

**The Relevance of Gatekeeping in the Process  
of Contemporary News Creation and Circulation  
in Saudi Arabia**

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## **Abbreviations**

ANT	Actor Network Theory
CEO	Chief executive officer
CITC	Communication and Information Technology Commission
DBS	Direct satellite broadcasting
E-newspaper	Electronic newspaper
FT	Financial Times
GM	General manager
HMC	Higher Media Council
ICT	Information and communication technology
IP	Internet protocol
PC	Personal computer
RSS	Rich site summary
SMS	Short message service
SPA	Saudi Press Agency
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization



## ABSTRACT

### **The Relevance of Gatekeeping in the Process of Contemporary News Creation and Circulation in Saudi Arabia**

By

Abdullah Almaghlooth

This thesis investigates the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia, using largely qualitative data obtained from the observation of two newspapers and a Twitter microblogger, and from personal interviews with thirteen participants. The researcher conducted participant observation in the newsrooms of the print and online editions of a traditional newspaper, *Alriyadh*, and of an electronic newspaper, *Sabq*. He also conducted participant observation of the work of a microblogger, Essam Al Zamil, as well as interviewing Saudi editors-in-chief, journalists, webmasters, bloggers and microbloggers.

The central finding of the study is the identification of an important component of contemporary news gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia, viz. post-production gatekeeping. The research illustrates the importance of this element to the field of digital journalism and considers its present and future effects, not only in Saudi Arabia but also internationally. Eight aspects of post-production gatekeeping are identified throughout this study as applying to the process of contemporary media production. These are: editing material after publication, deleting posts and news items, blocking, cyber-attacks, pressure on microbloggers to cease blogging, the effects of arrest, pursuing posters via their IP addresses and dumping hashtags through Twitter. The research also identifies four other significant aspects of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia, which are: social gatekeeping and women's issues; patriarchal gatekeeping; religious gatekeeping; and hard-copy versus soft-copy gatekeeping.

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

This thesis presents a study of the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. The researcher decided to study this subject as a result of experience gained while working for several print and electronic (e-) newspapers in Saudi Arabia from 1996 to 2009, during which he observed that gatekeeping had a significant impact on the creation and circulation of news. The complexity of adapting the theory and practice of gatekeeping to the rapidly changing environment within which print newspapers, e-newspapers, blogs and microblogs operate today in Saudi Arabia has motivated the study of this interesting area of research.

### **1.1 Objectives**

The objectives of the present research are threefold:

- To examine how gatekeeping is currently applied to news content in Saudi Arabia, with regard to print newspapers, e-newspapers, blogs and Twitter microblogs. The prevalence of the internet means that the creation and circulation of news are undergoing dramatic changes, which in turn affect the operation of gatekeeping and the processing of news in Saudi Arabia.
- To identify the new gatekeepers emerging in the media landscape in Saudi Arabia due to the development of various technologies which impact the creation and circulation of news.
- To improve gatekeeping theory in order to accommodate the changes occurring in the digital age.

### **1.2 Rationale for the study**

The rationale for choosing to study this topic begins with the abovementioned personal interest in this area of study, as the researcher is a professional journalist and academic

who has for some time followed the development of traditional newspapers and the emergence and growing prevalence of internet technology. The development of newspapers on the internet has become an interesting area of study, not only for scholars in the fields of mass communication and journalism research, but also for many people who are affected by the rapid development of the associated technologies. These touch the lives of millions around the globe who use the internet in their daily lives to produce content and share it with others. The rapid and comprehensive growth of digital media makes the study of related issues a matter of increasing interest for many specialists and non-specialists alike, lending significance to this and similar studies.

Secondly, many scholars have argued that the emergence of modern technology has affected the relevance of gatekeeping in news creation and circulation, and that there is a growing need to study this area. Beam (2005) points out that new technologies are changing the features of gatekeeping because of the dramatic transformation of the mechanisms of news creation and circulation. He argues that empirical research is therefore essential to assess the evolving impact of new media technology on gatekeepers and their activities.

It is thus hoped that the empirical research into the contemporary relevance of gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia reported here will contribute significantly to this area. Given the way that qualitative research in the social sciences normally functions (discussed extensively in chapter 4 on methodology), the findings of the present study exceeded expectations. In particular, the study reveals the existence of a new component, termed ‘post-production gatekeeping’, which operates after publication, rather than before as does traditional gatekeeping, and identifies a number of elements of this new component. These findings provide answers to crucial questions about the present and the future of the longstanding theory of gatekeeping in particular and of censorship in general. Firebaugh (2008: 1) argues that qualitative social science sometimes surprises with its findings; indeed, “it is the uncertainty that makes social research exciting and rewarding”.

The final rationale for this study lies in its attempt to identify the new gatekeepers in Saudi Arabia. Technological developments have resulted in the rise of certain new elements and the decline of others. This study seeks to identify these by conducting

observations and many interviews with influential contemporary content producers in Saudi Arabia, revealing elements in common with other parts of the modern world.

### **1.3 Significance of the study**

#### **1.3.1 Contribution to knowledge**

This research aims to make a significant contribution to the concept of gatekeeping in the study of the production and content of news in the internet era. Many authors, such as Beard & Olsen (1999) Deuze & Dimoudi (2002), Jürgens, Jungherr & Schoen (2011), Shoemaker & Vos (2009), Singer (2001) and Ristow (2013), have studied gatekeeping in the digital age but have failed to revise fully the theory to accommodate these digital activities under its umbrella. The present study thus makes an important contribution by identifying the post-production context in which much contemporary gatekeeping functions and establishing the vital role played by this new component.

Adding this component to the main elements of the longstanding theory allows it to accommodate the new elements that are observed to operate as a result of technological developments. The identification of the post-production context can be said to provide the missing link between traditional gatekeeping theory and the new gatekeeping. The researcher has identified a number of activities which fall into the post-production category, in particular the editing of material after publication, the deleting of posts and news items, blocking, cyber-attacks, pressure on microbloggers to cease blogging, the effect of arrests, pursuing posters via their IP addresses and dumping hashtags through Twitter (where the Saudi government has been shown to have loaded hashtags that criticize its performance by injecting large numbers of contrary messages into them, thus diverting attention from the original messages), all of which will be discussed in the following chapters.

Post-production gatekeeping can be expected to be widely discussed and closely examined in future studies in the field of digital journalism, especially in the light of two complementary factors. The pre-selection activities that have characterised traditional gatekeeping and thus dominated the media landscape for decades are in decline, whilst post-publication gatekeeping activities are growing dramatically in volume and importance, because of the diffusion of new platforms which strongly favour the latter and reduce the relevance of the former.

The finding of the existence and growing importance of post-production activities thus constitutes a crucial addition to the longstanding theory of gatekeeping, makes a substantial contribution to a field every aspect of which is moving significantly towards the digital modality and supports the assertion that gatekeeping theory and practice, augmented by the post-production component, will be influential for decades to come.

### **1.3.2 Importance of the study to Saudi Arabia**

This study is important to Saudi Arabia for several reasons. First, the country lacks specialized research centres and the government does not allow media departments to approve any studies that discuss theories of censorship in mass communication; nor do the universities permit any study of news creation and circulation in the country. The few studies which have addressed these issues have been conducted and reported by foreigners, such as Gunter and Dickinson (2013) and Marghalani, Palmgreen and Boyd (1998). They have therefore been subject to many limitations, arising from an incomplete knowledge of the national culture which restricts the authors' understanding of the events and their significance. The importance of the present study lies in the following:

- The most significant aspects of the current study are its identification of new methods adopted by Saudi gatekeepers to control the spread of news and information in the country and its account of how they function. Prior to the advent of e-newspapers, blogs and microblogs, news sources were limited in Saudi Arabia, but in the digital era the picture has become much more complex, making it very important to explore this interesting area of study. Müller (2004) argues that the topics of censorship and news creation in the Middle East have lately become very attractive, interesting and productive.
- Another significant characteristic of this study is that it is one of only a few to examine the impact of the gatekeeping model on the Saudi press, for a number of reasons. One is the absence of specialized media research centres and postgraduate departments, which has restricted the number of studies on media topics in general. Places on media study courses in Saudi universities are very few in number, reflecting the longstanding sensitivity of research into the mechanisms of the Saudi press, which Freedom House (2007) reports as arising from "the government's

position on the role of the press in society”. Alghamdy (2011) argues that the government seriously restricts press freedom through regulation, legal restrictions and censorship, controlling the media directly and via education.

- The spread of new communication tools and the decline of the traditional pre-selection role of the gatekeeper raise two questions: where are the new gatekeepers and how do they function in this complex environment? This study addresses these by collecting qualitative data from observations and interviews with those at the heart of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. It is the first study to observe how Saudi microbloggers create and circulate their Twitter posts. These observations reveal many crucial factors related to gatekeeping, proving its existence in microblogging and showing its impact on every aspect of producing tweets.
- As explained below in section 1.5 on methods, the researcher interviewed 13 Saudi journalists, bloggers and microbloggers,<sup>1</sup> most of whom provided information about their procedures for producing content and the threats they have received from the government for the first time, which lends considerable originality to the study. This was made possible by the researcher’s good relations with most of the interviewees, having been a journalist and blogger for more than ten years and thus earning their trust. The use of observations gave depth to the findings and allowed the researcher to challenge the evidence of interviewees, while reference to more than 400 written sources allowed him to investigate different perspectives.
- According to the editor-in-chief of *Sabq*, this is the first study to conduct an observation of that e-newspaper, reported to be the most visited Arab website, receiving seven million hits per day (Sabq, 26 August 2012), the most visited online newspaper in Saudi Arabia and its eighth most visited website. No another local website competes with *Sabq* on readership and popularity (Alexa, 2012). The study importantly reveals how relations between the Interior Ministry and *Sabq* directly affect the gatekeeping of its news items.

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews with seven of these participants are discussed in depth in chapter 7, while consideration of data collected during the remainder of the interviews is distributed throughout the remaining chapters.

- Religious gatekeeping also plays a significant role in the process of news production in the country. The study sheds light on its impact and influence on the media landscape in Saudi Arabia and the effects of religion on every aspect of life in the country, including the creation and circulation of news.
- The study is the first to include an interview with Asma Qadah, a Malaysian blogger who sheltered Hamzah Kashgari, a young Saudi microblogger who had provoked a widespread angry reaction from Twitter users and others when he posted a sequence of tweets on the birthday of the Prophet Mohammad in February 2012. He was accused of blasphemy, extradited from Malaysia and jailed in Saudi Arabia. This interview is important because Kashgari himself was unavailable for comment, leaving Qadah as the sole direct and reliable source of the details of the case.

#### **1.4 Research questions**

The research questions were developed following the rationale of the study, in order to explore the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia and to discover similarities and differences among print and electronic newspapers, blogs and microblogs in that country, in terms of their news production processes and news content by using gatekeeping analysis. The third question concerns the political and cultural impact on the content producers, while the fourth addresses the emergence of new components of gatekeeping to accommodate technological developments in the media landscape. The following research questions are therefore addressed throughout this thesis:

- What is the relevance of gatekeeping to the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia?
- How do traditional newspapers, e-newspapers, bloggers and microbloggers in Saudi Arabia employ gatekeeping in practice?
- How does the political and cultural context of Saudi Arabia influence the creation and circulation of news in both traditional and non-traditional media?
- Have new forms of gatekeeping evolved in the non-traditional media?

## **1.5 Study design, process and methodology**

In order to collect data in pursuit of answers to the questions above, the researcher used participant observation and interviews. The observations were of the work of a Twitter microblogger, Essam Al Zamil, and of the newsrooms of two newspapers, *Alriyadh* and *Sabq*, the former producing both print and online versions and the latter being a purely electronic publication. During these observations and at other times between 2009 and 2013, the researcher conducted 13 interviews, to identify the newly emerging attributes of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia and to assess the impact of gatekeeping on the production process. This entailed allowing sufficient time to identify these influences on gatekeeping during this period and to research a historical overview of the Saudi newspaper industry since its birth.

The researcher began by designing the research and choosing the methodology, including the methods of data collection and analysis. He first selected the research philosophy, approach and strategy, then identified the particular qualitative methods most appropriate to answering the research questions. As explained in chapter 4, this process entailed consideration of the five layers of the “Research Process Onion” framework recommended by Saunders et al (2003) and the justification of the choices made for each layer: philosophy (interpretivism), approach (inductive), strategy (ethnography), time horizon (longitudinal) and data collection techniques (observation and interviews). Interpretivism was selected as appropriate to explore the rationale behind a phenomenon, in this case the contemporary media gates in Saudi Arabia, to understand how it operates in different circumstances and how the emergence of new elements influences it. The inductive approach, which is suitable for exploratory and explanatory research, allowed the research findings to emerge from themes inherent in the raw data. The adoption of ethnography as a strategy to support the researcher and to guide the project during the fieldwork, comprising both observations and interviews, can be seen to have had a crucial function in exploring the subject and leading to substantial findings. The longitudinal time horizon was chosen for the present study because it required observations to be made at different times in order to examine variables in the newsrooms and production environment affecting the changing application of gatekeeping in the evolving Saudi media context.



The qualitative approach taken by the study is discussed and justified in chapter 4, as is the use of participant observation and interviews to collect the data required to answer the research questions. The use of two methods is argued to help to increase the credibility of the findings. Finally, the chosen method of data analysis was inspired by the recommendation of Marshall and Rossman (2006) that the researcher should analyse qualitative data as it is collected in order to develop an understanding of the phenomenon and exercise control over emerging ideas by checking and testing them. Their seven phases of data analysis were therefore followed: organizing, immersion, generating categories, coding, writing analytic memos, searching for alternative understandings and reporting. The research design thus springs directly from the need to answer the research questions, which were formulated on the assumption that there are similarities and differences between print newspapers, e-newspapers, blogs and microblogs.

## **1.6 Conceptual framework**

The study encompasses a restatement of gatekeeping theory in the context of contemporary news production in Saudi Arabia, where religious and social forces can be seen as particularly influential. This section therefore sets out the conceptual framework of the research by outlining the history of gatekeeping, the background to the four types of written media outlets in Saudi Arabia and the effects of religion and social pressure on Saudi media production.

### **1.6.1 History of gatekeeping**

Gatekeeping in its traditional form is defined by Shoemaker (1991: 1) as the process “by which billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day”.

Gatekeeping in this sense is the keystone of this research, which examines its influence on the contemporary news creation and circulation process in Saudi Arabia and seeks to restate gatekeeping theory to accommodate the changes arising from the prevalence of technology in journalism.

The term ‘gatekeeping’ first appeared in the social psychologist Kurt Lewin’s unfinished manuscript of 1947, “Frontiers in Group Dynamics: II. Channels of Group Life; Social Planning and Action Research”, in the journal *Human Relations*

(Shoemaker, 1991). Lewin coined the term to describe how social forces could change a community's food habits, using the term 'gatekeeper' to illustrate those who controlled the 'gates' through such actions as shopping for food and preparing meals (Shoemaker et al, 2001).

David White, who learned about Lewin's theory through working as his research assistant at the University of Iowa, was the first researcher to transfer it to a communication research project. White conducted a study in which he asked the wire editor of a small town newspaper, whom he called Mr Gates, to keep all the wire copy from press agencies such as the Associated Press, United Press and international wire service agencies, for one week in February 1949. Mr Gates gave a written justification of why he did not run 90% of the wire stories he received in the newspaper. This helped White to compare and analyse the stories actually used with all the news items that wire agencies had sent out throughout the week (Shoemaker, 1991). White (1950) analysed the selections of Mr Gates to identify the impact of various factors on these choices, thus demonstrating the influence of gatekeeping on the process of news selection (Dimitrova et al, 2003).

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argue that the factors affecting the decisions of gatekeepers include news values, government, culture, personal judgment, politics, ethics and beliefs. Harcup and O'Neill (2001) conducted an empirical study which showed that news stories must generally satisfy one or more of the following requirements: making reference to the power elite or celebrity, conveying entertainment, surprise, bad news or good news, having magnitude or relevance, following up an existing story, or referring to newspapers themselves. These contributions all indicate that the application of news values is part of the gatekeeping process. Paying attention to the material prior to publishing and putting it to the test is in line with gatekeeping assumptions.

Singer (2006) discusses the need for contemporary gatekeeping to revisit its conceptual basis to take account of the new challenges facing the process in the digital age. The emergence of the internet necessitates the conduct of empirical studies of active contemporary media and a re-theorisation of gatekeeping to accommodate the changes which have occurred due to technological developments.

Against the background of this wider consideration of the gatekeeping concept, the following subsections examine the four main types of written media outlets in Saudi Arabia: print newspapers, e-newspapers, blogs and microblogs. The justification for a focus on these four platforms lies in their importance to the modern Saudi audience, who consider them to be their main sources of news. By considering how gatekeeping is applied to their production, the aim is to elaborate the conceptual framework for the emergence of new gatekeeping components in the digital age, in response to changes brought about by the prevalence of the internet, and to identify the new gatekeepers.

### **1.6.2 Print newspapers in Saudi Arabia**

The significance of Saudi print newspapers arises from the historical fact that for many decades, they constituted the only source of news for most Saudis. Their history begins in 1929 and their importance remains highly significant. They are no longer the only source of news in the country, but still exert power over some readers and are considered one of most important news vehicles in Saudi Arabia. Many Saudis do not count a story as news until it is published in a print newspaper; they may receive information from various electronic sources, but they tend to doubt them until they see (and touch) them in print (Alghasha'ami, 2006).

Saudi print newspapers are subject to strict control by printing laws, which generally forbid the publication of any criticism of religion, the royal family or the government, thus preventing print journalists from discussing many issues (AlAwad, 2006; Al Shebeili, 2000; Alghasha'ami, 2006). The selection of editors-in-chief is decided by the Ministry of Information with the approval of the Ministry of the Interior, which reflects the extent of state control of newspapers. The establishment of a print newspaper must be approved by Royal decree and is subject to many conditions. For example, the paper must be produced by a company having no fewer than 40 Saudi shareholders, none of whom has a record of security offences. These high-level aspects of official gatekeeping directly affect the number of print newspapers operating in the country, as well as their news content.

There are currently eight companies publishing print newspapers in Saudi Arabia:

- Makkah Establishment for Printing and Information, founded in 1964 and based in Makkah, publishes *Al-Nadwa*, which changed its name to *Makkah* in 2013;
- Al Madina Press Establishment, founded in 1964 in Jeddah, publishes a daily newspaper, *Al-Madina*;
- Al-Yamama Press Establishment, founded in Riyadh in 1964, publishes the daily *Alriyadh*;
- Okaz Organization for Press and Publication, established in Jeddah in 1965, publishes the *Okaz* daily;
- Al Jazirah Press, Printing and Publication Establishment, founded in 1964 in Riyadh, publishes the daily *Al Jazirah*;
- Al-Bilad Press and Publication Establishment, established in Jeddah in 1964, publishes the daily newspaper *Al-Bilad* and the weekly *Aqra'a* magazine.
- Dar Al-Yawm Press and Publication Establishment, founded in Dammam in 1965, publishes *Al-Yawm* daily; and
- Assir Press and Publication Establishment, founded 2000 in Abha, publishes the newest daily newspaper, *Alwatan* (AlAwad, 2010).

It is instructive to compare Saudi Arabia, which has an area of 2,149,690 square kilometres and a population of 29,195,895, with its much smaller neighbour Bahrain (765.3 km<sup>2</sup>, population 1,234,571), which has nine print newspapers. Thus, Saudi Arabia has a population more than twenty times as large as that of Bahrain, yet it has fewer print newspapers, which gives an indication of the strictness of the censorship in the former, bearing in mind that the media in Bahrain is not free from censorship (GCC-SG.org, 2013).

The strict gatekeeping procedures imposed on Saudi newspapers and the rapid changes in news creation and circulation due to the impact of technology have motivated the researcher to conduct an observation of one of the leading Saudi print newspapers, in order to explore the elements of gatekeeping currently prevailing in the country. In short, the inclusion of a print newspaper in the present study allows examination of how traditional gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia has responded to technological developments.

### **1.6.3 Electronic newspapers**

Unlike print newspapers, very many electronic (online) newspapers operate in Saudi Arabia, because they can do so without approval by royal decree or other governmental requirements applied to print newspapers, and because the cost of establishing one is relatively low. Since 2004, e-newspapers, many of them independent, have therefore flourished in the Saudi news landscape. As their number increased, the government, while having no direct authority to gatekeep their content, did not remain passive but reacted by blocking some, while others suddenly ceased to operate. The authorities have more recently taken steps to regulate the sector. In January 2011 the Ministry of Information imposed a licensing requirement on all new and existing e-newspapers. Any publisher who failed to apply for a licence within six months from the date of the announcement would be held legally accountable and the site would be subject to blocking (Jawad, 2013; Al Omran, 2012). This government action reduced the number of e-newspapers, because many owners of news sites chose not to apply for the licence. Nevertheless, some remaining Saudi e-newspapers have high readership, receiving millions of hits per day (Sabq, 26 August 2012). The researcher selected *Sabq* as representative of this medium in order to investigate any differences there might be in the application of gatekeeping to print and e-newspapers, to determine whether any new forms of gatekeeping had evolved in the new context and to explore the extent of government involvement in gatekeeping the media production procedure.

### **1.6.4 Blogs**

The researcher decided to investigate blogs as part of the present study because of their importance and the sensitive relations between bloggers and the Saudi government. The first Saudi blogs appeared in late 2003 and they had become prevalent by 2006. The early bloggers used nicknames and aliases in order to remain anonymous while expressing their feelings, writing diaries and criticizing the government. A few bloggers then began to reveal their identities. One such pioneer who blogged under his real name was Fouad Alfarhan, who was arrested in December 2007 after his office in Jeddah had been broken into. His offence was to have listed in his blog the ten Saudis whom he most disliked and least wished to meet (Lacey, 2009). The study includes interviews with Alfarhan and with other bloggers who have been arrested, to illustrate the effects

of arresting bloggers on the production of their blogs (and those of others) and to highlight the elements that influence post-production gatekeeping.

### **1.6.5 Microblogs**

The Twitter microblogging service is a significant feature of the media landscape in Saudi Arabia, where it has become a crucial news channel for people. Twitter's CEO, Dick Costolo, is reported as stating that "Twitter has 140 million active users. Twitter's growth is coming from users in other countries, particularly those in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia alone saw growth of 3,000% in June [2012]" (Guynn, 2012). CBC journalist Anne Gaviola (2013) claims that "Saudi Arabia has the highest Twitter penetration rate in the world at about 40%". These statements reflect the importance of Twitter for Saudis, leading the researcher to include it in the study in preference to Facebook and other similar platforms, which had less significance for Saudis in the period of the study. The primary research therefore includes the observation of a Saudi microblogger, Essam Al Zamil, who ran a successful Twitter campaign which forced the government to change a decision, as reported in chapter five. This observation illustrates how many microbloggers produce their tweets, why they choose to participate in certain hashtags while ignoring others, and what kinds of gatekeeping are involved in their operations.

### **1.6.6 Religious and social effects on Saudi media production**

Religion and social forces affect many aspects of Saudi life, including the media. There are limited appearances by females on Saudi national television, for example, while many decisions affecting Saudi media productions are influenced by consideration of their religious and cultural impact (Marghalani, Palmgreen and Boyd, 1998). Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries in the world which has no cinemas and does not allow women to drive cars, because of objections by religious leaders and social traditions (Long, 2005). During the researcher's observations at the *Alriyadh* print newspaper, he saw no females on the premises. All of the staff were men and no female voice was heard. The newspaper has a separate section for women. When the researcher asked about this, as discussed in chapters 5 and 6, he was told that the reasons were social and religious.

The powerful role of religious leaders in the country tends to uphold certain traditions and to make it difficult for change to occur as it has in many other Muslim countries. The forces of conservatism remain much as described by Wilson and Graham (1994: 36):

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia remains a theocracy with little distinction made between religion and politics. The country's constitution is the Sharia, or Islamic law, and the al-Saud take care to couch all political decisions in religious terms.

Social and religious factors that affect the everyday lives of Saudis are reflected in the process of producing media content, including the influence of gatekeeping on both traditional and digital media platforms in the country. The observation and interview data collected in four diverse media outlets during the study confirm the impact of these forces and the effectiveness of their role, manifested either directly or indirectly in many elements of gatekeeping, as discussed extensively throughout this thesis, whose structure is now explained.

## **1.7 Structure of the thesis**

This introductory chapter has set out the objectives, rationale and significance of the present study, stated the research questions and outlined its design, methodology and conceptual framework. The remaining body of this thesis comprises seven chapters, dealing respectively with the impact of technology on journalism, the theoretical framework of the study, its design and methodology, the observation data, its analysis, the analysis of the interview data and a conclusion. The content of each of these chapters is now outlined in turn.

### **Chapter 2: The impact of technology on journalism**

The second chapter examines some challenges arising in the past from the application of new technologies to journalism and the various means by which these have met with and responded to resistance from governments, religious groups and others. The importance of this historical perspective lies in the perception that history is repeating itself to the extent that the contemporary media landscape is witnessing dramatic changes originating from new technologies and their influence on the traditional mechanisms of news creation and circulation. This touches on the cornerstone of the

study, which is the investigation of the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of the contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia.

Starting with this chapter allows the researcher to address many questions about the obstacles and challenges facing journalism throughout the years related to the prevalence of technology in mass communication. It also sheds light on the relevance of gatekeeping under the rapid changes brought about by technology, which plays a significant role in every aspect of media operations. The chapter highlights how governments have resisted the introduction of many technologies and later used them as gatekeeping tools to control and filter the dissemination of information through newspapers, then television and later the internet and other digital platforms. In short, it traces the historical background to resistance to technology from the invention of modern printing to the spread of microblogging, drawing appropriate comparisons between the past and the present in terms of the positive and negative applications of technology to journalism.

The chapter also discusses disputes within the management of Saudi newspapers and their impact on the content of these papers. It goes on to consider the great many legal and ethical issues facing online journalism as mass participation threatens the rules of professionalism. It contrasts the growth of the blogosphere in the West with the situation in Saudi Arabia, where the security authorities have arrested many bloggers and where newspapers which invite bloggers to contribute to their sites treat them with contempt and refuse to pay them. It next addresses the growing importance of microblogging, exploring the influence of Twitter on news creation and circulation via certain local and global incidents. The chapter ends by arguing that the ongoing case of Edward Snowden demonstrates the global significance of contemporary gatekeeping.

### **Chapter 3: Theoretical framework**

The third chapter investigates the historical development of the gatekeeping model and discusses criticisms of the process and its application to Saudi newspapers. Throughout, emphasis is given to the impact of the internet on gatekeeping in general and particularly on electronic newspapers, blogging and microblogging, by illustrating contemporary events. In brief, the chapter focuses on eight elements as follows:



- The definition and history of gatekeeping
- Criticism and discussion of gatekeeping
- Gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia
- Twitter gatekeeping
- The power of Twitter and its limits
- The growing impact of gatekeeping in the digital era
- Gatewatching: an alternative model
- Why gatewatching cannot replace gatekeeping.

The chapter thus concludes by introducing the theory of gatewatching, which Bruns (2005) has proposed to replace gatekeeping in the digital era. It discusses its weaknesses and strengths, why it is unable to supplant gatekeeping theory and why the latter remains appropriate to the study and to journalism, notwithstanding the dramatic changes wrought by developing technologies.

#### **Chapter 4: Study Design, Process and Methodology**

Chapter 4 focuses on the design of the research and the chosen methodology, including the methods of data collection and analysis, as outlined above in section 1.5. It first discusses the research philosophy, approach and strategy, then identifies the particular qualitative methods selected as constituting the most appropriate approach and sheds light on the research questions and sampling methods. It next explains the data collection and analysis procedures, discusses ethical issues, approval and consent, then concludes with an account of the translation of interview questions.

#### **Chapter 5: Observation**

The next chapter reports the researcher's observations of the work of print and online journalists and editors and of a microblogger. Having justified their selection, it recounts what occurred in the researcher's presence in the *Alriyadh* and *Sabq* newsrooms and during the time he spent accompanying Essam Al Zamil, explaining how the participants dealt with the news events which occurred during that time. These accounts are illustrated with photographs of people and places, screenshots and other graphics as appropriate.

The report of the observation at *Alriyadh* makes clear the complexity of the process by which a draft news story passes through many gates before being published in the print

or online editions, which the researcher likens to the difficulty of gaining physical access to the heavily protected *Alriyadh* building. The description includes explanations of the way that decisions are made of elements taken into account by the gatekeepers. It highlights the differences and similarities in this respect between the hard and soft copies of the newspaper. The section on the *Sabq* observation describes the techniques used to gain its high degree of publicity and exposure. It also provides data regarding its relations with the government and how religion drives the content and presentation of the site. Finally, the observation of Al Zamil reveals how he produced tweets and identified the factors influencing his creation and circulation of tweets and his selection of hashtags to follow. Light is shed throughout the chapter on the relationship of such factors and processes with gatekeeping, providing evidence that the theory continues to have strong and direct relevance to news production and circulation in the digital age.

## **Chapter 6: Analysis of Observations**

Chapter 6 offers an analysis of the data collected during the observations reported in chapter 5, highlighting the various gatekeeping mechanisms applicable to the different news gates in Saudi Arabia. It identifies the crucial influence at *Alriyadh* of a set of communication routines and post-production gatekeeping on the print and online editions respectively and extends their significance to the wider journalism field. It identifies social influence as a key gatekeeper and offers examples illustrating the rise of the audience as gatekeeper. Among the salient aspects of gatekeeping at *Sabq*, it discusses the filtering and pre-selection systems and the impact of religion. The data collected during observations of the print and online editions of *Alriyadh* also allow the researcher to compare and contrast hard-copy with soft-copy gatekeeping. One mechanism of contemporary gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia which applies specifically to soft copy is the blocking of websites, whose use by the Saudi government is analysed next. The chapter concludes by identifying and discussing the most significant theme emerging from the analysis, representing a major finding of the study, which is that of post-production gatekeeping, whereby a blogger, microblogger or commentator might produce material without external intervention, then the gatekeeper might later require that the material be deleted and its author identified.

## **Chapter 7: Interview analysis**

The second analysis chapter discusses the data collected by means of interviews with seven contemporary Saudi media producers: four bloggers and microbloggers, one of whom was once a print reporter, the editor-in-chief of a Saudi print newspaper, a member of the Saudi royal family with experience of print journalism and microblogging, and a high official of the Ministry of Information. The interview questions are listed and the responses analysed under the following themes: online gatekeeping, Twitter gatekeeping, patriarchy and social gatekeeping, audience gatekeeping, post-production gatekeeping and globalized gatekeeping. There are interesting findings related to cyber-attacks, hashtag disputes and blocking; and the chapter also discusses a resolution by the Council of Ministers regarding the gatekeeping of internet activities in Saudi Arabia, including the news media, as this puts into context the unique nature of state censorship and gatekeeping as applied to media production in the country. As with the observation analysis, the most significant finding which emerges concerns the importance of post-production gatekeeping, reinforcing the need to modify traditional gatekeeping theory so that it remains relevant.

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion and recommendations**

The study concludes by presenting the discovery of the umbrella concept of post-production gatekeeping as the cornerstone of its contribution, due to its significance across the field of journalism and its impact on the present and future of media production and on the understanding of censorship in the digital age, not only in Saudi Arabia but in the wider world. It is recommended that future research should examine in particular a major element of post-production gatekeeping: the use of cyber-attacks. It is important to explore this and other new methods which governments around the world apply to gatekeep information, especially given that new media platforms strive to provide smart electronic settings for content producers to share their contributions freely, while governments, as the current study has shown, work hard to invent new techniques to restrict this freedom and to turn technological progress to their own advantage.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Impact of Technology on Journalism**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

In order to ground the present study contextually, it is important to examine the impact of technology on journalism, to highlight the challenges arising in the past from the application of technology to journalism and to explore the ways in which governments, religious authorities and individuals have resisted innovations by means of dispute and sometimes violent action. This chapter paints the historical background of the resistance to technology from the invention of modern printing by Gutenberg in 1450 to the recent spread of microblogging services such as Twitter. Notwithstanding such resistance, it delineates the ever-pervasive influence of technology on journalism through the ages. The relevance of this influence to the topic of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia is that technology has played a significant role in very many aspects of its operation. Indeed, one of the crucial findings of the research emerging from the evidence adduced in this and subsequent chapters is that the Saudi government has initially resisted many technological innovations, only to use them subsequently in the gatekeeping of information by means such as cyber-attacks, blocking and other strategies.

There has been strong opposition to the use of technology in journalism for many decades. Indeed, history has witnessed considerable resistance to the spread of language-related technology ever since the invention of modern printing by Gutenberg 560 years ago. New technology has faced political repression campaigns in many places around the world as part of attempts to suppress the prevalence of print newspapers, and opposition continues against the flourishing of the internet, with its diverse vehicles and tools. There is a fear that the internet will create multiple sources of news and platforms to express ideas which threaten governments, undermine their broad powers and influence societies and citizens. Technology has also sparked conflicts, strikes, anger and questioning around the globe among print workers, many of whom appear to believe that the emerging devices will contribute to the loss of their jobs, because they

lack the knowledge to deal with the new technology which their organizations have started to use, and because such technology renders their livelihoods redundant.

The sense of outrage has not been confined to print workers, but has been felt by many traditional journalists as well. Johnson and Kaye (2004) argue that concerns arose in the newspaper industry, first about the rising number of people turning to radio for news, then about the number relying on television. The same story was repeated when the internet appeared and attracted a large segment of the public. Johnson and Kaye expect the opposition of journalists to continue with the appearance of any new technology which may threaten their profession.

According to Brown (1999) and Kirk (2006), the traditional media and the obsession of its people with the disruption created by fear of the new help to reveal and explain the current troubled state of the communications landscape, generally considered to embrace print, telephone, radio and television, which have been perceived as dominating that landscape. Therefore, traditional practitioners seem to be somehow suspicious of any emerging medium and consider it a potential foe, rather than a prospective friend. This fear of the new has typically led them to adopt one of two extreme, defensive responses towards new media: to “kill them” or “join them” (Nguyen, 2008).

The history of journalism provides evidence of violent reactions towards people adopting new technology. Innovative technologies are not always popular tools in the beginning, as we might think, and do not come into existence smoothly. Technology often faces severe challenges and struggles before becoming accepted. Relatively recent examples are computers, email and the internet, all of which suffered from waves of objections before being widely adopted by organizations (Markus, 1994; Mohl 2003).

