SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN SAUDI ARABIA: THE CASE OF THE 2009 FLOODS IN JEDDAH

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Abstract. The aim of this study was to explore the use of social media for political participation in Saudi Arabia taking the case of the Jeddah 2009 floods as an example. Data were collected for this qualitative study between 2010 and 2012 and were analyzed with the help of NVivo, a software for qualitative data analysis. The study followed the principles of thematic analysis to analyze 40 posts and the readers' comments on them from YouTube, Facebook, an online community, and Al Arabiya site. The findings of this study show that people used social media to express their feelings and emotions about the loss of lives, express their opinions about what happened and call for action about what should happen or organize themselves to take part in volunteer work. The results of this research contribute to an understanding of the role of social media in encouraging political participation in countries where participation in public affairs in some cases is not encouraged and in others, for example, street protests is not permitted.

1. Introduction

The 2009 floods in Jeddah, which occurred on 25 November, were one of the worst and most destructive floods in the history of the city with the official death toll reaching 116 people. In addition to claiming the lives of these people, the floods also wrecked more than 4000 cars and made homeless more than 1200 families causing the damage bill to run into the millions.

In response, hundreds, if not thousands, of internet users took it upon their shoulders to document what happened by posting videos on YouTube describing the events as they unfolded. They also managed to steer the government's attention to the disaster by expressing their feelings, opinions and criticisms on Facebook, political online communities and on Al[1] Arabiya site. More importantly, they used Facebook to call for action to be taken to remedy the situation or to punish the responsible or by organizing themselves to help with the rescue efforts.

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[1] Al-' is the Arabic equivalent to 'the' in English.

Specifically the study will try to address the following research questions: RQ1: How did people use social media to cope with what happened during the floods in Jeddah in 2009? RQ2: How did people use social media to explain and understand what happened? RQ3: How did people use social media to demand changes be made in light of what happened? RQ4: In what way each type of social media differed with respect to the above questions? It is hoped answers to these questions will provide insight into the impact of social media on political participation in Saudi Arabia?

The study is qualitative in nature. Data were collected for this study between 2010 and 2012. Following the principles of thematic analysis, the study analyzed a total of 40 complete posts and all the readers' comments on those items from YouTube, Facebook, an online community (Al-Saha al-Siyasia) and Al Arabiya site. The posts selected (10 from each site) were all related to the Jeddah 2009 floods (to find out more about how posts were selected see section 3 below). It is hoped the results of this research will contribute to a better understanding of the role of social media in encouraging political participation in countries where political participation is not encouraged.

Saudis are among the biggest adopters of the internet in the Arab world. About 46 percent of the total population in Saudi Arabia use the internet (the total number of internet users in the country exceeds 13 million[2]). Social Network Sites (SNS) are among the most popular sites on the Saudi internet. According to most recent rankings from Alexa.com[3], of the top 500 sites in Saudi Arabia, YouTube is ranked second from the top (in terms of the total number of page views) followed by Facebook in the third, Twitter in the ninth and Blogger in the tenth position, suggesting that social networking is one of the favourite internet activities among the internet users in the country.

Indeed, millions of Saudis visit YouTube on a regular basis to find out what is going on in their country from sources other than the traditional media especially after the site has proven its effectiveness in presenting the facts supported by concrete evidence. Some of the episodes on YouTube that use wit humour to treat sensitive issues, such as those of 'La Yekthar' show, have crossed the two million views.

Similarly, Saudis are well represented on Facebook. In fact, Saudis are the second biggest adopters of Facebook[4]. There are 4.9 million Saudis on Facebook with a penetration rate of 19.1%.[5] While in 2010 (the year this study started), Twitter was not yet popular, today Saudis are the biggest adopters of Twitter in the Arab world with 38% of all Arab twitters[6] are coming from Saudi Arabia.[7]

Saudis have always been active on online communities. Political online communities, in particular, give ordinary individuals from all backgrounds the opportunity to express themselves, steer the government's attention to their problems and get their messages across to senior government officials (Al-Saggaf, Himma and Kharabsheh, 2008) thus overcoming the barrier of limitation on freedom of expression. It is believed some of the decisions relating to the latest economic reforms reflected the

