**Young adults, new media, leisure and change in Saudi Arabia**

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**Abstract**

This paper outlines how satellite television, the internet and cell phones have entered then spread within Saudi Arabia. We identify the short-term and discuss likely longer term outcomes in a country where, up to now, out-of-home leisure has been unusually restricted and which remains an absolute monarchy. Previous research into young people’s uses of the new media is reviewed, followed by the results of our own investigations into young Saudis’ uses of Twitter, YouTube and religious websites in 2015. We then use our findings from interviews with 23 young Saudi adults to add fine detail to what is known about uses and users of the new media. It is argued that although there has been no change up to now, the new media are very likely to be involved in the spread of support for further liberalisation of uses of free time. We note that there has already been a seismic shift in Saudi political culture, which, as power passes to a new generation of young royals and government ministers, all in the context of the country’s need to rebalance its economy, make liberalisation of out-of-home free time uses increasingly likely.

**Keywords:** leisure, new media, politics, Saudi Arabia, youth.

**Introduction**

This paper is about the impact on leisure and politics when the full range of ICT-enabled media (satellite television, cell phones and the internet) arrive in a country where free time use has been unusually restricted and which is still an absolute monarchy.

The impact of new media on the leisure lives of young and older people has been researched extensively in economically advanced European and North American countries, in Australasia and also in certain emerging market economies in South America and the Far East (see, for example, Albrechtsen, 2000; Foley et al, 2007; Lee, 2008; Mason, 2008; Selwyn, 2003; Williams and Williams, 2005). New media now account for substantial amounts of free time use, and have been identified as facilitating the formation of new political generations among young people who ‘do politics’ differently than their elders (see Castells, 2012; Honwana, 2013; Porta and Mattoni, 2014). The role of new media in the spread of protests that became known as the Arab Spring in 2011, and also in the spread of the Indignados movement in Spain and the Occupy movement which spread across the USA then into other countries, all in 2011, has been widely recognised (see, for instance, Noueihad and Warren, 2013). Western cultural products that seeped through the Iron Curtain are acknowledged as helping to foster a desire for change among Eastern Europe’s youth in the years preceding 1989 (Pilkington, 1994).

We doubt whether there can be one universally true answer to, ‘What are the effects of new media?’ Here we confine ourselves to one case study country, Saudi Arabia. It is an extreme case – an extremely conservative case – in the endurance of absolute rule by its monarchy (political parties and all demonstrations and political assemblies are banned), and its Wahhabi version of Islam which prohibits most forms of out-of-home leisure that people throughout the rest of the world enjoy – consuming alcohol, cinemas, theatres, theme parks, concerts, galleries and exhibitions, for example. Men and families in separate sections can visit cafes and restaurants. Women and families can shop in air conditioned malls. These are the highlights of regular legitimate out-of-home uses of free time except that both sexes (separately) can pray, attend study groups and classes at mosques. However, in their homes Saudis now have access to the full range of media content plus a new ability to engage in peer-to-peer private communication.

**Methods**

Our evidence is from government and commercial statistics on media penetration and audiences in Saudi Arabia, and previous academic enquiries that have questioned young people and their teachers about their experiences and views on the new media. Most of this research is available only in Arabic, but some is in English language. We add to this existing evidence our own research into new media content, and the results of semi-structured interviews with 23 25-35 year olds who were purposively selected in roughly equal numbers from residents in Jeddah and Mecca, both major cities in the country’s Western province. Our interviewees were all Saudi nationals. We selected 20 married couples because our wider research interests included all the major youth life stage transitions – from education to work or non-work, in family relationships and housing. None of the wives were employed, had ever been employed or had even sought employment after completing education. In addition to the 10 couples we therefore interviewed three single, employed women from the same 25-35 age group. The respondents were selected in roughly equal numbers from those living in villas and those in traditional housing. These are official categories in Saudi housing statistics. Villas are typically detached, spacious dwellings. All the husbands who were living in villas were university graduates and held middle class (professional or management) jobs. The husbands in traditional housing were all employed, but earning far less than their villa counterparts. All the interviews were conducted by same-sex interviewers between March and June 2016.