This chapter highlights the impact of technology on journalism, because of its importance to the present study. In brief, it addresses the following topics:

- Resistance to early print technology
- Resistance to twentieth-century print technology
- Tensions in Saudi newsrooms
- Journalism and the internet

- The prevalence of blogging
- Microblogging and the influence of Twitter
- Technology as a new gatekeeper.
- Technology, journalism and society

In more detail, it begins by charting resistance to early print technology, then analyses the Wapping dispute and related issues. This leads to a discussion of structural tensions in Saudi newspapers. The heart of the chapter is a section on the internet, which highlights how it struggled to gain recognition from the mainstream media and academia. It also discusses how the internet has transferred some of the duties of the traditional gatekeepers of journalism to the hands of readers, then turns to the impact of blogging on journalism, arguing that it has become an additional channel available to journalists, despite much early scepticism. This section is particularly concerned with micro-blogging—specifically Twitter—and its role in contemporary news creation and circulation throughout the world today and in Saudi Arabia in particular, offering the examples of certain events which show its growing influence. After considering the extent to which technology can be seen as a new gatekeeper in itself and outlining some theories concerning the role of technology in society, the chapter concludes with a brief overview of the way in which journalists have tended to react to technological innovation.

Any research into the effect of the internet on an aspect of journalism requires a critical exploration of the impact on the press of new technologies in general, to help to understand the past and anticipate the future of journalism as it responds to current developments. It is to be hoped that investigating the past and present impact of technology on journalism will produce findings that will help the researcher to explore the future of gatekeeping as affected by the prevalence of the internet, at least to the extent that parallels can be drawn between past, present and future technological impacts on journalism.

## **2.2 Resistance to early print technology**

Following Gutenberg's invention of the movable-type printing press in around 1450, the growing availability of printed materials was not immediately popular. Groups such as the Stationers' Company in England and the scribes' guild of Paris resisted the new

technology and were successful in delaying its adoption for some time (Febvre and Martin, 1990). Operators of printing presses faced serious difficulties and complicated procedures to be able to exercise their activities. The papal court at one time required printing presses to obtain a licence from the Catholic Church. During the 15<sup>th</sup> century, some nobles declined to have printed books in their libraries, believing that to do so would damage their reputations. Resistance to mass-produced books spread to many countries of the Islamic world and the Far East. The authorities imposed strict restrictions on printing presses and clerics warned about them on their platforms, which led to the decline and undermining of the printed book for a period of time. The Church attempted to control the prevalence of books that challenged its interests, through the repressions of books during the Spanish Inquisition of the 1490s (Febvre and Martin 1990).

However, after a short period of repression, the printing press enjoyed dramatic growth throughout Europe and the world. Its use spread widely and its impact was almost immediate. Books began to multiply around the world and resistance to the printing press was soon negligible. Information and opinions travelled from person to person and place to place more efficiently and accurately after an age of challenges. A large part of the population, who were keen for information of any variety, gained access to a wealth of material. Libraries could now store greater quantities of information at much lower cost. The printing press later fuelled the European Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and facilitated the dissemination and preservation of knowledge in standardised form (Fung, 2002; Skinner, 1999).

The Ottoman Empire, however, was vehemently opposed to the new technology. According to Coşgel, Miceli and Rubin (2009), Sultan Bayezid II issued a decree in 1485 (within a few decades of the appearance of Gutenberg's press), prohibiting printing in Ottoman Turkish (using Arabic characters). Renewed in 1515 by his son, Sultan Selim I, the decree stated that "occupying oneself with the science of printing was punishable by death" (ibid), but it failed to deter those citizens who wished to employ this innovation to publicize knowledge. This situation led to a booming black market in books and the smuggling of printed material from Europe. The Ottomans continued printing restrictions much longer than any other rulers in Europe. Even after starting to relax restrictions in 1726, they continued to control the process heavily by

granting permission only to selected people, prohibiting publications covering religious topics and appointing a committee to review and approve the contents of all printed documents. The process of fully adopting the printing press for book production was so prolonged that it was not until the nineteenth century that the prevalent use of mass printing technologies was fully established. Until then, handwritten manuscripts continued to dominate the market. One of the reasons that the Ottoman rulers banned the printing press was its potential role in fomenting revolt. Coşgel, Miceli and Rubin (2009: 17) explain the main rationale behind the ban as follows:

The primary reason why the rulers objected to the adoption of the printing press was because they were fearful of its effect on their legitimacy. By undermining the ability of religious authorities to confer legitimacy, the introduction of the printing press was a significant threat to the stability of this process. Once adopted, mass printing would have altered the technology of transmitting knowledge and diminished the comparative advantage of religious authorities.

Huff (1993) also argues that the Ottoman rulers were trying to avoid repeating the European experience of revolutions which had occurred by allowing mass printing, while Robinson (1993) agrees that the appearance of the printing press was a serious danger to the stability of the Ottoman Empire. Allowing mass-produced books to circulate on its territory would weaken the power of the rulers and lead to the spread of knowledge, thus diminishing the influence of the religious authorities, who controlled the spread of knowledge through their pulpits and schools and whom the rulers were able to control in turn, by financing and overseeing their activities. Thus, “the problem was that printing attacked the heart of Islamic systems for the transmission of knowledge; it attacked what was understood to make knowledge trustworthy, what gave it value, what gave it authority” (Robinson, 1993: 234).

Despite the severe restrictions noted above, Gerçek (1980) points out that several parties managed to print material outside the Empire as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century. The Qur'an, for example, was printed in Venice in 1640. Similarly, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many Saudi writers and journalists print and distribute outside Saudi Arabia books which are banned in that country. In March 2009, the *Elaph* e-newspaper published interviews with three Saudi authors and the Minister of Information, Dr Abdulaziz Khoja, to discuss the ban on the distribution of some of Saudi authors'



books. Khoja stated in the interview: “Saudi Arabia is the host of two holy mosques and we have our own privacy. We cannot allow books which will harm the country and religion”. The same report carries the reply of a popular Saudi writer and columnist, Turki Alhamad, all of whose books are banned in Saudi Arabia and who distributes his work through Lebanese publishing houses: “Banning books is pointless in the age of the internet and globalization. Everybody can get access to any book anywhere by clicking a mouse” (Elaph, 2009).

### **2.3 Resistance to twentieth-century print technology**

Elsewhere, newspapers, like books, have often been subject to disputes following the introduction of new technology. In the UK in the 1980s, most publishers were passionate about new printing technology but at the same time were worried about the technological risks and the effect on labour relations. Only Eddie Shah had attempted to use it extensively when, in March 1986, he launched the *Today* newspaper, which broke new ground in terms of computer photo-setting and full-colour offset printing at a time when other UK newspapers were still using linotype machines and the letterpress (Howard, 2005; Oatridge, 2002). Shah (2008) claims that he faced over 10,000 pickets a night for more than seven months and death threats as a result of introducing this new technology.

However, the real resistance took place when the Australian media mogul, Rupert Murdoch, owner of the News International organisation and publisher of the London titles *The Sun*, *News of the World*, *Times* and *Sunday Times*, bought Atex equipment in order to build a plant in Wapping in East London, apparently to produce a new newspaper called the *London Post*. Atex produced systems for everything, from layout and word-processing to classified advertising, and was considered to be one of the leading suppliers of technology to the newspaper industry in the 1980s. The system was installed in secret, giving Murdoch confidence that he could take on the print unions and win, by taking advantage of cutting-edge technology and practices established in other countries (Oatridge, 2002).

On 24 January 1986, more than 6,000 employees went on strike after months of long negotiations and discussions with News International and Times Group Newspapers. The company’s leaders had ostensibly been seeking a legally binding agreement at its

new plant in Wapping that would incorporate flexible working, no-strike clauses, new technology and the end of the closed shop, although it had in fact long since decided not to settle but instead to provoke a strike (Littleton, 1992; Marjoribanks, 2000). The print unions organised demonstrations outside the company's premises, blocking the highway in Wapping. In addition, the unions and the Labour party called for a boycott of the four newspapers connected with the new technology. The demonstrations outside the Wapping plant were not always peaceful: more than 400 police officers and many members of the public were injured and more than 1,000 arrests were made during the dispute (BBC, 2005; Wintour, 1989).

It is important to note that the position of the British government was sympathetic towards News International, which made the company's job easier. Rupert Murdoch (1989: 25-6) claims that in planning the move to Wapping, News International had been "encouraged by Prime Minister Mrs Thatcher's victory in the 1984 miners strike, and signs that the authorities were moving against secondary boycotts and were prepared to protect private property from the actions of massed pickets".

On 27 January 1987, a final deal was agreed, the details of which were not revealed at the time. The vital point was Murdoch's agreement to pay 4,500 sacked print workers belonging to the Society of Graphical and Allied Trades a total of £55 million once the year-long strike ended, which it did the following month (Goodman, 2007). Not a single night of production was lost by Murdoch's company as a result of the dispute. By 1988, all UK newspapers had adopted the technologies that News International had brought in and adapted their working practices accordingly (BBC, 2005). News International has had a considerable effect on, and has challenged, existing technology. It has simultaneously helped in the breaking of the unions and the speeding up of change in newspapers across the UK (Jenkins, 1987; Leapman, 1983; Littleton, 1992; Marjoribanks, 2000; Shawcross, 1993).

Likewise, national newspapers publishing in Fleet Street and the *Financial Times (FT)* encountered the same issue while introducing the new technology earlier than 1986. For three decades, local unions had consistently resisted the introduction of new technology and restrained workplace relations; therefore, the newspapers' management attempts did not succeed. For instance, the *FT* made several attempts to convince the unions of the

benefits of introducing the technology, but failed. In 1983, the *FT* tried to set up a new form of technology for the printing press but this led to a 10-week strike which ended with the union winning the battle. However, the Wapping dispute reinvigorated the *FT* management's plan because the unions had so obviously conceded victory to News International (Marjoribanks, 2000).

As part of the *FT*'s ambitious and far-reaching plans for future development, Frank Barlow, *FT* Chief Executive, addressed its employees in 1986 about the importance of the Wapping dispute and how it had impacted on journalism in the UK, including on the *FT*. He argued that the *FT* might not be able to compete locally and internationally if it delayed using computer technology. Barlow (1986: 3) stated that the *FT* management had rejected the idea of repeating the News International strategy and had come up with a new plan:

I do not intend to do a Wapping. I intend to do the very opposite of Wapping. I intend to do exactly what the print trade union leaders have always said is the proper way to achieve change. I intend to negotiate the introduction of a modern web-offset printing plant using the existing four printing and maintenance unions and drawing the workforce from among our existing employees. I intend to do an anti-Wapping.

Thus, while having realised the importance of technology and its necessity for the newspaper's development, the management insisted on retaining its existing workforce. Therefore, the *FT*, according to Marjoribanks (2000), modified the experiences of News International to suit its plans and to avoid a new Wapping, as new forms of technology were considered by the *Financial Times* management as a means of restructuring the newspaper's workforce. The *FT* management announced its plan to all of its employees, made a series of presentations and sent videos, produced with the collaboration of Dow Jones, to all employees' homes. A senior manager said: "Wapping traumatised, Wapping helped us to get it through" (Marjoribanks, 2000: 584).

## **2.4 Tensions in Saudi newsrooms**

In a similar way to News International, many Saudi newspapers have suffered confrontation between workers and management, but it can be argued that in the Saudi case, there was an additional element to the disputes, that of management against

management. One of the most chronic dilemmas in Saudi newspapers is that each newspaper is managed by two teams, one on the editorial side led by the editor-in-chief and the other dealing with administrative affairs and led by the general manager (GM); both of these men report to the chairman of the board, who is usually a high ranking official for whom newspapers do not represent his first priority (Tanmia-Idaria, 2011). The main issue is that there are no clear regulations defining the responsibilities of these people. For example, the current chairman of Okaz Newspapers, Saaed AlHarthy, is consultant to the Saudi minister of interior, while the chairman of *Alyaum* newspaper, AbdulAziz AlHugail, is general president of the state railway organization. The absence of clarity regarding the chairmen of Saudi newspaper companies tends to exacerbate any issues between the editorial and administrative management teams, thus restricting the newspapers' development. To overcome this problem, some editors have attempted to publish news items just for the sake of pleasing the GM so that he will not block or fail to approve potential decisions.

Thus, Saudi editors cannot run their newsrooms without support from the administrative management. This turbulent relationship between GMs and editors has intensified the difficulty of introducing new technology to Saudi newspapers. For instance, the former editor-in-chief of *Alyaum*, Sultan Albazie, faced resistance from both management and workers when he tried to introduce new technology to his newspaper after assuming the editorial leadership 1993. Albazie was surprised by the primitive technology which was used by *Alyaum* compared with what other Saudi newspapers were using at that time. He raised his concerns with the GM, but the latter was against buying new machines for newspaper production due to austerity and the absence of competition with other newspapers at that time, as *Alyaum* was the only newspaper produced in the Eastern Province and was more or less guaranteed advertising revenue regardless of its quality, technically or editorially. The new editor's insistence on installing new technology sparked a dispute with the general manager within a week of his arrival. Albazie claims that the machines which *Alyaum* was using at that time existed only in museums. He gives the following reasons for fighting for new technology to be part of the daily work cycle:

Everything was produced manually from negative film, which had to be taken to the printing facility about 10 km from where the film was produced. I lived in fear every day of the possibility that the newspaper

would not come out tomorrow due to the risk of a breakdown or accident happening to the truck carrying the film. *Alyaum* management was not willing to support the change, because it would undermine their power over the editorial team (Albazie, email interview, 16 December 2011).

Beside his desire to enhance the work environment at *Alyaum*, Albazie recognizes freely that he wanted to seize powers from the GM which he believed to belong to his authority and that installing new technology was the only way to do this. When he was appointed editor, for example, he was surprised to find that the proofreading of news items, which is an essential editorial process, was under the control of the administrative department and done in its building, not in the editorial building, which at *Alyaum* was separate. Albazie insisted on installing innovative technology to help him at least to supervise the proofreaders from his office. In this, he clashed with the GM, but the support of the chairman ensured that he was successful. Albazie suggested erecting a statue of the former chairman of *Alyaum*, Hamad Ambark, in recognition of his “encouragement of the introduction of new technology in Saudi journalism” (ibid).

The editor had won a battle, but the war was not yet over. When he tried to convince the workers and journalists of the need for training in order for him to change the newspaper culture and move it into the digital era, he faced strong protests. He remembers allowing journalists to play solitaire and other games on their computers to encourage them to become gradually more attached to their new machines. This was a technique previously used by a Finnish company, whose CEO, according to Heikkilä (1995), had allowed employees to use their PCs to play bridge and other computer games during their working time, so that they would become familiar with the new computers and be more likely to accept their adoption after a period of resistance. This technique did not allow Albazie to convince all of his subordinates; some journalists persisted in confrontation. Albazie (2011) believes that “some workers tried to antagonize the chairman and fabricate stories to stop my improvements, but I didn’t stop”. The newspaper bought a comprehensive publishing system and the editor asked the technical workers and journalists to attend free courses, but some refused. There ensued a struggle between the editor on one hand and many journalists and workers on the other, supported by key administrative personnel. It lasted for around four years and ended in the resignation of the editor-in-chief.

Correspondingly, according to McManus (1994), there are invisible walls in many newspapers around the globe, due to disputes between the editors-in-chief, who are responsible for making the daily product, and the business managers, who handle the economic aspects of the newspapers' circulation; such tensions between editorial and management staff often occur and fuel clashes between the two parties. In many newspaper organizations, the differences between the two professional cultures keep editors and managers apart, resulting in a lack of communication and affecting technical progress, among other things (McManus, 1994).

## **2.5 Journalism and the internet**

According to Achtenhagen and Raviola (2009), many journalists were once generally suspicious about new technologies, because they were trained to produce their material with particular reference to the requirements of the printed word. The traditional journalists thought of the internet as a "black hole" where articles were published without names or journalistic standards. Their perceptions of the internet made them opposed to this innovation and its supporters. Many European newsrooms were divided by a sort of cold war between traditional and internet journalists, each having reservations about the other. The print journalists could not accept the way the internet journalists ran the news and would not agree to accommodate them in the newspaper as well. The major resistance by the traditionalists to organizational change slowed the development of the structure and delayed the arrival of new technologies and products.

Online journalists very often have to fight harder to convince their bosses to support their ideas and projects. In an email interview with the researcher, Khalid AlSuhail, the electronic managing editor of *Aleqtisadiah* newspaper, describes the resistance he faced while working on establishing a website in his newspaper in 2008 as "a fierce war". He worked in an environment of non-belief in the importance of the internet and its audience power at that time. His editor-in-chief refused many plans that he submitted to expand the website content and to increase the number of people working on the electronic copy of the newspaper. *Aleqtisadiah* management feared that giving the website more attention would adversely affect the circulation, which was already struggling. However, after much hesitation and many negotiations, AlSuhail received the minimum support required to develop the website, which in fact helped *Aleqtisadiah*

to compete with other Saudi newspapers after years of decline. AlSuhail (2012) considers that *Aleqtisadiah* winning second place in the Arabic Forbes list of best Saudi newspaper websites in 2011 provides evidence of the value of investing in the internet.

The case of *Aleqtisadiah* indicates that Saudi editors are afraid of the internet, believing that if they give it more space, the authorities will lose their accustomed control of newspapers. The reactions of editors to website development is similar to the reactions of millions of parents who lost control of their teenage offspring when the latter first acquired mobile telephones, realising that they could not prevent this development, control the temptations to which their children were exposed or censor their calls as they had once been able to do, because they lacked the necessary technical knowledge.

A study by Singer, Tharp and Haruta (1999: 4) elucidates the serious challenges likely to face the next generation of media managers, arising from the growing role of the internet in the media industry: “Not since the invention of the telegraph have there been more changes in gathering and dispersing information than there will be as the internet becomes ubiquitous”. The study shows that among the 184 newspapers whose editors responded to the survey, 80 (43.5 percent) said that the print and online newsrooms were staffed completely separately, reflecting a divergence in culture between the two teams which may well affect the harmony of newsrooms for a long time to come.

New technology always struggles to enter any field, including that of journalism, where the challenges may be said to be particularly great. The Wapping dispute illustrates how difficult and complicated is the marriage between journalism and technology. Online journalism has faced many obstacles and criticisms from professionals and academics, regarding the absence of ethical and legal standards, which have led them to question its professionalism. Palser (1999) argues that online journalism will face a great many legal and ethical issues in the future. Ethical standards are a requirement for the continuation of journalistic standards. The new technology has brought about changes in how news is presented and in the ways in which readers access and receive it, both of which have in turn led to changes in the function of the editorial office in online journalism. There has been a reduction, for example, in the importance of such tasks as processing and rewriting the news, bringing the important aspects of the news to the forefront and—more particularly—deciding what news will be presented, where and to what extent. In

a sense, some duties of the traditional gatekeepers of journalism are now in the hands of readers. With the internet, each reader has become the editor of his or her own newspaper, because s/he has direct access to information and news in quantities which until recently were available only to newspapers editors (Demir, 2011: 542).

Digital journalism has not always been a welcome addition to the academic curriculum or the news industry. In the early 1990s, some academics and industry professionals thought that the internet was nothing more than a passing fad which therefore did not deserve the attention of journalists and journalism faculties. They persistently and strongly criticised the internet and questioned its future (Kawamoto, 2003). For instance, there were significant challenges and resistance from both staff and students of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia when the management of the school modified the curriculum of media subjects to include digital journalism. Berkeley (2009) conducted a case study of major curriculum change within a university media degree which showed that there was very strong internal resistance to the change. This reaction in Australia against the advent of digital media has been replicated in many schools around the world. Indeed, it has not always been in vain, having on several occasions succeeded in preventing the emergence of new technology or contributed to delaying it. Sevcik (2004) claims that the Dvorak typewriter keyboard is a good case of an improvement that was successfully fought off by incumbent interests. He reports that the typewriter companies defended the QWERTY layout and fought the Dvorak innovation in order to control the market. Companies allied with each other, with stores and with teachers to prevent the Dvorak layout from gaining ground—and this resistance succeeded, in that the new format did not have the opportunity to flourish. The lesson, according to Sevcik (2004), is that vested interests can set up sufficient barriers to thwart technological improvements.

Rogers (2003) argues that even where resistance to change does not prevent an innovation from occurring eventually, it can delay it significantly, citing the case of using citrus fruit as a cure for scurvy. It is known that the full acknowledgment of this innovative medicine took over 250 years to be approved, despite its significance as a life-saving and economically useful technology. The spread of many other technologies, devices or tools has been prevented or delayed because of resistance from one party or another. For example, it took the Saudi newspaper *Alwatan* two years to use Twitter to



publicise its news items, while another, *Albilad*, took around three years to allow its readers to comment on its website. In same context, a Saudi law of 1939 allowed radio sets to be sold only to people who were issued with a licence, which required a lengthy application procedure. The very few people who were given permission to own a radio were close to the King (Alghasha'ami, 2005). Sabbagh (2013) remarks: "The acquisition of radio requires a license renewed annually sealed with five seals. Seems that the mind has not changed much about seventy years ago" (Twitter, 31 March 2013). Figure 2.1 shows a 1939 radio licence.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 2.1: Saudi radio licence,<sup>2</sup> 1939

Source: Mahmoud Sabbagh (Twitter, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> See the appendix for a translation of this and other Arabic text in figures.

It is important to understand that in Saudi Arabia, any new technology is likely to face great opposition at first, especially from religious leaders, who are followed by a majority of Saudi citizens. These leaders were against the introduction to the Kingdom of television, warning their followers not to buy it or watch it. People did so secretly and if caught, were isolated and ostracized. But after years of fighting between the religious leaders and others who supported television, the government decided to end this confrontation by establishing televisions centres around the country, which it could use to convey its message to the populace, and by exercising official control over the technology. Religious figures later become popular guests on national TV channels, thus strengthening their support around the country (Lacy, 2009). The same thing happened with satellite TV. Its emergence in the country faced extreme hostility from religious leaders, who warned that it would ruin Saudi society and weaken the faith of Muslims. In the early 1990s, many houses which had satellite dishes on their roofs came under gunfire in an expression of anger and in an attempt to intimidate the owners into removing them. Many others had leaflets delivered to their houses by hand, warning them that these devices were evil and dangerous to the unity of the country and its religion. Owners of satellite receivers were not alone in being attacked by some religious extremists: technical workers at Saudi TV channels also suffered harassment at times. One media pioneer in Saudi Arabia, Saad AlFuraih, then director of Saudi national TV, was attacked by religious individuals who detested his profession. His son, Abdulaziz AlFuraih reports:

My father was attacked while walking in Jeddah by a group of religious individuals who were angry at what he was doing in the television service. They beat him, cut off his hair and left him in the street, bleeding and suffering. This event forced him to go into exile in the UK for five years, without telling anybody about his location. He couldn't work in Saudi TV anymore because of the great pressure and anger directed at him (Abdulaziz AlFuraih, email interview, 25 January 2012).

This evidence suggests that any technology emerging in Saudi Arabia will face suspicion and risk attack, which may undermine the diffusion of any innovation in that country. Indeed, mainstream media organisations throughout the world appear to have feared the effect on their industry of every new technology. Instead of dealing with it as a friendly development, they have treated each one as a foe which is coming to seize their business. A further example is the appearance in the 1980s of videotext, which

newspapers around the globe feared could replace the core business of newspapers (Boczkowski, 2004; Fidler, 1997).

Today, however, very few would disagree that digital media technologies form an important and enduring feature of the global communications landscape, as it is arguably recognised that they will continue to have a significant impact on the media and will help to improve the profession. In recent times, indeed, digital journalism has ceased to be seen as a complementary tool of journalism and has become recognised as an essential element, to the point where some popular newspapers and magazines have ceased to produce hard copy editions. Between January 2008 and September 2009, 106 local newspapers closed down in Britain, while in America, major newspapers like the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Seattle Post* stopped publishing print editions (Curran, 2010). In just a few years, many significant newspapers have cut their reporting staff by half and drastically reduced their news reporting. The *Baltimore Sun*'s newsroom shrank to around 150 journalists from more than 400, and that of the *Los Angeles Times* from more than 1100 to fewer than 600 (Downie & Schudson, 2009). According to Johnson (2009), the circulation of print newspapers in the USA declined from 62 million in 1987 to 49 million in January 2009, leading publishers to print fewer newspapers and to depend more on the development of their websites. From being an object of scepticism, digital journalism had become a major source of news within a few years (Nguyen, 2008). For newspapers, the three-decade decline of readership continued. Between 1996 and 2000, a period when online news gained popularity rapidly, the World Association of Newspapers (2001) recorded a substantial circulation drop in most of the developed world, including the United States (1.8%), the European Union (2.5%), Hong Kong (9.2%), New Zealand (6%) and Australia (2.1%).

The World Association of Newspapers (2006) reports that during 2001, circulation fell by 4.02% in the United States, by 4.58% in New Zealand, 0.97% in Japan, 4.25% in Belgium, 11.4% in Denmark, 9.63% in Germany, 11.62% in Greece, 7.38% in France, 10.58% in the Netherlands, 9.85% in the United Kingdom, 2.23% in Sweden, 1.73% in Spain and 5.25% in Italy. In Australia, the year 2005 alone saw a drop of 2.23%. There is also evidence of a decline in television audience figures. Research by Morgan (2005) found that in stark contrast to the steep growth of the internet between 1994 and 2004,

the percentage of Australians aged at least 14 watching commercial TV in the past seven days had fallen from nearly 80% to around 67%.

Barton (2005) contends that the internet is without doubt one of the most significant innovations in the history of communication, at least as important as the invention of radio and of television, if not more so. Scott (2005) argues that the internet holds the key to changing the way information is created and consumed, with an immediate, unlimited supply of easily accessible information on every topic under the sun; essentially, it allows any citizen to become a self-employed gatekeeper. McNair (2009) agrees, adding that the advent of the internet means that the ability to produce information for mass distribution is no longer restricted to those in power, nor limited to those who own the means of media production: it is now in the hands of anyone who knows how to use the internet. Rupert Murdoch, the owner of a number of mainstream media outlets, has declared that the age of the media baron is dead and is cited as saying: "Power is moving away from the old elite in our industry – the editors, the chief executives and, let's face it, the proprietors. A new generation of media consumers has risen demanding content delivered when they want it, how they want it, and very much as they want it" (McNair, 2009: 26). Murdoch's admission confirms the dramatic changes that have overtaken the mechanisms of news creation and circulation. Its importance lies in the fact that one of the most powerful and iconic figures in the mainstream media now openly recognises that the old media policies are being superseded by new rules as the internet attains increasing dominance.

Pavlik (2010: 229) argues that new technology has always been a source of richness for journalism and has historically played a significant role in advancing it:

Since Julius Caesar ordered the *Acta Diurna* in AD 59, distributing information about the important events of the day has been enabled, if not often driven, by technological advances. Gutenberg's printing press not only made possible the printing of the Bible and other religious texts; it also laid the foundation for mass literacy and the invention of the newspaper.

Regan (2000) agrees that the internet has been a positive force in journalism. He reports having attended a two-day conference on journalism and technology in the USA, where pessimistic contributors warned that the new media would ruin journalism. During one

particularly gloomy panel about the future of journalism, a member of the audience remarked that it was “like listening to a group of 15<sup>th</sup> century monks talking about the printing press”. Regan (2000: 9) explains this pessimism by noting that journalists “are a skeptical group by nature and view all change through a jaundiced eye. After all, that is what we are paid to do for most of our professional lives, so it’s easy to understand why some journalists are fearful and suspicious of these changes”. His advice is to stop complaining and to move into the new media era, which is full of rich potential.

Other writers predict the redundancy of journalism’s traditional gatekeepers due to the spread of the internet and the availability to the public of new technology. Broddason (1994: 241) warned almost two decades ago that the extinction of many journalistic professions was imminent because of advances in technology: “As newsgathering expert systems become available to the general public... the gate-keeping function of newspeople will diminish and as a group, they will probably experience deprofessionalisation”. Singer (2003: 153) disagrees, however, arguing that gatekeepers will survive as long as journalism exists: “Without the gatekeeper, the quantity of the news product increases but its quality is likely to be diluted.”

This section has provided clear evidence that mainstream media organisations everywhere, not only in conservative countries like Saudi Arabia, have tended to resist the incursion into their domain of every new technology, up to and including the internet. Meanwhile, supporters of new technology contend that it should not frighten journalists but soothe them with the realisation that journalism never dies, although the way we communicate it does (Regan, 2000; Singer, 2003; Shirky, 2009).

## **2.6 The prevalence of blogging**

Others note that as technology changes, so resistance to it develops and is renewed, so that such resistance does not represent the distant past, but the comfort of yesterday. For instance, when the use of blogs was expanding, traditional journalists saw them as a trivial tool or a threat. There was no balanced view. Rosen (2005) claims that, for some, such blogs represent a force that will end journalism’s ‘sovereignty’. Hermida (2010) argues that scholars of communication and journalism have also highlighted concerns that blogging will undermine traditional media, suggesting that the blog challenges established journalistic norms and values. Shaw (2005) proclaims that bloggers are

‘wannabe’ journalists, amateurs, lacking qualifications and likely to violate the accepted standards of journalism. He raises concerns about their performance, claiming that not all, perhaps not even most bloggers care about being accurate or fair. Their highest priority is to get ‘scoops’ without spending time on the quality assurance that applies commonly in the mainstream media. They write what pops into their minds and rely on the ease with which a post can be corrected later if something which has appeared is shown to be wrong. Other scholars, like Lowrey (2006), Robinson (2006) and Singer (2005), think that the position of the traditional media against blogging arises from their interest in controlling the industry and trying to retain the old practices. But the most telling criticism of bloggers would address their apparent desire to work without regulation, unaware that the very regulations which they seek to avoid would in fact protect them and help them to grow and to gain the respect of those professionals and scholars who are presently most strongly opposed to them and their methods.

Notwithstanding such resistance, after much disagreement and condemnation of blogging, its use by newsrooms increased dramatically. Indeed, competition from other newspapers led to more investment in resources for newsrooms, including blogs (Lacy & Martin, 2004). In the United States, 95% of the top 100 newspapers offered at least one journalist-authored blog in 2007, up from 80% in 2006 (Hermida, 2010). There has been a similar expansion of blogging in Europe, with blogs offered by 44% of news organisations (Oriella PR Network, 2008). In the UK, more than 80% of the leading national newspapers offered at least one blog by November 2006, up from just 17% in April 2005 (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Ji and Sheehy (2010) note that the traditional media gave much attention to political blogs during the 2008 US presidential campaign, when many traditional journalists began writing blogs in addition to their work for newspapers, magazines and television. This amounts to the recognition of the importance of blogging and bloggers. Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) emphasise that blogs are a new form of journalism and a positive contribution to the profession; in a complementary formulation, blogs are a boon to democracy in their capacity to give the citizen a new and powerful voice, against corporate domination of the news and of people’s lives—they renew the classical public sphere.

Welch (2003: 26) argues that while blogs represent a threat to non-productive journalists, they are a haven for promising ones: “For lazy columnists and defensive

gatekeepers, it can seem as if the hounds from a mediocre hell have been unleashed. But for curious professionals, it is a marvellous opportunity and entertaining spectacle.” Hermida (2009) and Welch (2003) assert that blogs also represent a great opportunity for talent, encouraging tens of thousands of potential columnists to write for no fee, fuelled by passion and enthusiasm. Many newspapers and mainstream providers have taken advantage of this supply of talent and invited such bloggers to contribute to their news outlets without payment. Bader Aljaafari and Fawaz Saad are bloggers who started working for *Alsharq*, the newest Saudi newspaper, in November 2011. They are not paid, unlike other columnists working for the same newspaper. Fawaz Saad (Email interview, 12 November 2011) is unhappy about the way that *Alsharq* treats its bloggers:

They treat us like second-class citizens. We don’t get paid and our articles are not the property of the newspaper. It seems as if we are backup for the traditional columnists. I joined *Alsharq* in the first place to support my friend Fouad Alfarhan, who invited me to accompany him in his new journey as manager of the *Alsharq* website.

Bader Aljaafari described his situation with *Alsharq* as “hectic”, complaining that he had not been paid and was waiting for a solution (Email interview, 12 November 2011).

The traditional Saudi newspapers started recently to invite bloggers and micro-bloggers to join them, without payment as often as possible, in order to take advantage of their enthusiasm, popularity and the subsequent free publicity. Fouad Alfarhan, the best known Saudi blogger, who was arrested in 2007 because of one his blogs (Global Voice Online, 2007), was recruited by *Alsharq* in 2011 as its website director. He utilized his relationships with other bloggers to persuade them to write for *Alsharq*, as the above example of Fawaz Saad shows. However, while he brought many bloggers to his newspaper, he also attracted significant criticism from both traditional columnists and bloggers. Columnists consider him a non-professional, while bloggers think of him as a renegade; but Alfarhan made clear from the beginning that his role was confined to developing and maintaining the website. He stated on Twitter: “I know the sensitivity of some parties about being presented within the traditional media, but the editor knows that, so there is clarity and full understanding of my roles and limits in the newspaper” (Alfarhan, 25 December 2011). However, the reality is somewhat different according to

some of his friends, who believe that his role goes beyond developing and maintaining the website (Saad, 2011).

Hamdy (2010) argues that blogging continues to become more popular in Arab countries after decades when people struggled to find a platform to share their opinions. The newspapers, TV and radio stations are limited and restricted, so blogs are seen by many people as the medium of their dreams. By 2006, there were an estimated 40,000 Arabic blogs and Arab bloggers are becoming ever more influential as the use of the internet continues to grow in the region. While it is true that bloggers are only now taking their first steps in Saudi newspapers and that some of them are still not paid for what they write, there is evidence that they have a promising and powerful future in the journalism industry. For instance, the most readable articles in *Alsharq* are written by a blogger (Alsharq, 23 January 2012).

## **2.7 Microblogging and the influence of Twitter**

If blogs are influencing the traditional creation and circulation of news, an even greater and more controversial impact on journalism can be credited to microblogging, especially via Twitter. Knight (2010: 27) claims that “Anyone who thinks he or she knows what journalism is in this era of blogs and Twitter is certainly free to rant”. Farhi (2009) explains that although many people remain ignorant of microblogging, news organizations and journalists have been quick to implement Twitter for a clear reason: “Its speed and brevity make it ideal for pushing out scoops and breaking news to Twitter-savvy readers”.

Close observation of the *Guardian* leads Ali Nobil Ahmad (2010) to assert that Twitter is now used as a collaborative research tool by editors and journalists working on stories and blogs, both for ideas and to provide facts for all of kinds of news, whether breaking, foreign, entertainment or other forms. Ahmad reports that *Guardian* journalists utilize Twitter to develop their stories, to gather evidence in support of their features and to augment their more orthodox sources. Thus, as Copland (2011: 96) notes, “Twitter is not just changing the way news is circulated. It’s also impacting the way the news is created”. He reinforces this point by describing how news emerged of the assault by US forces on Osama bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound in the dead of night. Copland claims that “there was no one there to record it on camera. Yet the event was broadcast



via Twitter as it happened, live across the globe”. A Pakistani IT consultant was accessing his Twitter account as helicopters circled and mysterious explosions occurred in his neighbourhood. He updated a growing number of followers about what was happening in his area, giving many details. His tweets received considerable attention from followers and even international news agencies, which forced high-ranking US officials to explain the military operation through Twitter prior to President Obama’s announcement, illustrating the growing influence of Twitter. Copeland (2011) believes that Twitter is being exploited by traditional players and by bloggers themselves, who use stories published as tweets by strangers. It has become usual to read headlines in newspapers around the world inspired by tweets.