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[2]http://www.citc.gov.sa/English/Reportsandstudies/Indicators/Indicators%20of%20Communications%20and %20Information%20Techn/Indicators%20Q3%202011-%20English%20-%20FINAL.PDF
[3] http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/SA
[4] http://www.alriyadh.com/2012/02/17/article710610.html
[5] http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/?interval=last-week#chart-intervals.
[6] Persons who tweet
[7] http://sabq.org/dIbfde.

aspirations of the members of political online communities, especially Al-Saha al-Siyasia, or are inspired by requests made specifically on Al-Saha al-Siyasia. Indeed, Al-Saha al-Siyasia, which is the most popular online political community in Saudi Arabia, is often used by the government to gauge public opinion or feel the pulse of the people[8].

Similarly, Al Arabiya site is another popular destination for Saudis and one of the frequently accessed online media sites in the Arab world. According to Al Arabiya site, 21.60% of its audience comes from Saudi Arabia.[9] The commentary service, which allows readers to comment on the articles published, is an exceedingly popular platform among the Arabs with many of the articles published on Al Arabiya site receiving more than 1000 comments from readers. The service is located at the end of each article allowing users to post their comments after they scroll down through all the replies to a particular article.

2. SNS and Political Participation: A quick look

This section will first define online communities, SNS and political participation (as the three main concepts in this study), and then it will discuss briefly three studies that looked at political participation on social media.

SNS and 'online communities' are very similar to each other. In fact, several computer mediated communication researchers view SNS as part of online communities; while some others see SNS as the latest trend in computer mediated communication. For the purpose of this paper an online community is defined as consisting of:

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

Likewise, for the purpose of this paper, SNS will be defined as:

> Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection[11], and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p.211).

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[8] http://81.144.208.20:9090/pdf/2004/08Aug/04AugWed/Quds19.pdf (Saudi Arabia withdraws its initiative practically. Retrieved August 4, 2004, from Al-Quds Al-Arabi Newspaper Website: http://www.alquds.co.uk/)
[9] http://english.Al Arabiya.net/index/static/about_en
[10] Words in brackets are not attributed to the author who is quoted
[11] In the case of YouTube, a users channel's subscribers are considered the list of connections.

As can be seen while there is some similarity between the two concepts, Al-Saggaf (2011) takes the position of distinguishing between online communities and SNS in at least one important dimension. While the former, defined above, refer to sites that are dedicated to communities of interests, structured by topics or according to topical hierarchies, the latter revolve around people, not interests, with the individual at the centre of their own community. For more information about the characteristics of participation on Saudi online communities and on SNS see Al-Saggaf, Himma and Kharabsheh (2008) and Al-Saggaf (2011) respectively.

With regards to the third concept, for the purpose of this paper, political participation is defined "as any act that is performed with intention of transmitting information about social preferences and issues to political decision makers and exerting pressure on these decision makers to pay attention to the demands being voiced" (Milbrath, 1965 cited in Quintelier and Hooghe, 2011).

There are several studies that looked at the relationship between social media and political participation. A US study by Zhang and Chia (2006), for example, concluded that the relationship between internet use and political participation is a complicated one. While Zhang and Chia did not find a significant impact of internet use on political participation, they argued its influence has been underestimated and more research should be conducted to assess this influence. Bode (2008) also called for more research to confirm her findings which were, according to her, limited by the small sample[12] she used. Nevertheless, unlike the previous study, hers found a significant impact of Facebook on political participation. Similarly, Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela's (2012) study, which also used US national data, found that seeking information via SNS is a positive and significant predictor of people's social capital and civic and political participatory behaviors. While the results of Bode's and Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela's studies differed from Zhang and Chia's study, it is understandable given social media was not around in 2002 when Zhang and Chia's study was conducted. It should be noted that although the current study collected qualitative data unlike all these studies which were quantitative in nature, its results are in line with the results of Bode's and Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela's studies in that social media appeared capable of facilitating political participation.