Although not the main reason for targeting 25-35 year olds, the choice proved convenient for our questions about the impact of new media. Our opening question was, ‘How has your life been affected by…?’ and satellite television had usually entered their homes when they were children. The internet and cell phones had usually become part of their lives when they were teenagers or in their 20s, prior (where relevant) to marrying. Actually, as soon as we mentioned new media the respondents wanted to talk only about their smartphones, typically a latest iPhone or Samsung Galaxy. These were their new gadgets. Satellite television was relatively old, and had become just normal television, but respondents could recall the arrival of ‘boxes’ and ‘dishes’ in their childhood homes.

We could not ask directly about political opinions in a society where any criticism of the ruling dynasty is a serious offence, and likewise any criticism of Islam. The political views of young people across the Arab region (including Saudi Arabia) have in fact been polled regularly since 2008 in what was originally intended to be consumer market research, but which found the series covering the years in which the ‘events of 2011‘ erupted, and this led to the regular inclusion of structured questions about attitudes towards democracy and what the respondents regarded as the main problems facing their countries (see ASDA’A Burson Marsteller, 2008 – 2016). We refer to this evidence in what follows. However, our approach was to ask how respondents believed that their own lives and their country would change over the next 5 to 10 years. The interviews were conducted during the months following the announcement of the Saudi government’s *Vision 2030* (see Global Research Strategy Report: Economy – KSA, 2016). The controversial proposals, on which many of our respondents gave opinions, included the part-privatisation of Saudi Aramco, until then the 100 percent state owned custodian of the country’s oil and gas reserves, cuts in subsidies for domestic energy consumption, the introduction of a value added tax, and making it easier for foreign firms to invest and operate in Saudi Arabia. *Vision 2030* incorporated earlier proposals to transform Saudi Arabia into a knowledge economy which would be less dependent on oil and gas revenues (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2013). This was the context in which our questions were answered.

We proceed with a summary of what is known about the Saudi mediascape from published statistics and previous research into uses of the new media by young Saudis. This is followed by the results of our own investigation into Saudi contributors, followers and viewers on Twitter and YouTube, and selected religious sites during 2015. We then present illustrative evidence on uses of the new media by our 25-35 year old interviewees and their families. We proceed to discuss how, up to 2016, other uses of free time had remained as restricted as ever, but also how the creation of new public spaces had already changed Saudi political culture. We conclude that, alongside power passing to a new generation of reform-minded Saudi royals, coupled with a generally acknowledged need to diversify the economy, the media induced desire of many young Saudis to live the normal lifestyles that they watch each day in their homes on TV, PCs and cell phones could lead to a general liberalisation of out-of-home uses of free time. This will be welcomed enthusiastically by some, but strongly opposed by other Saudis.

**The Saudi mediascape**

Satellite television broadcasting to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states began in 1990 during the first Gulf war (to liberate Kuwait). Previously Saudi households had been able to watch just two terrestrial channels, both state owned and controlled, one devoted to news and the other to religion. In 1990 these channels also became available by satellite as did the news channels of other Gulf states as well as the CNN, BBC and other international broadcasters’ versions of regional and world news. Al-Jazeera began broadcasting from Qatar in 1996. News was followed quickly by entertainment channels with comedies, game shows, quizzes, dramas, music, films and shopping channels. *Arab Idol* is just one of many Arabic versions of popular European and American programmes that are now available across the Middle East. Most satellite channels that are available in Saudi Arabia are free to view, funded by governments (mainly news, current affairs and religion) or by advertising. Households just need to purchase and install a dish and box. Channels offering the latest films and live top sport require a subscription and a card for the box to decrypt the channels.

As soon as this wide range of content became available, there was concern in all the Gulf states about how this was influencing the populations’ thoughts and behaviour, especially those of young people (see Al-Homoud, 2005; Al-Luhiani, 2008; Alzahrami, 2008; ASBAR, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Kraidy, 2013). Audience research throughout the population (which is essential for broadcasters seeking advertising revenue) shows that the most popular channels in Saudi Arabia are those broadcast by MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Centre) which began operating from London in 1991 but has been Dubai-based since 2002, though owned throughout by Saudi businessmen. Its 10 channels offer family entertainment, kids’ entertainment, movies, music and drama in addition to news. There is a Bollywood channel for those who prefer this to Hollywood, but Turkish dramas and ‘soap’ serials are also popular. That said, as throughout the rest of the world (see Hesmondalgh, 2013), the most popular news and entertainment in Saudi Arabia are locally sourced. National news channels are preferred to Qatar, American, British, Russian and other versions of world and Middle East news.