In Saudi Arabia, Twitter has become the fuel of traditional newspapers, e-newspapers and even blogs. During many events, Twitter has proved its importance in creating news for the mainstream media and the public. In an email interview with the researcher (20 March 2010), Hadi Faqih, former managing editor of *Okaz*, a traditional newspaper, acknowledged that the editors of some traditional Saudi papers have asked their journalists to keep an eye on Twitter in order to utilize “promising tweets”. A recent incident involving Twitter illustrates how it has influenced the way in which news is created and circulated in Saudi Arabia. On 9<sup>th</sup> December 2011 a micro-blogger shared a link to an article in the magazine *Science* alleging that Saudi universities had artificially boosted their international rankings by ‘buying’ unwarranted citations (Bhattacharjee, 2011). Twitter user Faiq Muneef translated the *Science* article in a number of tweets; many Twitter users then retweeted his tweets and others posted the same links (Muneef, 2011), creating the hashtag #Ta9neef, which means ‘ranking’ in Arabic. These users criticized the means by which two Saudi universities rose in the global rankings based on money rather than academic merit, as reported in the *Science* article and disseminated by Twitter users. The #Ta9neef hashtag became popular among Saudi Twitter users, who included it in hundreds of stories about the King Abdulaziz and King Saud universities. One such critic was Rogaya AlYahya, who claims that King Abdulaziz University, where she was studying, unexpectedly distributed different textbooks to the students in a particular class prior to a scheduled visit by members of the Commission for Academic Accreditation, then asked the students to ignore these books after the visit was over (AlYahya, 2011). Mohammed Alwan, a Saudi columnist,

predicted under the hashtag that “the traditional newspapers will pick up the stories from Twitter and publish them if the gatekeepers allow them to do so” (Alwan, 2011). Jameel Theyabi, the general managing editor of *Alhyat*, responded to Alwan via Twitter: “The *Science* article will be the headline of my newspaper tomorrow” (Theyabi, 2011). On the second day, Twitter users continued to criticize the two universities under the hashtag, forcing them to respond to the *Science* article through Twitter. However, columnist Ammar Bakkar criticized the universities’ responses: “Their messages were weak and Twitter users control the situation”. The hashtag had brought the issue into public view (Bakkar, 2011). Khalaf Alharbi, an *Okaz* newspaper columnist, satirized the two universities in his column of 11<sup>th</sup> December 2011, two days after the hashtag had been triggered (Alharbi, 2011). On 24<sup>th</sup> December, the president of King Saud University met with all the faculty members to discuss the *Science* article and broadcast live via the internet. He stated in the meeting: “Twitter users cannot damage our reputation, whatever they may do” (record of King Saud University meeting with all faculty members, 2011). This event reflects the power of Twitter in contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia.

Twitter and other new social networks did not enjoy immediate popularity in Saudi Arabia and faced resistance from religious figures such as Mohammed Al-Munajid, who issued a *fatwa* (religious ruling) forbidding Muslims to register with social networking services and declaring illegal all relationships between their users, whom he declared liable to fall prey to the attempts of foreign intelligence services to recruit agents throughout these outlets (Al-Munajid, 2009). Robinson (1993) and Turaif (2011) claim that doubts always arise in the minds of Muslims regarding new technology. They believe that these technologies, beginning with the printing press and continuing beyond the internet and Twitter, arrive from the West to westernize people’s minds and to change their behaviour and values, whether they are seriously useful items or significant sources of pleasure.

At the end of September 2011, a Saudi religious leader, Mohammad Al Areefi, invited more than 20 other senior Saudi religious figures, including members of the General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, the official body responsible for issuing fatwas, to his home. There, they received a presentation by Professor Saleh Alfuraih, a Faculty member of Um al Qura University, explaining Twitter tools and methods so that

the religious leaders could learn how to use Twitter confidently. The meeting also discussed the importance of Twitter to all Saudis today and the need for religious leaders to take a position on it before it was too late (Shbkh.net, 2011). Following this meeting, Twitter users in Saudi Arabia noticed a growing demand by religious figures to join the microblogging service. The most significant indication of the meeting's impact was the rapid increase in the number of followers of its host, Mohammad Al Areefi, to more than 800,000 within three months, making him the Saudi with the largest number of followers (mtwtron.com, 2012).

Ziad Al-Drees , permanent delegate of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and a columnist, predicted on Twitter the demise not just of print newspapers but of electronic newspapers too, due to the prevalence of Twitter (Al-Drees, 2012). The phrase "I saw it on Twitter" has become familiar in Saudi Arabia, which indicates how popular this new technology has become among Saudis as a news vehicle. The number of Saudi Twitter users increased by 240% in 2011 (Qhatani, 2011), reaching more than three million (Ghamdi, 2011). Twitter users have led successful campaigns and fuelled criticisms of traditional newspapers. In December 2011 and January 2012 they created three hashtags to criticize three print newspapers: #sudairy (the surname of the editor-in-chief *Al Riyadh*), #hah (the initials of the editor-in-chief of *Okaz*) and #Kmalik (initial and surname of the editor-in-chief of *Aljazzirah*). These hashtags focused on the mistakes that the three had made and highlighted their praise of high government officials or members of the royal family to obtain benefits for themselves. The success of the hashtags is reflected by the numbers of tweets under them containing many criticisms which the three editors would never have heard or read before the Twitter era. In conjunction with this criticism, a group of Twitter activists in Saudi Arabia founded a website (mnshour.com) dedicated to monitoring the blunders of Saudi print newspapers (Mnshour, 2012).

## **2.8 Technology as a new gatekeeper**

Cases such as those discussed in the preceding sections appear to offer support to the many scholars who have long argued that technology limits the extent to which the contemporary media landscape can be controlled by censorship and its components, such as gatekeeping (Levinson, 1999). However, there is strong evidence that to the

contrary, technology itself has become a new gatekeeper. Thus, the power of gatekeeping has been transferred during the digital era from the few to the many. Readers and technology companies have a powerful influence on news creation and circulation. Search engines, readers' comments, rating and blocking are among a range of new gatekeeping tools that are changing the roles and functions of journalism today (Hargittai, 2000; 2003; Cassidy, 2006; Singer, 1997; 2006; 2008). Thus, the crucial and changing impact of technology is directly relevant to the present study in the context of contemporary news production and distribution in Saudi Arabia.

To broaden the perspective, it is worth considering the somewhat extreme views of Morozov (2011), who takes a rather negative attitude towards technology and expresses a belief that the internet imposes censorship and restricts freedom. This stance can be contrasted with the views of scholars such as Castells (2011), who perceive the new technologies as tools that make the world more sophisticated, augmenting and spreading knowledge and prosperity. Morozov (2011: 4) cites an editorial in the *Baltimore Sun* as going so far as to claim that the internet "was making the world safer and more democratic", then counters this optimistic assertion by invoking the Twitter-orchestrated Iranian uprising of 2009, which he offers as an illustration of the underestimation of the impact of technology on freedom, whether in politics or the media:

It became clear that the Twitter Revolution so many in the West were quick to inaugurate was nothing more than a wild fantasy. And yet it still can boast of at least one unambiguous accomplishment: if anything, Iran's Twitter Revolution 2009 revealed the intense Western longing for a world where information technology is the liberator rather the oppressor, a world where technology could be harvested to spread democracy around the globe rather than entrench existing autocracies (ibid: 5).

Morozov asserts that it is the enemies of freedom and the extremists, not the supporters of democracy, who have benefited most from new technology:

As a result, many once popular arguments about the liberating power of consumerism and technology faded from public view. That Al-Qaeda seemed to be as proficient in using the internet as its Western opponents did not chime well with a view that treated technology as democracy's

best friend. The dotcom crash of 2000 also reduced the fanatical enthusiasm over the revolutionary nature of new technologies: the only things falling under the pressure of the internet were stock markets, not authoritarian regimes (ibid: 7).

Saudi blogger Fouad Alfarhan (22 August 2007) argues that governments which once opposed the existence of Twitter now consider it a gift from heaven. He believes that the Saudi government would like all of its citizens to use Twitter, because this would expose their political orientations, allowing the government to identify its supporters and opponents easily and deal with them in the light of their beliefs.

In February 2012, the Saudi authorities arrested three online journalists reporting on protests in the Eastern Province and blocked their news websites. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (2012), the government also arrested a microblogger because of his tweets. The technology thus proved to be a tool to be used in gatekeeping information in the media landscape, by enabling the monitoring and arrest of those whose words were unacceptable to the authorities.

Edward Joseph Snowden, a former employee of the US Central Intelligence Agency and of Booz Allen Hamilton, technical contractors for the National Security Agency, recently revealed to the press that he had participated in top-secret American and British government mass surveillance programmes (Blake, 9 June 2013). It might be argued that this ongoing case differs from one of espionage in that state secrets were allegedly published, rather than being communicated to an enemy for gain, and that the attempts by the US government to extradite Snowden from Russia in order to put him on trial for his revelations amount to a form of gatekeeping. If this argument is accepted, this indicates that contemporary gatekeeping in its broadest sense is not restricted to developing and non-democratic countries, but occurs even in democratic ones, albeit in different forms.

## **2.9 Technology, journalism and society**

Baek (2007: 4) notes that the “technological deterministic approach considers technology as an omnipotent cure ... for all social and economic problems”, while Toffler (1980) argues that information and communication technology (ICT) is powerful because it has become or will become the cornerstone of the production of

social wealth or power. Whereas the former theoretical position supports the power of communication technology during history, the latter places more importance on the power of technology in the future. Thus, Negroponte (1995) insists that the future society will be better and more organized due to digital technology. Valle (2009) disagrees with the rosy picture of technology, arguing that technology “opens doors, but does not oblige us to enter”. On the whole, these views reflect the optimism that reigned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was dreamt that technology would create a paradise on earth. Today, the situation facing communication is intimately linked to the incessantly growing world of technology, washed by a complex tide of economic, political and social forces which regulate many of the currents that propel its evolution and affect the way human life and dignity evolve. The technological phenomenon has turned into the most dangerous form of determinism. In other words, “Technology does not determine society: it gives it expression. But neither does society determine technological innovation: society uses it” (Valle, 2009: 18).

The increasing use of technology in journalism today raises questions about its importance in the production of news and in society more generally. As the present study is concerned with the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia, it is worth examining some theories which address the role of technology in society, its effect on media production today and how it influences the process of news creation and circulation in the digital era.

One such approach is actor-network theory (ANT), which evolved from the work of Michel Callon (1991), Bruno Latour (1992) and others, focusing on the role of technology in the field of science studies. The value of ANT lies in its ability to explain the complex relationships between members of the public in social network sites, and how the production of posts is affected by the environment in which they are produced. Many scholars have suggested that this theory gives an understanding of the process of producing the news through an environment where information is flowing under the influence of technologies whose impact differs from that in the traditional platforms. These effects play a crucial role in the creation and circulation of news, which makes it worthwhile. ANT may also elucidate ways of interpreting the relationships between the social networks and traditional institutions by recognizing how the mechanism of the sites works and the nature of the operations of various components, in order to

understand the production procedure. For instance, its application to Twitter involves an understanding of the rationale behind the creation of a hashtag and an identification of the microbloggers who have been involved and influential in it. This will clarify many factors helping scholars to analyse and understand the phenomena which ANT supports (Turner, 2005; Deuze, 2003; Klinenberg, 2005; Verweij & van Noort, 2014).

Hanseth and Monteiro (1998) argue that technology affects everyone by its presence in every aspect of daily life. Furthermore, they claim that ANT is a crucial technology theory which has a significant impact on many aspects of contemporary social life, of which the media are part. They describe the role of actor-networks as being analogous to the many influences on how a person drives a car on the public roads: the traffic regulations, the road, other cars and so on. In this case, the act being performed by the driver and all of these influencing factors need to be considered together. This is exactly what the term 'actor-network' denotes, i.e. an act linked with all of its influencing factors (which themselves are interlinked), producing a network (ibid: 96).

Bowker (2002: 2) describes the actor-network approach as "an array of concepts in order to describe the development and operation of technoscience. Their valuable concepts include: regimes of delegation; the centrality of mediation; and the position that nature and society are not causes but consequences of human scientific and technical work".

Gane and Beer (2008) point out that there are elements missing from ANT which make it a target of criticism in the media field; in particular, it ignores the role of social and cultural development within the network. These authors argue that ANT's disregard of this perspective contributes to a significant loss of strength and means that many journalism researchers avoid employing it within their field. As far as this study of gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia is concerned, it would be difficult to utilize this theory here, because the impact of culture within the network constitutes a significant component and may indeed be considered the engine of the thesis.

Another important theory addressing the role of technology in society is structuration theory, developed by a sociologist, Anthony Giddens, whose aim was to clarify the overlap between the assets of human and social structures to which they belong. Interpretations of social life in perspective, according to Giddens, either tend towards

force or effectiveness (agency), which is made up of the purposes, meanings and activities of individuals, or tend towards structure, that is, the logic, restrictions and regulations of society. Giddens suggests an alternative to this dichotomy through the representation of social life as a process of building or ongoing construction. This is present in every moment of social interaction and the structures are not restricted, but provide the right conditions for work and social action.

The structural model developed by Giddens represents a link between efficiency and infrastructure; the aim of this theoretical restructuring is to end the imperialist self of the individual, as well as ending the imperialist theme of the community, through an emphasis on that area of social science where human actions are organized through time and space. This theory helps to recognize human behaviour as based on a mixture of structure and agency impact, known as the “duality of structure.” Instead of describing the capacity of human action as being inhibited by powerful and stable societal structures (such as educational, religious or political institutions) or as a function of the individual expression of will (i.e. agency), structuration theory accepts interactions among meanings, standards, values and power, and posits a dynamic relationship between these different facets of society. The outcome depends on the rules governing social norms and how people interact with technology. In this theory, technology is not rendered as an artefact; instead, it addresses how people, as they interact with a technology in their ongoing practices, enact structures which shape their developing and situated use of that technology. Scholars have suggested that structuration theory be employed to assess broader social phenomena such as that addressed in the relation between journalism and technology. Employing a general social theory of this kind represents an interdisciplinary effort at linking perspectives from information studies, sociology, organizational science and journalism studies (Larsson, 2012).

Ashuri (2012) conducted a study of the influence of structuration theory on journalism and the technology that abounds in contemporary newsrooms. She concludes that Giddens’ theory was adopted by Wanda Orlikowski (2000), who frames the role of technology in terms of mutual interaction between human agents and technology, thus declaring it to be structurally and socially constructed. She identifies the following constituents of Orlikowski’s practice lens model for studying technology in organizations:



(a) technology is affected only by creative human action; (b) technology facilitates (and constrains) certain types of activity; (c) when acting on technology, human agents are influenced by the organizational properties of their settings, relying on existing reservoirs of knowledge, resources, and norms to perform their journalistic work; and (d) when human agents employ technology, their actions impact the institutional properties of their organizations by either reinforcing or transforming them. (Ashuri 2012: 53).

Structuration theory has received much criticism in the field of journalism studies. Many researchers have warned that the theory is very complicated and is applicable only in specific contexts. Appropriate fields include that of information technology (Hanseth and Monteiro, 1998).

Archer (1982) proposes that to allow for their analytical separation, human actions should be viewed over the short term, while structures should be seen as more enduring. In addition, Giddens's conceptualisation of structure as rules and resources existing only as memory traces has led to criticisms of subjectivism. Critics argue that structuration theory does not so much resolve the dualism of action and structure as offer victory to the knowledgeable human actor. Orlikowski (1991) counters that structure is understood to be an abstract property of social systems lacking material characteristics, not something concrete, situated in time and space. "Structure cannot exist apart from human actors who enact and interpret its dimensions. Structure has only virtual existence" (p. 147).

Larsson (2012) criticizes structuration theory for doing "little to advance our knowledge about the relations between the macro and micro levels of structural conduct—structuration theory merely 'throws a blanket' over the concepts of structure and agency, effectively preventing investigation of what is going on beneath" (p.257). Giddens (1989) himself acknowledges that the theory touches upon more philosophical matters, while other writers have suggested that structuration should be understood as a 'meta-theory' (Jones and Karsten, 2008).

In the same context, Dutton (2009) discusses the impact of technology on the contemporary media landscape. He claims that the internet and associated ICT play essential roles in changing concepts in media production and journalism. He considers

the internet to be reconfiguring our ways of communicating with each other, sharing information, access services and other resources, which helps to illustrate how patterns of digital divides and selections can change the communicative power of individuals and groups. The author argues that it is difficult to predict the societal implications of the internet. The mechanisms concerned are inherently unpredictable at both micro and macro levels, because they rely on interactions among numerous strategic and non-strategic choices made by actors about how they seek to shape access to and from the external world.

Dutton (2009) reaches a result he calls ‘the ecology of games’, reasoning that governmental agencies, politicians, new media producers, bloggers and others are all attempting to gain access to citizens through the internet. He argues that the internet reconfigures access in two major ways:

First, it can change the way we do things, such as how we get information, how we communicate with people and how we obtain services and access technologies. Secondly, and perhaps more fundamentally, its use can alter the outcomes of these activities. It changes what we know, whom we know, whom we keep in close touch and what services we obtain (e.g. through e-government), as well as what technologies we use and what know-how we require to employ them. ICTs can also reconfigure access by: changing cost structures, eliminating or introducing gatekeepers and expanding or contracting the geography of access (Dutton, 2009: 4).

The above discussion confirms that technology has increased the power of gatekeeping and its influence by increasing its domination and its access, giving great importance to this research, which exposes the theory to empirical study. The aim is to identify the strengths of this theory in the contemporary era, which is witnessing a major growth of the internet.

There are many theories related to the impact of technology in society, such as the research discussed earlier, which although different, confirms that gatekeeping theory is not static, but evolves dramatically due to the growth of the internet, which motivates the researcher to focus on this promising area of study. In conducting this research, an expected finding is that gatekeeping theory has gained important elements which formed in cyberspace. These elements have added new dimensions to evidence

supporting the notion that technology has contributed to the revitalization of the theory and caused it to continue to grow and rise, which requires such studies to explore phenomena that reflect the implications of this massive technical development.

Benkler (2006) suggests that the internet has contributed to the flow of information and the culture of production in two major ways: it has made the culture more transparent and has also made it more malleable, allowing readers to participate more effectively in a cultural scene which was once the preserve of specific groups and leading to the emergence of a new popular culture. These practices make experts better “readers” of their own culture and more self-reflective and critical of the culture they occupy, thereby enabling them to become more self-reflective participants in discussions within that culture. This also offers citizens more freedom to express their feelings and opinions via new channels.

On the other hand, Benkler (2006) details some important criticisms of the early claims about the democratizing effects of the internet and discusses five specific aspects of technology growth which have been seen as negative: information overload, the centralisation of the internet, the centrality of commercial mass media, the activities of authoritarian regimes and the digital divide.

Information overload, which Shenk (1997) refers to as ‘information glut’ and ‘data smog’, arises from the great increase in existing data and information as technology in the internet age allows almost everyone to write and speak to everyone else. This abundance contributes to the existence of so much inaccurate information that it is difficult to test it all and ensure its accuracy. Technology is changing the ways of receiving information, so the audience has more choices, but most of them are false. Investigating every single source of information available on the internet is impossible.

Bimber and Copeland (2013) claim that the internet has contributed to the decline and deterioration of democracy and freedom of expression, because of the heavy volume of information that has led to the chaos of informatics and blocked consensus based on clear principles and criteria.

The centralization of the internet stands in sharp contrast to earlier predictions of scholars that the proliferation of websites would lead to growing equality among

members of society. Statistical studies have shown that while some sites attract very large audiences, there are many others which have very few visitors. The internet is becoming a carbon copy of the traditional media, which has led to a revision of optimistic expectations that democracy would thrive online. There are layers of influence and the voices of many users, often members of minorities, are not heard because they are disconnected from those users who wield the power in real life. Indeed, it is difficult to differentiate between the real and virtual worlds nowadays. The freedom that was expected to come with technology is no longer a topic of optimistic discussion. The image of the internet has been soured by restrictions to the expression of opinion and by resistance from different groups who are fighting ideas which led to the decline of rational opinions and spread extremism (Benkler, 2006; Noam, 2005; Yimam and Kobsa, 2000).

Benkler's (2006) third area of concern is the centrality of the commercial mass media to the function of the Fourth Estate. The term 'Fourth Estate', denoting a societal or political force or institution whose influence is not consistently or officially recognized, most commonly refers to print journalism (Schultz, 1998). Benkler (2006) argues that the printed news media have derived their strength from the power of the institutions that issued them, allowing them to face corruption and political power with courage, but he wonders whether bloggers and other internet activists are able to take the same approach in the age of technology. While accepting that the digital media play a clear role in fighting small issues, Benkler (2006) asserts that it is difficult for them to face authoritarian states or major organizations in possession of power and funding. He concludes that the new technology has not actually empowered journalism, since bloggers cannot confront vast organizations as the mainstream does and cannot rely on trust earned over past decades. Thus, while it may be good and interesting that individuals and groups of volunteers use the internet to talk to each other, this activity cannot seriously replace the well-funded, economically and politically powerful traditional media. In this respect, Benkler's analysis contrasts somewhat with that of Dutton (2009), who argues that the digital media can be seen to constitute a Fifth Estate and who provides a range of evidence of the effectiveness of the internet and the impact of its users in societies around the globe.

A related criticism raised by Benkler (2006) is that authoritarian governments can use filtering and monitoring to limit internet use. Many non-democratic states repress internet activists in various ways in order to prevent the spread of any opinions and ideas that conflict with the views or interests of those in power. Bloggers and microbloggers around the globe have suffered arrest, blocking and cyber-attacks. The internet allows authoritarian regimes to identify its opponents and to suppress them firmly. In developing countries, countless blogs been blocked and many bloggers have ceased blogging and writing after being arrested. A large number of them have also lost their jobs as a result of the authorities' reaction to their blogs and even to their Twitter posts. Dictatorial forces use the internet negatively. Having lost the initial battle, when the emerging internet offered a new channel of resistance, they have now found many different ways to employ the technology as a trap to undermine their foes. Thus, in recent years the world has witnessed very many and varied attacks on bloggers and other producers of content considered inconsistent with the vested interests of authoritarian governments. For instance, the Chinese government has demonstrated its ability to control internet usage by the world's largest national population, by blocking international websites that are accessible to users in most other countries. In short, undemocratic power structures have successfully prevented millions of users from enjoying the democracy which many scholars predicted that the internet would offer (Benkler, 2006; Morozov, 2011; Lacey, 2009).

The final criticism of the internet raised by Benkler (2006) is that of the so-called digital divide. While technology has contributed to an increase in the number of participants in opinion-sharing and debate, it has also played a key role in creating new distinctions among members of many societies. The gap has widened between people due to the prevalence of the internet. This confirms that the internet does not grant democracy to everybody and strengthens the belief held by many people that they have no role in society because of their internet illiteracy. There are significant divides of this kind among different income groups, racial groups and geographical areas, as well as between society in general and persons with disabilities of various kinds. The impacts of the digital divide are stronger in third world countries, because wealth there is more concentrated in specific layers; thus, the rich find that their wealth grants them great privileges and a limited number of citizens enjoy overwhelming advantages over the

majority of others. Access to technology is restricted to the wealthy few, while most people have no opportunity to express their views or to enjoy democratic participation through the internet (Benkler, 2006; Fikes, 2005).

These doubts concerning the democratizing effects of the internet are directly related to the topic of the present research, which is the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. This thesis places particular emphasis on digital censorship in a non-democratic country and will promote understanding of the tools and procedures that states, organizations, institutions and individuals employ to block and restrict the flow of information. The study illustrates some darker aspects of technological evolution in the digital era which deserve careful attention and close examination in order to identify the new phenomena that thrive due to the prevalence of the new technology.

## **2.10 Conclusion**

Garber (2011: 116) describes how journalists have received new technology:

E-mail, at least at first, was an extremely strange concept. Though the hyphens seem quaint today, they're a good reminder of the tentative way in which new technologies insert themselves into our language and our lives. We resist them. And then we ease them in gradually, sometimes grudgingly.

Garber's description of how journalists reacted to email applies more or less equally to their behaviour towards any new technologies that arrive in the newsroom. The resistance never stops and challenges to journalism will continue to force the revisiting of current theories and models to suit today's journalism. Examining the impact of technology on journalism entails reviewing technological determinism as well.

This chapter has shed light on the impact of technology on journalism, by analysing the Wapping dispute and similar events which caused structural tensions in many newspapers around the globe. It has also discussed resistance to the growth of the internet from mainstream media and academics. In particular, it has examined the serious opposition to the adoption of new technology by Saudi newspapers and how recent innovations have brought changes to existing practices and production processes. It has offered an account of the impact on journalism of blogging and microblogging

(Twitter), highlighting their increasingly influential role in news creation and circulation in the contemporary world, especially in Saudi Arabia. It has outlined the reactions of journalists to technological innovation and considered the role of technology in journalism and society.

The discussion of technological progress in journalism, while illustrating the significant role that technology has played in the growth of journalism, has revealed the strength of a backlash that could not have been predicted. This review of the incessant resistance and opposition in newspapers to the introduction of new technology at various times in the past makes it obvious that there has been constant change in many longstanding mechanisms and traditional processes involved in the creation and circulation of the news. It is the contention of this thesis that this is essential, because any study of the effect of the internet on an aspect of the critical theory of journalism requires an exploration of the impact of new technologies on the press, to help to understand the past and anticipate the future of journalism as it responds to current developments. Furthermore, investigating the past and present impact of technology on journalism reinforces the importance of exploring the future of gatekeeping as affected by the prevalence of the internet, at least to the extent that parallels can be drawn between past, present and future technological impacts on journalism. The next chapter sets out the theoretical framework in which this investigation is to proceed.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Theoretical Framework: Gatekeeping**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

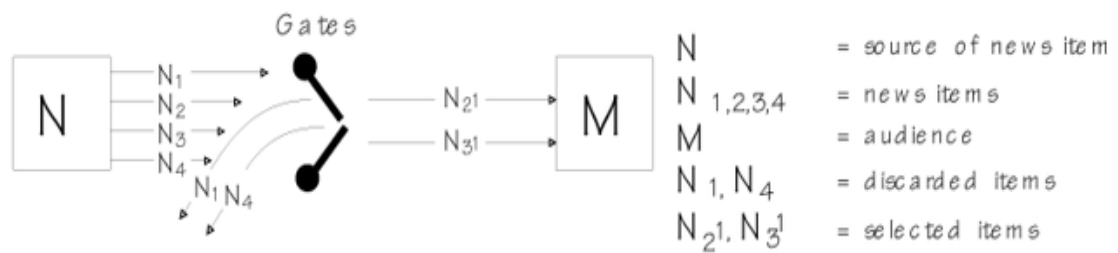
This chapter examines the development of gatekeeping theory over time. It also discusses criticisms of gatekeeping and its application in Saudi print newspapers. Throughout the chapter the researcher emphasizes the impact of the internet on gatekeeping in general and particularly on electronic newspapers, blogging and microblogging, by illustrating contemporary cases. It concludes by presenting critically an alternative model, which is gatewatching.

#### **3.2 Gatekeeping**

This study discusses the relevance of the gatekeeping model in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. It examines how gatekeeping is applied in the current news industry in the country, with regard to Saudi print newspapers, e-newspapers, blogs and microblogs. The complexity of the decision-making mechanism of the Saudi press today, as the researcher's direct experience of traditional and electronic newspapers confirms, requires a review of the gatekeeping function, which may help to explain the environment within which traditional newspapers, electronic newspapers, blogs and microblogs operate in Saudi Arabia.

The gatekeeping model depends on news editors deciding what kinds of items are published and which are rejected. Tuchman (1978) explains that it is up to editors to decide what will be published or broadcast and how they want it to be covered. The final versions appearing on the screen or in the newspapers are the outcomes of the gatekeeping process (Schudson, 1989). Figure 3.1 shows White's gatekeeping model, where the many messages that are available are reduced in number and transformed into fewer messages according to the decisions of the gatekeepers (Berkowitz, 1997).





**Figure 3.1:** White's gatekeeping model (Shoemaker, 1991: 10)

Shoemaker (1991: 1) defines gatekeeping as a framework or process of information control which concerns items of message encoding; this means not just the selection but also the display, withholding and timing of information as it goes from the sender to the receiver.

The coining of the term “gatekeeping” by Kurt Lewin is reported in section 1.6.1, as is its first application to a research project by David White, who reviewed the selection for publication of around ten per cent of available news wire stories by an editor referred to as “Mr Gates”. White (1950) describes Mr Gates’ selection as “highly subjective”; he rejected around a third of the stories because of his personal assessment of the value of the story content, particularly whether he believed it or not. The other two-thirds of the rejected stories were unpublished because there was insufficient space in the paper or because similar stories had been covered recently (Dimitrova et al, 2003).

Sigal (1973) classifies the information coming into communication organizations from different channels into three categories: routine, informal and enterprise. Routine channels include press releases and official proceedings such as trials, and election results. Informal channels include background briefings, leaks and reports from other news organizations. Finally, enterprise channels include interviews conducted at the reporters’ initiative and spontaneous events that reporters witness first-hand (Sigal, 1973: 120).

Gans (1979) argues that US journalists share a set of permanent social values which guide the production of news. Braun (2009) claims that news values are generally held to be active at several stages in the gatekeeping process. However, he points out that “their set of news values has been applied far more broadly to many types of news” (Braun, 2009: 7). Harcup and O’Neill (2010) conducted an empirical study that showed that news stories must generally satisfy one or more of the following requirements:

making reference to the power elite or celebrity, conveying entertainment, surprise, bad news or good news, having magnitude or relevance, following up an existing story, or referring to newspapers themselves. These contributions all indicate that the application of new values is part of gatekeeping process. Paying attention to the material prior to publishing and putting it to the test is in line with gatekeeping assumptions. According to Lewin (1951), during the gatekeeping process, movement through a channel from gate to gate is controlled by a set of rules.

Several factors affect the decisions of the gatekeeper about whether to approve or reject news stories beside the news value, such as personal judgment, organizational practice, culture, government-press relations, financial issues and the internet. Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 65) claim that “professional roles and ethics have a direct effect on mass media content, whereas the effect of personal attitudes, values, and beliefs on mass media content is indirect”. Noam (2005) contends that gatekeeping has weaknesses but that journalism today still needs it. He justifies his view thus: “True, gatekeeping power is bad news, but so is disinformation. Screening and branding of information helps audiences. When information comes unfiltered, it will create community-based media but also lead to rumor and last minute political ambush” (p.58). Roberts (2005: 3) argues that the emergence of blogs has returned gatekeeping to the forefront of research considerations and describes gatekeeping theory as “the vanilla ice cream of mass communication theory. It may not be everyone’s favourite, but nearly everyone can tolerate it.”

### **3.3 Criticism and discussion of gatekeeping**

In contradiction to the bland image of Roberts’s “vanilla” metaphor, Williams and Carpini (2000) state that gatekeeping appears to be struggling, because if one information source will not publish something, websites will. Singer (2006) shares this concern. She believes that the internet defies the whole notion of a ‘gate’ and challenges the idea that journalists (or anyone else) can or should limit what passes through it.

According to the results of a survey by Deuze and Paulussen (2002), the recent spread of the ideas of speed and immediacy, of hypertext and multimedia has become the basis of a new type of journalism, which in turn negatively affects the traditional roles of journalism, including gatekeeping. Boczkowski (2004) also found that journalists prefer

to utilize a “gateopening” practice instead of using gatekeeping, with the improvement of participant contributions to the news today. Many current studies have tended to focus on “users as content producers” (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009) and how their presence may be shifting news work from traditional gatekeeping tasks towards gateopening, where news workers foster user participation.

There has been a widely held belief in White’s conceptual model of gatekeeping, since it considers the primary newsmaker as playing the principle role in news creation. However, researchers have argued that this jurisdictional claim might be challenged by the growing presence of users as content producers in the new media environment (Bruns, 2008; Gillmor, 2004; Hoffman, 2006; Lowrey, 2006; McCoy, 2001; Robinson, 2007; Ruggiero and Winch, 2005; Singer, 2006; Williams and Carpini, 2000).

Roberts (2005) disagrees, arguing that gatekeeping continues to operate despite the new technology. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) add that gatekeeping still plays the foremost role in news creation today; indeed, they believe that its role has become more powerful in the internet era, while audience members are part of a secondary gatekeeping process. Just as Mr Gates showed a personal preference for one topic over another, so do readers. Moreover, *New York Times* staff can now “look over the reader’s shoulder” at what people read and what sorts of articles are most popular, based on its website statistics, on how many stories are commented upon and on the nature of those comments.

Nowadays, readers play a key role in the selection or rejection of the news to be published, via their selections in the ‘most popular subjects’ boxes in newspaper websites or their databases; they can also influence the order or priority of stories. Before the internet era it was very difficult to acquire immediate and accurate information about the most popular subjects among readers; marketing departments were required to conduct research surveys to obtain indications of readership and popularity (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). Now, by contrast, editors can rapidly find answers that will affect their decisions to give more attention in the future to certain subjects, for instance because they receive more clicks than others. Readers’ desires are matters of priority for gatekeepers; thus, in a sense, the reader becomes the gatekeeper.

In response to the changes that have occurred due to the internet boom, Barzilai-Nahon (2008) has developed a new model of gatekeeping which concentrates on information

and communication technology and more particularly on the role of the internet in shaping the news selection process. Challenging the traditional view of one-way gatekeeping with respect to the relationship between gatekeepers and their audience, the internet offers multi-way gatekeeping. Thus, in the context of the internet, the notions of sender and receiver are no longer significant; Barzilai-Nahon asserts that “during any interaction on the net the roles of sender-receiver are repeatedly exchanged, while the gatekeeper and the gated can play both roles” (2008: 1499). This is a fundamental challenge to White’s unidirectional and apolitical gatekeeping model. One of the aims of the present study is to examine the nexus between these two models with reference to the specific context of Saudi Arabia.

### **3.4 Gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia**

Müller (2004) argues that the role of censorship in news creation in the Middle East has lately become a very attractive, interesting and productive area of research. Gatekeeping is not a familiar term in Saudi Arabia, however, as a result of the absence of specialized research centres and postgraduate departments of media, which has restricted the number of studies of media concepts in general. Media departments in Saudi universities are very young and limited: only three of the 22 universities in Saudi Arabia offer a bachelor’s degree in media and the first master’s programme, which began in 1998 at King Saud University, accepts only five students per year. Other schools have recently started postgraduate programmes (Okaz, 2011). Another reason for the paucity of media research in Saudi Arabia is that the mechanisms of the Saudi press have constituted a sensitive subject for decades. A Freedom House report states that “the lack of a theoretical framework for freedom of the press in Saudi Arabia is due largely to the government’s position on the role of the press in society” (Freedom House, 2007).

In spite of this, a few studies and papers have touched on gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia, particularly with reference to censorship. These are mentioned throughout this discussion of gatekeeping in the country. Indeed, in order to understand gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia it is necessary to discuss some of the steps and turning points in the history of state censorship in the Kingdom.

