions of the regulations and conventions, the beneficiary of such license should satisfy the following requirements:
a- To be of Saudi nationality
b- To be of at least 25 years old. The minister may make some exceptions regarding such age for some justifications he may see at his sole considerations.
c- To be of good behavior, conduct in exercising this activity.
d- To be holder of appropriate qualification as it will be determined by the executive rule.
2- In case of companies, the same previous requirements shall be applied on their representatives.

3- The executive rule shall organize the required conditions for the activity of foreign media offices and their correspondences.

Article 6:

The governmental authorities, the pedagogic and research institutions, the scientific associations, the literature and cultural clubs and the national press establishments may publish non periodical prints in the domain of their specializations and under their own responsibility.

Article 7:

The fees of the licence and its renewal shall be determined for the head office or the branch as follows:

1- Two thousand Riyals (2.000 Riyals) for each of the following activities:

(a) Printer houses

(b) The preparation services before the publishing

(c) Press

(d) Distribution

(e) Technical Radio, Television and cinema production.

(f) Television and Radio Studios

(g) Press Services

(h) Advertising and publicity

(i) Public relations

(j) Import, sale and rent of films and video tapes

(k) Production, sale and rent of the computer programs

2- One thousand Riyals (1.000 Riyals) for each of the following activities:

(a) Libraries

(b) Audio recordings and discs

(c) Drawings and calligraphy

(d) Photography

(e) Copying and transcripts

Article 8:

The opinion expression liberty is guaranteed by several publishing means within the scope of the legal and regulatory provisions.

Article 9:

Upon granting the print license the following criteria shall be respected:

1- The print should not violate the provisions of the Islamic Law

2- That it will not lead to disturb the country peace and its public order or to serve foreign interests that are in contradiction with the national interest.

3- That it will not lead to the stimulation of confessional feud and the diffusion of the dissociation spirit between citizens.

4- That it will not lead to the prejudice of the persons dignity and freedom or to blackmail them or to make harm to their reputation or the trade names.

5- That it will not lead to support or exhort crimes

6- That it will not injure to the economic or health situation in the Kingdom

7- That it will not disclose the investigation or debate facts before obtaining the relevant permission from the competent authority

8- That it will abide by the objective, constructive criticism aiming at the public interest and based on true facts and evidences.

Article 10:
Every printed print inside the kingdom should mention the required stationer statements as to be determined by the executive rule.
Article 11:
The license may be assigned, leased to or enable third party to participate therein upon the approval of the ministry and in accordance with the provisions of the present regulation.
Article 12:
If the beneficiary of the license deceases, the heirs should inform the ministry within two months from the death date. The may continue the activity upon the ministry approval in accordance with the provisions of the present regulation.
Internal Prints
Article 13:
Every composer, publisher, printer man or distributor desiring publishing or distributing any print should submit two copies thereof to the Ministry for obtaining the relevant license before being printed or offered for circulation.
The ministry shall grant or refuse the license with presenting justifications within thirty days. The concerned party may appeal the refusal decision before the Minister.
Article 14:
Any printer house shall keep a register of the prints that are printed therein, which will be produced to the competent authorities upon request. The ministry, through the executive rule, may exclude any print from the registration condition.
Article 15:
The composer, publisher and printer man are responsible of any contravention contained in the print if published or put under circulation without authorization. Failing to recognize any one of them, the distributor shall become then the responsible, otherwise the responsibility shall fall on the seller.
Article 16:
The ministry shall request the compositor or the publisher to present, according to the deposit regulation, the required copies of any print printed inside the kingdom.
Article 17:
The advertising and publicity materials may not be added to the films, tapes or similar in which are recorded technical or sportive materials or otherwise that are subject of exploitation agreement in the Kingdom than through local advertisement establishments or companies and upon being duly authorized by the ministry. The executive rule shall determine the time period of the advertisements in every action.
External Prints
Article 18:
The external prints shall be granted a license on condition they do not include any item offending Islam or the Kingdom Regime or injuring the State Supreme Interest or breaching the public ethics.
Article 19:
The external prints shall be authorized or refused with stating justifications within thirty days from the application date. The journals shall be dealt with according to the stipulations of the executive rule.
Article 20:

Any Saudi citizen publishing non periodical print outside the Kingdom and presenting an authorization application to the Ministry should enclose to his application the documents justifying the deposit of the required copies, according to the deposit regulation.

Article 21:

The Ministry censure shall not apply on the prints imported by the governmental authorities, the pedagogic and research Institutions, the scientific associations, the literary and culture clubs and national journalist establishments for their own purposes.

Article 22:

The executive rule shall organize, within the scope of the provisions of the present regulation, the import and distribution of external prints. It shall further determine the procedures necessary to facilitate the accompaniment and subscription of books and other prints by researchers and intellectuals for their scientific purposes and within the limits of their personal possession.

Article 23:

Foreign newspapers may be under the approval of the Prime Minister published in the Kingdom as to be determined by the Executive rule and in accordance with the provisions of the present regulation.

Local Press

Article 24:

The local newspapers shall not be subject to the censure, except within exceptional circumstances that are determined by the Prime Minister.

Article 25:

1- National parties or individuals may publish newspapers, outside the scope of the national newspapers establishments, by authorization of the ministry and after the approval of the Prime Minister.