3. Data Collection and Data Analysis

To make sense of the data collected, this qualitative study followed the principles of the thematic analysis technique. This approach to data analysis allows analysts to code (mark) sections of text according to whether they appear to contribute to emerging themes or not (Patton, 2002). It is a process for encoding qualitative data, which requires an explicit code such as a list of themes. According to Boyatzis (1998, p.4), a theme is a pattern found in the data that at a minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at a maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon. Thematic analysis relies on the ability to see patterns in seemingly random data, which is what Boyatzis calls 'pattern recognition'. There are three distinct stages in thematic

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[12] Undergraduate students of a university in US.

analysis: stage one, deciding on sampling and design issues; stage two, developing themes and a code; and stage three, validating and using the code. Within the second stage there are three ways to develop a thematic code: a theory driven, prior data or prior research driven and inductive (i.e., from raw data) or data driven (Boyatzis, 1998, p.29). The themes developed for this study emerged from the raw data.

Data collection proceeded as follows. A team of seven female undergraduate students was trained in using thematic analysis to collect and analyze qualitative data. After dividing the team into four groups, each group selected six posts and the responses to them from one of the sites they were assigned i.e. YouTube, Facebook, Al Arabiya site, and an online community (Al-Saha al-Siyasia). A post could be a topic for discussion (and the responses to it) on Facebook or on an online community or an article published on Al Arabiya site or a video posted on any of these sites or on YouTube. The author, on his own, also selected four posts and the responses to them from each of the four sites and analyzed them making the total number of posts analyzed 40. Posts selected for analysis were located by inserting "Jeddah 2009 floods" keywords (in Arabic) in the Google search engine search area. The results that appeared at the very top of the search results page were selected for analysis discarding only those posts related to the Jeddah 2011 floods[13]. That is, the posts related to the Jeddah 2011 floods were ignored.

Upon viewing a YouTube video, or reading an article posted on Facebook, Al Arabiya site or the online community, a description of the content of that post was written in a Word document. Next all the responses to that post were carefully read and studied and then a representative sample of the comments (approximately 70 comments) or the ones that were illuminating in respect of the research questions or contrary to the assumed knowledge of the researchers were noted in the same Word document. The reasons not all the comments were noted in the Word document is because for each post there were hundreds of comments (most of the comments on YouTube videos, for example, exceed 700) making copying and pasting each comment very time consuming. For this reason all the comments were carefully read and studied online and a selected sample, as discussed above, was copied and pasted by the researchers into the same Word document so they can be used as quotations during the discussion of the findings. Finally, comments on the nature of interaction between the original author of the post and the respondents, or on the interaction between the respondents themselves were written in the Word document. These comments tried to provide opinions, perspectives and interpretations in relation to how the medium used facilitated political participation or how can an observation be explained from within the Saudi social, cultural and political contexts. Team members followed the following criteria when recording field notes: being objective, unbiased, and factual and recording only what happened, not what they thought or felt had happened. There was also emphasis on being systematic and detailed. The team collected and analysed their data under the supervision of the author.

Data analysis was completed with the help of QSR NVivo 8, a software package for managing qualitative data, and was performed separately by each group i.e. each group, including the author, analysed their own data separately. The unit of analysis

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[13] On 26 January 2011, Jeddah experienced another major flooding.

was each individual post and the responses to it. Data analysis proceeded as follows. First a new project was created in NVivo and all field notes documents were imported into NVivo. These field note documents included the raw data (the comments copied and pasted into the Word documents) and the comments made by the researchers. The documents were then read several times so the researchers could familiarize themselves with the data collected. Next, free nodes (i.e. nodes not organized or grouped) were created based on keywords in the field notes. The nodes represented themes that revolved around the main ideas in the text or the purpose or the objective from it, or a specific concept that emerged from the data or a pattern or trend in the data. Similar text within the field notes was then located and assigned to these nodes after thoroughly reading through the field notes and ensuring the text assigned captures the theme that the node represents (the themes, which emerged from the text, are the same as the nodes in NVivo). To illustrate this step, an example is used. Consider the following comment made in response to another that made fun of the people who drowned in a YouTube video posted during the event:

> you think this is cool? you think this is exciting ?!! will i hope next time
> you be in that water and having much more excitement you idiot! people
> died!! and you think this is exciting! STUPID.