Satellite broadcasting is censored in Saudi Arabia, but only to exclude pornography (adult entertainment channels), the propagation of faiths other than Islam, and Shiite channels that are explicitly hostile to the (Sunni) al-Saud regime. The royal dynasty and over 80 percent of the Saudi population are Sunni. A Shiite minority is concentrated in the East and tends to tune to Bahrain rather than Saudi-sourced channels. The Bahrain channels cater for their own, mainly Shiite, local viewers.

A cell (mobile) telephone service became available in Saudi Arabia from 1998, and an internet service has been available since 2003. These services can be accessed in all regions, but whereas 97 percent of households now have satellite dishes, in 2014 only 64 percent had internet connections (see Table I). This is probably because smartphones have been available since 2009 and, if the respondents in our interviews are reliable guides, have become many people’s preferred way of accessing the internet. Saudi Arabia is third in the world league table in the number of cell phones in use per head of population (South Korea is top) (see Table II).

**Table 1**

**Total Internet use in Saudi Arabia (2005-2014)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
| Internet users (in millions) | 3.0 | 4.8 | 7.6 | 9.3 | 10.3 | 11.4 | 13.6 | 15.8 | 16.5 | 19.6 |
| Internet penetration as a percentage of the total population | 13% | 20% | 30% | 36% | 38% | 41% | 47.5% | 54.1% | 55.1% | 63.7% |

Source: Annual Report 2014 of Saudi CITC – Communication and Information Technology Commission.

**Table II**

**Total mobile service subscriptions in Saudi Arabia (2007-2014)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
| Mobile service subscriptions (in millions) | 28 | 36 | 44.8 | 51.6 | 53.7 | 53 | 51 | 53 |
| Mobile phone penetration as a percentage of the total population | 113% | 138% | 167% | 186% | 188% | 181.5% | 169.7% | 171.4% |

Sources: Annual Report 2014 of Saudi CITC – Communication and Information Technology Commission

There has been the same flurry of research into young people’s internet use as followed the advent of satellite television in the 1990s. This research has found that young Saudis use mainly social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram). They text, send emails, some visit Twitter, and many use YouTube for entertainment. (Alswayn, 2014). Young people believe that the internet develops their new technology skills, widens their social and cultural horizons, and they value the privacy offered by their smartphones, tablets, laptops and PCs (Almuntashri, 2012; Alnaimen, 2012; Aleinzi and Alajloni, 2009; Subehi and Al-mosa, 2013). Private peer-to-peer interactive communication is possible by voice calls, texts and in enclaves of friends on Facebook and WhatsApp (Al-Otaiby, 2014).

Some internet sites are blocked. As with satellite channels, this is to exclude pornography and material considered religiously offensive, but with the internet censorship proves far less effective. For example, the satellite channels and websites of radical Shiite clerics can be blocked but the same clerics pop up on Twitter and be heard and watched on YouTube. Pornography can be accessed by anyone who is willing to search.

**Twitter, YouTube and religious website content in 2015**

International researchers who have visited the Kingdom and who have perused Saudi input on new media sites, specifically YouTube and Twitter, have noted the anonymous contributions that are critical, often lampooning their country’s political and religious leaders (for example, Coleman, 2013; Murphy, 2011). This content, which does exist, needs to be set in context. Table III lists the Saudi bloggers on Twitter who had the most followers in 2015.