2- The Ministry approval shall be sufficient for publishing the following:

(a) Prints of limited circulation, not for sale purposes, published by national parties, provided that such prints shall be limited to the prints serving the activity of the publishing party.

(b) The specialized vocational and scientific magazines published by national parties and individuals

3- The release of scientific newspapers and magazines by the pedagogic public institutions and government authorities under notice to the ministry

4- The supervisor of any of these prints mentioned in the present article and the director of the party that publishes it shall be responsible of the contents therein by virtue of the provisions of the present regulation.

Article 26:

The name of the license owner, the editor in-chief, the release number, the place of issue, the date, the price and the printer house name shall be mentioned in a prominent place of the print.

Article 27:

1- It is forbidden to use the name of any previous suspended journal before the expiry of ten years of its suspension, unless the concerned parties cede the name before the expiry of such period.

2- It is forbidden to take name of any journal that constitutes a confusion with other journal name.

Article 28

The executive rule shall determine the regulatory rules of the annual subscription rate in journals, the unit price and the advertising affairs.

Article 29

The Ministry may withdraw the license or cancel the approval after the journal is published for the two following cases:

1- failing to publish the journal within maximum two years from the license date

2- if the journal release is suspended for a consecutive period of at least one year

Article 30:

The newspapers and the personnel working therein are prohibited to receive any benefit of donations, allowance or otherwise from internal or external parties without the ministry approval.

Article 31:

The journal shall not be prohibited from issue but within exceptional circumstances and upon the approval of the prime minister.

Article 32:

(a) The announcements of establishments and individuals may be published on condition to mention that they are advertising material.

(b) The announcements of countries may be published upon the ministry approval and on mentioning that they are advertising material.

Article 33:

1- The journal editor-in-chief or his representative in his absence shall be responsible of items published therein.

2- Without prejudice to the responsibility of the editor-in-chief or his representative, the writer of the text shall be responsible of its contents.

Article 34:

The Newspaper "Oum El Kora" is the official journal of the State.

Penalties

Article 35:

Any journal ascribes to third parties untrue statement, or publishes false news should rectify it by publishing it free of charge, upon the request of the concerned party, in its first release to be issued after the demand of rectification, in the same place in which the news or statement was published or in a prominent place. The injured party shall have the right of claiming indemnification.

Article 36:

The ministry may, when necessary, withdraw any number of the journal without any indemnification, if it includes any infraction to the Islam Law, upon a decision taken by the Commission stipulated in article 37.

Article 37:

A Commission of at least three members, one of them must be a legal counselor, chaired by the competent Secretary of the Ministry, formed by decision of the Minister, shall examine the breaches of the provisions of the present regulation. It shall adopt its resolutions at the majority upon summoning the contravener or his attorney, and hearing his statement. It may call any other person it seem necessary for hearing his statement. It further may call any person for assistance. The resolutions of the Commission shall be effective after their validation by the Minister.

Article 38:
Without prejudice to any severer penalty stipulated by any other regulation, any one contravening any of the provisions of the present regulation shall be punished by a financial fine of maximum fifty thousand riyals or by closing the store or the establishment for maximum two months or by closing the store or the establishment definitely. The sanction shall be issued by decision of the Minister upon the resolution taken by the Commission stipulated in article 37 of the present regulation.

Article 39:
The ministry may withdraw the prints offered for circulation, whether interior or exterior in the following two cases:
1- When it is forbidden from circulation
2- When it is unauthorized and comprises interdictions stipulated in article nine or article eighteen.
The competent authority that will examine this will be the Commission stipulated in article 37. It shall decide what it will see appropriate and will spoil without indemnification such prints or request the concerned party to re-export them outside the Kingdom on his own expenses if such prints are from abroad.

Article 40:
Any convicted person of any sanction by virtue of the present regulation may appeal before the complaints cabinet, within sixty days of the notification date of such decision.

Article 41:
If the ministry grants the license and some unexpected things imply its withdrawal, it hall then indemnify the concerned party the cost value of the released copies.

General provisions
Article 42
The ministry shall entrust for the scientific and intellectual works qualified and specialized persons, having experiences in regulations and press instructions. It may for that purposes call for its assistance any person it may see appropriate in part-time.

Article 43:
The ministry shall put in coordination with the concerned parties the regulatory rules for celebrating and supervising books and press houses fairs.

Article 44:
It is possible by decision of the minister to establish associations for some of the activities stipulated in article 2 for treating the problems, coordinate missions. Each association shall prepare its bylaw clarifying the purposes and organizing works and which should be approved by the minister.

Article 45
The ministry is the competent authority for following up the implementation of the present regulation and calling to account any contravener of its provisions.

Article 46:
The Minister shall issue the executive rule of the present regulation with maximum eighteen months from the publication date. It will be published in the gazette.

Article 47:
Any one exercising any of the activities governed by the present regulation must readjust his situations to comply with the provisions thereof within two years from the effective date.

Article 48:

The present regulation shall supersede the press and prints regulation issued by royal decree No.17/M on 13/4/1402H and will repeal and contradictory provision.

Article 49:

The present regulation shall be published in the gazette and will be in force after 90 days from the publication date.