Saudi newspapers are subject to six printing laws, the first of which was sanctioned by the Shura (consultative) Council in 1929 and the most recent of which the government

issued in April 2011 (Alhayat, 2011; Al Shebeili, 2000). These laws in general forbid newspapers to publish any criticism of religion, the royal family or the government. They make it clear that complete responsibility for any material published in a newspaper rests with its editor-in-chief (AlAwad, 2006; Alghasha'ami, 2006). In 1959, the General Directorate of Publication within the Saudi Ministry of Information issued a book setting out the new censorship criteria, which were approved by royal decree No. 15. These new rules prohibited the sale within the country of any outside publication without prior review by the censorship department of the General Directorate of Publication, a restriction which continues to apply to international publications in Saudi Arabia today (Alghasha'ami, 2005). This censorship means in practice that *Time* magazine and other foreign publications, including newspapers, are available in the market but in an incomplete form. Whole pages will be removed because of a picture or a paragraph in a story or novel which displeases the gatekeepers in the Ministry of Information. It has become normal to see, on the shelves of Saudi supermarkets or bookstores, books and newspapers which have been cut. Saudi readers, unlike those in other countries, continue to suffer the disappointment of finding that their favourite publications are incomplete (Sabbagh, 2009).

Another important event in the history of the Saudi press was in 1967, when a Higher Media Council was established by royal decree. In its first 14 years it was led by the Minister of Information, but in 1981 another royal decree designated the Minister of the Interior to chair the Council. This body approved the names of Saudi newspaper editors, decided on punishments, monitored the implementation of printing laws and oversaw the overall policy of newspapers (Hafidh, 1989; Kutby, 1999).

Under this restrictive regulatory regime, Abdualkareem AlGhuhuman and Yousef Alshaikh, the editors of *Dhahran News* and *Alfajer Aljadid*, were arrested and banned from writing and their newspapers were closed down, because they had published articles criticizing the government. Vassiljev (1980) reports that AlGhuhuman published, in issue 44 of *Dhahran News*, an article by Mohammed Abdullah concerning female education which was considered to be critical of the government. This article, which cost the editor his job and freedom, stated:

Our men cannot afford to send their daughters to neighbouring countries. Illiteracy is killing our girls and forcing us to seek brides from abroad. It

is time to prepare our girls to learn their religion and household chores. We suggest the opening of schools and housekeeping institutes while respecting our privacy and traditions (Alghasha'ami, 2002: 28).

For his part, Alshaikh was punished because of his criticism of government bureaucracy in regard to supporting farmers.

*Dhahran News* and *Alfajer Aljadid* were not the first Saudi newspapers to disappear as a result of a government decision. Abdullah Abduljabar (1959) reports that in 1932 the government sacked the editor-in-chief of *Sawt Alhejaz*, Abdulwahab Aashi, because his newspaper's editorials were free of any praise of the king and the government for a few days. The newspaper struggled on for a few months but then closed.

If the reasons for the closure of *Sawt Alhejaz*, *Dhahran News* and *Alfajer Aljadid* are clear, this is not always the case; the cause of the disappearance of some Saudi newspapers is still unknown many decades later. For instance, *Alesha'aa*, a newspaper founded in September 1955 in the Eastern Province by Saad Albawardi, survived for just three years. While Albawardi was celebrating its third anniversary, a policeman knocked at his door at midnight and said that he would have to spend a year in his birthplace, Shagra, a small town near the capital of Saudi Arabia, or go to jail. Albawardi selected the first option and his paper was shut down by government order (Alghasha'ami, 2002). The demise of *Alesha'aa* remains a mystery today: nobody knows why it was suppressed, even though more than five decades have elapsed since then.

The *Alesha'aa* case is thus an example of how the gatekeeper works in Saudi Arabia, which Mohammed Oween (2003) claims is to base decisions on his personal opinion without obvious criteria: "He reads something we don't see, he understands something we don't understand, that's why he makes incomprehensible decisions." AlAwad (2010) sees this as part of a wider pattern of subjectivity and unpredictability: "The personal factor has noticeable effects on the selection and production of news stories in Saudi Arabia. It reflects the wide authority enjoyed by the editor, supported by the fact that there is no clear institutionalism guiding work in the press institutions in general."

The press in Saudi Arabia has struggled significantly under different types of censorship. These can be highlighted by the example of some of the difficulties facing

another newspaper, *Al Riyadh*, in the years since it was established in 1953, which will clarify the nature of the challenges facing the Saudi press throughout its history. *Al Yammamh* (later called *Al Riyadh*) was started by the individual efforts of a historian, Hamad Al-Jaser. It was the first Saudi newspaper based in the capital city, but was printed in Egypt because of a lack of printing presses in Riyadh, due in turn to government restrictions on publications. Al-Jaser received written permission to publish the newspaper after a meeting with Prince Saud, the eldest son of the founder of Saudi Arabia (Hafidh, 1989).

In 1954 the newspaper was banned because it had published an article by Abdullah Al Tariqi entitled 'Where we are heading'. This article closed the newspaper because it contained a criticism of the government, but Al-Jaser succeeded in healing the rift by writing a letter to the Department of Press Censorship promising not to publish any criticism of the government in future. However, a setback took place on 27 July 1958, when the paper welcomed a visit to Saudi Arabia by the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, describing him as a "messenger of love". This description cost the editor, Hamad Al-Jaser, his primary position as Senior Lecturer at the Religious and Arabic Language Studies Institute, because the religious authorities in Saudi Arabia at that time, in the person of Mohammed bin Ibrahim, believed that nobody but the Prophet Mohammed deserved the title of 'Messenger' (Hafidh, 1989).

Two decades later, Turki Al-Sudairy, Editor-in-Chief of *Al Riyadh*, was banned from writing for three months because he called the Saudi Minister of Information "a minister of denial" in his daily column in 1977 (Alwatan, May 4, 2010). Jihad Khazen, former Editor-in-Chief of *Alhayat*, described his experience as an editor from 1988-1998:

I have been asked not to publish something more times than I care to remember. Ours is a system of denial. We commit sins of omission, not commission. Arab information ministries are mockingly referred to as ministries of denial or praise: Deny the news, or praise the ruler. A westerner once observed, 'Never believe the news until it is officially denied'. This is even more true of the Arab press (Khazen, 1999: 88).

Saudi journalists have struggled to cover many events despite such censorship. AlAwad (2006) and Alshamiry (1992) list three types of censorship that traditional newspapers suffer from in Saudi Arabia, first being official censorship. The Saudi government practices the following techniques for interfering in traditional newspapers:

- They are not allowed to engage in any journalistic activities without obtaining a prior licence from the Ministry of Culture and Information.
- The Ministry appoints editors-in-chief, or at least approves their appointment.
- The government provides financial subsidies to (traditional) national newspapers facing financial difficulties. If these subsidies are not sufficient, the king supports these newspapers from his own finances. In July 2007, the king granted *AlNadwoah* £163,000 to prevent it from having to stop printing (mofa.gov.sa, 2007).
- The Ministry circulates guidelines and instructions received from the Higher Media Council to the newspapers about publishable and non-publishable materials and subjects.

The second type is editorial censorship, which editors-in-chief exercise over their own papers. Indeed, some editors practise censorship stricter than that of the Ministry of Culture and Information, in order to protect themselves and to keep their positions (Al Shebeili, 2000). The third type is self-censorship, which journalists themselves practise as a reaction to official or editorial censorship or other pressures. Khazen (1999) admits that self-censorship is prevalent in the Saudi press due to a fear of inaccurate interpretation: “I always discovered my journalists didn’t write stories because they don’t want to upset people. This is worse than official and editorial censorship.”

Such forms of censorship make it very difficult to predict which news item will or will not be published in the traditional newspapers the next day. Al-Khahtani (1999) claims that “official censorship always makes the press cautious of covering certain topics, whether in times of war or peace, which [has] led Saudi readers to follow the international media”. A clear example of this censorship, showing how strict the Saudi gatekeeper was, occurred at the outset of what became known as the Gulf War: in 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, a neighbour of Saudi Arabia, Saudi newspapers published nothing on this potential threat to Saudi territory for a week. Al Omran (2012) claims that for the first week of August 1990, the Saudi government banned this information: “For a week, we were unaware a hostile army was moving towards our borders”. Khaled al Maeena, former editor-in-chief of the *Arab News* print newspaper, describes the situation thus: “I received direction from the ministry to not publish any news about the invasion. The headline story in my newspaper on the invasion day was about



opening a new rose garden in Tabouk, in north western Saudi Arabia” (Personal communication, August 10, 2010).

Could Saudi gatekeepers make the same decision to ban news of an invasion in the contemporary era? This rhetorical question is one of many which prompted the researcher to investigate this area. The emergence in Saudi Arabia of the internet and particularly electronic newspapers, blogs and microblogging has changed the way that Saudi gatekeepers deal with the news. Their impact has transformed gatekeeping. There are several new factors influencing the process of gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia today which make it both interesting and valuable to study the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in the country. Today’s Saudi gatekeeper might not ban all news of the invasion if something similar happened in a neighbouring country, but would surely employ new methods to confront the fluidity of electronic and international news, such as issuing brief and frequent official press releases through the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) to update the public. This conclusion can be drawn from the approach of government media to the terrorist bombings which took place in Saudi Arabia in 2003.

The Saudi press is still struggling under the control of censorship, which prevents it from publishing any stories about the government that have not come via the SPA gate. Thus, in a study of the press in Saudi Arabia, AlAwad (2010) found that for stories and decisions relating to the government, the papers relied mainly on the SPA, which normally furnishes the national press with statements and official instructions issued by the government. It is therefore natural that the Saudi press should publish no news about the royal family, whether negative or even positive, if it does not come from an SPA feed. This does not mean that the Saudi population does not hear or read critical stories about the royal family, but that these will all come via the international media. In the late 1970s, for example, many international newspapers carried prominently the story of a Saudi princess who had been publicly executed. The Saudi press made no mention of it, but on the streets people exchanged many different versions of events, derived from the foreign news sphere, in the absence of officially sanctioned national news. The facts were that a Saudi Arabian Princess, Misha’al bint Fahd al Saud, was executed for alleged adultery in 1977, at the age of 19. She was the granddaughter of Prince Muhammad bin Abdul Aziz, elder brother of the then King of Saudi Arabia, Khalid bin

Abdul Aziz. A South-African born independent film producer, Antony Thomas, made a British documentary about this incident, called 'Death of a Princess', in response to the curiosity and hunger for the facts regarding the mystery of her death on the part of the public both inside and outside the Kingdom. Thomas stated later: "Whoever I spoke to – whether they were Palestinians, whether they were conservative Saudis, whether they were radicals – they attached themselves to this princess. She'd become a myth" (FrontLine, 2005). Given this strength of feeling, it can be argued that the official silence on the matter served to increase the rumours and to motivate authors and television producers to write books and make programmes about the event.

Parallels can be drawn between the way the Saudi press dealt with this incident and the handling by the British press of the relationship between King Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson in the late 1930s. Bloch (1997) and King (2003) claim that the British media remained deferential to the monarchy, so that no stories of the affair were reported in the domestic press, while the foreign media, especially in America, reported their relationship widely. King Edward's private secretary, Alec Hardinge, reflected on the pointlessness of the British press embargo in a letter to him on 13 November 1936: "The silence in the British Press on the subject of Your Majesty's friendship with Mrs Simpson is not going to be maintained ... Judging by the letters from British subjects living in foreign countries where the Press has been outspoken, the effect will be calamitous" (Broad, 1961: 71).

Alshamiry (1992) reports that 20.6% of Saudis in his study sample said that they read only the sport sections of the newspapers, because they did not trust the other pages, due to the strict laws preventing editors from freely publishing the truth. Alshamiry argues further that the strict control and censorship imposed on the national media has forced Arabs to seek accurate news from the foreign media. Almajid (2003) agrees that Saudi readers tend to obtain their news from foreign newspapers, because media censorship prevents domestic ones from covering events transparently.

One response to the weakness of the traditional print media in Saudi Arabia has been the arrival, albeit somewhat belated, of e-newspapers. In May 2001, after retiring from traditional journalism, Othman Al Omair, the owner of a number of hotels and companies in Morocco and Saudi Arabia, took advantage of the migration of Saudi

readers and technology to launch an Arabic e-newspaper, *Elaph*, targeting a Saudi audience who had not yet experienced e-newspapers. Nasser Alsaramy, former department head of *Al Riyadh*, has justified the delay in establishing e-newspapers in Saudi Arabia by reference to the prohibition of the use of the internet by some religious leaders in the country. However, this was overturned when the Grand Mufti (the highest religious authority in Saudi Arabia) issued a fatwa declaring internet usage to be *halal*, i.e. legal, in response to other clerics' attempts to explain to the Grand Mufti, who is blind, the benefits that Muslims could gain from it. Many Saudi businessmen and independent journalists followed the fatwa by establishing e-newspapers (Burnews, 2009).

Since 2000, the performance of traditional newspapers has been criticized by some academic researchers and opinion leaders. For instance, Mohammed Barayan, an academic researcher, found that 28.6% of the news stories he analysed focused on the Saudi king and 36% on government officials. He called on decision makers in Saudi Arabia to make major changes, especially in view of the present environment, where the internet is accessible in Saudi Arabia (Barayan, 2002).

Therefore, 2003 was perceived to be a turning point for the Saudi press, when a royal decree abolished the Higher Media Council (HMC) after 36 years of playing a critical role in monitoring and controlling the Saudi media. This decision reflects the impact on Saudi Arabia's mainstream press of e-newspapers. According to Mazen Balilah, former editor-in-chief of the print newspaper *Al-Madina* and member of the Shura Council, the decision was thought to be the government's response both to changes brought about by the internet and to the significant criticisms of traditional newspapers' performance by national journalists and academic researchers (Al-Bilad, 2007).

The abolition of the HMC and the spread of e-newspapers, followed by blogs and microblogging websites, gradually changed gatekeeping roles. Traditional newspapers started to publish topics they had never tackled before, such as curriculum reform, civic associations and an elected parliament. Turki Al-Sudairy, editor-in-chief of *Al Riyadh*, has pointed out that to compete with e-newspapers he had to change his policy on reviewing stories to decide which should be published. In February 2004 he delegated to his department heads the power to approve news items, in order to accelerate the

process of publishing. Until then, the department heads would propose items for publication and the editor-in-chief had to approve or reject each one. If he was not available in the office he approved the news by telephone, or his deputy took over the function, but with limited authority. This practice had continued from 1965, when *Al Riyadh* was founded, until 2004, which indicates the significance of changes to the gatekeeping role in traditional Saudi newspapers (AlGhamdi, 2010).

However, Saudis still complain about the margin of freedom in traditional newspapers and the role of gatekeeping in restricting it. Mohammed Al-Sohaimi, a columnist for *Al-Madina*, decided to stop writing for traditional newspapers because of editorial censorship. He has described what has happened to the Saudi press recently as like a naked woman in the street; everybody looks at her but one man goes to her and covers just her eyes. For Al-Sohaimi, the naked woman represents a newsworthy event, the people in the street stand for e-journalists and bloggers, while the man who goes to cover her eyes symbolizes the traditional newspapers. Al-Sohaimi refuses to continue writing for the traditional newspapers because “they are not covering the news for the readers but covering the news from the readers” (Rotanakhalligia, 2011). Al-Sohaimi believes that the editors of print newspapers are not aware of what is happening on the internet and that they live in denial, which makes them not only refuse to publish some of the news but also create untrue news to distract the readers. One of the issues facing traditional newspapers is their editors’ internet illiteracy. Some of them read the internet news as hard copy and hire employees to follow websites and to brief them on their content (Faqih, 2012).

Many topics are still considered taboo in traditional newspapers, such as Saudi females driving, the appointment of ministers and criticism of religion, whilst these topics are the daily diet of electronic newspapers, blogs and microblogs. To illustrate the differences among the written mass media in Saudi Arabia in dealing with sensitive topics, Table 3.1 sets out their coverage of one event. This gives an indication of how these four gates engage in gatekeeping nowadays.

**Table 3.1:** Coverage of the female driving campaign

Date	Where	Type	Coverage
15/05/2011	<i>Al Riyadh</i>	Traditional newspaper	Nothing
15/05/2011	<i>Sabq</i>	E-newspaper	A Saudi woman drove her husband's car in Jeddah to support the Saudi women's driving campaign (the item did not include the date of the campaign)
15/05/2011	Faces Without Masks	Blog	A Saudi woman drove her husband's car in Jeddah to support the Saudi women's driving campaign which will take place on 17 Jun 2011.
15/05/2011	Twitter	Microblog	#SaudiWoman Practices her right to Drive #Women2Drive #Jeddah #WomenRights #News

The above table illustrates clearly how differently news outlets treated news of the same event on the same day. The simple facts were that on 14 May 2011 in Jeddah, a Saudi woman drove a car, which women are not allowed to do. Each type of information source in the country covered it in its own way, which explains the differences in the gatekeepers' judgments. *Al Riyadh*, in common with all other traditional newspapers, did not cover the event at all. *Sabq*, an e-newspaper, covered most of it but without mentioning the date of the forthcoming campaign in favour of women driving (Sabq.org, 15 May 2011), while Faces Without Masks, a blog, covered the whole story of the event (nomaskfaces.blogspot, 2011) and Manal Al-Sharif, a Saudi blogger, gave details of the event on her Twitter account, which then had more than 8,000 followers, with five hashtags linking to tweets that provided information about the campaign (Al-Sharif, 15 May 2011).

This comparison shows that it is not only traditional newspapers in Saudi Arabia which apply the gatekeeping model, but that it is adopted by e-newspapers, blogs and microbloggers as well. The editor of *Sabq*, Mohammed AlShehri, has admitted that he conducts strict censorship to avoid the blocking of his website. His team selects the news to be published from among a large number of news items, each of which goes through four channels before it can be published (Shams, 2011). This is identical to the process of gatekeeping described by Shoemaker (1991: 2) as involving the selection from a large number of messages of those few that will be transmitted to one or more receivers. In the same interview, AlShehri, who edits the most viewed e-newspaper in Saudi Arabia (Alexa, 2011), indicates that he takes into account the interests of

advertisers, which is consistent with the assertion of Shoemaker and Vos (2009) that advertisers can exert substantial influence on what passes through a channel, including what is selected and how it is shaped.

Even bloggers avoid tackling some topics and apply a gatekeeping process involving channels and filtering. Ahmed Alomran, who is well known as ‘Saudi Jeans’, the name of his blog, has never run any story on it about sectarianism in Saudi Arabia (Alwatan, 2010). Alomran (personal correspondence, May 25, 2011) has disclosed that his father asked him to stay away from one thing: “Don’t talk about sectarianism”.

On December 11, 2007, another Saudi blogger, Fouad Alfarhan, was arrested after his office in Jeddah had been broken into. His offence was to have listed in his blog the ten Saudis that he most disliked and least wished to meet. This list included members of the royal family, high government officials and religious leaders.

The list included Hisham Yamani, the former commerce minister, who had told Saudis they were not compelled to eat expensive rice; Saleh Al-Laheedan, the chief justice, who would later call for the death sentence on the owners of satellite TV channels; and prince Waleed bin Talal, the successful businessman whose plans for a kilometre high skyscraper had pushed up the prices in the north Jeddah area, making it impossible for Fouad to buy a house he had wanted there (Lacey, 2009: 318).

Alfarhan was arrested when he left a coffee shop in Jeddah. He was surrounded by a group of men in tracksuits and running shoes, with no uniforms in sight. He is quoted as saying: “It was all very polite and even respectful in a weird way. No one would have known I was being arrested, unless I chose to make a scene or tried to escape – in which case they were dressed to catch me very quickly” (Lacey, 2009: 318). The men took him home to say goodbye to his wife and family while they searched his books and computers to obtain a profile of his politics and any connections he might have with organizations or groups (Alfarhan, personal communication, 14 March 2012).

Alfarhan was then held in a cell where he was not allowed to make any decisions, but had to seek permission from his guards whenever he wanted to turn the light on or off and each time that he needed to go to the toilet, for example. Alfarhan, who was the best known Saudi blogger and one of the few people in the country who would dare to criticize its high officials at that time, was now unable to do even the smallest thing for himself. Lacey (2009: 318) cites him as saying: “They left me in my cell for thirty two

days. I have to say that no one hurt me or threatened me, and that I got my three meals a day. But they played with my mind.”

Alfarhan’s arrest could either frighten other bloggers from criticizing the government or generate a backlash, according to AlOmrani (Saudi Jeans), who stated in the *Washington Post* (Ambah, 2008):

I think some people will be afraid now, especially those who use their real names – they will be more careful. A lot of bloggers will be intimidated. But it could also cause a backlash in the blogosphere, and spur bloggers to write even harsher criticisms.

As was expected, some bloggers stopped criticizing the Saudi government, while more tried to emulate Alfarhan by starting or continuing to do so. Alfarhan’s arrest and other similar moves have thus not in practice helped the Saudi authorities to impose their control over the media in the digital era. The Saudi gatekeeper is unable to guard multiple gates effectively; the sources of news are too numerous to be controlled as they were before. For instance, in March 2012 the Saudi Ministry of Information banned Saudi bookstores from distributing a new book by a religious leader, Salman Al-Oadah, called *Revaluation Questions*, which is then reported to have become the most widely read book in the country, precisely because of the attempt to suppress it. Soft copies were circulated and people who would not normally have been interested in its subject matter chose to read it because of its notoriety (IslamToday, 15 March 2012).

Some Saudi writers and bloggers appear to have placed a premium on being arrested or prevented from publishing, in order to gain publicity and exposure in the internet age. This has put more pressure on gatekeepers, who have become confused as to how to respond to the changing environment. They have approved some articles which anger the government and suppressed others. The Saudi media are going through a critical period of complete unfamiliarity. The confusion as to the application of gatekeeping rules has led many Saudi writers, journalists and bloggers to join Twitter, so that they can express themselves without concern as to whether their contributions will pass the gate or not and will cause their blogs to be blocked or not. Thus, Twitter has come at the right time for Saudis, but it brings along with it a number of new issues regarding publishing and censorship, which are discussed in the next section through the case of Hamza Kashgari.

### 3.5 Twitter gatekeeping

There are notable features of Twitter related to its effects among its users. Before discussing its relation with gatekeeping, this section begins by summarizing its major components and functions. Twitter is a microblogging service launched in 2006, which was originally developed for mobile phones and designed to let users post short (no more than 140 characters) text updates or ‘tweets’ to a network of others. Each entry typically consists of a phrase, a short comment, a picture, or links to videos or articles. Users can post such tweets on the Twitter website or send text messages directly from their mobile phones. Because Twitter enables real-time propagation of information to any number of users, the platform is a convenient environment for the dissemination of breaking news directly from the news source and/or from the geographical point of interest. The network structure is reasonably simple (Bastos, Raimundo and Travitzki, 2013; Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Suh et al, 2010).

Three important technical terms (*mention*, *retweet* and *hashtag*) are worth explaining. In addition to its typical usage, which is to post a short message to the public, a tweet is often used to converse with an individual or group. When a user wants to specify another user in a tweet, she/he can use the form of *mentioning* ‘@username’, which is subsequently parsed and translated into a clickable hyperlink to the mentioned user. A particular case of mentioning is the *retweet*. When a user finds an interesting tweet written by another Twitter user and wishes to share it with her/his followers, she/he can retweet the tweet by copying the message, typically adding a text indicator (e.g. RT, Via) followed by the user name of the original author in @username format (Suh et al, 2010). Finally, a *hashtag* is a word or phrase prefixed with the symbol #, which is a form of metadata tag. Any microblogger can use this symbol followed by any word in order to create a hashtag to identify a keyword or topic of interest and facilitate a search for it (Dictionary.com, 2010).

Twitter, which is partly owned by a Saudi billionaire, Prince Al Waleed Bin Talal Bin Abdul Aziz, has grown very rapidly in popularity in the past few years. According to a tweet by Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who is to head Al Waleed’s soon-to-be launched Alarab news channel, usage of Twitter in Saudi Arabia grew in 2011 at the ‘staggering’ rate of 600 per cent, which is highest growth rate worldwide (Abbas, 2012). This growth in popularity has happened in parallel with a change in demographic



profile, especially since first-generation users, who were generally tech-savvy early adapters and bloggers, are now being overtaken by influential members of mainstream society, such as Saudi royals, government officials, members of the clergy and celebrities from the fields of sport, entertainment and the media (Abbas, 2011).

Twitter's popularity in Saudi Arabia has led its users to compete with each other to win more followers and more fame. Prior to the emergence of Twitter there was no obvious mechanism in Saudi Arabia through which the popularity of a person could be measured. The country has a serious shortage of research centres in general, which led to a lack of facts and figures in many fields. Twitter has served to fill this gap in knowledge. A person's number of Twitter followers indicates how popular he or she is and increasing this number has become a priority for users in the country. Twitter users, sometimes referred to as 'tweeps', are willing to cross red lines and to provoke their own arrest by angering the authorities, just to gain more followers. Some tweeps have increased their following by buying followers from websites which offer them for sale, while others have tried to take advantage of the unprecedented atmosphere of freedom which twitter has created to break some restrictions.

Some Saudi microbloggers have gone beyond buying followers, by conducting contests through their accounts and tempting others to participate by announcing prizes of up to £5000. As a condition of entry, participants must follow the user who is conducting the competition and retweet the contest announcement. This method has helped many microbloggers to gain real followers, who demonstrate their loyalty by retweeting the post in order to gain the trust of the account holder and to stand a chance of winning the money. Below is a picture of tweets posted by a Saudi microblogger, Princess Aljawharh AlSaud. (For a translation, see appendix.)



@G\_ALSAUD 6hrs الجوهرة آل سعود ..

مافي تفاعل مره ، عموماً الي سوو ريتويت  
لهم مكافأه وهم عددهم 6 اشخاص ..  
ابتابعكم رقم الايبان والاسم ..مصرف  
الراجحي او الاهلي #والمسابقه تتأجل



@G\_ALSAUD 7hrs الجوهرة آل سعود ..

راح اسوي مسابقة ، والجائزة ثلاثين الف  
ريال وان شاء الله يفوز بها الشخص المحتاج ،  
نبداء المسابقة الساعة 2 #ريتويت  
#الراتب\_مايكفي\_الحاجة

Figure 3.2: Tweets posted by Princess Aljawharh Al Saud (8 August 2013)

The breaking of religious prohibitions on Twitter has given rise to the phenomenon of audience gatekeeping, which in terms of ascendancy and power can be said to have overtaken the role of the traditional gatekeeper. It plays a particularly powerful role in Saudi Twitter today, indicating strongly that microblogging will not put an end to gatekeeping but revive it. A recent example of the influence of the audience gatekeeping is the case of Hamza Kashgari, a Saudi microblogger aged 23 years who caused controversy when he posted a sequence of tweets on the birthday of Prophet Mohammad on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> February 2012. In these tweets, Kashgari imagined a conversation with the Prophet in which he treated him as an equal, stating that while he admired many of the Prophet's characteristics there were also others that he hated. The following are three of these messages, cited by Giglio (2012):

On your birthday, I will say that I have loved the rebel in you, that you've always been a source of inspiration to me, and that I do not like the halos of divinity around you. I shall not pray for you.

On your birthday, I find you wherever I turn. I will say that I have loved aspects of you, hated others, and could not understand many more.

On your birthday, I shall not bow to you. I shall not kiss your hand. Rather, I shall shake it as equals do, and smile at you as you smile at me. I shall speak to you as a friend, no more.

These words sparked anger not just among Saudi users but on the part of Muslims around the world, who posted nearly 30,000 tweets in reply in less than 24 hours. Many

microbloggers believed that Kashgari had insulted the Prophet by addressing him and speaking about him inappropriately. They accused him of blasphemy, atheism and apostasy. Many said he must be punished and some that he should be killed. Others went so far as to threaten to kill him themselves, or offered money for his head. Hundreds of users retweeted his address in Jeddah, using the Google map service to make it easy to find and kill him (Saudi Jeans, February 8, 2012).

Mohammad Al Areefi, a religious leader with more than five million followers, more than any other Saudi Twitter user, asked the Minister of Information, Abdulaziz Khoja, to do something about Kashgari's tweets. Within hours, Khoja responded by tweeting: "I have instructed all newspapers and magazines in the Kingdom not to allow him to write anything and we will take legal measures against him" (Khoja, 6 February 2012a). In another tweet he wrote: "I cried and was angry because someone insulted Prophet Mohammad, especially because he is from the land of the two Holy mosques" (Khoja, February 6, 2012b). Another religious leader, Nasser Alomar, posted an influential video on YouTube which was viewed more than 150,000 times, in which he wept for one minute and 14 seconds because he could not bear to see the Prophet insulted. His video was circulated rapidly and fuelled popular anger against Kashgari. One viewer commented on YouTube in response to the video: "If Kashgari didn't receive an accusation he will be dead" (Saudi Jeans, 8 February 2012).

Before this, on February 6<sup>th</sup>, in response to public pressure, Kashgari had already deleted the controversial tweets and published an apology, saying that he had sinned and that he had now repented. He explained that what he had written earlier was "feelings I erred in describing and writing, and that I ask God for forgiveness, but they don't really represent my belief in the Prophet" (Saudi Jeans, 8 February 2012; Why evolution is true, 8 February 2012).

The Kashgari scandal led many Saudi Twitter users to delete some of their tweets, while others had gone so far as to close their Twitter accounts, fearing that they would meet the same fate as Kashgari. *Saudi Now*, an e-newspaper, reported that a young Saudi writer named Ayman Al Jaafary had closed his Twitter account after Kashgari's controversial tweets and that Kashgari himself had admitted that some of his friends had deactivated their Twitter accounts for fear of the potential threat to their lives. Al

Jaafary, who had approximately 11,000 followers, was one of many Saudis who left Twitter or changed their way of tweeting after the Kashgari affair (Saudi Now, 7 February 2012, Giglio, 2012).

In fact, the series of events involving Kashgari by no means ended with his apology of 6 February. He fled to Malaysia via Jordan and surprised the public with an interview in the *Daily Beast* which was interpreted as meaning that his apology had not been sincere and that he had made it solely to gain time so that he could escape. He stated in this interview:

I view my actions as part of a process toward freedom. I was demanding my right to practice the most basic human rights—freedom of expression and thought—so nothing was done in vain. I believe I’m just a scapegoat for a larger conflict. There are a lot of people like me in Saudi Arabia who are fighting for their rights (Giglio, 2012).

The interview upset many Saudis, more than 10,000 of whom joined a Facebook group called “The Saudi People Demand the Execution of Hamza Kashgari”. This put more pressure on the Saudi government, which contacted Interpol and the Malaysian government. Kashgari was arrested and returned to Saudi Arabia, where he is serving a prison sentence (Kazi, 17 February 2012).

Asma Qadah, a Malaysian blogger who sheltered Kashgari in Malaysia for a few days while he was seeking asylum in New Zealand, has claimed in an email interview with the researcher that both the apology and the interview were misunderstood. She states:

The thing is, he regretted the way he misused those words but not writing what he believes and his freedom of speech. I was the translator of English interviews because Hamza was barely able to explain his situation, although he understood what I translated in simple English and those reporters knew a few words of Arabic (formal Arabic, not slang). I was trying to avoid the media’s eyes and drive them away from Hamza’s location that time for his own safety after the Saudi King requested Hamza’s arrest and return to Saudi. Our plan was to request asylum either from New Zealand, Canada or a European country like the Netherlands. After the Saudi king ordered him to be arrested in any country, we all knew that his life was in danger and that he might be executed, so political asylum was part of protecting his life (Qadah, March 10, 2012).

In her interview, Qadah reports having received many threats from Arab tweeps in response to her tweets about Kashgari. She considers that she cannot write what she believes on Twitter because the self-gatekeeper does not allow her to write what she wants: “It’s not possible to write what I would like to write, especially with the way the public and scholars deal with these matters.”

Jamal Khashoggi, former editor-in-chief of a Saudi newspaper, *Alwatan*, argues that the microblogger suffers the same restrictions as the print journalist and sometimes more:

I know a particular religious leader who was quiet during the Kashgari crisis because he was afraid of losing followers if he had written something which did not correspond to the opinion of the majority, who were angry at Kashgari and didn’t want any soft talk about the case, but punishment (Email interview, 4 March 2012).

People in Saudi Arabia apply the gatekeeping principle in their daily lives, particularly when they write publicly. Many listen to music, but very rarely do people disclose this passion freely, to avoid the anger of a society which likes to hide its desires and to follow them behind closed doors (as discussed more fully in section 3.6). Hence, it is difficult to take what Saudis write at face value. This is why the researcher chose to observe and interview journalists and bloggers, to learn more about the ways in which their opinions pass through different channels prior to being declared publicly, so that the final product does not reflect what they truly believe. Journalism is a processed product, like canned food: it does not have the authentic taste of the ‘real thing’. Saudi journalists, including the researcher himself, are victims of longstanding practices which not only make them unable to deliver reality, but also make them prevent others from doing so. Most have become gatekeepers of themselves and of others as well; Kashgari is an obvious example.

Alabtah (2002) believes that censorship has moved into Saudi people’s heads, having become part of their lives over the past decades, so that if they do not find a gatekeeper they will become one. She argues that the government gatekeepers have successfully made a gatekeeper of every citizen by means of the intensive censorship which has disrupted their minds and thoughts, so that all Saudis have become gatekeepers.

Notwithstanding any such individual self-gatekeeping, the challenge to religious taboo of Kashgari's tweets spread beyond Saudi Arabia. A Kuwaiti microblogger, Hamad Al-Naqi, followed Kashgari's lead by tweeting about the prophet Mohammed on 27 March 2012. The next day, the Kuwaiti police arrested Al-Naqi and charged him with insulting the Prophet. Initial reports in the *Kuwaiti Times* e-newspaper stated that he had denied posting disparaging remarks, claiming that his Twitter account had been hacked for some time; later, however, Al Naqi admitted that he had posted the disparaging tweets and that his account had not been hacked. His family is reported to have issued a statement in which they distanced themselves from his actions (Kuwait Times, 28 March 2012).

Another Twitter user in Saudi Arabia was recently accused of offending Islam and its Prophet Mohammed in remarks on his Twitter page, making him the second Twitter user to be charged with apostasy in Saudi Arabia within four months. Hundreds of Twitter users had demanded the arrest of Mohammed Salama on apostasy charges, after he posted that he had once tried to commit suicide because he doubted the Koran. The *Sabq* e-newspaper described him as having followed the same path as Hamza Kashgari, stating that religious leaders had blamed the Information Ministry for what was happening by giving people the chance to read and write things that had been banned for ages (sabq.org, 6 March 2012).

In response to public pressure following the Kashgari case, the Saudi Ministry of Information announced initiatives to monitor Saudi Twitter users for tweets offending against Islam (Alwatan, 25 March 2012). This reflects the fact that the mass gatekeeper is more powerful than the traditional gatekeeper, whose role focused on selecting and circulating the news, while the masses force individuals to write what the public wants and to avoid what may upset them. Since Kashgari's controversial postings, the Saudi authorities have blocked the accounts of many Twitter users in the country. Indeed, even some Saudi writers have demanded that Saudi contributions to microblogs and other social media websites be controlled. Saleh Alshehi, in his daily column in *Alwatan*, has called on the Saudi authorities to monitor these websites: "If left uncensored, they will become tools of destruction" (Alshehi, 31 March 2012).