Here the theme developed from the keywords "you think this is cool" and "you idiot" was "expressing feelings of anger". So this quotation was assigned to the 'expressing feelings of anger' node. The good thing about these nodes is that they acted as 'buckets' in the sense that they held all the data related to a specific theme. For example, all the quotations related to 'expressing feelings of anger' theme are placed under this node. At the end of the creation of the free nodes, the author merged all the projects into one, repeated the analysis of each free node, and analysed all free nodes including his jointly. Finally, theses free nodes were further divided into tree nodes. That is, broader categories were developed to group the free nodes. For example, 'expressing feelings of anger', 'expressing deep sorrow' and 'praying for the dead' were all grouped under the tree node 'Expressing feelings and emotions'. The aim was to create a hierarchy that will make it easy to make sense of the data and facilitate interpretation.

4. Results

4.1. EXPRESSING FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS (RQ1)

One of the things social media gave its users was the ability to express their feelings and emotions over the death of the flood victims. The expression of feelings and emotions was a salient feature that was observed in all the mediums chosen for study. Of course credit for capturing the incident and exposing the gravity of the problem should go to YouTube as it was the main media outlet used by people to compile evidence of what happened. People flooded YouTube with videos of the impact of the floods as the events unfolded. YouTube returned more than 4000 hits for the videos uploaded when 'Jeddah catastrophe' term (in Arabic) was searched. Whether people

were discussing the flood victims on online communities, Facebook or Al-Arabiya site, the discussion often revolved around a YouTube video.

One YouTube video, for example, captured a man fighting for his life in the water before managing to put his grip on the back of an air conditioner. Overcome by the strong current, which moved him from one side to the other, he eventually let go of his hand and disappeared in the water. The video which was taken by a female from the comfort of her bedroom, as stated in the description of the video, was also accompanied by sad background music. Hebah Al-Omari who selected this video for analysis and watched it said

> this video was … difficult to watch. I had to leave my computer several times from how overwhelming and horrifying it was. I felt every second of his pain, fear, and helplessness.

Respondents' comments varied. Many respondents wished for the presumed drowned man to go to Heaven in the hereafter. Others angrily said why did not the female assist the man instead of filming him as he drowned. Others blamed the man's neighbours for not doing anything to help him. Yet, others said that there was nothing anyone could do to help and if people tried to rescue him they could have drown too. The prevailing feelings, however, were those of deep sadness over the loss of lives. Upon reflection, it is possible that expressing feelings and emotions in that way and 'playing the blame game' might have helped the participants cope with the trauma and overcome the feelings of grief and loss. Another way social media users used it to deal with the disaster and start the healing process and confront their feelings of survivor guilt (if any) was by telling their stories and sharing their personal experiences, which for many people these involved talking about their close encounters with death. Sharing personal experiences was useful for another reason. It educated others about what to do if they faced similar circumstances. For example, when someone told them that he witnessed a man being rescued by a winch driver, many commentators thought using the winch was a good idea and that from now on they would tell others about this idea.

Another YouTube video captured a successful rescue attempt of a family stranded in their car. When a group of men saw a car swimming in the water, they formed a line and as the car approached them pulled the family members one by one until all of them were lifted to safety. While this story had a happy ending, the video also showed the struggle of other people in the water as the strong current swept them away. This video was accompanied by the Titanic song as background music. This video attracted many comments. The vast majorly of the comments applauded the bravery of the men who risked their lives to rescue the stranded family. This comment from one of the viewers typifies their responses: "Hey everyone I swear by Allah that tears fell from eyes for the bravery of these Africans and foreigners. Ya Allah (my Allah) see how badly we (Saudis) treat them (foreigners) and when in need the Saudis are the ones watching and the foreigners are the ones helping out"[14]. One participant questioned the wisdom of playing the Titanic song as background music when Quran would have been more appropriate. Indeed most of the other videos analysed were observed to have Quran or spiritual Islamic songs (Anasheeds) at the background which may suggest that this

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[14] Comments are not edited by the author.

disaster might have in the case of some strengthened their relationship with Allah and in the case of others it awoke their sense of belonging to their religion. However, and interestingly, when some Saudi scholars blamed people's sins for what happened claiming that what happened was a punishment from Allah, most of the social media users rejected this interpretation; while others expressed their frustrations with these scholars or their disappointment about their conclusions, which, in turn, is also interesting to note given, Muslims do believe that sometimes bad things happen to them because of their bad actions. There is also the belief in fate and destiny and that whatever calamity Muslims experience, it is preordained by Allah and that they should be patient when it happens to them to receive the reward from Allah. This raises an interesting question: does the use of social media encourage people to become less religious or more liberal in their thinking? Hopefully this question will be addressed in future research.