**Table III: Top 10 in Saudi followers on Twitter in 2015**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Name | Gender | Websites | Main interests | No. of tweets | No. of followers |
| 1 | Omar Almulhem | M | <https://mobile.twitter.com/Omar_Almulhem?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw> | Social activist - voluntary work | 60,688 | 2,712,945 |
| 2 | Fahad Albutairi | M | <https://mobile.twitter.com/Fahad?p=i> | comedian actor on Social media | 49,704 | 2,050,188 |
| 3 | Bader Saleh | M | <https://mobile.twitter.com/BidzSaleh?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw>. | Saud writer and presenter of comedy program on YouTube. | 8,556 | 2,028,542 |
| 4 | Ameerah Altaweel | F | <https://mobile.twitter.com/AmeerahAltaweeL?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw>  Ex-wife of a Saudi prince Alwaleed bin Talal | Business and charitable work. | 3,142 | 1,194,381 |
| 5 | Omer Hussein | M | <https://mobile.twitter.com/omarhuss?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw>. | Social media- presenter programs on YouTube | 49,012 | 1,084,395 |
| 6 | Essam Alzamel | M | <https://mobile.twitter.com/essamz?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw>. | Business of ICT- economic writer | 113,379 | 695,268 |
| 7 | Malik Nejer | M | <https://mobile.twitter.com/Nejer?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw>. | Painter and movie maker on YouTube | 5,750 | 659,207 |
| 8 | Abdullah Jaber | M | <https://twitter.com/jabertoon> | Painter of Cartoon on Social Media (with critical views for social issues) | 18,478 | 374,962 |
| 9 | Yazeed Al-rajhi | M | <https://twitter.com/Yazeed_AlRajhi> | Business man - rally racer | 20,723 | 273,177 |
| 10 | Loujain Hathloul | F | <https://twitter.com/LoujainHathloul>  the wife of Fahad Albutairi (no.2) | Feminist and social activist, famous for being filmed while driving a car on Saudi roads | 13,696 | 263,859 |

The list is headed by a social activist, Omar Almulhem, who is well-known for promoting charitable work for needy groups who might be refugees, the aged or the disabled. Moslems are expected to perform charitable work or to give to charitable causes. Another name on the list, Ameera, is also associated with her promotion of charities. However, most names are entertainers – comedians, cartoonists, painters, movie makers and a presenter of media shows. There is also a businessman/racing driver and the internationally well-known feminist ‘driving’ activist who lives in Dubai with her even more followed (on Twitter) husband. No clerics are among the top 10, nor any political commentators of any persuasion.

In Saudi Arabia any talk about religious identity (Sunni or Shiite) or tribal identity raises sensitive issues that are considered incompatible with the unity of the nation which is emphasised and demanded by the state. So no-one likes to discuss these topics in public. However, the internet creates online space where young and older people to do just this (see Samin, 2008). The content of these sites suggests that Saudi youth dislike ‘extremists’, except that Siegel (2016) has detected a trend since the escalation of the war in Syria in 2012 for Saudi clerics (Sunni and Shiite) and political leaders to adopt derogatory language which, she claims, has resulted in what was formerly extreme becoming mainstream.

In summary, our investigation of Saudi cyberspace suggests that most Saudi contributors are 20- or 30-somethings, and their top searches are for entertainment but also concern religion and security. Overall, those with political concerns are looking for stability and peace in their region rather than opportunities to oppose anyone – governments, religions or nations. Very few young people seem to like the ideas of any extremists. Some absences from Saudi cyberspace are as noteworthy as presences. There has been no online outbreak of Saudi radicalism which, in a Saudi context, would be anti-Islam and republican on a scale to provoke a response from national authorities.

**New media use by 25-35 year olds and their families**

Our interviews provide detailed illustrative evidence on how the new media are being used by tech-savvy young Saudis. Satellite television had entered all but one of our respondents’ homes while they were children. In most families the wider choice of channels and programmes was eagerly embraced, but there had sometimes been (ultimately unsuccessful) resistance.

Male respondents who we interviewed typically explained that their jobs left little time for watching television, then reeled off all the programmes that they somehow managed to watch, typically the news, any interesting documentary, the sports channel for ‘must see’ events, and entertainment and cartoons with their families, and films with their wives. The married women were heavier, daytime viewers. One told us that, ‘TV satellite channels are very important for me. During the day I turn on the TV for the music channels and when I finish the housework I see some attractive channels like those about fashion, health and beauty, and also some shopping channels that have things that you cannot find at the local market. I do not like the political, economic or sport channels. Arabic drama is silly so I like to see global dramas like Turkish or English, and movies also.’