The above discussion of Twitter gatekeeping is consistent with the finding of Bastos, Raimundo and Travitzki (2013: 261) that “gatekeeping remained an important concept for research about digital networks, and it continued to rely on the principle of a bottleneck of interconnections that determines the flow of information”. It is very clear that gatekeeping is powerful in microblogging sites, because everybody is subject to a set of communication routines as guidelines for their Twitter posts, providing evidence to confirm that this platform is loaded with restrictions and censorship, heavily affecting the messages that pass through it. The use of Twitter by Saudis has special characteristics that will be considered in the next section, which completes the discussion of Twitter gatekeeping.

### **3.6 Saudis on Twitter**

Twitter grants its users considerable freedom to express and share their thoughts, especially in non-democratic countries such Saudi Arabia. Users at first rushed to speak their minds and criticize the government, society, religious and cultural traditions, enjoying the experience of free speech after years when few platforms were open for them to contribute their views. Gradually, however, this freedom turned into a prison of the mind, heavily fortified with gates. The greater the number of followers, the more control is applied to the microblogger, who will find him/herself subject to many gatekeeping restrictions when posting tweets. This section examines some of these restrictions.

One of the major challenges facing Saudi microbloggers is to overcome the social guardianship which prevents citizens from freely expressing themselves in writing. They therefore tend to hide their true feelings and avoid publishing anything which would upset the social norms. In the early years of Twitter, from 2006 to 2008, the only Saudis who participated were those interested in the technology, because the website did not support Arabic; it was only later, when people from all segments of society were able to participate, that the social pressure began. The open gate closed as users’ families took an interest in what they were writing and thinking. For instance, Saudi society is intolerant of people who publicly admit to listening to music, because music is forbidden, according to many religious hadiths (e.g. Bukhari, Volume 7, Book 69,

Number 494v). Therefore, while many Saudis listen to music covertly, they do not want to upset their relatives and society at large by declaring their liking for it publicly.

This is an illustration of a widespread form of restriction in the country, which can be designated ‘social gatekeeping’. This will be discussed in chapters 6 and 7 in relation to women’s issues and to patriarchy, both of which reflect the significance in Saudi Arabia of social gatekeeping in relation to digital communication in general and Twitter in particular. Indeed, evidence will be presented of its effect on media production of all kinds, indicating that Saudi society will impose some form of gatekeeping on all media production, whether by traditional means or modern ones, because social pressure will be there as a gatekeeper to prevent Saudis from freely publishing their thoughts.

A good indication of how Saudis utilize microblogging is given by list of tweets most often retweeted in Saudi Arabia in 2012-2013, reproduced in Figure 3.3. It shows that 18 of the 25 tweets most often retweeted were posted by religious users, while 20 of the 25 had religious messages, indicating that religion is a crucial gatekeeping factor in Twitter use among Saudis. The list confirms that Saudi users do not hesitate to retweet any tweet having a religious message, while thinking carefully before retweeting anything else, which is a reflection of broader societal influences on Saudi microbloggers. There is further discussion of religious gatekeeping in chapters 5 and 6, with evidence of its contribution to contemporary gatekeeping.




**Faisal Almaghlooth**  
@f9oo

Follow @f9oo

25

6,333  
Retweets

4,136,363  
Potential impressions

344,697  
Effective Reach

ارادوا تكريم الملاك محمد علي بوضع نجمة له برصيف المشاهير واشترط بوضعها على الحائط ومبررا: اسم محمد لا يوطأ عليه ولا يدنس

<http://t.co/JVGsdf07>

2012-07-20 19:07:57


**عبدالعزیز الطریفی**  
@abdulaziztarefe

Follow @abdulaziztarefe

24

6,415  
Retweets

7,259,423  
Potential impressions

604,952  
Effective Reach

الجنادرية تمثل التراث (بالمباني والأواني) وأما (المعاني) كالاختلاط والرقص والموسيقى والسفور فهذا تراث الغرب لا تراث العرب ولا المسلمين

2013-04-11 21:02:36


**عبدالعزیز الطریفی**  
@abdulaziztarefe

Follow @abdulaziztarefe

23

6,472  
Retweets

2,315,391  
Potential impressions

192,949  
Effective Reach

نشأ (فصل الدين عن السياسة) في الغرب لأن دينهم فاسد وسيُفسد السياسة. ونشأ الفصل في الشرق لأن المياسي فاسد والدين يُفسد عليه مياسته

2013-07-03 20:08:10


**Fahad Albutairi**  
@fahad

Follow @fahad

22

6,644  
Retweets

2,680,571  
Potential impressions

223,381  
Effective Reach

خالد الفيصل: "على هذه الأرض معجزة اسمها الإنسان السعودي" .. هو من ناحية معجزة

<http://t.co/7OZRv0d> معجزة، ما في دولة ما هو موجود فيها

2012-10-31 13:04:51


**faisal bin turki**  
@faisalbinturki1

Follow @faisalbinturki1

21

6,997  
Retweets

68,920  
Potential impressions

5,743  
Effective Reach

وافقت إدارة نادي الاتفاق الشقيق رسميا على عرض نادي النصر لشراء المدة المتبقية من عقد اللاعب يحيى الشهري

2013-05-30 17:48:33


**علي الظفيري**  
@AlAldafiri

Follow @AlAldafiri

20

7,108  
Retweets

2,451,820  
Potential impressions

204,318  
Effective Reach

اتضح الصورة جيدا، الاسلاميون -بكل عيوبهم- هم التيار الوحيد الذي يقبل بالنظام الديمقراطي، فيما تنحصر خيارات الآخرين بين الاستبداد والعسكر

2013-07-04 10:22:13


**أ.د. ناصر العمر**  
@naserelomar

Follow @naserelomar

19

7,158  
Retweets

2,781,703  
Potential impressions

231,809  
Effective Reach

لو كان الاحتفال باليوم الوطني حلالا لوجب تحريمه لما يصاحبه من مقاصد شرعية ( واجتماعية وأمنية ، فكيف وهو محرم ! ) ظلمات بعضها فوق بعض

2012-09-23 19:53:38



الوليد بن طلال  
@Alwaleed\_Talal

Follow @Alwaleed\_Talal

7,346  
Retweets

4,138,010  
Potential Impressions

344,834  
Effective Reach

18

أثناء جولتي بمركز المملكة <http://t.co/ctZBo802Ue>....

2013-04-29 06:59:04



توفيق الربيعية  
@tfrabiah

Follow @tfrabiah

8,528  
Retweets


4,870,971  
Potential Impressions

405,914  
Effective Reach

17

يمنع استخدام عبارة "البضاعة المباعة لا ترد ولا تستبدل" من بداية شهر محرم

2012-11-07 07:54:22



د. عمر المقل  
@dr\_almuqbil

Follow @dr\_almuqbil

9,214  
Retweets

46,100,637  
Potential Impressions

3,841,720  
Effective Reach

16

انفجار الرياض أيقظ نصف سكان الرياض وأرعب القرييين منه، فكيف "إذا رجّت# الأرض رجاً؟ أم كيف سيكون الحال "يوم ترجف الراجفة تتبعها الرادفة"؟

2012-11-01 09:51:27



نواف التميمي  
@alterryat

Follow @alterryat

9,485  
Retweets


6,445,791  
Potential Impressions

537,149  
Effective Reach

15

لمن أطلق اشاعه وفاتي أنت سبب مرض والدتي حفظها الله .. حسبي الله ونعم الوكيل .. لا .. تعلق فأتنا ساموت يوماً ما أن كان يهلك ..

2012-10-18 11:52:03



أ.د. ناصر العمر  
@naseralomar

Follow @naseralomar

10,899  
Retweets


4,120,617  
Potential Impressions

343,385  
Effective Reach

14

قيل لشاب: أسجد لبشار، فرفض، فعذب شديداً فقبل له: لماذا لم تسجد وأنت مكره؟ قال: لم أكن أصلي، فاستحييت من ربي أن تكون أول سجد لبشار؟ فأصبح مؤذن السجن

2012-04-01 21:27:45



د. عائض القرني  
@Dr\_alqarnee

Follow @Dr\_alqarnee

11,642  
Retweets

4,103,357  
Potential Impressions

341,946  
Effective Reach

13

إنا لله وإنا إليه راجعون، توفي والدي الليلة عن عمر ناهز 78 عاماً وسوف يُصلى عليه غداً في المسجد الحرام بعد صلاة الجمعة، غفر الله له ولجميع المسلمين

2012-10-04 21:02:19



سلمان العودة  
@salman\_alodah

Follow @salman\_alodah

11,866  
Retweets

9,762,362  
Potential Impressions

813,530  
Effective Reach

12

الراتب\_مايكفي\_الحاجة\_الأسعار\_نار\_ونصف\_الراتب\_تسديد\_ديون\_..\_الأقربون\_أولى\_#\_بالمعروف\_..

2013-07-20 00:22:26



**د. محمد العريفي**  
@MohamadAlarefe



**13,280**  
Retweets

**5,462,281**  
Potential Impressions

**455,190**  
Effective Reach

**11**

الشباب عند الإشارة، يوزعون كيساً فيه هذه المحتويات، إفطار لعابري السبيل، ما أحسنهم

<http://t.co/LRQWYVt3vv>

2013-07-22 15:45:25



**د. محمد العريفي**  
@MohamadAlarefe



**13,465**  
Retweets

**11,508,767**  
Potential Impressions

**959,064**  
Effective Reach

**10**

جبن كرافت، شاي ليبتون، شامبو بانيتين، حلويات mbc بدأت #مقاطعة\_المعلنين في mbc جالاكسي، قسماً لا تدخل بيتي، حتى توقف إعلانها بقناة الفساد

2012-12-25 14:15:34



**أحمد الشقيري**  
@shugairi



**14,297**  
Retweets

**2,586,844**  
Potential Impressions

**215,570**  
Effective Reach

**9**

اغضب للرسول ولكن بأخلاق الرسول ! ##إلا رسول الله

2012-09-13 11:37:15



**عبدالعزيز الطريفي**  
@abdulaziztarefe



**14,304**  
Retweets

**10,480,891**  
Potential Impressions

**873,408**  
Effective Reach

**8**

أعظم ما يُزكي النفوس كثرة ذكر الله مع كثرة الصلاة . (قد أفلح من تزكى وذكر اسم ربه (فصلی)

2013-05-24 11:27:53



**أحمد الشقيري**  
@shugairi



**17,276**  
Retweets

**5,634,091**  
Potential Impressions

**469,508**  
Effective Reach

**7**

لم أتمنى أن تنتشر حلقة لخواطر بقدر أمنيته أن يرى حلقة اليوم أكبر عند ممكن أنشروها ولا تفرقوا! #http://t.co/htSTeSnGxG لو سمحتم

2013-07-12 23:38:25



**سلمان العودة**  
@salman\_alodah



**18,978**  
Retweets

**10,179,720**  
Potential Impressions

**848,310**  
Effective Reach

**6**

الحمد لله تم الإفراج عن الصديقين محمد العريفي ومحسن العواجي قبل ساعة

2013-07-22 00:49:36

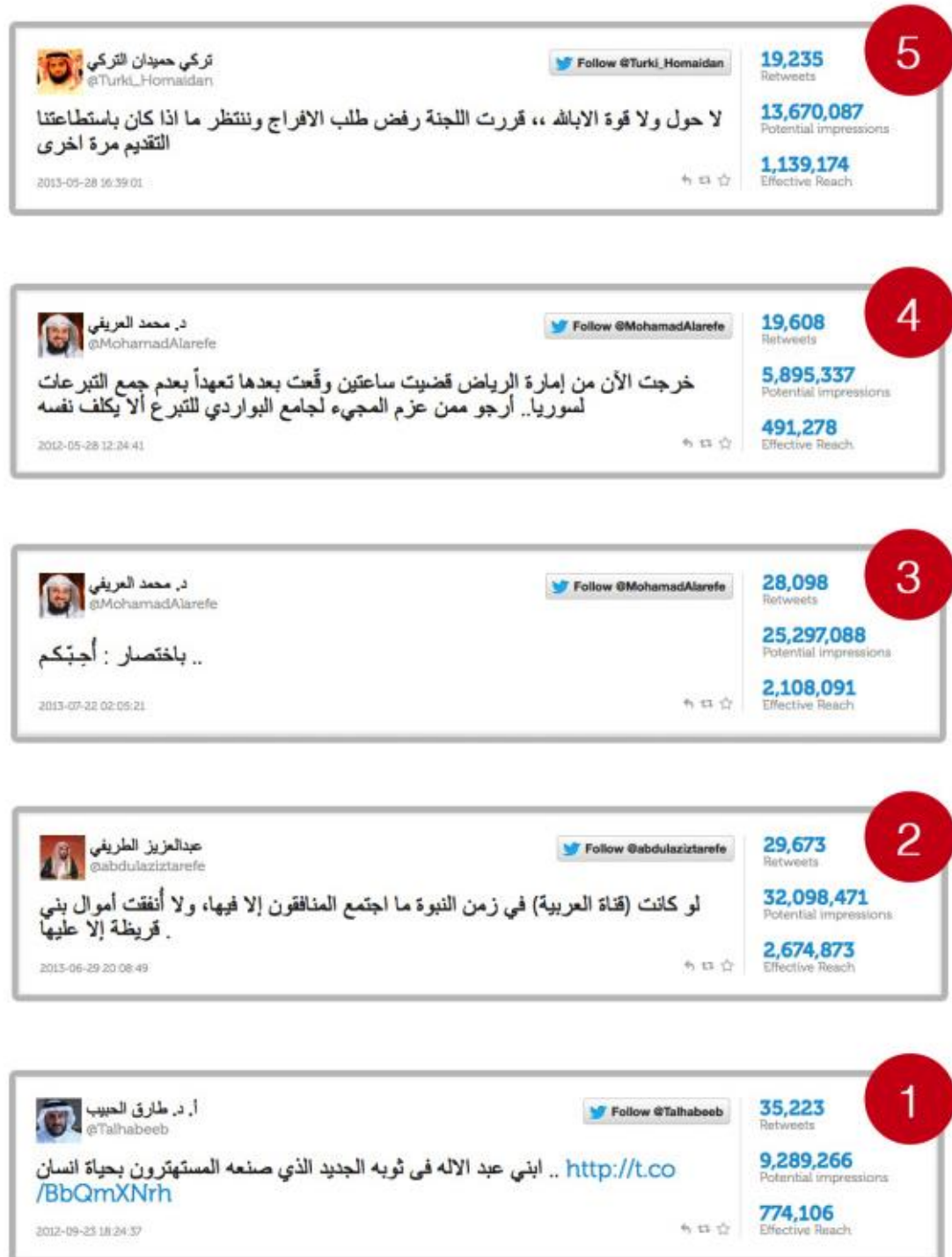


Figure 3.3: Most retweeted Saudi tweets, 2012-July 2013 (FNAsocial, 23 July 2013)

Another common method of gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia is for a senior official of a government department which disapproves of the output of a particular microblogger to follow him or her on Twitter. The aim is to embarrass the microblogger and thus to affect his or her production. Saad Almuhanha, a Saudi microblogger, said in interview:

“I criticized the Ministry of Higher Education through my twitter account. I posted stories about its corruption, but I stopped tweeting because an undersecretary at the ministry started to follow me. I felt embarrassed and did not want to hurt his feelings by criticizing the sector he works for. It’s kind of screaming in his face” (personal interview, 15 September 2013). This technique, which is widespread in Saudi Twitter usage, illustrates the strenuous efforts made by the government to stop Twitter users from publishing criticism of it. The underlying principle can be said to apply to people anywhere in the world, in the sense that many microbloggers would be hesitant to criticize their bosses or family members if they followed them on Twitter, because of the embarrassment that this would cause.

### **3.7 The power of Twitter and its limits**

Meanwhile, despite the restrictions imposed by the various forms of gatekeeping discussed above, the spread of Twitter has led to an unprecedented level of criticism of the Saudi government. The microblogging website has become a platform from which to criticise the government and its servants. Twitter has allowed Saudis to enjoy a freedom of expression and speech which they had never before experienced. People openly mock that period from the 1940s to the end of the century and even into the new millennium when they were unable to criticize the tea boy in the office of a government minister. Critics of authority are now able to go much further, by hashtagging (i.e. naming in a microblogging campaign, using hashtags) any minister who makes a statement they dislike or who does something which does not match their ambitions. The citizens of the Arabian Peninsula are now able to end the career of a figure of authority, as when Saudi Twitter users started an online campaign by hashtag against the Saudi ambassador to Cairo, Hisham Nazer, for indifference towards a Saudi woman at Cairo Airport during the evacuation following the political unrest that swept Egypt recently. This campaign resulted in the recall of the ambassador and encouraged many campaigns to suspend more Saudi political appointees (Alarabiya, 2011; Saad, 2011).

But it seems that the Saudi honeymoon with Twitter may end very soon, as the Saudi cabinet has issued a formal letter to the ministries which was published by an e-newspaper, *Alweeam*, in April 2012, warning civil servants not to criticize the government on the internet or to sign any petitions addressed to the king. Such open

letters, calling for reforms to the Saudi system and laws, have increased in number recently, thanks to the growth of Twitter, which makes it relatively easy to collect signatures and build support. The letter from the cabinet states that any government employee who criticizes any public body or high official will be dismissed immediately. According to *Alweeam* (3 April 2012), the letter urges the security authorities to censor Twitter and other internet platforms and to inform the authorities whenever any employee fails to comply with the new restrictions, so that he can be punished. This has made many Twitter users afraid to post any criticism of the government and means that Twitter is effectively just like any other media outlet subject to censorship by the Saudi government, which controls which messages go through and which do not.

Microblogging is thus far from being free of gatekeeping; if a tweet passes the self-gatekeeper this does not mean that it will pass the external gatekeeper, who will be monitoring any suspicious tweets. There are no free platforms. If anyone writes something, whether in print or on Twitter, he/she will be accountable for it. This assessment applies not merely to Saudi Arabia, but to other cultures and jurisdictions, including those of the UK and the USA, as the following examples illustrate.

On 17 March 2012, Liam Stacey, a 21-year-old undergraduate student of biology at Swansea University, was jailed for 56 days for posting offensive comments on Twitter about the on-pitch collapse of Bolton Wanderers footballer Fabrice Muamba. Stacey, who admitted incitement to racial hatred, was arrested after his tweets were reported to police by Twitter users from across Britain, including the former England striker Stan Collymore. The court heard that Stacey tried to claim that his Twitter account had been hacked, that he had tried to delete his page and then that he was drunk at the time (Morris, 2012).

Another UK Twitter user who was arrested was Leigh Van Bryan, 26, who was handcuffed and kept under armed guard in a cell with drug dealers for 12 hours after landing in the USA, because he had posted the following tweet on 16 January 2012: “Free this week, for quick gossip/prep before I go and destroy America?” Bryan told US security officials that ‘destroy’ is slang for ‘party’ in the UK, but they were unconvinced, confiscated his passport and held him on suspicion of planning to commit

crimes. The Department of Homeland Security is said to be scanning Twitter for ‘sensitive’ words and tracking the people who use them (Hartley-Parkinson, 2012).

Twitter itself is reported to have implemented a system that would let it withhold particular tweets from specific countries. The company has insisted that it will not use this “gagging system in a blanket fashion, but would apply it on a case-by-case basis, as already happens when governments or organisations complain about individual tweets”. Nonetheless, there has been a storm of criticism from Twitter users all over the world, complaining that their freedom of speech is gradually being taken from them, in contrast to Twitter’s reputation for giving its users an unparalleled service (Borger and Arthur, 2012).

If the written media of communication in Saudi Arabia differ in covering stories, they agree to a large extent on preventing the publishing of material on specific topics including religion and tribalism. Social factors are very influential in news selection among traditional and electronic newspapers as well as bloggers. For example, tribalism plays a significant role in Saudi society and this in turn influences the press. Al Shebeili (2000) claims that newspapers normally deal with Bedouin family origins and tribes with great caution, to avoid any possible conflicts between the paper and tribal groups; the same argument can be applied to e-newspapers and blogs. Many Saudi newspapers have turned a blind eye to tribal disputes, to stay on the safe side. The researcher has personally witnessed more than one case regarding intertribal issues where the editor killed the idea of reporting the events. The subject of tribes is taboo not just in traditional newspapers, but even in blogs and microblogs.

### **3.8 The growing impact of gatekeeping in the digital era**

In brief, the gatekeeping role in traditional and electronic newspapers, blogs and microblogging in Saudi Arabia is worth studying to realize how it works in different gates, to understand its development in the media environment and to contribute to re-theorizing the concept. It is debatable whether the internet has undermined the power of Saudi gatekeepers; the reality is that they are determined to maintain their dominance and control of information in the digital era. Google co-founder Sergey Brin has expressed concern about the efforts of gatekeepers in a few countries including Saudi



Arabia to control and monitor online information: “I am most concerned by the efforts of countries such as China, Saudi Arabia and Iran to censor and restrict use of the internet” (Katz, 2012).

Bui (2010) claims that the internet has brought with it its own gatekeeper: the search engine is a contemporary gatekeeper which achieves the significant task of guiding readers to particular sites. Bui refers to “information discrimination or ‘search engine bias’, which means the unequal treatment of websites and web pages in such a way that makes some websites more readily within reach of information seekers than others”.

Other scholars deem the internet to have strengthened gatekeeping because it gives more reliability to the mainstream media, which filter their news through the traditional gatekeeping elements. McChesney (2001) argued at the turn of the millennium that mainstream media had the competence to control internet gatekeepers via overwhelming advantages such as resources, audience and credibility. With the flourishing of the new media, however, the news audience is no longer powerless and professional journalists are no longer the only gatekeepers who can create the news. Dibeau and Garrison (2005) argue that the gatekeeping role is losing its hegemony because of the entry of new media players. Thus, the internet can be said to have weakened traditional gatekeeping. Its power has moved to several producers who have more effective roles; power has passed into the hands of the many, not the few as it was before (Boczkowski, 2004; Harper, 1996; Hume, 1999). Roberts (2005: 2) agrees that “the internet has turned solid ‘gates’ into little more than screen doors”.

Hypertext and readers’ comments have enabled bloggers and readers in general to produce their own news, which can be more powerful than the traditional material we used to receive. Many popular contemporary stories have been generated by non-professional journalists. Nowadays, readers are viewed more as collaborators than as consumers (Huesca & Dervin, 2003).

Online journalism has the potential to change the way an audience learns about and processes the news. Users can customize or personalize news from original and alternative sources at their convenience in ways not possible with other media. They can exercise more control over the news they read and can select from a virtually unlimited number of news sites. With new communication modalities and convergence, the



personalized nature of online journalism potentially offers audiences a view of the world that is much more contextualized, textured and multidimensional, especially when compared to the stories told about the world by traditional media (Pavlik, 2001: 22).

The present study argues that the widespread use of technology in journalism is reflected in a significant change to the process of contemporary news creation and circulation, whose effect is to multiply the number of gatekeepers. The gatekeepers once simply comprised editors and officials, but now they are far more numerous, often unseen and complex in their interactions. The study explores the impact and roles of the new gatekeepers, using observations and interviews to gather evidence that the extent and complexity of gatekeeping have increased in the internet era.

### **3.9 Gatewatching: an alternative model**

Bruns (2005) argues that it is impossible for traditional gatekeeping to survive with contemporary journalism in an open medium like the internet. He adapts the idea of multiperspectival news reporting, which was initiated in the 1970s by Herbert Gans, to derive a new concept. The individual user submission appears to be in decline, according to Bruns, requiring a new model to replace one of the longstanding mass communication models, gatekeeping. This new model, which he names ‘gatewatching’ or ‘collaborative online news production’, has as its elements new tools introduced by the internet, such as the comments of readers, discussion and blogging. Bruns claims that gatewatching acts as an umbrella over news websites today. Gatewatching sites compile reports and usually allow all of their users to submit material as well as to comment on stories, so that no particular individual can monopolise the production of news.

Bruns (2005: 34) describes the collaborative, open-source news production model enabled by the new media and the process adopted by news ‘producers’ (a term coined by combining ‘producer’ and ‘user’) to “publicize news (by pointing to sources) rather than publish it (by compiling an apparently complete report from the available sources)” in the online environment and to overthrow the ‘gate’. Most would rather watch the gate and push it quietly and gently. According to Rettberg (2008), bloggers not only watch the gate but also pounce on it when mainstream media slips up. Gatewatching thus

describes a “feedback loop between blogs and mainstream media, where the bloggers use existing news stories to break news, which then in turn is reported on by the mainstream media” (Rettberg, 2008: 106).

The following is an example of gatewatching presented by a Chinese blogger and journalist who utilized the internet to produce material which has received widespread attention from the public and the government, despite strong initial resistance. Sun Chunlong, a blogger and investigative journalist with *Oriental Outlook Weekly* based in Beijing, exposed in his blog a scandal in relation to a landslide in Loufan County, Shanxi Province, in 2008. Like most bloggers, Sun had used his blog as a journal to record events in his personal life and to publish news reports he wrote for *Oriental Outlook Weekly*, but when he published an open letter to the acting governor of Shanxi Province in his blog on 14 September 2008, his life turned upside down. His letter accused the government of publishing falsehoods about the Loufan landslide. Officials in Shanxi Province had reported on 1 August 2008 that a natural landslide at a mining site had killed 11 people, but Sun, a native of Shanxi, heard something quite different, which encouraged him to search for the truth (Yu, 2011).

Sun had to disguise himself to pass the checkpoints on the way to the scene of the accident and to maintain his disguise throughout the interviews he conducted, as the local government tried to block all media access to the scene or to survivors of the accident. Sun successfully collected accurate evidence, including pictures to support the information he had uncovered (Yu, 2011). He discovered that the landslide had not been a natural disaster, as the officials maintained, but an accident “which was the result of irresponsibility” and which buried 41 rather than 11 people. Sun tried his best to publish his findings in print newspapers and other Chinese media outlets, but the gatekeepers would not allow his story to pass through their channels, so he published it in his blog, where it was read by thousands of Chinese. “They first expressed shock, then anger and admiration. Shock at the severity of the case and at the audacity of local officials in Loufan to cover up the case, anger at the money-power alliance preventing media exposure, and admiration of Sun” (Yu, 2011: 384). This story would not have been published in the same scenario if there had been no gatewatching, because this new concept makes it possible for journalists to produce a story if the traditional gatekeepers refuse to publish it.

### **3.10 Why gatewatching cannot replace gatekeeping**

There is no doubt that gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia is losing some of its immense power in the digital era, but it can still be considered the engine of Saudi news creation and circulation, whereas gatewatching is still passive, imaginary and difficult to implement on the ground, due to the absence of many major features, discussed below.

Bruns's fundamental hypothesis is that mainstream "industrial" journalism, which depends on the gatekeeping model, is outmoded, a dinosaur that needs to reinvent itself in order to remain relevant. Bruns (2005; 2008) argues that gatewatching is the solution and would ideally supplant gatekeeping; this analysis can be firmly rejected, because the gatewatching model has many weaknesses which make it unsuitable as an alternative to gatekeeping at present. Essentially, Bruns offers a collection of other authors' opinions, criticizing gatekeeping and welcoming the open gate assumption, without a mechanism to explain how gatewatching would function in different media outlets, as is available for gatekeeping. Milberry (2006) claims that Bruns's theoretical grounding for gatewatching is weak and offers this detailed critique:

[Bruns] relies solely upon a book written by Herbert Gans in 1980, which proffers a multiperspectival model of the news, a two-tier system comprising mainstream and alternative news producers. The application of this model to a virtual environment is interesting, but it is a somewhat soft premise for an entire book. Bruns brings everything back to this (rather limited) model, flogging it relentlessly and, frankly, boring the reader at times. In fact, Bruns' over-reliance on other people's ideas is the key drawback of the book. It reads like a collection of quotes, with little evidence of an authorial voice (p. 772).

Beside the well-founded criticisms of gatewatching levelled by Milberry, there are other concerns regarding Bruns's study. He applies his hypothesis to Eastern and Western digital media forms but does not consider the Middle Eastern media, which has its own characteristics that ought to be addressed. The Saudi writer, Raja'a Alem (2011), differentiates between media environments as follows:

Westerners and easterners when they write express what they feel and touch, while Middle Eastern writers, and particularly Saudis, when we write, we think how our grandmothers will receive our ideas, how our tribes will react to them, then we don't write what we think and believe but what they want us to write.

Alem's account indicates that Saudis live in a different society and environment, which heavily affects the production of news. Another Saudi writer, Mohammed Al-Ali (2005), claims that "we are born with our own gatekeepers. It is hard to be free from them. They are our father, mother, and closed society."

Bruns also fails to cover the influence of individual background on decision-making in the gatewatching model, while its influence on media production is considerable, according to the gatekeeping model; Shoemaker and Rees (1996) and Craft and Wanta (2004) assert that the personal and political characteristics of journalists or bloggers influence media content and have significant power over decision-making in new creations. An earlier section of this chapter (3.5) highlighted the personal impact on blogging and microblogging of individuals, especially in the case of Hamza Kashgari, which confirms its importance for past studies and for this current study. This is a fundamental element of the analysis proposed by the present thesis, because of its heavy influence on news production today, which depends considerably on the contribution of individuals, given the importance of new electronic devices.

The above discussion allows two related conclusions to be drawn: first, that the gatewatching model is too weak to provide a reliable theoretical basis for the analysis of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia, and secondly, that gatekeeping remains a fundamental tenet of journalism studies and will continue to be so. In short, it is to be expected that gatekeeping will survive, rather than dying as Bruns suggests. The internet has empowered rather than weakened the gatekeeping model by introducing new vehicles. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) affirm that the online audience has become a new gatekeeper. The most popular articles appear on many websites, encouraging editors to focus on the same subject in the future and to ignore other stories that have received fewer clicks. The number of clicks guides both online editors and bloggers to select particular stories. Many subjects have been forgotten and not received the attention they deserve because they have not had the required number of clicks or hits, which eliminates them from the appropriate list of the editors.

The search engine has appeared as a gatekeeper in the online age. A study by Hargittai (2000) focuses on the new gatekeeping power of search engines maintained by web portal companies. Hargittai states: "These sites are 'portals' or initial locations for many

web surfers in their information seeking. This gives the web portal companies the power to choose which links are displayed to users when they seek information.” Another gatekeeper which is emerging in conjunction with the internet is rich site summary (RSS), a technology developed in 1997 to syndicate information between websites, according to Bruns (2005). RSS feeds act like virtual wire services, presenting all requested stories from a particular source to a reader. Large portal sites such as Google and Yahoo! have integrated customized RSS feeds into their presentation of information (Beam, 2007). This discussion allows the researcher to assert with confidence that the new technology has brought new gatekeepers into the industry. The data collected for the study, which will be discussed and analysed in detail in chapters 5, 6 and 7, will confirm that gatekeeping not only exists but is growing dramatically.

### **3.11 Summary**

This chapter has discussed the history of gatekeeping and its application in Saudi Arabia. It has also highlighted some criticisms of gatekeeping and its alternatives, particularly since the growth of the internet, which has forced gatekeeping to change some of its traditional elements. The later chapters will resume the examination of the traditional model and will discuss how the emergence of new elements requires modifications to the long-standing theory to make it more compatible with the new developments occurring as technology evolves. First, chapter 4 considers the design and methodology of the present study.

## **Chapter 4**

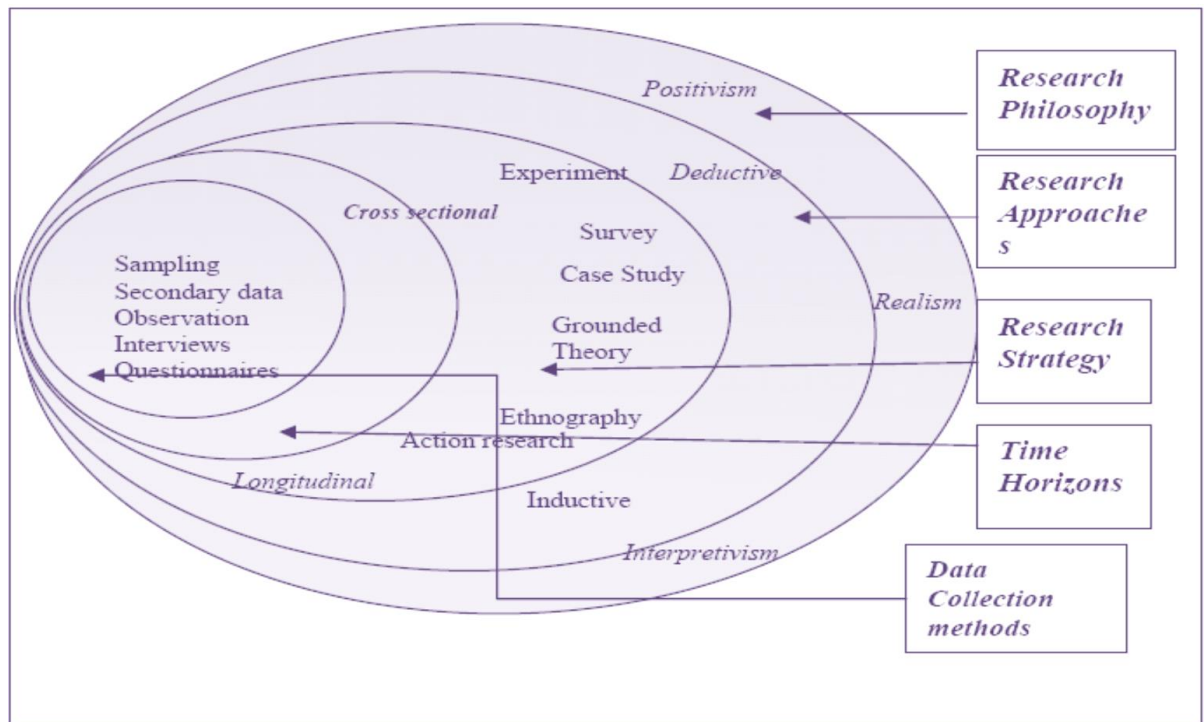
### **Study Design, Process and Methodology**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

The preceding chapters have provided a firm basis for the study by setting out the historical, theoretical and technical background to the phenomenon under examination. This chapter concentrates on the design and process of the research and the chosen methodology, including the methods of data collection and analysis. It begins by discussing the research philosophy, approach and strategy, identifying the particular qualitative methods selected as constituting the most appropriate approach and shedding light on the research questions and sampling methods. Having addressed the data collection and analysis procedures, it ends by considering ethical issues, codes and consent.