On Facebook, videos that documented the story of the floods were also posted and shared. One video documented the disaster in Jeddah using a slideshow of disturbing images from the disaster and a voiceover narration running in the background which showed the author was very sad and upset about what happened. The vast majority of respondents appeared deeply moved by what they saw and expressed deep emotions of sadness as in the case of this person who said "I am an Egyptian, full of love for Jeddah and I am really heartbroken about what happened to it. May Allah be with you". In addition, some expressed anger at those responsible for the disaster; others defended the government; others vented their fury over the deaths; some expressed deep sorrow over the loss of lives; some others expressed sympathy for those who lost loved ones; some lamented the absence of their right to live a 'safe life'; and some promised to help those in need as much as they can. The respondents did not just come from Jeddah but rather from every part of Saudi Arabia as the profiles of participants had revealed suggesting this crisis might have encouraged citizens from different racial and religious backgrounds to be, on this occasion, more tolerant and caring towards each other.

4.2. EXPRESSING OPINIONS (RQ2)

Social media gave its users the ability to express their opinions about those responsible for the floods in Jeddah freely. The call for the impeachment of the mayor of Jeddah (Adel Fakeh) by one of the members of a Facebook group is an example of the freedom of expression social media users enjoy. In a country where content disseminated from traditional media is censored and peaceful street protests are banned and freedom of expression to a large extent is limited, the issue of the impeachment of Mayer of Jeddah, which is a sensitive topic in nature, given he was a high profile senior government official, would not have been raised if it had not been for the decentralised nature of the social media and its many-to-many communication feature that made it effective in enabling social media users to express their views and reach others. While there were many comments with tens in favor and tens others against the idea, the interaction was predominately peaceful and the discussion was constructive and took the format of a highly intellectual debate that did not deviate from acceptable standards of conduct, albeit in one conversation two communicators engaged in fighting with each other. This may suggest that the members of this Facebook group although they

disagreed with each other's ideas, their disagreement did not cause them to indulge in fights or flame wars or engage in sarcasms or attacks which are all common in discussions that take place on Al Arabiya site or YouTube (see examples of these below). The following comment encapsulates the theme of the continuous conversation that occurred between these members of this Facebook group.

> I have a Q, and I hope that somebody can answer me, so I could feel
> better.
> Why don't Jeddah bring people from Japan or the US or China to fix
> whatever problems we have In Jeddah???
> 1- The rush hour and traffic 24 hours, no need to be smart which means
> we need another way of transportation to get around.
> 2- We need them to fix our swerge system.
> 3- we need them to fix our roads.

The reason the interaction was more or less peaceful on Facebook could be due to the longevity and regularity of interaction between the group members. The continuous interactions among group members might have allowed genuine relationships to develop among them, despite the fact that some of these relationships operated solely online. Thus there might have been a cost associated with being rude in this case which might have made it difficult for these members to engage in fighting and flame wars.

Rapping about the floods in Jeddah and uploading the music video into YouTube is another example that demonstrates that social media users do enjoy a high degree of freedom of expression. Rap music is very uncommon in Saudi Arabia. When Klash, one of the first artists to introduce this type of music in Saudi Arabia, included what then deemed to be defamatory language he was jailed for a year. While the attitude towards this music is probably not as bad as before, rap music does not appear on TV or radio in the same way other types of music appear and many of Klash's songs are blocked in the country due to their offensive nature and use of vulgar language. On YouTube, however, uploading rap music is easy to do and it appears these types of music attract thousands of people as evidenced by the fact that Klash's song which documented the story of the Jeddah floods was viewed more than 1.2 million times. In this song Klash recorded his voice over a slideshow of the song lyrics and pictures from the disaster. In his song he first introduced Saudi Arabia and then described the catastrophe, that according to him, destroyed hundreds of lives, damaged thousands of cars and properties, scared women and children to death and left men stranded in the streets. He ended his song by calling for justice from those responsible, by thanking the volunteers who helped out in the aftermath of the disaster and by praying for the dead of Jeddah to rest in peace and for their families to find comfort in each other.