Some couples who lived in traditional housing were limiting the channels that they accessed on grounds of cost: they could not afford the subscription channels. However, a more common reason for self-censorship was to protect their children from non-Islamic content. This also applied in one of the villa households. Aziz, a graduate in Islamic studies who had become a school-teacher of the subject, had grown up in a family where there was no television and had initially resisted installing a set in his home following marriage. Aziz had eventually relented under pressure from his wife, but filtered availability to the channels that he considered safe. Mohamed and his wife Amani, a couple with children who lived in a traditional house, were acting similarly. Mohamed explained that, ‘We have TV satellite channels but I have made a filter for them and left only the local and Islamic channels and also channels for news and sport. There is a lot of rubbish on some channels so we need to take control.

The men in management and professional jobs talked eagerly and at length about their smartphones, how these had become essential in their working lives, and how they had no time for frivolous uses (though in practice they were all finding the time). Fahad, a sales director in a retail chain, told us that, ‘The smartphone is part of my life, especially my job. I need it to manage all my job issues. On the level of my personal life, I like searching social networks, especially Twitter to know everything about something (he laughs). This is a huge world. It brings everything to your table but you have to be careful that you don’t try to eat everything. You have to be selective. Actually I am keen on political, economic and sport news. So I follow some groups on Twitter which send me updated news on all their issues.’ Samah, Fahad’s wife, had also found that her smartphone had become an essential part of her life, but used it differently than her husband. ‘The smartphone is useful and very important to make contact with everyone immediately. I have three WhatsApp groups on my iPhone: family group (mum, dad, brothers and husband), my close friends group, and the school group (all teachers and mothers in the private schools of my kids). My friends chat and I do that when I have time. I use the Instagram to find news about things like music, beauty products and kids’ issues, so I can buy or order something online.’

The husbands and wives who lived in traditional housing were using their smartphones (they all had one each) in similar ways to their middle class counterparts, but were having to control the costs. Some of their phones were bought second-hand, and they were using top-up cards rather than contracts which typically cost $80 a month. Just four out of our 23 respondents, all religious conservatives, were using the internet to hear or express views with political implications. Aisha, a wife living in traditional housing, used her smartphone, ‘As a recorder for the Holy Quran. It has a large space to download all Holy Quran voice readings. I can revise the Quran that I learnt at the Quran school by listening in my free time. I have religious WhatsApp groups for religious women who are leaders in da’wa (preaching Islam). We are all females so we work as a group to promote Islam online by sending text messages.’

**Free time**

Satellite television and the internet had made our respondents’ private time and family time more varied and interesting. New media were filling and sometimes cluttering what could otherwise have been a big emptiness. The cluttering applied equally to middle class men’s work time. However, as regards the rest of men’s and women’s non-work time, the places to which they could go and the things that they could do outside their homes remained as limited as ever. That said, the new media had clearly whetted some respondents’ appetites for change, but this would not have been solely due to the new media. Many had personal experience of life outside their own country. As children they had been taken on family holidays to Turkey, Dubai and Lebanon. One couple had already visited Malaysia. At any time there are around 150,000 Saudi students studying overseas, and the main host country is the USA. However, the new media have enabled everyone to watch people living in other countries each day on television.

‘Dubai’ was one word that sparked strong reactions from our respondents. Some exclaimed, ‘Bring it on!’ For others, Dubai was a nightmare. Those who spoke about the need for liberalising free time in Saudi Arabia were all middle class villa dwellers who had the money and wanted more opportunities to spend it locally. One middle class wife believed that, ‘In 10 years Saudi will be like the emirates now. Jeddah will be like Dubai and more beautiful.’ A second middle class wife had similar ideas. ‘I hope Saudi society will be better than now. I travelled a lot with my family in the past and I saw different countries. I liked Beirut, Dubai and Bahrain and I wish that Saudi was more modern like these countries. What I mean by modern is the lifestyle. For example, if I want to visit my family in Jeddah I need my husband to drive. I cannot go by myself.’