#### **4.2 Research process**

Saunders et al (2003) recommend the “Research Process Onion”, illustrated in Figure 3.1, as a framework to assist researchers in carrying out their studies appropriately and successfully at all levels. In essence, it divides the research structure into five layers, namely: philosophy, approach, strategy, time horizon and data collection techniques/procedures. This layered structure was found to be appropriate for deciding the selection of an appropriate strategy and set of tools for the present academic research, helping to choose among the various methodological options available. The following sections give details of the chosen methodology in relation to the onion. The chosen philosophy is interpretivism, the approach is inductive, the strategy is ethnography, the time horizon is longitudinal and the main data collection methods are observation and interviews.



**Figure 4.1:** The Research Process 'Onion'

Source: Saunders et al (2003: 83)

### 4.3 Research philosophy

There are different research philosophies available for conducting any research, each of which reflects a specific view of the research process and the way in which knowledge ought to be developed. Saunders et al (2007) suggest that research philosophy can take three different forms: positivism, interpretivism and realism. In the case of the positivist philosophy, the researcher is considered to be a wholly independent and highly objective analyst who merely interprets the collected data in a value-free way, focusing on the external social world, as the “key properties should be measured through objective methods, rather than being inferred subjectively through sensation, reflection or intuition” (Easterby-Smith et al, 1991: 22). In contrast, interpretivism, or the “phenomenology philosophy”, looks deeply into the details of any situation in order to understand the reality behind it and claims that the positivist approach to research is no longer valid in a constantly changing world, affecting e.g. business organizations and social sciences; however, it may be acceptable in some circumstances. Consequently, the researcher should consider the individual qualities of each subject’s experiences in terms of constructions and meanings (Easterby-Smith et al, 1991; Saunders et al, 2003). According to Saunders et al (2003), the third philosophy is realism, which combines

aspects of both positivism and interpretivism, based on the actual reality and entirely unrelated to an individual's beliefs and thoughts. In this respect, the research question is perceived to be the main determinant in choosing a suitable and effective approach to adopt.

There is thus a significant relationship between the nature of the research and the selected philosophy. Since the present study investigates the relevance of gatekeeping in contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia, the most appropriate philosophy is interpretivism, which explores the rationale behind a phenomenon, seeking to understand how it operates in different circumstances—in this case the contemporary media gates in the country—and how the emergence of new elements influences it. In contrast, positivism would be unable to provide the study with the required information, such as sensations, reflections or intuitions, whereas the cornerstone of this research is the interpretation of phenomena, emotions and body language in order to explain the motives and purposes behind decisions. This can be best done by means of observation, which will help the researcher to understand situations or positions in relation to the relevance of news creation and circulation in the media platforms which are the objects of study.

Denzin (1989: 10-11) argues that as a mode of qualitative research, interpretive interactionism attempts to make the world of lived experience directly accessible to the reader. It endeavours to capture the voices, emotions and actions of those studied. The focus of interpretive research is on those life experiences which radically alter and shape the meanings that persons give to themselves and their experiences. He further claims that the human disciplines and the applied social sciences have a mandate to clarify how interpretations and understanding are formulated, implanted and given meaning in problematic, lived situations. Ideally, this knowledge can also be used to evaluate programmes and processes that have been put in place to assist troubled persons and understand situations.

The interpretive philosophy behind qualitative research addresses the need to facilitate a fuller understanding of the phenomenon, context or culture being explored (Cooper, 1989; Dunkin, 1996), which the present study seeks to do. Interpretivists are concerned with understanding the social worlds people have produced and which they reproduce



by their continuing activities. This everyday reality consists of the meaning and interpretations given by social actors to their own and others' actions, to social situations and to natural and constructed objects. In short, in order to negotiate their way around their world and make sense of it, social actors have to interpret their activities collectively and it is these meanings, embedded in language, that constitute their social reality.

There are six steps which an interpretive study should follow (Denzin, 1989: 48):

- 1 Framing the research question;
- 2 Deconstruction and critical analysis of prior conceptions of the phenomenon;
- 3 Capturing the phenomenon, including locating and situating it in the natural world and obtaining multiple instances of it;
- 4 Bracketing the phenomenon, reducing it to essential elements and cutting it loose from the natural world so that its essential structures and features may be uncovered;
- 5 Construction, or putting the phenomenon back together in terms of its essential parts, pieces, and structures; and
- 6 Contextualization or relocating the phenomenon back in the natural social world.

Following Denzin's (1989) suggestions, the researcher based the research questions on personal experience, on observations made in newsrooms during his time as a journalist in Saudi Arabia and on interactions and discussions with experts in the field as a researcher. Prior to conducting this study, he undertook a critical analysis of the traditional gatekeeping concept (chapter 3), identifying weaknesses and strengths so that data collection could begin with appropriate knowledge of the theory and its influences on the media landscape today. The critical analysis provided the researcher with a new perspective which eventually helped to identify a significant new component of gatekeeping, making this an influential interpretive study.

As recommended by Denzin (1989), the researcher sought to capture a phenomenon, to define it and to link it to similar contexts. This was done by selecting the phenomenon of gatekeeping, defining its parameters and its position in the domestic Saudi context, then comparing this with wider international contexts, thus shedding light on the differences between them and strengthening the researcher's ability to criticize the current concept and to foresee potential solutions based on an analysis that had been

shaped by investigating the concepts in different cultures. The researcher then bracketed the phenomenon by noting the central ideas, drawing a mind map and brainstorming, thus dividing the phenomenon into smaller parts, which enabled more detailed information to be obtained and contributed to a rich and informative analysis that yielded specific results. This interpretive technique allowed the study to draw focused and significant findings. The bracketing technique benefited the subsequent construction stage by structuring the essential parts and providing themes within the results of the analysis.

The above interpretive process as a whole contributes to a contextualization of the phenomenon, yielding findings that clarify the phenomenon and its present position in the current situation, based on the evidence gathered by the researcher. More specifically, the present research adopts a thickly descriptive interpretivism, which is the art of description or giving an account of something in words. In interpretive studies, thick descriptions are deep, dense, detailed accounts of problematic experiences. These accounts often refer to the intentions and meanings that underlie an action. Thick description goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. It establishes the significance of an experience or the sequence of events for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard.

A thick description creates verisimilitude; truthlike statements that produce for readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described. Thick descriptions are valid experiential statements, if by valid or validity, is meant the ability to produce accounts that are sound and adequate and able to be confirmed and substantiated (Denzin, 1989: 83-84).

This interpretive description strengthens the data collecting process by focusing on crucial elements during the implementation, which establishes essential findings. The deep, solid, highly detailed features of the thick description employed within the interpretivist philosophy guided the observations of newspapers and microbloggers presented in the following chapters. The guidelines of Denzin (1989) provided a powerful way to understand the rationale and motivations behind many decisions made by gatekeepers, by recognizing their reactions, language and emotions. Identifying these

motives and drivers and linking them with the background of the persons and organizations being studied, as Denzin (1989) suggests, will allow the results of the study to contribute significantly to comprehending the relevance of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. Thick interpretive description has played the foremost role in obtaining data related to the development and features of new gatekeepers in the country. The approach set out by Denzin (1989) helped in linking historical events to contemporary realities, which facilitated the identification of motivating and causal factors behind the current production of news in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, if the study had not captured the motivations surrounding gatekeepers' decisions via such thickly descriptive and interpretive observation, it would not have been possible to obtain the results that were forthcoming in this way.

#### **4.4 Research approaches**

Thomas (2003) asserts that qualitative research typically takes an inductive approach to the relationship between theory and research, while Becker and Bryman (2009) explain that this entails generating concepts and theory out of data, in contrast to the deductive approach usually taken to quantitative research, in which concepts and theoretical ideas guide the collection of data. For Thomas (2003), the primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies. Key themes are often obscured, reframed or left invisible because of the preconceptions in the data collection and analysis procedures imposed by deductive reasoning, such as those used in experimental and hypothesis-testing research.

Marshall (1999) states that the inductive approach is intended to assist in gaining an understanding of the meaning of raw data. During the data analysis phase of the present research, it certainly helped to elucidate many procedures and the rationale behind them. It thus played a very influential role throughout the analysis process, making a crucial contribution to explaining the meanings of many actions and the reasons for them, via observations and interviews. This element granted the researcher the ability to explore different areas while developing the data analysis, linking each finding with appropriate subjects and identifying its role and importance in news creation and circulation and its relation to the gatekeeping function.

## 4.5 Research strategy

As to the research strategy, the study has adopted ethnography to support the researcher and to guide the project during the fieldwork, comprising both observation and interviews. Indeed, ethnography can be seen to have had a crucial function in exploring the subject and leading to influential results. Brewer (2000: 6) defines ethnography as “the study of people in naturally occurring settings or fields by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities”. The goal of this strategy is to collect data in such a way that the researcher imposes a minimal amount of his or her own bias on the data. Multiple methods of data collection may be engaged to facilitate a relationship that allows for a more personal and in-depth portrait of the informants and their community (ibid).

Silverman (1997: 9) distinguishes three strands of ethnography: “the discovery of other cultures that cannot be understood in the light of pre-existing knowledge (anthropological tradition), the contingency of continually negotiated human activities (interactionist tradition) and participant observation of how people handle the contingencies of a given situation (ethnomethodology)”. More generally, a common-sense understanding of ethnography is that it offers a descriptive account as if from the inside, allowing more reasoned judgments of motivation to be made, while Wolcott (1973) defines it as a qualitative research strategy which assists in finding the precise way to conduct the study.

It was important to employ an ethnographic strategy in the present research in order to ensure the effectiveness of observations and interviews in complex and dynamic environments, identifying the most appropriate techniques to use in the fieldwork and adopting the recommended relationship between the researcher and participants. The researcher therefore followed the interpretive guidelines and principles suggested by Altheide and Johnson (1994: 291), who recommend the identification of relationships “between what is observed (behavior, rituals, meanings) and the larger cultural, historical and organizational contexts within which the observations are made:

- The relationship between the participants and the setting or field:
- The issue of the perspective or point of view used to render an interpretation of ethnographic data, whether the observer’s or the members’.”

The recommendations of Altheide and Johnson (1994) and of Brewer (2000) were followed in conducting an interpretivist study via an ethnographical strategy, which helped the researcher to understand the relationships and the variables in the contemporary newsroom and to explore the changes arising from the use of new tools by journalists in Saudi Arabia today. These new platforms and devices which have emerged in the modern newsroom have contributed to multiple changes in how news is created and circulated in the country, affecting the relevance of gatekeeping to news production. The chosen ethnographic strategy facilitated the identification of those attributes that had arisen or become absent and the exploration of the effects of those characteristics on news production in a particular part of the world.

#### **4.6 Time horizon**

The time horizon chosen for the research was longitudinal. Longitudinal research is used to explore relationships between variables that occur in an organization or society. This observational research technique involves studying a group of individuals in the same environment over an extended period of time, whereas a cross-sectional study lasts for a short period of time. Cross-sectional research is often quantitative, while qualitative researchers tend to prefer a longitudinal time horizon (Becker and Bryman, 2009). This choice was appropriate here because of the nature of the study, which required observations to be made at different times in order to examine variables in the newsrooms affecting the changing relevance of gatekeeping in contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi newsrooms have changed significantly with the growth of internet usage and the flourishing of electronic newspapers, blogs and microblogging, elements which have contributed to the environment in which news is produced and disseminated. Against the background of the development of newspaper censorship in Saudi Arabia since 1929, when the government issued its first six printing laws to regulate the domestic press, the study observes two newspapers, *Alriyadh* and *Sabq*, and a microblogger, Essam Al Zamil. The researcher conducted 13 interviews between 2009 and 2013 to identify the newly emerging attributes of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia and to assess the impact of gatekeeping on the production process. This entailed allowing sufficient time to identify these influences on gatekeeping during the

period 2009-2013 and to research a historical overview of the Saudi newspaper industry since its birth.

#### **4.7 Research questions**

This study explores how gatekeeping influences Saudi journalism today and how its novel features affect newspapers, both traditional and electronic, blogs and microblogs. In particular, it focuses on how traditional newspapers, e-newspapers, blogs and microblogs in Saudi Arabia employ the gatekeeping model. In addition, the researcher has investigated who the contemporary Saudi gatekeepers are and whether they are journalists, bloggers or others, by interviewing some of them and observing their work. The project seeks to clarify to what extent gatekeeping influences the readership of the news gates in the country. As noted in section 1.4, the following research questions are addressed throughout this thesis:

- What is the relevance of gatekeeping to the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia?
- How do traditional newspapers, e-newspapers, bloggers and microbloggers in Saudi Arabia employ the gatekeeping concept?
- How does the political and cultural context of Saudi Arabia influence the creation and circulation of news in both traditional and non-traditional media?
- Have new forms of gatekeeping evolved in the non-traditional media?

#### **4.8 Methodology**

This social study takes a qualitative approach, using participant observation and interviews to collect the required data. Mason (2002: 84) defines observation as “methods of generating data which entail the researcher immersing herself or himself in a research ‘setting’ so that they can experience and observe at first hand a range of dimensions in, and of, that setting”.

Silverman (2000) claims that qualitative researchers throughout the years have had their methodology recognized and appreciated by the social scientific world, thanks to their achievements and results. Paving the way for the tremendous development in qualitative inquiry was the growing dissatisfaction among academics who wished to form a deeper

understanding of their subject than mere numbers and statistical models could provide (Lindlof, 1995: 9).

Extensive reading on qualitative research methodology indicates conclusively that it is the appropriate approach for the present research. It allows a thoughtful understanding of the subject and provides and explains the rationale behind decisions and circumstances, which is what this study seeks to achieve. Pauly (1991: 7) articulates the belief that qualitative research not only provides findings of fact but also contributes to an understanding of how the facts came to be as they are:

The “something” that qualitative research understands is not some set of truisms about communication but the awful difficulties groups face in mapping reality. The qualitative researcher is an explorer, not a tourist. Rather than speeding down the interstate, the qualitative researcher ambles along the circuitous back roads of public discourse and social practice. In reporting on that journey the researcher may conclude that some of those paths were, in fact, wider and more foot-worn than others, that some branched off in myriad directions, some narrowed along the way, some rambled endlessly while others ran straight and long, and some ended at the precipice, in the brambles, or back at their origin.

Joniak (2000) adds that by choosing this methodology and following a more scenic path, qualitative researchers open up a deep, colourful and contextual world of interpretations. Qualitative research gives the researcher great opportunities to identify problems and observe intensively. It offers a better understanding of the topic and a clearer interpretation of social phenomena and their relation to people, which is the aim throughout this research, in order to understand the nature of the circumstances which have led to the current situation regarding the relevance of gatekeeping in contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia.

Becker and Bryman (2009: 92) argue that qualitative research is seen as distinctive in the following respects:

- *Focus on actors' meanings*: qualitative researchers aim to understand the behaviour, values, beliefs, and so on of the people they study from the perspective of the subjects themselves. This tendency reflects a commitment that researchers should not impose their own understanding of what is going on.

- *Flexibility*: much qualitative research is relatively unstructured so that the researcher is most likely to uncover actors' meanings and interpretations rather than impose his or her own understanding. The lack of structure has the additional advantage that the general strategy is flexible, so that if the researcher encounters unexpected events that offer a promising line of inquiry, a new direction can be absorbed and followed up.
- *Emergent theory and concepts*: typically, concepts and the development of theory emerge out of the process of data collection rather than appearing at the outset of an investigation, which is what occurs in quantitative research. This preference for the inductive approach reflects the predilection among qualitative researchers for interpretation to take place in subjects' own terms.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994: 2) explain qualitative roles in term of understanding the situations surrounding the subject via the multiple elements that the approach entails:

Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. Accordingly, qualitative research deploys a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand.

Rakow (2011) argues that qualitative researchers are likely to be interested in understanding cultural phenomena or in changing them; the interview and observation methods are well suited to providing data appropriate to these general aims of such research and to what this study seeks to evaluate, viz. the relevance of gatekeeping in contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. This project requires an understanding of the culture of the country, of contemporary journalism and of its procedures, which calls for a qualitative study. Qualitative methods have some weaknesses, such as the longer time often needed to collect and to analyse the data when compared to quantitative research, but this investment in time is justified by the final product, which will be an enhanced understanding of the subject, of the trends in its development and of the motives of its actors.



More specifically, in order to examine the mechanisms used by different media vehicles in their news creation processes and their news content, the research needs to go beyond the description of the manifest content of the news organization (McQuail, 1994). According to Halloran, a comprehensive analysis of the communication process and an examination of the messages of news organizations needs to be combined with an exploration of communication in news organizations and the context in which they function, whereas Maykut and Morehouse (1994) suggest that one of the four factors helping to build credibility in a qualitative research project is the use of multiple methods of data collection. This approach will help the researcher to capture and explore new elements, as the different research methods strengthen one another, yielding superior reliability. The present study, therefore, has used several methods, including participant observation, non-participant observation and interviews, to help to increase the credibility of the findings. The research design relies directly upon answering the research questions, which were formulated on the assumption that there are similarities and differences between print newspapers, e-newspapers, blogs and microblogs. These considerations encouraged the present researcher to utilize two main methods to collect data: participant observation and interviews. He had planned to use social network analysis and other digital analysis methods, but found that the observations and interviews provided sufficient rich data for him to be able to answer the research questions fully and in detail, thus fulfilling the objectives of the study.

The present study investigates news production processes, particularly how the gatekeeping principle applies to four different types of media platform, in terms of the creation and content of their news. Participant observation was used to gather data on production processes, examining how news selection took place, how the news was circulated and what the motivators were for each action observed during the field research. Most importantly, this method allowed the researcher to address the research questions by scrutinizing the impact of the gatekeeping function in the different media. Direct observation, which involved listening and being able to ask questions, allowed the researcher to approach the perspectives of editors, webmasters, bloggers and microbloggers and to identify the exact processes that they followed. Interviews were held with people in these four media to illustrate and explain the findings in more detail.

The few existing studies of the role of gatekeeping in the Saudi media have almost all been concerned with print newspapers; rarely have they examined the new media vehicles. The use of observation and interviews has helped the present researcher to discover how those new media platforms function and to explore how they influence gatekeeping in the contemporary process of producing traditional print newspapers. In other words, it is hoped that they will lead to a better understanding of the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. Direct observation has helped the researcher to gather significant information by witnessing the production mechanisms used in various media organisations in Saudi Arabia and observing how these four media vehicles operate nowadays, while the interviews were designed to enrich the study by capturing ideas and dimensions that were missing from the media scene. The way this qualitative research study was conducted has helped the researcher to obtain crucial and original results, contributing novel material to gatekeeping theory.

While investigating the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of the creation and circulation of news in Saudi Arabia, the researcher identified a new component, post-production gatekeeping (taking effect after publication rather than before), which forms a cornerstone of the study and elucidates many activities that were unclear until the present study discovered them. This newly identified process is illustrated extensively and its analysis in chapters six and seven reveals its impact not just in Saudi Arabia but globally, thus making a significant contribution which reflects the importance of the study to the field of journalism. Firebaugh (2008: 1) argues that qualitative social science sometimes surprises with its findings; indeed, “it is the uncertainty that makes social research exciting and rewarding”, and which made the qualitative approach suitable for the present study.

Now that the broad methodological choices have been outlined and justified, the following sections look in more detail at each of the main methods used to collect data: participant observation and interviews.

#### **4.9 Participant observation**

Inspired by the observations reported by Gaye Tuchman (1978), the researcher decided to address the above research questions by adopting the participant observation method,

which involved witnessing the production processes followed in the newsrooms of two Saudi newspapers and by a microblogger. These observations, as outlined earlier in this chapter, were based on the interpretive philosophy, the inductive approach and ethnography as a research strategy. The researcher also followed the guidelines for qualitative observation and analysis presented by Marshall and Rossman (2006) when monitoring the newsrooms of *Sabq* and *Alriyadh* and the work of Essam Al Zamil.

#### **4.9.1 Rationale and purpose of participant observation**

Harrison (1995: 180) contends that observation is one of the best methods for studying and analysing the “formally invisible world of journalistic activity and media production”, adding that observation “is vital to understand the kinds of formal and informal decisions which are made in the newsroom on a day-to-day basis”. Hansen et al (1998: 44) suggest that observation is a significant research method for studying how media content is produced: “participant observation goes behind the scenes of media output to help reveal the complex of forces, constraints and conventions that inform the shape, selections and silences of media output”. Others consider observation to be one of the most effective methods in the field of journalism studies, as it allows scholars to interact directly with the research environment and the actors within it (Tuchman, 1978; Iorio, 2004; Jensen, 2002). Ted Conover is cited by Sims (1995: 13) as declaring that observation is his preferred way to pursue journalism:

The idea to me that journalism and anthropology go together ... was a great enabling idea for my life—the idea that I could learn about different people and different aspects of the world by placing myself in situations, and thereby see more than you ever could just by doing an interview.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) point out that observation requires researchers to spend a long time in a research setting. Being involved in this way enables them to capture the experiences of the participants. Unobtrusive observation allows researchers to learn about behaviours and the meanings which participants attach to them.

#### **4.9.2 Observation protocol**

An observation protocol was followed to guide the structure of the recording process. The aim of the observational record was to realize as much information as possible about the news policy and news selection of the chosen print and electronic newspapers

with regard to their production process; eleven main topics were addressed when recording the information gathered in the print and online newsrooms and from the Twitter microblogger, as detailed below.

- The history and current state of the three chosen platforms
- The development of print, electronic editions, and Twitter
- The news policy of print and electronic versions, and Twitter
- The relations between the staff working on the observed platforms with the relevant governmental agencies
- The use of new technologies in the print and online production processes
- The influences of religion and culture on the production of news
- The concern of the organisation for the use of new communication technologies in its production process
- The production process itself
- Newsroom working relationships and environment
- The gatekeeping and selection process
- How new communication technologies were used to gatekeep the information.

Data were collected from the observation of the newsroom routines and the Twitter microblogger by qualitative methods such as generating, grouping, summarising and discussing to explore the final results. The researcher followed the seven phases of data analysis stipulated by Marshall and Rossman (2006): (a) organizing the data; (b) immersion in the data; (c) generating categories and themes; (d) coding the data; (e) offering interpretations through analytic memos; (f) searching for alternative understandings; (g) presenting a report of the study.

#### **4.9.3 Advantages and disadvantages of observation**

Like other research methodologies, observation has both advantages and disadvantages. Hansen et al (1998: 46) list a number of its strengths: it

- Records and makes the invisible visible.
- Counters the problem of inference.
- Improves upon other methods through triangulation.
- Qualifies or corrects speculative theoretical claims.
- Reminds us of the contingent nature of cultural production.
- Provides evidence for the dynamic as well as embedded nature of cultural production.

Wimmer and Dominick (2000: 112) claim that observation has several unique advantages and is the most appropriate approach to witnessing changes in production: “Observation is particularly suitable for a study of the gatekeeping process in network news because it is difficult to measure gatekeeping.” They also note that the greatest advantage of participant observation is that the study takes place in the natural setting of the activity being observed and thus can provide data rich in detail and subtlety. Finally, they assert that participant observation is usually inexpensive.

In contrast, Harrison (1995) notes a weakness of observation, which is that the observer needs time in order to be fully accepted by the participants (Harrison, 1995: 182). The present researcher has good personal relationships with many Saudi editors, including the editor-in-chief of *Alriyadh*, having worked for this newspaper for two years, which facilitated the comfortable conduct of the newsroom observations. Similarly, the researcher worked with the editor-in-chief of *Sabq* for four months and developed a good relationship with him. He also had contact with many *Sabq* journalists on several occasions, which helped the two parties to understand each other and to work satisfactorily during the observation. As for Essam Al Zamil, the researcher met him four times and reached a mutual understanding with him; thus, Harrison’s problem of acceptance will not have impaired the results in this case.

During the course of this study, unstructured face-to-face interviews were also conducted with editors, journalists and reporters on both papers as part of the observation method, whose aim was to investigate how editors, journalists and reporters dealt with news selection. It also examined the effects of news published on the internet on news decisions made by the two newspapers, given that the internet and the government are the main factors influencing censorship of the Saudi media. A third aim

of the observation was to determine which factors most strongly affected news decisions in the national press. One of its main goals was thus to understand and present the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia, helping the researcher to formulate effective questions for the email interviews which were later conducted with editors, journalists, reporters, bloggers and microbloggers.

#### **4.9.4 Research participants**

The remainder of this section sets out the reasons for choosing *Sabq*, *Alriyadh* and Essam Al Zamil as subjects of observation and identifies the six persons interviewed as part of the observation exercise.

*Sabq* is a Saudi e-newspaper and operates the most visited news website in Saudi Arabia. It was established in 2007 and receives millions of hits daily. The popularity of its website is reflected in the number of hits and the thousands of comments on its news items that readers leave (Alexa, 2010). The two persons interviewed during the *Sabq* observation were its editor-in-chief, Mohammed Al Shehri, and an anonymous comments reviewer.

*Alriyadh* was founded 1963 and is one of the most popular and widely distributed print newspapers in Saudi Arabia (Rugh, 2004). It is considered a conservative, semi-governmental paper. Although print based, it has a website which attracts the second largest online news audience in Saudi Arabia (Alexa, 2010). Three men were interviewed as part of this observation: Hani AlGhofaily, head of the New Media Department, Ahmed Al Swoilem, his deputy, and an anonymous editor of the print newspaper.

Essam Al Zamil is one of the most influential Saudi bloggers and microbloggers, having more than 150,000 followers. He became popular by criticising the government and leading electronic campaigns through Twitter. He writes for a print newspaper, *Al-Yaum*, but also uses his own blogs to publish articles which fail to pass through the print newspaper gate. Al Zamil has started a number of boycotting campaigns on Twitter and has been quoted by various local and international media outlets. One such campaign was a boycott of Al-Marai, the largest Saudi producer of milk ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6l9\\_43joUE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6l9_43joUE)), to protest against the company's

decision to raise its prices following an increase in its costs. The campaign was successful: Al-Marai restored its original prices after the Ministry of Commerce interceded in favour of a reduction. After many successful campaigns and blogs, Al Zamil has become one of the leaders of opinion in the country and has overtaken many columnists and religious leaders in popularity. His influence over contemporary news creation in Saudi Arabia through his campaigns, articles and blogs led to the decision to place him on the list of interviewees.

Observation was thus used to collect data on the process of gathering and disseminating news by an influential Saudi blogger and two organizations considered among the most important news vehicles in Saudi Arabia today in terms of readership. Another reason for selecting them was to examine the differences and similarities between them in terms of the influence on them of the gatekeeping model, since they represent different styles of production: *Sabq* is perceived to be a modern e-newspaper, whereas *Alriyadh* is a traditional print newspaper and Essam Al Zamil represents Twitter, the newest news engine in the country.

## **4.10 Interviews**

In addition to the participant observation discussed above, data for this qualitative study were collected in a series of structured interviews, designed to elicit the opinions of seven Saudis active in the field of news creation and gatekeeping. These interviewees comprised an editor and a journalist working for e-newspapers, an editor and a journalist working for a traditional newspaper, two bloggers, a microblogger and the Deputy Minister of Culture and Information. The interviews were intended to complement the observations, to identify the production processes and gatekeeping activities undertaken or experienced by the interviewees and their organisations, to explore the differences between the news vehicles in adopting gatekeeping and to determine whether their differing environments significantly affected how they created and circulated the news.

### **4.10.1 Interview questions**

In an attempt to examine the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia, the researcher addressed the same seven questions to each of the seven journalists, bloggers and microbloggers:

- Are blogs and microblogging platforms free of gatekeeping? Why do you think this? Do you write in them what you believe without hesitation or any sort of censorship, whether external or internal? Why is this/is this not the case?
- Have you ever changed your mind about posting a blog or tweet because you thought it would anger somebody, whether from your family or externally? Please provide examples if possible. Can you explain why you have or have not changed your mind in this way?
- Is the audience the new gatekeeper? Why do you think this is/is not the case? Does it dominate how and what you write? Either way, why is this the case?
- How do you produce your media work? Can you illustrate the usual routine you practice when you deliver your media items as an article, blog or tweet?
- Do you change your degree of expression according to the platform you are writing for, whether a print newspaper, blog or Twitter? Why?
- Are you afraid of your account or site being blocked over a post you have contributed? Why?

Interviews are conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' knowledge and the meaning of what they say. Patton (2002: 341) writes that the purpose of an interview is "to allow us to enter the other person's perspective". Kvale (1996) explains that interviews may be used in a qualitative research study to understand the respondents' world, because such an understanding is rooted in the perceptions of their own experiences, which entails eliciting factual and meaningful information. Structured interviews, such as those conducted here, where the same questions are addressed in the same order to all interviewees, help the researcher to obtain informative answers while improving the reliability and credibility of the research data. They also give the researcher the opportunity to prepare the questions carefully in order to investigate the subject deeply (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

The interviews were conducted via email, which has become common practice in qualitative studies. Orgad (2005) reports that people being interviewed online (usually by email) answer questions carefully and take the time to think deeply before they reply.



She argues that data collected online can therefore be very useful to the qualitative researcher and sometimes provide insights that face-to-face methods do not. Taped interviews normally need to be transcribed, but this is not necessary with written online answers (ibid). Another potential advantage of online interviews, according to Illingworth (2001), is that people may feel more comfortable discussing sensitive subject online. Thus, the present researcher was able to send the list of questions to participants in different parts of the world, granting them the time and space to think about their answers and deliver them without pressure, which helped the study to produce in-depth explanations of the phenomena under examination. Another strong reason for adopting the email mode of interview was the resistance in Arab culture to face-to-face meetings, especially when the researcher is male and the potential interviewee is a woman. There are many such restrictions and limitations which make the email interview more convenient (Opdenakker, 2006; Kivits, 2005; Wengraf, 2001). The fact that the interviewees were from Arab countries encouraged the researcher to choose to conduct the interviews by email in order to reach out equally to all participants and to overcome the limitations arising from culture, tradition and religious influences.

#### **4.10.2 Interviewees**

The researcher worked from 1996 to 2009 for four Saudi newspapers, which gave him an idea of the nature of the news industry in the country and its people and provided him with the opportunity to get to know many journalists, bloggers and microbloggers. This experience helped him to select the seven main interviewees for the present study, based on his reading and on statistics showing the impact of Saudi bloggers and microbloggers in terms of numbers of followers and blog visits. These seven interviewees, whose influence and significance justify their inclusion in this study, are listed below, with an account of the factors underlying their inclusion.

**Ahmed Al-Omran** of Saudi Jeans (saudijeans.org) was one of the first Saudi bloggers to be quoted by an international news agency. In Saudi Jeans and its Arabic counterpart, al-Omran examines issues rarely discussed publicly in Saudi Arabia, including religion, freedom of speech and the treatment of Saudi women. Many of the issues that he explores are heavily censored by the Saudi dictatorship and are unreported in the mainstream media. Al-Omran was nicknamed “the Saudi blogfather” for his essential

role in the creation of Saudi Arabia's nascent blogosphere (Oslo Freedom Forum, 2012).

Al-Omran, who now works for an international news agency in the USA, has played a pioneering role in blogging in Saudi Arabia; the value of his contribution made him a candidate to participate in the present study. The researcher contacted him by email and having received his agreement to participate in the research project, sent him a consent form and list of questions.

**Manal Al-Sharif** used microblogging services in 2011 to help start a campaign for women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia. She was jailed on May 22, 2011 for nine days and since then has received considerable attention, both locally and internationally. For example, the *New York Times* has described her campaign as a "budding protest movement" that the Saudi government tried to "swiftly extinguish", while Associated Press reported that the Saudi authorities "cracked down harder than usual on Al-Sharif, after seeing her case become a rallying call for youths anxious for change" (MacFarquhar, 2011).

Following her release from prison on 30 May 2011, Al-Sharif started a Twitter campaign called Faraj to release from Dammam women's prison a number of Saudi, Filipino and Indonesian women who had been "locked up just because they owe a small sum of money but cannot afford to pay the debt" (Emirates 24/7, 4 June 2011). As a result of her leading of such campaigns, the magazine *Foreign Policy* named Al-Sharif one of the top 100 global thinkers of 2011 (Foreign Policy, 2011). In 2012, she was named one of the 'Fearless Women of the Year' by the *Daily Beast*, while *Time* magazine named her one of the 100 most influential people of 2012. In 2012 she was also one of three people awarded the first annual Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent at the Oslo Freedom Forum. Al-Sharif has recently worked as a weekly columnist in the *Al-Hayat* print newspaper and appeared on various TV shows.

She resigned as information technology advisor to Saudi Aramco, one of the world's leading oil companies, because her tweets and other media activities had angered the company's management. She stated in a tweet on 20 May 2012: "To acknowledge and to prevent more rumours I have submitted my resignation from Aramco on April 18

because there is a conflict between the company's direction and my personal convictions" (Al-Sharif, 2012).

Her Twitter account attracted many followers around the globe and became a source of news creation in itself. For instance, the *Observer* published a story based on her microblogging posts, according to which, "This month, Al-Sharif was unable to join four other Arab women in Washington to receive a Vital Voices Leadership Award from an organisation founded by Hillary Clinton" (McVeigh, 2012). Her main reason for not being at the awards was reported to be concern for her family's safety.

Al-Sharif's microblogging posts and her written attempts to challenge the Saudi gatekeepers made her a potential participant in this study. She follows the researcher on his Twitter account, so he sent her a direct message and she welcomed the idea of being part of the study. The researcher sent her the questions via email, applying the ethical approval protocol explained later in this chapter (section 4.12).

**Iman AlQahtani** is a former print newspaper reporter and microblogger. Her inclusion was felt to be valuable because of her breadth of experience and the extreme pressure that she appears to have been under from the authorities, eventually leading her to cease tweeting.

**Fouad Alfarhan** is unusual in that he is one of the few Saudi bloggers who uses his real name, rather than blogging under a pseudonym. In addition, in December 2007, he was the first Saudi blogger to be arrested over his blogs. At the time of writing, Alfarhan was working for the newest Saudi print newspaper, *Al-Sharq*. He has comprehensive experience as a long-time blogger and as an employee of a restricted mainstream media outlet. The importance of his participation in this study lies in the fact that he had an understanding of the different gatekeeping mechanisms in the country, first as a pioneering blogger and later as an employee of a traditional newspaper. This experience of both environments made him more likely to be able to provide particularly insightful answers and bring depth to the discussion of the impact of gatekeeping on contemporary Saudi news creation, offering significant evidence. To recruit Alfarhan, the researcher contacted him by phone and he agreed to participate in the study.

**Salman Y Aldossary** is editor-in-chief of the Saudi *Aleqisadiah* print newspaper. In his mid-forties at the time of the interviews, he was much younger than most other Saudi print newspaper editors, who were in their seventies, giving him a rather different generational perspective. He is further distinguished by being an active microblogger, while other editors tend to shy away from technology, either because they do not know how to use it or to avoid clashing with readers who are indignant with those in charge of Saudi print newspapers for ignoring the problems of ordinary people while focusing on “buttering up high officials” (MBC.net, 11 June 2013). Aldossary has faced severe criticism for his support of the government through his articles and his newspaper’s policies and has also clashed with many bloggers and microbloggers in recent years. He thus occupies a relatively traditional and conservative position in Saudi journalism, while representing a more youthful perspective on gatekeeping. This contrast and his central role in contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia make him vital to the present project. In order to obtain his agreement to answer questions regarding developments in gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia, the researcher called him and explained the project to him; he agreed to be interviewed in September 2012.