The song was received very favorably by the viewers as evidenced by the number of comments viewers left at the bottom of the video (700 comments were submitted in total). The vast majority of the comments praised the artist and expressed deep admiration for the song and its lyrics. Some of the respondents' comments which are illustrative of this category included "Iloveyou klash"; "that's great claaash"; "i love this song keep going bro in this way only you are our voice we are talking by you .i belive in you clash"; "that's amazing ... really"; "keep the good work going this is really heart touching"; "from east to west klash is the best"; "well done clash keep going

baby"; "a salam aleikum, This song sounds just awesome !!!, dope !!!, i like it very much. a salam aleikum". On the other hand, there were many comments that contained very abusive, offensive, inflammatory, and racist language. These comments were not related to the song; rather they were exchanges between the viewers of the song. Here is an example of these comments that should be considered barley inappropriate compared to the other more repugnant messages: "can u come to drive my car u seem (to be) a stupid driver hey man when you talk about saudi u have to say kingdom of saudi arabia we are saudi not like u poor *f-word* stupid jealous of us". As mentioned above, the anonymity, lack of public self-awareness, and the medium's lack of oral and non-verbal cues which cause abandonment of social inhibitions might have been the reason for members engaging in such exchanges.

Online communities such as Al-Saha Al-Siyasia, which is by far the most widely spread online community in Saudi Arabia, witnessed very lively debates about what happened in Jeddah. On Al-Saha Al-Siyasia the members analyzed the causes that lead to the disaster in great depth. They looked at the causes from several angles. For example, some provided evidence that the areas affected in Jeddah are actually valleys and people should never have been allowed to build on them in the first place. Others claimed that what happened was actually punishment from Allah as discussed above. Likewise, a few thought it must have been punishment from Allah for the atrocities the Saudi army committed against the Al-Hothies in Yemen; others defended the government; yet others accused the Jeddah municipality of corruption and management misappropriation and of failing to put in place adequate infrastructure and implement the already budgeted and planned projects; blaming for what happened all the Jeddah mayors who served in this position over the past thirty years.

4.3. CALLING FOR ACTION (RQ3)

Social media was very instrumental in facilitating a platform for people to call for action to be taken[15]. All social media sites chosen for this study (i.e. YouTube, Facebook, the online community and Al Arabiya) were observed enabling users to call for action to be taken. The results achieved from these calls for action were significant suggesting senior government officials might be monitoring social media closely. While not all the demands were met, several of these demands were implemented and the ones that were not accommodated, promises were made to study them. For example, while a solution to the problem of Al Musk Lake was not found at the time, local authorities later hired a consulting firm to propose a solution to that problem. Al Musk Lake, which is 40 km east of Jeddah, is where all the human waste (sewage water) at Jeddah gets dumped at. The lake was named Al Musk Lake by Jeddah residents to make fun of its horrible smell. Al Musk is a beautiful aromatic substance used commonly by Arabs as a traditional perfume. Each day 1200 water tankers empty their loads into the lake. After the downpours that caused the heavy flooding in Jeddah, water levels rose considerably. It is feared if the lake overflows due to another heavy rain fall, the impact on the four million city residents could be catastrophic. However, the problem of Al Musk Lake may soon be solved as a SR95 million-contract was

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[15] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudiarabia/6685083/Saudis-protest-on-Facebook-over-government-handling-of-floods.html

signed with a specialized company to undertake the drying up of the lake[16]. Plans to construct proper sewage systems and deal with surface water drainage and build dams that could stand future flooding were also announced and acted upon.