Others, needless to say, had completely contrary ideas. Aziz, the teacher of Islamic studies, spoke as follows. ‘Look, maybe you will not like my words, but I think that Saudi walks on the wrong side. The development plan and new vision for the future are Western-made so will serve America and Israel. This is the painful truth. Is it normal for this to happen in this country? No, this is a Western plot to cut the wings of Saudi as a symbol of Islam. There is also the ISIS story: all America-made. Because of that I think our society will go into a dark place. When Western countries enter a society they control not only the oil but the whole society, and youth in particular. Maybe you will see cinemas, women without the veil, bars and wine, drugs and free relationships among persons of different or the same sex. This is the black scenario. Rational thinking says that we have to beware and not go with everything the West wants or even what our own government wants if that is against Islam.’

Aisha, a wife in a traditional house, was equally concerned. ‘Dubai? You asked me about Dubai as a model. Of course, no, this is the worst model. I have not been there and I do not want to be there, but I have read and looked through the internet about that miserable city. I am afraid that it includes a mixture of things that will destroy Islamic life.’

**Politics**

Everyday out-of-home life may have hardly changed throughout the advent of the new media, and the Saudi Arabia is still an absolute monarchy, but beneath the formal power structure there has been a seismic shift in Saudi political culture. The primary agent has been satellite television. Instead of news channels that present only the government’s position, for a quarter of a century the issues have been debated on satellite TV. This began with Arabic language foreign news channels, and eventually the Saudi channels were obliged to follow in order to retain their audiences. Monarchs must still be treated with respect, but government ministers and senior officials must now expose themselves to questioning. During 2016 Prince Mohamed, then Deputy Crown Prince but Crown Prince since 2017, was interviewed live on television and by a print journalist (for the *Economist* magazine). These were the first such interviews by a prominent Saudi royal.

Ordinary citizens can now express political views publicly. Political discussions are not just within families but spread into internet enclaves. Saudis who reside within Saudi Arabia normally use pseudonyms on public websites such as Twitter. Those who reside outside the country, typically in nearby Kuwait or Dubai, can achieve fame using their real names. Most Saudi media personalities, whether entertainers or political commentators, live outside their own country, like the owners of the popular MBC television channels.

Similar views to what our respondents told us, expressed more concisely, were simultaneously being posted on Twitter. During 2016 there was considerable blogging about Saudi involvement in the war in Yemen. Saudis tended to agree that involvement was justified in order to stem Shiite and Iranian influence, but were worried about the risks to Saudi troops, and the possible spread of fighting through Oman and into the Saudi provinces with substantial Shiite populations. There was greater diversity in tweeted opinions on *Vision 2030,* as applied among our 23 interviewees. Enthusiasts blogged about Saudis becoming normal people. Others argued that economic modernisation would work only if accompanied by other modernisations, like the rule of law and involving the people in politics. Other bloggers were fearful or angry about immanent de-Islamisation. Some of our respondents were firmly behind the government’s plans, but even they were likely to feel that it would take many years before the benefits were felt by most of the population. Many had serious concerns. One recognised that, ‘Saudi society now is now under the microscope for everything. Economically the new vision for 2030 will change the face of our country. After 10 years we should see some results of this plan, and hopefully the life of society will change for the better, but in my opinion the plans are different from real life though this will not appear quickly.’ Wives talked mainly about the future of their families. Non-graduate husbands and their wives were mostly sceptical about *Vision 2030*. Even if they agreed with the aims, they did not trust the government to deliver for people like themselves.

The Saudi regime is fully aware of the new public spaces that the new media have created, and therefore knows that it faces a new type of Saudi public opinion (see Thompson, 2017). The regime knows that it must somehow manage and at least appear responsive. Local and national consultative bodies have been part of the power structure throughout the 20th century history of the Kingdom. Until 2005 all members of these bodies were chosen by royal highnesses, whose choices were usually tribal chiefs and heads of important businesses, but since 2005 local consultative bodies have been partly elected, and in 2015 the proportion of places filled by election rose to two-thirds and women were allowed to participate as candidates and voters. However, the national consultative body is still wholly appointed, and local elections are contested by individuals who do not represent parties with policies and programmes.