A member of the **Saudi royal family** who wrote for a print newspaper and participated in a microblogging service agreed to participate anonymously.

An undersecretary in the **Saudi Ministry of Information** also requested anonymity. By interviewing him, the researcher sought insight into the strategic approach to gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia, as the Ministry of Information is considered the lynchpin of gatekeeping in Saudi journalism, being where the strategic decisions are made for all Saudi media outlets.

#### **4.11 Data analysis**

The chosen method of data analysis was inspired by the recommendation of Marshall and Rossman (2006) that identifying carefully each step of qualitative data analysis will lead to significant results. They argue that the researcher needs to analyze as he goes along, adjusting his observational strategies, shifting some emphasis towards those experiences which bear upon the development of his understanding and generally exercising control over his emerging ideas by virtually simultaneous checking or testing of these ideas.

Probably the most fundamental operation in the analysis of qualitative data is that of discovering significant classes of things, persons and events and the properties which characterize them. In this process, which continues throughout the research, the analyst gradually comes to reveal his own “is’s” and “because’s”: he names classes and links one with another, at first with “simple” statements (propositions) that express the linkage, and continues this process until his propositions fall into sets, in an ever-increasing density of linkages (ibid: 156).

They also suggest that the researcher should use the preliminary research questions developed earlier in the proposal and the related literature as guidelines for data analysis. The present researcher followed this advice throughout the data collection and analysis, which enhanced the outcome of the study.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) state that as a coherent interpretation with related concepts and themes emerges from analysis, any troublesome or incomplete data will lead to further data being collected and analysed, thus serving to strengthen the interpretation, which takes shape as major modifications become rarer and concepts fall into established categories and themes. The analysis will be deemed sufficient “when critical categories are defined, relationships between them are established and they are integrated into an elegant, credible interpretation” (ibid: 156). In the present research, this approach to establishing a coherent interpretation led to key findings from the data analysis regarding post-production gatekeeping, the rise of the audience as gatekeeper of news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia and the key role of social influence as a gatekeeper, affecting news creation decisions in particular.

In detail, the researcher followed the seven phases of data analysis stipulated by Marshall and Rossman (2006): (a) organizing the data; (b) immersion in the data; (c) generating categories and themes; (d) coding the data; (e) offering interpretations through analytic memos; (f) searching for alternative understandings; (g) presenting a report of the study. “Each phase of data analysis entails data reduction, as the reams of collected data are brought into manageable chunks, and interpretation, as the researcher brings meaning and insight to the words and acts of the participants” (ibid: 156).

After each interview, a transcript of the responses was created. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, so each transcript was translated from Arabic to English, the

language used for analysis. Both the original Arabic and English transcriptions were presented to each interview participant for checking, giving them the opportunity to verify the interpretation of interview data.

The translated transcripts were then studied and reviewed, which included identifying and grouping the data useful to the study. This important step involved determining the meaning in the data gathered from interviews in relation to the purpose of the study. After the transcripts of interview data had been created and verified, the data were analysed qualitatively by reviewing, indicating, summarising and grouping the important information related to the study and the answers to the research questions. The topics into which the data were grouped during this analysis were: Online gatekeeping, Twitter gatekeeping, Patriarchal and social gatekeeping, Audience gatekeeping, Post-production gatekeeping and Globalized gatekeeping.

#### **4.11.1 Organizing the data**

It is sensible not only to organize the data before starting to analyze them, but also to continue to do so throughout the analysis. The advice of Marshall and Rossman (2006: 185) to revisit the “huge pile” of data at this level is very significant. The researcher followed this by logging the types of data based on dates, times, names and places, noting where they were collected, when and from whom. This helped to organize the data in sequence and so to obtain results accurately and promptly.

#### **4.11.2 Immersion in the data**

Patton (2002: 440) warns how difficult and daunting the organization of field data can be:

The data generated by qualitative methods are voluminous. I have found no way of preparing students for the sheer mass of information they will find themselves confronted with when data collection has ended. Sitting down to make sense out of pages of interviews and whole files of notes can be overwhelming. Organizing and analyzing a mountain of narrative can seem like an impossible task.

He suggests that taking note of people, events and questions will assist this process, while Marshall and Rossman (2006) recommend immersion; according to them, reading the data many times will help the researcher to become familiar with them and to sift

them. Indeed, the researcher found that reading the data collected over and over helped him to identify the most significant material related to the objectives of the study, on which it was possible to focus throughout the data analysis, refining it to attain concentration and compatibility.

#### **4.11.3 Generating categories and themes**

Through questioning the data and reflecting on the conceptual framework, the researcher subjects the scheme and the data to significant intellectual effort. Marshall and Rossman (2006) claim that good editing and immersion strategies will generate appropriate categories through prolonged engagement with the data as text. These categories then become ‘buckets’ or ‘baskets’ in which segments of text are placed. The procedure of category generation involves noting patterns evident in the setting and expressed by participants. As categories of meaning emerge, the researcher searches for those that have internal convergence and external divergence.

Patton (2002: 159) explains that inductive analysis means discovering patterns, themes and categories in the data, whereas in deductive analysis, the categories are stipulated beforehand, “according to an existing framework”. Analyst-constructed typologies are those created by the researcher that are grounded in the data but not necessarily used explicitly by participants. In this case, the researcher applies a typology to the data. As with all analysis, this process means uncovering patterns, themes and categories.

The inductive approach and interpretive philosophy adopted here helped the researcher to generate categories and themes. Much of the evidence presented and discussed throughout the study was gathered by adopting the techniques recommended in the guidelines of Marshall and Rossman (2006), which promoted the concept of induction and assisted the establishment of convergence between the data collected and the literature reviewed, thus identifying new themes of benefit to the study and the discovery of promising facts.

#### **4.11.4 Coding the data**

Marshall and Rossman (2006) explain that codes may take several forms: it is up to the researcher to choose among abbreviations of keywords, coloured dots, numbers etc. As the researcher codes the data, new understandings may well emerge, necessitating changes to the original plan. Hay (2005) outlines a two-step process beginning with

basic coding in order to distinguish overall themes, followed by an in-depth, interpretive stage at which more specific trends and patterns can be interpreted. The majority of qualitative researchers will code their data both during and after collection as an analytic tactic, because coding is analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The present study adopted this tactic, using manual highlighting during collection and later, and the researcher took an ethnographic approach, employing descriptive coding to categorize the opinions of the various participants, because descriptive coding allows specific data to be located quickly and easily. For instance, the study used the descriptive codes of religious gatekeeping, social gatekeeping and post-production gatekeeping. This coding procedure saved time and allowed the researcher to maintain focus during and after collection, so that the findings were informed by all the most significant facts, strengthening the study.

#### **4.11.5 Offering interpretations**

The researcher must next bring meaning and coherence to the themes, patterns and categories identified at the earlier stages, developing “linkage and a storyline that makes sense and is engaging to read” (Marshall and Rossman, 2006: 162). This is the process of offering interpretations, which means “attaching significance to what was found, making sense of the findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order” (ibid).

Interpretation is thus a cornerstone of data analysis and particularly in the present case, as this is an interpretive study, seeking explanations to elucidate many contemporary phenomena in Saudi newsrooms and in the behaviour of bloggers and microbloggers in relation to the relevance of gatekeeping. The points of interpretation, along with the observation and interview data, have determined the path of the study and are fundamental to its capacity to draw sound explanatory conclusions.

#### **4.11.6 Searching for alternative understandings**

After developing and coding the various categories and themes, Marshall and Rossman (2006) advise the researcher to begin writing analytic memos, summarizing key segments of the findings. This will help to initiate the mechanism of evaluation by creating credible understandings and exploring them through the data, which requires



the researcher to search through the data while challenging the very understanding that he or she has put forward, searching for different perspectives which will help to incorporate the results into larger constructs as appropriate (ibid).

#### **4.11.7 Writing the report**

Taylor and Bogdan (1984) explain that the final stage of analysis is the writing of a report of the findings. This is more than a simple presentation of data gathered through interviews and observation, comprising an in-depth analysis where the participants' perspectives are represented and their worldviews structure the report.

#### **4.12 Ethical issues**

Throughout the study priority has been given to ethical considerations. Gilbert (2008: 146) describes ethics as “a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others. Being ethical limits the choices we can make in the pursuit of truth. Ethics say that while truth is good, respect for human dignity is better.” According to Saunders et al (2007), ethics are moral principles, norms or standards that guide moral choices about people's behaviour and their relationships with others. The ethical policy of the University of Salford obligates researchers to apply for ethical approval before conducting field studies. To ensure complete respect for the interviewees, the interviews were conducted according to the following conditions:

- They were held at convenient times.
- The approval of interviewees was obtained before interviews took place.
- They had the right to halt them at any time.
- They were informed of the purpose of the research before the interviews.
- The confidentiality of their personal data was guaranteed in advance.

Silverman (2000: 200) states: “When you are studying people's behavior or asking them questions, not only the values of the researcher but the researcher's responsibilities to those studied have to be faced.” When conducting research, an investigator should not ignore the security and privacy needs of the research participants; ethical issues must receive primary attention and be a serious concern for researchers studying human behaviour.

Major ethical issues are: codes and (informed) consent, confidentiality and trust (Ryen, 2004). These affect the ways in which subjects are informed, approached and asked to take part in the research in advance. The researcher must also inform participants how the information gathered will be utilized. These ethical requirements were considered at every stage of the present research.

#### **4.12.1 Approval and consent**

The researcher received written approval from the editors of both newspapers and from the microblogger to observe the complete process of news production for one week each. It was then a priority to introduce the research topic and the study objectives to all potential participants. In order for them to understand the nature of the research and their roles and rights in the study, an informed consent form was provided, giving information such as the purpose of the study, the planned use of the data and details of what was required of the participants. It was made clear to all at the outset that participation was voluntary. All subjects were informed of the context of the research, because using covert research strategies would be a serious breach of ethical conduct (Barnbaum and Byron, 2001).

The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential. This means that the person concerned should have legal capacity to give consent and be able to exercise free power of choice. There must be no element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, or any other ulterior form of constraint or coercion. Participants should have sufficient knowledge and comprehension of the elements of the subject matter involved to enable them to make an enlightened decision (Gilbert, 2008: 151). The researcher informed all 13 interviewees participating in the study of its objectives and provided them with a summary of its design. All then agreed to participate in the study and every participant signed a consent form to allow the researcher to use their responses in the present study. All except two of the interviewees agreed that their real names should be used, because they believed that to do so would contribute meaningfully to the research findings and would serve the interests of the literature on digital journalism in Saudi Arabia, which has lacked data and references. As explained above (section 4.10.2), two participants requested anonymity: a member of the Saudi Royal family and an undersecretary in the Saudi Ministry of Information.

Data and information were managed according to the Data Protection Act. All data collected have been kept in a locked cabinet either as hard copy (in handwritten, typed or printed form) or electronically on a CD-ROM or DVD. The researcher has set passwords for his PC and any removable devices including memory sticks.

The researcher also received ethical approval for the present study from the Research Ethics Panel at University of Salford, which was provided with detailed information regarding the conducting of the research.

### **4.13 Translating the interview questions**

Because the research was conducted in an Arab country, the researcher translated the questions for the seven structured core interviews into Arabic. In order to assure the accuracy and precision of the questions, he relied on Arabic/English lecturers who also had some knowledge of the management domain. The reason for translating the questions into Arabic was to ensure that the interviewees could share with the researcher the objectives of the work. This method is recommended by Fontana & Frey (1994: 371), for whom the “use of language is very crucial for creating the participatory of meanings in which both interviewer and respondent understand the contextual nature of the interview”. Finally, the researcher translated all the interview transcripts back into English. Again, the translations were revised by Arabic/English translation lecturers as well as a number of PhD students of Arabic linguistics, to ensure their accuracy.

### **4.14 Summary**

This chapter has discussed the study design, process and methodology, highlighting the research philosophy, approach, strategy and time horizon. The research questions were stated and attention was given to the characteristics of qualitative research and their potential impact on the way in which the study has addressed these questions. The chapter concluded by discussing sampling, data analysis, ethics and translation.

This concludes the first, more theoretical part of the thesis, which has been based largely on desk research. Attention now turns to the actual conduct of the fieldwork and the empirical data so gathered, beginning with the observations made by the researcher.

## Chapter 5

### Observation

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter reports observations of the work of a print newspaper, *Alriyadh*, an electronic newspaper, *Sabq*, and a microblogger, Essam Al Zamil. It highlights the significant procedures which took place in the researcher's presence in the newsrooms of the two newspapers and during the time spent accompanying the microblogger and discusses how the participants reacted to and dealt with the news events which occurred throughout the periods of observation, in order to understand the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. It also justifies the selection of the two newspapers and the microblogger.

#### 5.2 *Alriyadh*

##### 5.2.1 The importance of *Alriyadh* within the mainstream Saudi media

*Alriyadh* was selected for observation as the Saudi print newspaper with the highest circulation figures, according to Shobaili (1971). The World Association of Newspapers (2008) reports that around 150,000 copies were distributed in 2007, giving *Alriyadh* the largest readership in the country. The importance of this newspaper also derives from its relations with the Saudi government. Many observers regard *Alriyadh* as the voice of the government and consider that most of its published items reflect official positions. The king of Saudi Arabia has referred to its editor-in-chief, Turki al Sudairi, as 'the King of journalism', which indicates the respect that the editor receives from the most powerful people in the state (Campagna, 2006). Although *Alriyadh* is owned by a group of Saudi businessmen and is thus officially independent, the World Association of Newspapers (2008) considers it to be a semi-official newspaper, under the direct influence of Crown Prince Salman, former Riyadh city governor and currently Saudi minister of defence. Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show Turki al Sudairi with the King and the Crown Prince.



**Figure 5.1:** Turki al Sudairi, editor-in-chief of *Alriyadh*, holding the hand of King Abdullah

Source: Alriyadh Information Centre



**Figure 5.2:** The editor-in-chief of *Alriyadh* talking to Crown Prince Salman during a visit to the paper in 2010

Source: Alriyadh Information Centre

*Alriyadh* has a correspondingly powerful role within the Saudi press. The fact that it has many more employees than any of its competitors has meant that its editor has three times been elected as head of the Saudi Journalists' Association; his newspaper has the largest number of employees who are members of the Association and thus eligible to vote for its president.

*Alriyadh* is also one of only eight print newspapers in Saudi Arabia and represents a style of news production which this study seeks to compare with other methods of creating and circulating news in the country. The nature of Saudi print newspapers has changed in the digital age, justifying the monitoring of recent changes in their production and related longstanding theories concerning the editing process, such as that undertaken in the present research. The impact and importance of *Alriyadh* since its foundation in 1964 encouraged the researcher to attempt to understand the operation of the gatekeeping process in its newsroom and to discover how this particular newspaper, with its close relations with government, creates and circulates the news, as part of this study of the relevance of gatekeeping to contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia.

### **5.2.2 Justification of the observation method**

The reasons for using the observation method in the case of *Alriyadh* can be summarized as follows:

- Observation helped the researcher to examine the nature of the relationship between the newspaper and the gatekeepers, by paying careful attention to the news journey in the workplace. No other method would have provided the insight and inside information required to monitor the process and mechanisms of news production and to identify the elements of cause and effect at each step in the newsroom, helping the researcher to understand the circumstances that led to each decision. One of the great advantages of observation is that it allows a researcher to obtain a detailed description of the environment and atmosphere in a workplace, whether through overt communication or more subtle channels such as body language. Throughout the observations at *Alriyadh* the researcher captured many events which helped to understand the reasons for certain actions. This method has generated a large body of data on which to base findings by allowing the process to be witnessed without affecting the business cycle. Throughout these observations, many results

were obtained by monitoring the processes of news creation and circulation which are unlikely to have been able to be discovered by other methods.

- The observation method also allowed the researcher to incorporate unstructured interviews into the case studies, giving this methodology multiple advantages over other methods and providing the opportunity to clarify actions, thus enriching the dataset significantly and guiding the study to valuable findings.
- The nature of the observation method allows a researcher to develop good relations with subjects (in this case, journalists in the newsroom). While conducting observations at *Alriyadh*, the researcher built and improved relations with a number of journalists and gatekeepers, enabling the discovery of information which he would have been unable to acquire by other methods. Indeed, the researcher gathered some data as a direct result of his good relations with the journalists throughout the observation phase. Having conversations with him regarding his research gave them a sense of the topic and what he was looking for, so they were able to point out events and give indications that helped him to derive maximum benefit from the observation. The researcher captured numerous facts as a result of the journalists themselves coming to him and offering information related to the study, reinforcing his belief in the importance of observation in gathering data on subjects such as that of the present study.

### **5.2.3 Setting**

Having received the approval of the newspaper management and obtained the necessary signatures on the consent form, the researcher conducted observations at *Alriyadh* over three days. The first was on 6 August 2011, the second on 4 August 2012 and the third on 5 August 2012. Audio recordings were made and photographs taken on all three days. The taking of photographs inside the newspaper building was officially restricted, but the management gave the researcher permission to do so on condition that they were able to review all the photographs that he had taken before allowing him to reproduce them for the purposes of this research. He complied with this condition.





**Figure 5.3:** Photograph taken from the researcher's car, showing the *Alriyadh* building and the security fence surrounding it

Entering the *Alriyadh* building in Shara' alshafah (Journalism Street) in Riyadh was like entering a prison. The researcher had to pass through two checkpoints, at each of which the managing editor had to be contacted and his permission sought to allow him through. The building was surrounded by security barriers, as shown in Figure 5.3, and guarded by men of the national army. These strict procedures which the researcher witnessed do not apply to other Saudi newspapers, but only to *Alriyadh*; they began in 2004 when the editor-in-chief received a death threat from a terrorist group because of articles the newspaper had published. Indeed, while *Alriyadh* is assumed to represent the government's position, it faces widespread opposition from religious people because of what they see as its liberal orientation (Elaph, 18 July 2004).

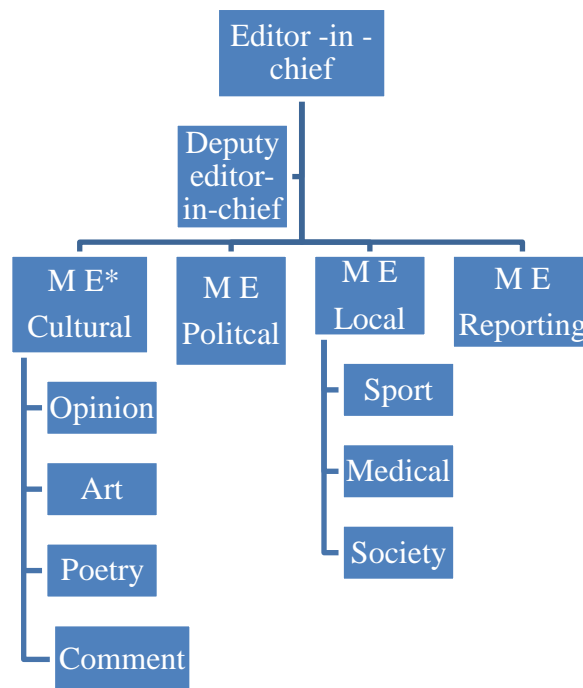
The difficulty of physically entering the *Alriyadh* building can be seen as reminiscent of the complex process of introducing a news item to the newsroom and having it approved for publication in the newspaper, as will become clear below. Before reporting the observation conducted at *Alriyadh*, it will be useful to outline the production process:



- The newspaper has three main printings per day. The first edition, which is scheduled to go to press at 4 pm, reports events occurring earlier in the day and the day before. It carries no news of events after 3 pm. The first print run is timed to catch flights to other cities around the country. The second edition, which goes to press at 7 pm, includes news of events not covered in the first edition. Its distribution is concentrated on parts of the country close to the capital, Riyadh, where the newspaper is produced, while the third printing carries late news and is limited to the immediate vicinity of the capital. It is normally ready to be printed at around 1 am, except during Ramadan (the ninth month of the Islamic calendar), when it is delayed until 4 am.
- Each edition has a managing editor, who assumes the authority of the editor-in-chief to approve the material and to oversee the newsroom throughout his shift.
- The editor-in-chief approves the first and second editions and if he is not available his deputy does so on his behalf.
- The newspaper has four managing editors and one deputy editor-in-chief.
- The newspaper has seven sections, each having a leader who reports to the managing editor. The latter reports in turn to the editor-in-chief.
- Each edition has a newsroom which can be considered its centre of operations and the heart of the production of the newspaper. The nature of the newsroom and its activities will be explained throughout the observation report below.
- All journalists work on the same floor, in open-plan offices. There are no doors between offices, only small aisles between each department.
- The newspaper has its own website which publishes the same material as in the hard copy, with a latest news section run by the new media group at the newspaper. The website has its own team and a different format, which will be described in detail in the following observation reports. The website has around two million hits every day and receives around 7000 readers' comments daily, making it one of most visited websites among Saudi newspapers (Alexa, 2012).

#### 5.2.4 First observation of *Alriyadh*

Figure 5.4 shows the organisational structure of *Alriyadh*.



\*M E: Managing editor

**Figure 5.4: Organizational structure of *Alriyadh***

The researcher spent five hours in the main newsroom of *Alriyadh* on 6 August 2011, from 11 pm to 4 am. The newspaper management decided the date and the time, which was convenient for him because it was during Ramadan, which Muslims worldwide observe as a month of daylight fasting whose observance is regarded as one of the Five Pillars of Islam (Global Times Online, 2012). During Ramadan, the newspaper changes its working schedule so that the first shift runs from 10 am to 5 pm and the second from 10 pm to 4 am. The researcher sat with seven journalists, one managing editor and a technician who helped the journalists with any information technology and computing issues.

The journalists represented the various sections of the newspaper and each individual in the newsroom had a computer screen in front of him, with many internet pages open. The researcher noticed that all of the screens had two open pages in common: the newspaper's RAPID email system and the Twitter microblogging website. The RAPID

page allowed everybody in the newsroom to see all the emails coming to the newspaper from international news agencies, the national news agency and *Alriyadh*'s correspondents and reporters. The news was classified in the RAPID system under headings such as politics, sport and local news, helping the journalists to identify the type of news.

Each journalist in the newsroom was responsible for selecting news items and submitting them to the head of his section to approve them before editing and reviewing them. Journalists would also convey to their section heads any new directions received from the editor-in-chief or one of his deputies; the senior management of the newspaper often had reservations or new directions on news creation based on letters from the Ministry of Information or senior officials, as will be detailed throughout this observation report.

As the researcher began the first observation, news was coming in that Saudi security forces had killed a gunman who had opened fire that day on a checkpoint near the palace of Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz, the interior minister. The newsroom was aware of the incident almost as soon as it happened, through Twitter and other sources, but could not proceed with the news, either in the hard copy or on the website. While the researcher was in the newsroom, journalists were urgently seeking clearance from the senior management to run the story, at least on the website, after many international news platforms, twitter users and even blogs had published the story with photographs. However, they received clear instruction not to publish anything about the incident until it had been officially published by the governmental news agency, the SPA. While CNN, the *Guardian* and other international news organizations were covering and analyzing the attack on the interior minister's palace, the *Alriyadh* website was carrying in its 'latest news' section news of the signing of a contract between a football player and his club. It took around three hours for the SPA to publish a short statement about the incident, comprising 220 words without pictures. The representative of the politics section received the item and sent it with a headline to his section head, who approved it without amendment and signed off the hard copy of the news item to be published on the front page of the next day's first edition after the managing editor's final approval, suggesting that the item should be illustrated with a picture of the minister. Once the managing editor had given his approval in writing, the news item and the picture were

ready to be published in the hard copy and placed in the latest news section of the *Alriyadh* website.

At 3:06 am, Ahmed Al Swoilem, deputy director of the *Alriyadh* website, wrote in Arabic on Twitter a reflection on the difficulties raised by such a procedure. His tweet translates as follows: “The difference between print and electronic newspapers is that print newspapers cannot publish any official news that does not come from the SPA, which makes it difficult for a print newspaper to win a scoop” (Al Swoilem, 2011).

The researcher spent most of that night observing the efforts of the newsroom to obtain management approval to cover the attack on Prince Nayef’s palace and to establish when the SPA would wire the official account to the newspapers, as journalists from all of the different sections were involved in this incident, which dominated the activity of the newsroom. While seeking further details of the incident, the journalists read thousands of tweets commenting on the news, but none of the information they gathered was published or was taken into consideration while the researcher was in the newsroom, with the exception of the short statement from the SPA referred to above.

The researcher also noticed a news item which the editor had sent that day to the art section regarding an Arab female singer. The editor added an email note reminding the journalists to ensure that they chose a suitable picture. *Alriyadh* usually modifies pictures of any woman to be included in the paper, using Photoshop, to cover her arms and other parts of her body, as illustrated in Figure 5.5.

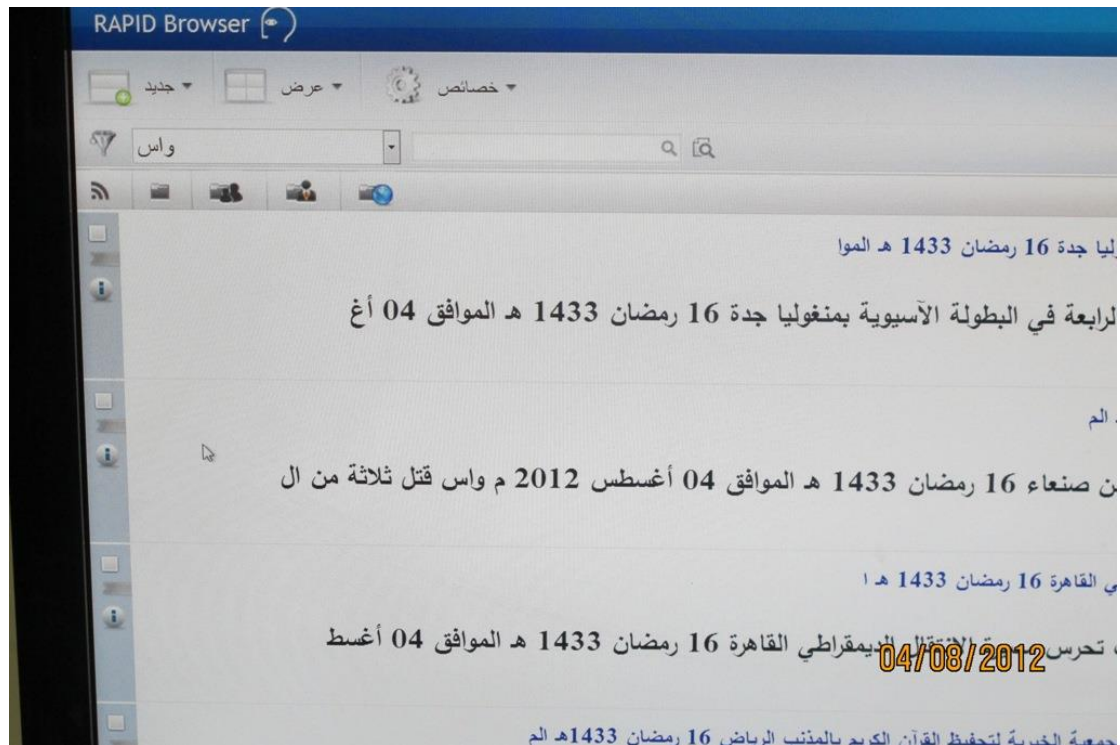
The last thing the researcher observed that night was the managing editor signing a draft copy of the front page of the next day’s first edition, containing news of the attack on the interior minister’s palace. This approval meant that the managing editor was satisfied with the layout and content of the page and would be responsible for any consequences.



**Figure 5.5:** The result of Photoshop modification by *Alriyadh* to cover a woman's body

### **5.2.5 Second observation of *Alriyadh***

A year after the first observation, on Saturday 4 August 2012, the researcher spent four hours in the *Alriyadh* newsroom, from 10 pm until 2 am. This second observation was again conducted at night because it was during Ramadan. The summer Olympic games were in progress in London, so the newsroom was busy with Olympic news. This time, just five people were present: the researcher, a journalist representing the sport section, two representing the website and an IT specialist. The researcher sat next to the sport representative, who allowed him to review his routine work.



**Figure 5.6:** The RAPID browser system which *Alriyadh* uses to deal with the news

The researcher observed on the RAPID email system (Figure 5.6) that many news items were coming in concerning the participation in the London games of two historic athletes. Wojdan Shaherkani, who competed in judo, and Sarah Attar, who ran in the 800 metres, became the first women ever to represent Saudi Arabia at the Olympic Games. However, the researcher also noticed that nobody was taking any action regarding this news thread. When the researcher asked one of the journalists in the newsroom why they were ignoring all mention of Shaherkani and Attar, he replied that the newspaper had received a letter which the Ministry of Information had sent to all print newspapers, explicitly stating that they were not to publish any news whatsoever about these female athletes, whether positive or negative. When the researcher told him that on the contrary, he had seen some items on the subject in a different Saudi print newspaper earlier that same day, the journalist responded: “We take everything we receive from the ministry seriously and cannot dissent from the directions, because we would pay the price, either by a ban on the newspaper or one of its top leaders” (Anonymous interview, 4 August 2012).

The other print newspaper to which the researcher had referred was the English-language *Saudi Gazette*, whose editor, Khaled Al-Maeena, was later quoted by Yahoo! Sports (10 August 2012) as saying:

We were the only newspaper to write about it. I believe these girls are heroines, and we should celebrate as a nation. Unfortunately, other people do not agree. The government allowed them to compete for only one reason, because if they don't send women, then in the future Saudi Arabia will not be allowed to participate in the Olympics.

Paradoxically, on the day of the observation, one of the journalists in the *Alriyadh* newsroom was busy preparing a report on the participation in the London Olympics of Maryam Yusuf Jamal, a female athlete from Bahrain, a country neighbouring Saudi Arabia. When this news item appeared, a Saudi microblogger, Riyadh Alshamsan, wrote the following tweet: "Alriyadh newspaper today covered Bahrain athlete Maryam Jamal but not female Saudi athletes" (Alshamsan, 5 August 2012).

One of the *Alriyadh* journalists whom the researcher observed in the newsroom admitted that it was not professional to ignore the participation of Saudi female athletes in the Olympics, but explained that he could not argue with his leaders because he remembered more important events which his newspaper had been unable to cover because of direction received from either the Ministry of Information or the senior *Alriyadh* management. He said:

We sometimes disagree with instructions not to publish some news, because nowadays the reader has different options to receive the news, not like before, but our leaders and senior government officials believe that publishing the news in *Alriyadh* will give it credibility. Twitter and other news vehicles have still not gained this credibility. We publish the news later than others but it is still widely distributed and is not seen as out of date. Its spread through Twitter and others via *Alriyadh* proves how effective we have been until now (Anonymous interview, 4 August 2012).

Although Twitter is very popular in Saudi Arabia, Saudi readers still prefer to retweet news from traditional sources (mainstream journalists or official sources), rather than from a personal account, even one with many followers, according to recent research by Shamary (2012). Shamary's study indicates that traditional sources have retained their significance in the internet era, confirming that microblogging and other new media

tools have not yet attained the reliability and credibility enjoyed in Saudi Arabia by the traditional media, even if citizens do criticize them. The print newspapers and mainstream media take advantage of this legacy of trust by finding original stories on microblogging websites and reproducing them, so that when they are subsequently shared through Twitter, it is the traditional news providers whose names are circulated, rather than those of the originators of the stories concerned.

During the second observation, one of the journalists in the newsroom noticed through the RAPID email system a news item from a newspaper correspondent about an accident involving a bus carrying pilgrims that had killed four people and injured 32. The email contained seven pictures. The journalist called the local news leader on the night shift to make him aware of this breaking news. The researcher went personally to the local news section and sat with the night shift head to monitor the process of covering it. The section had two journalists at the time: the night shift leader and a reporter. The leader asked the reporter to check his email and print out news of the accident which the newsroom journalist had sent to the night shift leader. The reporter's job was to call a senior official to confirm the accident, to obtain from him an official statement commenting on the incident and to edit the language of the correspondent's material before publishing. The reporter therefore called an official of the Directorate of Civil Defence, who confirmed the incident and sent the reporter by fax an official statement, which had taken him around two hours and 40 minutes to prepare since he had received the call from *Alriyadh*. The reporter added the statement unaltered to the item that he had already worded and attached the pictures, then shared the resulting article with his superior, who approved it. It was next sent as hard copy to the managing editor, who expressed a reservation about the headline, which he thought too lurid, and asked the local news shift leader to tone it down. The shift leader then spent around 15 minutes in his office discussing the alternatives with his reporter and came back with two new options. The managing editor selected and approved one of these headlines and read the news item once more. Having made minor changes to the language of the text, he sent it to the technical department to be incorporated into the newspaper layout. Within around 50 minutes, the coverage of the accident was ready to be sent to the printer and the website. The managing editor approved the layout without further comment, then the reporter and the researcher left the newsroom.





**Figure 5.7:** The New Media Department, where Alriyadh.net is produced

### **5.2.6 Third observation of *Alriyadh***

The researcher devoted the third day of observation, on 5 August 2012, to the *Alriyadh* website (Alriyadh.net), because of its importance and its different format from that of the printed paper, even though the two versions were produced under the same umbrella and the same editor-in-chief. The researcher met Hani AlGhofaily, head of the New Media Department, responsible for both the mobile short message service (SMS) and the website, who was appointed with the task of developing the *Alriyadh* website so that it would compete with those independent websites which had recently attracted many Saudi readers. He was chosen for this position as a very promising programmer and one of the most successful Saudi internet pioneers, who had established some of the most visited websites in the Middle East, such as HawaaWorld, a female networking website, which received around five million hits per day (Alexa, 2012), and other sport websites and social forums. Prior to these internet projects, he had contributed in 2000 to founding the first interactive website for King Saud University while he was studying computer science at the same university. By his appointment, *Alriyadh* appeared to be seeking to change the traditional perception of the newspaper as an old-fashioned news vehicle.

AlGhofaily took up his post in 2008 and after negotiations doubled the manpower of the existing group, then gradually expanded it to a department with more than 30 employees working day and night to enrich the website and feed mobile subscribers

with constantly updated news (*Alwatan*, 14 November 2009). The intention was to leave *Alriyadh* as a traditional newspaper which had been established with government approval and support, using the backing of this mainstream media company to compete with independent electronic newspapers (the differences are explained chapter two). When independent e-newspapers first appeared, the mainstream press doubted their capacity, sustainability and ability to compete for public attention, but these doubts proved unfounded: they did indeed enjoy the trust and attention of the public, leading *Alriyadh* and other mainstream organizations to move towards employing people they had seen as ‘geeks’ and other amateur internet programmers who showed passion and promise in this field (Otaif et al, 2011). Hani AlGhofaily was one such programmer who had no journalistic experience but who had founded successful entertainment websites. He joined a mainstream media company intending to help its website to join the list of most visited sites, which at that time was headed by e-newspapers, blogs and entertainment sites. Upon joining *Alriyadh* he began to make significant changes to the look of the website and attempted to adjust the content by opening windows for readers to comment on the news items. The improvements that AlGhofaily and his group made to the online version of *Alriyadh* led to a very rapid rise in numbers of visitors within weeks, putting it among the hundred most visited websites in the country (Alexa, 2008). The following year, *Alriyadh* received an award as the best Arabic media website of 2009 at the Pan Arab Web Awards (Al Swoilem, 2009).