On the other hand, several demands were implemented immediately. Ordering an investigation into what happened and prosecuting those responsible for the disaster was the main request that people made on social media. Upon this request being brought to his attention, King Abdullah immediately ordered the formation of an investigative committee, headed by the governor of Mecca Prince Khaled Al-Faisal himself, in the largest clampdown on corruption in Saudi Arabia's history[17]. The independent investigative committee resulted in many police arrests of senior officials, some of them were stopped from traveling at the airport. They are still being tried as of the writing of this paper. King Abdullah also in 2011 established the National Anti-Corruption Commission and appointed a minister to head it and to report to him directly, so all government departments can be held accountable for their actions, and corruption in the government sector can be combated. With regards to the call for impeaching Adel Fakeh, while he was not impeached, as per people's request, he was removed from his post albeit to a higher level position (he is now the Minister of Labor). The demand for financial compensation for the victims was also acted upon swiftly. For every person who died in the floods one million Saudi Riyal (approximately $266,666 USD) check was handed to his/her family. 116 checks were handed by court officials to the families of the 116 deceased persons whose names were made publicly known. Those whose houses were damaged were placed in temporary furnished accommodation. Those whose cars were damaged were given assistance to fix their cars or buy new ones. Similarly the request to honor Farman Ali Khan, a Pakistani expatriate who saved 14 people and then drowned before saving the 15th person, was also met. King Abdullah awarded him the King Abdul Aziz Medal of the First Order in appreciation of his heroic humanitarian act and a street in Jeddah was named after him[18]. His family also received a huge sum of money in recognition of his courage and sacrifice. It should be noted that while all these actions were taken in response to people's demands, for obvious reasons there is no evidence in the traditional media that the government actually consulted social media regarding these measures.

4.4. SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE (RQ4)

Social media enabled users to express their feelings and emotions in a language they are familiar with. For example, they wrote their comments in the way they talked i.e. using their own dialect or (slang Arabic). Some expressed themselves in English; others wrote their comments in Arabic but using English characters. The language of their comments also varied with some comments being written as if they were intended for a group of intellectuals gathered at a conference; other comments were very informal as if the author was talking to a group of his or her close friends. Rude and offensive comments were very common on YouTube and on Al Arabiya but less on Facebook and online

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[16] http://arabnews.com/saudiarabia/article542534.ece?service=print

[17] http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/dozens-of-saudi-officials-held-over-corruption?pageCount=0

[18] http://arabnews.com/saudiarabia/article524270.ece

communities, because on Facebook and online communities the group members are mostly friends who might lose a lot by being disrespectful. This is in addition to the fact that content on online communities is monitored as it is on Al Arabiya site, albeit on Al Arabiya site only specific types of content are blocked if deemed inappropriate and rude comments are not among those types.

Social media users expressed their opinions in the most convenient way to them. On YouTube, users uploaded videos that documented the incident while providing a voiceover narration at the background in which a description of what the video showed or in-depth analysis was given. Most of the backgrounds of the YouTube videos that described the floods in Jeddah included either recitations of the Quran or spiritual Islamic songs (Anasheeds) implying the disaster might have resulted in a religious awakening for some people. The videos were often followed by a commentary from the viewers. In some cases those who commented provided evidence that contradicted the content of the video either in the form of a textual comment or in some cases another video.

On online communities, such as Al-Saha al-Siyasia, users searched for the truth as well as engaged in meaningful discussions that shaped the debate about what happened on November 25, 2009. It was on online communities that the story of Farman Ali Khan was first reported. Online communities are also credited for producing a list of all the former mayors of Jeddah and a list of all the people who died because of the floods which might have enhanced people's understanding of those responsible for the floods and those who lost their lives because of them.

On Facebook users launched campaigns that demanded actions to be taken by the government. The government, as discussed above, responded swiftly and took serious steps to meet those demands. On Facebook users organized the rescue efforts that made a significant positive impact on the lives of those affected in the aftermath of the floods. Prior to this crisis volunteerism was hardly practiced in the society. Moreover, organizing volunteer work on Facebook was a 'first' in the history of this country. On Facebook also, users expressed their opinions on the 'walls' of the special interest groups that they joined. For example, when a government supporter tried to find excuses for the Jeddah municipality, a member immediately posted a clipping from an old local newspaper article dated as back as 1981 that showed that a water drainage system for the city of Jeddah was on the agenda of the Municipality 30 years ago but that nothing has happened since then implying that not only the present mayor was corrupt but all former mayors were also corrupt.