There is currently a serious imbalance. Only the ‘anti-Dubai’ religious conservatives can blog publicly and upload onto YouTube. They have dedicated television channels and websites. They can mobilise by following favoured preachers provided they do not stray into criticism of the monarchy or anything that might be construed as support for ‘terrorist’ movements such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. Religious conservatives can assemble in mosques to pray, and in Quran classes and study groups. ‘Pro-Dubai’ opinion is confined within families, close friends, and internet enclaves except when bloggers use pseudonyms or reside outside Saudi Arabia. These citizens’ voices cannot be amplified by Saudi-based leaders equivalent to clerics, and have no equivalents to mosques where they might assemble and display the extent of their support because of the ban on ‘political’ parties and movements.

**Discussion and conclusions**

However, the prospects for ‘pro-Dubai’ socio-cultural liberalisation in Saudi Arabia are rather better than would be read straight-forwardly from the current balance of mobilised opinion. Power in Saudi Arabia is currently passing to a new generation of royals. Up to now all successor kings have been sons of Abdul Aziz, the monarch who negotiated independence in 1932 then ruled until 1953. Abdul Aziz had 22 wives and consorts and fathered 45 acknowledged sons. The last successor son became King Salman in 2015 at the age of 80. King Salman’s own son, Prince Mohamed, aged 30 when his father ascended to the throne, became Crown Prince in 2017 but, more important, has become the main public spokesperson and apparent driver of government policy, including *Vision 2030*. King Salman and Prince Mohamed are regarded as ‘hawks’ on foreign affairs compared with the previous King Abdullah, but liberals on the side of economic and social reform. Prince Mohamed has established a council of young ministers, and most controversially, he has formed a Commission on Public Entertainment which has negotiated with Six Flags, a USA-based operator of amusement parks, with a view to opening facilities in Saudi Arabia. During 2017 the first ever public concerts in Saudi Arabia were held. Also, the previously feared religious police lost their power to make arrests. The first museums opened, mainly to make visits by pilgrims more attractive, and to persuade them to prolong their visits and spend more while in Saudi Arabia. Prince Mohamed has also held discussions with Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and encouraged them to base operations in Saudi Arabia. It is possible that within 20 years Saudi Arabia will have women driving cars, relaxation of the rules prescribing sex segregation in education, employment and public places, and cinemas, theatres and concert halls in all major cities. If Prince Mohamed wished, he could make support for these policies publicly visible. Moderate clerics will acquiesce: Saudi Islam is state funded. The Imans will recall that many of their traditions date only from when Saudi Arabia began to urbanise. However, nothing is certain. Prince Mohamed will not necessarily become the next king. There could be a conservative backlash.

‘Normal leisure’, if and when it becomes possible in Saudi Arabia, will not be the normal leisure of America or Europe but as in most Arabic Islamic countries. Even modest progress towards Western-type democracy is unlikely. King Abdul Aziz remains a revered figure. He secured independence for the country following centuries during which the entire Middle East was part of the Ottoman Empire, and the dynasty has maintained internal peace following centuries of wars between Arab tribes, and Arabs and Persians, for guardianship of Mecca and Medina. The monarchy has spread the country’s wealth throughout the population. Saudis live as well and as unequally as Americans. They know that Western-type elections would create a contest between Shiite and Sunni parties, among the latter between moderates and ‘Wahhabis’, and there would be further divisions along traditional tribal lines. Young Saudis place security well ahead of democracy as the main problem facing their country (ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller, 2016). They do not want the country turned into another Iraq, Libya or Syria.

Unfortunately, socio-cultural liberalisation will not solve the country’s underlying economic problems which are to reduce dependence on oil and gas and to Saudise the workforce. An enlarged cultural and entertainment sector could be part of economic rebalancing, but ‘pro-Dubai’ Saudis are far more likely to envisage themselves and their children becoming customers rather than employees in a future Jeddah Disney. If any profits and salaries flow to foreigners, the local population will not be the main beneficiaries of this rebalancing of their country’s economy.

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