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THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT REACTIONS TO YOUTUBE BASED PROGRAMMING: THE CONTENT MAKERS' PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction:

This paper examines the behavior of the Saudi authorities in response to Saudi youth's production of local relevant content through the platform of YouTube, from the perspective of content makers themselves. It attempts to answer the research question which concentrates on the nature of the relationship between the government and the young creative content creators of YouTube.

The Literature Review showed, for instance, (Lim, 2012; Khondker, 2011; and Kalathil and Boas, 2003) that there is a narrow range of research in the field of Arab and Saudi media in general but there is a particular poverty of research that attempts to offer a comprehensive perspective of young Saudis' production and consumption of YouTube in one of the most conservative and culturally sensitive countries, perhaps, in the world.

The Literature Review also pointed out academic debates over the methodological approaches and limitations over the buzzword of big data where a massive number of researchers adopt the digital positivism paradigm to investigate the area of research. Leading names in this context are (Peng, 2012; Boyd, 2007 & 2015; Fuchs and Dyer-Witthford, 2012; and Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2017). Other studies highlighted the significance of a paradigm shift to produce critical social media theory and critical social media studies by employing rigorous traditional methods that explore new patterns, experience and meanings for the research problem. They argued that the big reliance on digital positivism produce no real meaning for the study (Fuchs, 2017; Golding, Raeymaeckers and Sousa, 2017; and Manovich, 2009).

Based on the gap in the Literature, this paper attempts to add value to this discipline by offering an empirical analysis to the research problem through the qualitative lens to explore the reality of the social worlds of the Saudi YouTube context.

The Methodology:

The intent of the research was to conduct face-to-face interviews with content creators in their natural settings at the studios, in Saudi Arabia, in order to observe the work flow that could have offered the researcher with first-hand experience of challenges and reality of production activities for YouTube. However, the visa could not be obtained which shaped the design of this study and its procedure. Therefore, this study conducted ten in-depth semi-structured online interviews where they were flexible and emergent in nature which brought usefulness and quality for this study of YouTube in Saudi Arabia. Online interviews have been conducted by adopting the framework of Salmons (2015) to ensure about the validity, the quality and the ethics of the procedure.

The ground theory approach was adopted to explore new patterns and to allow for the emergence of new concepts for the research problem. The framework the study followed from theoretical sampling to theoretical narrative was Charmaz (2014) and Auerbachian and Silverstein (2003). The interviews were conducted in Arabic, transcribed to Arabic by the researcher and then translated by a professional translator. Ethical measurements were put in place.

The results:

Firstly, the investigation found that the legal vacuum of YouTube in Saudi Arabia has had positive and negative implications for the market. The vagueness and uncertainty has enabled young people to unleash their creativity and boost the scale and the scope of YouTube based programmes but also this ambiguity has offered the government an opportunity to intervene whenever it wants to protect its interests. As a result, the paper came up with two typologies that relate to the production of online media content in a non-democratic context. The culture of connection and the culture of exploration have been highlighted in the aforementioned discussion.

Secondly, young people's behavior was to employ safe technique of self-regulation based solely on their judgement and common sense which was not always accurate as the analysis has found.

Thirdly, the reaction of the Saudi government was subject to various factors, including the nature of content, the context and the timeframe of YouTube based programmes. The research found that the authority shows a great deal of relaxation and acceptance towards YouTube based programming. However, this was not always the case as the authoritarian attitude still exists in non-democratic governments.

The empirical analysis has exhibited that the authority responded differently to different cases which spanned from imprisoning, blocking the episode and contacting the producer in relation to the content. The hand of government was visible in the beginning of the YouTube based programmes phenomenon (2011-2013), but it became less during (2014-2016).

Finally, the research explored that there were some attempts by senior members of the Royal Family of Saudi Arabia to contain the youth and their initiatives; arguably, to minimize the critical tones of YouTube based programmes. The era of 2014-2016 was

marked with the decline in talk shows and critical programs in favor of the growth humorous and entertaining programmes. Furthermore, the Saudi young people of YouTube were critical towards the middle and low agencies of state but never against the senior ranks of state such as the King.

The contribution of this paper is that it adds to the debate about the behavior of authoritarian regimes towards the utilization of social media platforms by young people during peace time. It offers an insight on how globalization platforms such as YouTube can pose challenges for non-democratic governments but yet how the state can respond to this challenge. This analysis has covered the attitude of the Saudi government which gives an indication of general policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

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