On Al Arabiya site, users posted comments to challenge the official version of the truth of the site by offering their own version of the truth on the site. Al Arabiya site was responsive. For example, when readers criticized, during their discussion of one of the Al Arabiya site articles, the Presidency of Meteorology and Environment report that stated that the weather was fine on the day of the flashfloods, Al Arabiya site discussed this issue in a separate article on its site. In addition, Al Arabiya site has been observed to take several of their news items from online communities including the story of Farman Ali Kahn and the list of all the former mayors of Jeddah which both appeared first on online communities. This suggests that online communities and social media, which people have control over, did not only make them authors of media content

instead of being a passive audience, as before, but also made what they produced newsworthy for traditional media.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the use of social media for political participation in Saudi Arabia taking the 2009 floods in Jeddah as an example. Specifically the study tried to address the following research questions: How did people use social media to cope with what happened during the floods in Jeddah in 2009 (RQ1)? How did people use social media to explain and understand what happened (RQ2)? How did people use social media to demand changes be made in light of what happened (RQ3)? In what way each type of social media differed with respect to the above questions (RQ4)?

The findings of this study show that people used social media to express their feelings and emotions (particularly to grieve the loss of lives or vent anger at those responsible), express their opinions (mainly to explain and understand what happened and why), and call for action (specifically to seek justice for the victims and or to organize themselves before they went to the streets of Jeddah to help with the rescue efforts).

The findings in this study appear to accord with the literature. That the individuals used social media to express their feelings and emotions, as this study has shown, has also been reported previously. Young (2009) study, for example, showed that 40% of the study participants regularly updated their status/feelings on Facebook. In addition, 29% of the participants considered the ability to express oneself as an important outcome of their experience on SNS. Similarly, the current study finding that individuals used SNS to express their opinions is also supported in the literature. Al-Saggaf (2011), for example, found that one way in which females in Saudi Arabia use to express opinions of political nature is by the mere joining of Facebook groups. Berns and Chau (2006) also found that individuals used the social media site they studied effectively to communicate ideas, opinions and information about civic life. As for the finding relating to calling for action, Al-Saggaf and Weckert (2006) found that their participants used online communities to criticize a crucial political decision, reach a consensus regarding it among themselves, and communicate their opposing views about it to government officials which, in a few cases, triggered the government action. Similarly, Harlow and Harp (2012) found that their participants (in US and Latin America) used SNS for both online activism and offline activism including to pressure decision makers. Unlike in the case of Saudis where offline activism is not permitted and social media is one of a very few alternatives to call for action, in the case of the participants in Harlow and Harp (2012) study, social media was used to enhance traditional offline means not to replace them. With regards to the longevity and regularity of interaction in making the communication on Facebook more or less peaceful, these have been found to be the main reason for less fighting and flame wars in online communities (Al-Saggaf, Himma and Kharabsheh, 2008). On the other hand, the anonymity, lack of public self-awareness, and the medium's lack of oral and non-verbal cues on YouTube and Al Arabiya site which, according to Joinson (1998) and

Mar (2000), cause abandonment of social inhibitions might have been the reason for members engaging in fighting and flame wars.

The findings need to be considered in light of the following limitations. First, the results are limited to the four sites studied and should not be generalised to other social media sites like Twitter[19]. Second, the results are limited to the sample used (the 40 posts and the responses to them) and should not be generalised to the rest of the content about the Jeddah 2009 floods. Third, since in the case of Al Arabiya site, the respondents do not need to register to post comments, their identity could not be verified which does raise the issue of the authenticity of respondents and the potential for deception.

Nevertheless, this study should be considered significant given it will, hopefully, pave the way for future research about the impact of social media on the political landscape in Saudi Arabia particularly after these sites have proven to be very effective in encouraging the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Some interesting questions include: can these sites facilitate a public sphere for the Saudis? If yes, what is the effect of this public sphere on the relationship between state and society? Can these sites facilitate civic engagement that will eventually cause substantial social changes in the country to occur? Only further research can reveal the answers to these questions.

In a region where internet is largely censored, freedom of expression is limited and traditional media is controlled by governments, social media offers users an attractive alternative to discuss politics with each other and express their opinions about what is happening in their country. The opportunity to comment on what is posted on these sites allowed users to not only discuss issues that concern them as a group but also enabled them to contribute to the media conversation about the topics that matter to them. In addition, it allowed them to offer alternative interpretations about the stories reported in the media, correct facts and back up their additional information with evidence that they obtained from multiple sources.

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[19] Generalisations were not sought in this study anyway.

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