The most important development, according to AlGhofaily himself, whom the researcher interviewed during the observation, was the introduction at the end of 2011 of a subsidiary website called *Alriyadh.net*, which included updated news and videos, whereas *Alriyadh.com* had always been limited to the content of the hard copy plus readers’ comments. The successful initiatives of the new group leading the website made them able to ask for more powers from the editor-in-chief, who had started to believe in the impact of the electronic format once he appreciated its financial importance and large readership, despite not reading the electronic version himself because of his internet illiteracy. The *Alriyadh* website now received around two million hits per day and its annual revenue had reached approximately four million pounds. This won the website team the trust of the management, who allowed them more space to inject their ideas (Hani AlGhofaily, personal interview, 5 August 2012).

The support given to the website team was reflected in the philosophy of *Alriyadh* in managing the website. They freed it from the restrictions which applied to the print newspaper and had also limited the old electronic version. Throughout the observation the researcher noted differences between the print newsroom and the website team, whose members enjoyed the trust of their management and relaxed roles, based on their recent achievements referred to above. The following observation report attempts to clarify the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of news creation and circulation among the *Alriyadh* website team and to elucidate the distinction between the two news vehicles under the control of the same mainstream company.

This third observation again ran from 10 pm to 2 am and took place in offices of the New Media Department, home of the website team, where seven employees were on duty. The two leaders, whose role was to guide the team technically and editorially, were Hani AlGhofaily and his deputy, Ahmed Al Swoilem. AlGhofaily's main responsibility was to supervise the website technically, including oversight of all server traffic, while his deputy was accountable for the content of the news items on the web. Working for this supervisory group was a technician, responsible for the transfer of hard copy content to the web and for placing it at the particular website address, [www.alriyadh.com](http://www.alriyadh.com), where comments could then be added by readers. The remaining employees whom the researcher observed in the website team were two comments controllers and two proofreaders. The researcher learned that the website team worked 24 hours a day throughout the year to feed both [www.alriyadh.com](http://www.alriyadh.com) and the newer [www.alriyadh.net](http://www.alriyadh.net) with the required content.

The nature of the duty cycle in the website offices was totally different from that of the print copy newsroom. The researcher also observed that during its routine work the team did not follow the same style book and terminology as for the paper version. For example, the printed version of *Alriyadh* would use full official titles whenever referring to members of the government or any other officials, senior or otherwise. Thus, a hard copy news item about the king of Saudi Arabia would use his full designation as "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Prime Minister of the Council of Ministers and Commander of the National Guard" (Khaldi, 2006), whereas *Alriyadh.net* would use a much shorter title, such as "King Abdullah" or simply "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques". When the researcher was in the

operational offices of the website team he observed that many news items used such shorter titles; when asked about this, the head of the department replied: “The nature of Alriyadh.net requires simpler and less complicated language. We took the initiative and waited for a comment from the management, but we haven’t received any, so we continue” (AlGhofaily, personal interview, 5 August 2012).



**Figure 5.8:** Hani AlGhofaily (right) reviewing a news item before the technician posts it online

During the four hours the researcher spent with the website team, he was not aware of any critical news that he should highlight. The team was busy with the coverage of the London Olympics, receiving the news from *Alriyadh* correspondents and international news agencies through the RAPID system mentioned earlier in this report. The researcher also noticed that the team paid considerable attention to the comments of readers, of which the website received around 7000 each day (Al Swoilem, 2009) and which were subject to strict censorship. The newspaper hired four comments controllers, two per 8-hour shift, selected through the personal relationships of existing members of the website team. The hiring process began with team members asking the people around them to recommend others whom they believed able to fill the position and to distinguish any violations in the comments. The website team adopted this means of recruiting comments controllers because of the nature of the job, which necessitated choosing people whom they could trust to handle the comments with awareness of the sensitivities involved (Hani AlGhofaily, personal interview, 5 August 2012). These controllers deleted and edited thousands of comments daily because of their importance

for the newspaper. Notwithstanding the strict censorship applied by the website team and the significant investment in financial and human resources, many published comments were still found unacceptable to the security authorities and some were deleted by the team two or three days after publication. During his observation of the website team, the researcher witnessed calls from the managing editor to the team leader discussing a published comment about which he had concerns.

It became clear that the response to unwanted comments did not stop at filtering them out or deleting them. The website team leader explained that the security authorities had asked him, via the editor-in-chief, to provide them with all available information on two people who had posted comments and published controversial information at different times. Responding to the security authorities' official request, the website team supplied them with full information about two commenters. The *Alriyadh* website required each commenter to provide the following information: his/her name, email address and the opinion he/she wanted to share with the public. In addition to this overt information, the website retained the internet protocol (IP) address from which each comment had come. The IP address, a numerical label assigned to each device (e.g. computer, printer) participating in a computer network that uses the internet for communication, allowed the security authorities to locate the commenters and to determine how to find them (AlGhofaily, personal interview, 5 August 2012).

While some aspects of censorship were thus seen to be very strict, the researcher learned that the website team was able to publish any non-sensitive news (not on important matters such as those related to government) on *Alriyadh.net* without undergoing the traditional approval process that was strictly applied to the print copy, as explained earlier. The website team, according to its leader, was empowered to run any light story for *Alriyadh.net* directly based on team members' judgment. When the researcher queried the fact that a colleague had posted a sports item without seeking permission internally from his leader or externally from the managing editor, the deputy director of the *Alriyadh* website explained: "They are familiar with what to publish without approval and what to seek approval for. We receive a reproach from the higher level sometimes, but small ones that don't stop us from doing what we are doing. The rhythm of electronic copy requires a different spirit" (Al Swoilem, personal interview, 5 August 2012).

The interesting thing about the website team is its contribution outside the mainstream media company which employs them via *Alriyadh*. The leader of the website had his own internet projects and activities, while his deputy had a successful independent blog and podcast, through which he was able to express his impressions without limitation. Hani AlGhofaily (personal interview, 5 August 2012) stated: “We have tried to convince the management to open blogs for our journalists and team but we have not been able to. That’s why our thoughts travel somewhere else”.

### **5.3 *Sabq*: an electronic newspaper**

The researcher decided to conduct an observation of the *Sabq* e-newspaper for a number of reasons, the most important being that it was reported to be the most visited website in the Arab cyber world, receiving seven million hits per day (Sabq, 26 August 2012), the most visited online newspaper in Saudi Arabia and the eighth most visited website in the country, after Google Saudi, YouTube, Facebook, Google, Windows Live, Twitter and Yahoo. No another local website competed with *Sabq* on readership and popularity (Alexa, August 2012).

The researcher selected *Sabq* as representing independent e-newspapers in Saudi Arabia, i.e. not subordinate to mainstream media companies like *Alriyadh*, which issue print newspapers and answer to the Ministry of Information, receiving routine letters of instruction from the ministry, and whose editors meet the minister periodically and accompany the king on his travels. (There are eight such print newspapers owned by mainstream companies, listed in section 1.6.2.) The only contact that independent e-newspapers have with the ministry is to obtain permission to practice electronic media activity, a recent initiative by the ministry to organize their relationships with 200 independent e-newspapers in Saudi Arabia (Samc, 29 May 2012). As the present study concerns the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia, it was important to include an independent e-newspaper and appropriate to choose *Sabq*, which has more online traffic than all other Saudi e-newspapers combined. The significance of conducting an observation of *Sabq* lies not only in its number of readers, but also in its relation with the Ministry of the Interior. A blogger, Ahmed Al Omran (27 September 2011), tweeted about the undisclosed relations between *Sabq* and Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, the Deputy Interior Minister

for Security Affairs, whose picture (Figure 5.9.) hung in the office of the owner and general manager of the newspaper. Many questions revolve around the relationship between the Ministry and this e-newspaper, because of the many scoops *Sabq* has had on security issues.



**Figure 5.9:** The picture of Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, Deputy Interior Minister for Security Affairs, in the office of the owner and general manager of *Sabq*

*Sabq* was founded in 2007 and because of its unique position has become an essential source of news in Saudi Arabia. Throughout the observation the researcher attempted to gain a better understanding of the way in which the paper created and circulated the news as a vital vehicle new to the country. He spent five hours in the *Sabq* offices in Riyadh, in order to identify the techniques used to gain its high degree of publicity and exposure. It was half a day filled with facts about an electronic newspaper enjoying a large number of readers and surrounded by many questions.

Before reporting details of the observation, it may be helpful to present some significant information about *Sabq*:

- *Sabq* was founded 2007 by Ali Alhazmi, who had been a technician at *Alwifaq Electronic News*, which was closed by the Ministry of the Interior.



- Having witnessed the large number of hits received by *Alwifaq* and its impact on the media landscape, Alhazmi decided to open an e-newspaper named *Sabq*, which means ‘scoop’ in Arabic, to focus on Islamic issues and security incidents.
- Ali Alhazmi is an employee of the Ministry of the Interior.
- Alhazmi was editor-in-chief of the newspaper until 2009, when he appointed a new editor and became the owner and general manager of the newspaper, making *Sabq* the first e-newspaper in Saudi Arabia to have an editor and a manager, while all the others, being relatively small concerns, had a single leader who combined the two positions.
- Mohammed Al Shehri, the new editor-in-chief, had worked for print and traditional newspapers before he joined *Sabq*. (All of the above information was collected in a personal interview with Mohammed Al Shehri, 7 August 2012.)
- Before the launch of *Sabq* there were few e-newspapers in the country, but its impact on media creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia was such that by 2011 there were 220 of them (Albehlal, 2011).
- Beside receiving a large number of hits and visitors to its website, *Sabq* had approximately 250,000 SMS subscribers in 2011, earning it about £84,000 a month as the most popular SMS news provider in the country (Argaam, 2011).
- *Sabq* has two deputy editors-in-chief: Lutfey Abdulataif and Mohammed AlTayer, who approve the news, while the editor-in-chief is responsible for strategic planning and approving every message from the *Sabq* SMS services.
- *Sabq* has the highest numbers of followers on Twitter among Saudi newspapers, whether print or electronic. It even has more followers than some international newspapers; for instance, *Sabq* had 966,245 followers on 12 September 2012, while the *Guardian* had only 568,335.

### 5.3.1 Setting

The researcher observed the work of *Sabq* on 7 August 2012 by arrangement with its editor-in-chief. The newspaper allowed him to take photographs without restriction and to record the interviews conducted during the observation, which again ran from 10 pm until 2 am. The rented offices, comprising nine rooms, were located in a commercial building in the centre of Riyadh. The general manager, editor-in-chief and chief financial officer each had separate offices, the remainder being allocated as follows: a



room for the assistant editors, a meeting room, an editing suite seating twenty people, a room for designers and technicians, an administrative office and a room for the deputy editors-in-chief. Figure 5.10 shows the organisational structure of *Sabq*.



**Figure 5.10: Organisational structure of *Sabq***

### 5.3.2 Observation

The researcher arrived at the *Sabq* offices on time for his appointment, but the editor-in-chief made him wait for 40 minutes next to his assistant. Nobody was in his office, but he may have been taking telephone calls while the researcher was waiting. The observation began with an interview with the editor-in-chief, which the researcher prefaced by summarizing the research project. Mohammed Al Shehri then answered all of his questions unreservedly. He stated that his career in Saudi journalism began as soon as he had graduated in political science. He worked for a traditional newspaper, *Alwatan*, for three years as political editor, then for a further three years as head of the political section. In 2007 he resigned and began work for a print newspaper under formation called *Al Dawliah*, but financial problems prevented it from going into production. He then joined *Shams*, a print newspaper addressed to youngsters, where he worked for a few months before beginning to contribute to *Sabq*. Ali Alhazmi, owner of *Sabq*, then invited him to be its first editor-in-chief, a role which he assumed in January

2009. The paper then had only five employees, whereas by the time of the interview this had risen to 119 in total, at the headquarters and throughout the country.

After the interview, Al Shehri showed the researcher around the offices and let him spend two hours in the newsroom to observe the process of producing the news. During this time he sat next to the researcher, who soon noticed that an editor was working on a news item regarding Sarah Attar, the 800 metre runner referred to in section 5.2.5 above as the first Saudi female to participate in the Summer Olympics. When the researcher enquired how *Sabq* was able to publish this news despite the Ministry of Information having directed all Saudi newspapers to avoid publishing any news about the participation of Saudi females in the London games, the editor-in-chief replied that he had received no such instructions from the ministry:

I read on Twitter that the print newspapers have received direction not to write anything about Saudi women's participation in the Summer Olympics in London, but as we are an electronic newspaper we don't receive such directions from the ministry. We publish what we want as long as we respect Islamic guidance, customs and traditions (Personal interview, 7 August 2012).

The meaning of 'Islamic guidance' became clear in the way that *Sabq* treated the news item about Sarah Attar. When the editor was satisfied with it, he asked the editor-in-chief to approve it. Al Shehri would not usually approve everyday news, but because he was in the newsroom at that time, the editor asked him to do so. He read it carefully and approved it without any correction, but ordered the editor to replace with the Olympic flag the picture of Attar which had been attached to the original translated interview from the CNN website. The editor then sent the email to a technician in the next room, ordering him to post it online as it was. When the researcher asked Al Shehri why *Sabq* had chosen to publish a picture of the flag rather than of Sarah Attar, he responded as follows:

We will never publish a picture of Sarah or any woman on our website. We follow our traditions and customs. We have never published any woman's picture since establishing the newspaper. We never ever broadcast any video containing music. I do not exaggerate if I say that our readers choose us over hundreds of newspapers because we are committed to Islamic directions and we will keep this identity, which makes us the leader of news in the country and the Arab world as well.

See what other Saudi newspapers gain because of their policy of publishing women's photos – they lose themselves and the readers too (personal interview, 7 August 2012).

A few weeks later, however, on 11 November 2012, *Sabq* published a story about the visit of the King's son, Mutaib bin Abdullah Al Saud, the Commander of the Saudi National Guard, to U-turn, a YouTube company founded by young Saudis of both genders to produce video materials targeting the younger generation in the country. The original coverage by *Sabq* of this visit was illustrated with a photograph of the U-turn group (Figure 5.11), modified to cover the faces of all females present. The e-newspaper later removed the photograph altogether, after receiving heavy criticism from its readers via Twitter and other platforms. The reaction of *Sabq* to such criticism indicates that having acted as gatekeeper prior to production by covering the female faces, it subsequently applied post-production gatekeeping in response to its audience, which can be seen as having become the new gatekeeper, as discussed in chapters 6 and 7. Figure 5.12 shows the same photograph without modification, as published by the *Okaz* newspaper in Saudi Arabia.



**Figure 5.11:** Photograph of the U-turn group as modified and published by *Sabq* on 11 November 2012, then later deleted

Source: *Sabq*



**Figure 5.12:** The same U-turn photograph as published in *Okaz* without modification

Source: *Okaz*

*Sabq* is not the only news vehicle to use post-production gatekeeping, which is often applied via Twitter. Feras Bugnah (@ FMB4), a popular Saudi video blogger, was detained on 19 October 2011, along with his crew, after his report on poverty in Riyadh was viewed hundreds of thousands of times on YouTube (Mackey, 2011). He is one of many Saudi microbloggers who have deleted their tweets in acquiescence to their followers, who have become their gatekeepers. He wrote on 2 November 2012 that “Twitter is a waste of time”. Following this short tweet he received widespread criticism from his followers, which he was unable to resist: “I deleted the tweet. I cannot stand it any more. This is not the only time I’ve deleted a tweet because of my followers’ feedback. There have been many” (Bugnah, personal interview, 3 November 2012). This is one example of many events which show how prevalent is the practice of post-production gatekeeping.

Another recent example of post-production gatekeeping in contemporary microblogging in Saudi Arabia occurred when Mohammad Alarefe, a Saudi religious leader, who has more than 3 million followers on Twitter, posted a tweet on 23 October 2012, criticizing the capability of Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Emir Of Kuwait. He received a flood of criticism from his followers, his tweet became the subject of headlines in many Arab newspapers and he was prevented from appearing on the national television

channels of many countries. In response, he deleted the tweet after a few days (Alweeam.com, 25 October, 2012).

There is thus widespread evidence that gatekeeping is being applied to the creation and circulation of news in Saudi Arabia today and that it affects electronic newspapers, blogs and microblogs as well as the traditional news media. It has acquired new characteristics in the digital age, including the novel process of post-production gatekeeping, which became clear to during the researcher's observations of both *Alriyadh* and *Sabq*.

During his visit to *Sabq* the researcher tried to confront its editor-in-chief about how he influenced the process of the production at *Sabq* after having worked for a liberal newspaper. The researcher asked him if he had changed his approach when he joined *Sabq*. After a period of openness while working for *Alwatan*, a print newspaper known as the most liberal in Saudi Arabia (Cablegatesearch.net, 8 Sept 2011), he now appeared to have moved from the left to the right. He replied:

I found that I was mistaken at *Alwatan* and I feel I am on the right path at *Sabq*. It's not wrong to make a mistake but it's wrong to keep making the same mistake. We have more than seven million hits every day, which indicates the love and trust we enjoy from the Saudi public. We have refused to publish advertisements worth millions because the advertisers want us to publish pictures of women. We prefer to sacrifice the money for the sake of our values and audience.

Later that night in the newsroom, the researcher witnessed an editor receiving a call from one of the newspaper's reporters and writing down what the reporter was telling him. When the researcher asked him about it, he stated that he had received news about the security forces arresting a person accused of terrorism two hours earlier; *Sabq* had taken the lead in publishing such news throughout the years. The editor edited the news item and sent it by email to the deputy editor-in-chief, who deleted some information, added other details, then sent it to the technician to upload it to the *Sabq* website. The researcher went directly to the deputy editor-in-chief to ask him about the changes he had made and the reasons for them. He replied: "I deleted the number of security personnel who participated in the arrest because we can't really know the exact number. I also added a few lines about similar situations which have occurred lately."

*Sabq* received news from its reporters by email and by telephone. It also had more than six reporters who did not write news items but transferred them to the newsroom by telephone. The approval process was very simple: all news went to the newsroom, where the editor first decided which items deserved attention and which did not. Once a news item had been edited, it would go to the deputy editor-in-chief, who would approve it and direct a technician to post it as a headline, as a news flash or as minor news within the *Sabq* news website.

The researcher asked the editor-in-chief about the informers and the unique relationship between *Sabq* and the Ministry of the Interior. He admitted that relations were close:

We're proud of our relations with the ministry. But we were blocked once for a couple of days because of a wrong news item we wrote about the ministry. The general manager and I met Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, the Deputy Interior Minister for Security Affairs, and he accepted our apology and ordered the website to be unblocked. A week later, the Deputy Interior Minister sent a letter to thank us for our progress in journalism and we published it as a headline (Personal interview, 7 August 2012).

The researcher then asked the editor-in-chief if it was true that he was a full-time employee of the Interior Ministry and he replied affirmatively. This motivated the researcher to ask him another question about the nature of relations between *Sabq* and the influential ministry, to which he answered, "It is based on mutual respect", without giving details.

The researcher observed that *Sabq* had two employees in the newsroom reviewing the comments. One of them, when asked about the number of comments he review, replied: "A lot". His role was to delete and edit them. When the researcher asked him about his criteria he said: "I have worked here for two years and have learned what the newspaper is allowed to publish and what not". In other words, his role was to apply self-censorship on behalf of the newspaper. The editor-in-chief interrupted to explain that *Sabq* had ten comments controllers: four working in the office and six from home, where they had access to the website (Personal interview, 7 August 2012).

After this meeting with the comments controller, the researcher was taken by the editor-in-chief for a farewell tour. In the administrative and finance offices, he noticed that



most of the employees wore full beards, like most religious men in the country. Figure 5.13 illustrates this. The researcher left the *Sabq* offices when the shift ended at 2 am.



**Figure 5.13:** These photographs of bearded men, taken in the *Sabq* offices, reflect the ascendancy of religious personnel in the newspaper.

## 5.4 Essam Al Zamil, microblogger

The importance of conducting an observation of a microblogger and specifically of a Twitter user lies in Twitter's remarkable global growth. Between April 2008 and April 2009, the number of Twitter accounts rose from 1.6 million to 32.1 million and this number continues to increase dramatically (Vascellaro, 2009). This growth has been a result of media attention and the fact that much breaking news is posted on Twitter first. Twitter has rapidly become a source of news. As the present study is concerned with contemporary news creation and circulation, it is difficult to ignore this promising contemporary news vehicle, whether in newsrooms or in society. Twitter has been rapidly adopted in newsrooms as an essential mechanism to distribute breaking news quickly and concisely, or as a tool to solicit story ideas, sources and facts (Hermida, 2010). UK national newspapers had 121 official Twitter accounts by July 2009, with more than one million followers (ibid). This statistic shows the growing role of Twitter in news creation and circulation worldwide, while its magnitude in Saudi Arabia may be due more to the scarcity of media platforms and to the prevalence of censorship. It is easy to illustrate how popular Twitter is in Saudi Arabia: the number of users recently jumped in one year from 115 000 to around 393 000 (Alarabiya.net, 7 May 2012).

The CEO of Twitter, Dick Costolo, declared in a recent interview with the *Los Angeles Times* (12 July 2012) that Saudi Arabia was the country with the fastest growing Twitter use by far:

Twitter has 140 million active users... Twitter is seeing some of its most torrid growth in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is the fastest-growing country with 3,000% growth last month. Half of active users log in every day. More than half of users are primarily accessing the service on their mobile devices ... It took three years and two months to send the first 1 billion tweets. Now 400 million tweets are sent a day. It takes 2½ days to send 1 billion tweets.

The numbers quoted above are evidence of the extremely rapid growth of this microblogging service, particularly in Saudi Arabia, where this new medium can be seen to have become a leading source of news, with great potential for the future. Twitter users in Saudi Arabia are not all young people, but represent all generations: a recent survey of 6100 Saudi internet users of all ages found that 87% of them used



Twitter as a source of news and to learn about what was happening in their country (Ahmed, 2012).

Most Saudi readers now find that they receive the news more promptly via Twitter than from the mainstream media because of delays imposed on the latter by restrictive censorship. For instance, Saudis were able to read the news and watch videos of the arrest of Saudi Shia reformist Nimr Bakir al-Nimr by Saudi security men on Twitter on a Sunday morning at 10:30, whereas the traditional media did not broadcast the news until that evening. A comment on the *Alriyadh* website, reacting to its publication of the news of the arrest of al-Nimr, stated: “It is too late. We read the news this morning and watched the video. Thank you Twitter” (Alriyadh, 8 May 2012).

The attention now given to microblogging services such as Twitter led the researcher to decide, as part of the present study, to conduct an observation of a microblogger, Essam Al Zamil, to illustrate how gatekeeping is relevant to contemporary news creation and its circulation on Twitter through him.

#### **5.4.1 Background of Essam Al Zamil**

Essam Al Zamil is a blogger, microblogger and columnist for the *Alyaum* print newspaper in Saudi Arabia. He is one of the most popular Saudi microbloggers based on his number of followers, having begun blogging and microblogging about information technology, as did most pioneer Saudi bloggers. He has a chemical engineering degree from Tulane University in the United States and runs a successful domestic IT company called Remal, whose success can be gauged by the fact that its export sales of social electronic games exceed the local market by 10 million dollars (Martin, 22 February 2012).

Al Zamil now rarely or never tweets about his business interests, however, having been inspired to follow a political path since hearing US President Barak Obama deliver a speech to the Muslim nation on 4 June 2009 in Cairo. Al Zamil had joined Twitter in February 2007 to connect with friends and to discuss common interests, but the Cairo speech was a turning point in his life and his vision of Twitter. He was struck by a particular passage in the speech: “America’s strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable. It is based upon cultural and historical ties, and the recognition that the aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that

cannot be denied” (Obama, 4 June 2009). This prompted Al Zamil to write an ironic tweet in English in response to Obama’s speech in Cairo: “If you care about Israel so much give them Florida and return Palestine to the Palestinians”. The Saudi microblogger had at that time around 200 followers, but this number increased dramatically after his Obama tweet. He states that the effective response to this single tweet was the most important element influencing his change of attitude towards Twitter. As he received a range of different responses and expressions from all over the world, he realized that microblogging could be a valuable tool to achieve many things. From that moment, he changed his microblogging techniques (Personal interview, 2 June 2012).

As of 1 July 2012, Al Zamil had around 158 000 followers, his new strategies having made him one of the most followed Saudi Twitter users. He has become more focused on social issues and leads successful campaigns, making headlines in Saudi print newspapers. His successful efforts for Saudi consumer rights have also led him to start campaigning politically. At the time of the observation, he was involved in a successful campaign, including a major contribution on Twitter, to cancel a meeting between Saudi businessmen and a delegation of Russian businessmen at the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry on Tuesday 12 June 2012, in protest against Moscow’s position on the Syrian uprising, as reported below in section 5.4.4.

To study Al Zamil’s technique of microblogging, his creation and circulation of posts and how he utilized the gatekeeping model in operating his account, the researcher conducted an observation following the pattern established by Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, who conducted an observation of an electronic activist during the US presidential election of 2008. The researcher met Al Zamil in London on 1 June 2012, during his preparation for delivering a conference speech on his microblogging efforts in Saudi Arabia. After the researcher had asked him to participate in the study and briefed him on the subject, Al Zamil agreed to allow him to observe him in his hotel room in London on two days: 2 June and 11 June 2012. These observations took place after Al Zamil had signed the consent form.

### **5.4.2 Setting**

Wherever Al Zamil goes, even outside Saudi Arabia, he takes his PC and his laptop, because he cannot microblog without two screens in front of him: one to tweet on and the other on which to check the facts. He never tweets via his smart phone, for reasons of accuracy, but he does use it to see his mentions and to reply to urgent questions. He takes microblogging seriously and treats it as a ‘profession’ (Personal interview, 2 June 2012).

The first observation lasted 105 minutes and the second 82 minutes, both in his hotel room in London, in front of his two screens. No one else was present during the observations.

### **5.4.3 First day**

The first observation started at 9 pm. Al Zamil opened the main Twitter page, then scrolled down his time line to see the updates coming from the 840 users whom he follows. After 10 minutes of checking his time line he opened his direct messages. He found seven unread messages from users whom he follows. (A Twitter user can receive direct message only from those other users whom he or she follows.) Four of these unread messages were asking him to participate in hashtags because of his influence and the number of followers he has. Al Zamil reported receiving daily three or four messages from people he follows, requesting him to join particular hashtags. During the first day of observation, he dismissed two hashtags immediately, telling the researcher that he was not interested, but without giving details. He was concerned about the third hashtag because of doubts about the credibility of the sender of the message. When the researcher asked him why he would question the credibility of a user whom he follows, he said, “Not every single Twitter user I follow do I trust. Sometimes I follow people to sense their reactions to different circumstances”.

In the case of the fourth hashtag, he was willing to participate as requested. He justified his prompt acceptance to participate by the fact that the message came from a relative whom he trusted. The hashtag was about the issue of ‘feminizing’ cosmetics and lingerie shops in Saudi Arabia, i.e. preventing men from being employed in such shops or from entering them unaccompanied by a woman, which the Ministry of Labour had approved and which the Grievance Board had then overturned. When he read his

cousin's invitation to follow the hashtag, he telephoned him to ask for further details. He then spoke for 16 minutes to the cousin, Mohammed Alzamil (@mohalzamil), who was the legal counsel who had won the battle with the Saudi Ministry of Labour to stop the feminizing of cosmetics and lingerie shops. The cousin's objection to the feminizing of these shops was rooted in his belief that it was part of an attempt by Saudi religious groups to prevent the mixing of men and women in all commercial premises in the country. Strict separation would start in cosmetics and lingerie shops and would then be imposed elsewhere (Aleqt, 2012). After speaking to his cousin, Essam Al Zamil explained that he was more eager than ever to support the hashtag, because of what his cousin had told him:

Mohammed has told me that the Ministry of Information sent an order to all Saudi print newspapers not to announce the news regarding the decision not to feminize cosmetics and lingerie shops in the country and my cousin thinks that by publicizing the Grievance Board's decision through Twitter, it will undermine the Ministry of Labour's effort to suspend the Grievance Board's decision.

He added that he was not in complete agreement with his cousin's attempts to prevent the feminizing of these shops, but that he was strongly in favour of the right of free expression and against the restrictive gatekeeping rules that the Ministry of Information had applied in this case; he would therefore do whatever he could to 'open the gate' for his cousin and others whom he felt deserved support in doing so.

Al Zamil retweeted to his 158 000 followers four of his cousin's tweets on the subject, helping to make the public aware of the latest decision and to fuel a debate among users regarding the topic, which had received a great deal of attention in Saudi society for a number of years, until the approval by the Ministry of Labour was revoked. The hashtag had been very slow before he retweeted, with around 130 contributions, but it then jumped to approximately 5600 contributions in just three hours.

During the first day of the observation, Al Zamil retweeted a comment by one of his followers, complimenting the Minister of Commerce, Tawfiq Bin Fawzan Al-Rabiah. The researcher asked him why he had retweeted this tribute while being critical of the government and wondered whether it was because both he and the minister were religious and had common interests. He denied that their shared religious background

was the reason for his retweet and asserted his admiration for the new minister, who had joined the Saudi cabinet early in 2012: “I met him and believe in his vision, but I am not sure about how he can handle the complicated issues confronting him”.

#### **5.4.4 Second day**

The researcher conducted the second observation of Essam Al Zamil at the same place, on 11 June 2012, beginning at 11 pm. As the period of observation began, he received a message with the hashtag ‘meeting of shame’ (translated from Arabic), referring to an attempt by Saudi Twitter users to stop a meeting between a delegation of Russian businessmen and a group of Saudi businessmen at the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in protest at Moscow’s position on the Syrian uprising. According to Topsy, a real-time search engine for social media, the hashtag was first used at 5 pm and there were very few contributions until Al Zamil started tweeting on it at 11 pm, when the number of mentions rose very sharply. Figure 5.14 shows the influence of his tweets on the hashtag.

The rest of the activity during the observation that day was related to this same hashtag. Al Zamil continued tweeting about it until he fell asleep and the researcher left his room, by which time his tweets on the subject had been retweeted 1249 times.

The next day, Al Zamil and the researcher woke to the news that the meeting had been cancelled in response to public pressure via Twitter (Saudi Gazette, 12 June 2012). That day, Al Zamil was the subject of many news items, referring to his contribution to the popularity of the hashtag, as a result of which he became more popular on Twitter and received more requests to support new hashtags, which can be seen as recognition of his media power.



**Figure 5.14:** The effect on the hashtag ‘meeting of shame’ of contributions by Essam Al Zamil, starting at 11 pm

## 5.5 Summary

This chapter has reported the observation of news operations at the *Alriyadh* print newspaper and the *Sabq* e-newspaper and of the process of tweeting and retweeting by a microblogger, Essam Al Zamil. It elucidates the researcher’s methodology and describes what he observed during this phase of the study. A number of crucial factors regarding the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia which have emerged from this exercise will be discussed in depth in the data analysis chapter, which follows.

## Chapter 6

### Analysis of Observations

#### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter offers an analysis of the data gathered during the researcher's observations of the print and online editions of *Alriyadh*, of the *Sabq* electronic newspaper and of a microblogger, Essam Al Zamil, aiming to show the relevance of gatekeeping in their creation and circulation of news. It highlights the various gatekeeping mechanisms applicable to the different news gates in Saudi Arabia. It also explores the impact on the production of the print version of *Alriyadh* of a set of communication routines, a crucial gatekeeping component, and identifies post-production gatekeeping as a significant influence on the online edition of *Alriyadh*. The analysis sheds light on social influence as a key gatekeeper affecting news creation decisions in the two Saudi newspapers under observation. This chapter offers examples from the newsrooms to illustrate the rise of the audience as gatekeeper in the process of news creation and circulation. It concludes by identifying a number of aspects of gatekeeping at *Sabq*, such as the filtering and pre-selection systems and the impact of religion on its production.

The following gatekeeping themes emerged from the observations and are analysed in turn in the remaining sections of this chapter.

- Communication routines
- Social gatekeeping and women's issues
- Governmental gatekeeping
- Audience gatekeeping
- Religious gatekeeping
- Personal attitudes
- Hard versus soft-copy gatekeeping
- Blocking
- Post-production gatekeeping.

## 6.2 Communication routines

Observation of the news process at *Alriyadh* confirmed that significant gatekeeping activity occurred in its newsroom. The first event that the researcher witnessed there illustrating the impact of gatekeeping on news creation and circulation was when the managing editor ignored the news that Saudi security forces had killed a gunman who had opened fire that day on a checkpoint near the palace in Jeddah of Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz, the interior minister, which was reported by international news stations and newspapers such as CNN and the *Guardian* and by independent domestic Saudi electronic newspapers, but not by Saudi print newspapers. The newsroom at *Alriyadh* avoided publication of the story by applying its communication routines, including calling the editor-in-chief, who was not at work at the time, to ask him what to do.

Shoemaker (1991) describes the gatekeeping process as involving movement through a channel from gate to gate, controlled either by a gatekeeper or by a set of communication routines. The routines employed by *Alriyadh* journalists guide the newsroom and create a number of different gates preventing the news from moving easily through the channels. This movement becomes particularly difficult at *Alriyadh* if the news concerns members of the royal family or key personnel in the cabinet, both of which applied to Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz, who was at that time the second most senior member of the royal family and deputy prime minister. He died on 16 June 2012 (Al-Shihri, 2012).

Mostyn (2002: 186) corroborates the strict gatekeeping rules operated by *Alriyadh*, stating that the Saudi press “is controlled by the 1982 Press and Publication Code which, as an Article XIX report points out, is far from conforming with international standards protecting freedom of the press”. Although the news item about the attack on Prince Nayef’s palace was passed by the international agencies to the *Alriyadh* email system (RAPID), to Twitter and to independent Saudi electronic newspapers, *Alriyadh* editors remained committed to their set of communication routines, which include the following:

- Not to publish any news item about members of the royal family or key government people that has not come through the official Saudi news agency, the SPA.



- To telephone the editor-in-chief, whether he is on duty, on leave or even on holiday, or outside his working hours, regarding any news item coming to the attention of the newsroom editors and related to royal family members or key government people, to inform him and to seek his directions on what to do.
- Important government news items, even those coming from the SPA, should be approved as to content and layout by at least one of the managing editors in person.

*Alriyadh* journalists appeared to apply these routines irrespective of whether they believed in them, seeing them as simply part of their job. Ahmed Al Swoilem, deputy director of the *Al Riyadh* website, wrote in Arabic on Twitter a reflection on the difficulties raised by such a procedure, finally acquiescing to what Lewin (1951) calls “impartial rules”, which Shoemaker (1991) refers to as “communication routines”. In his study of 16 newspapers in the 1950s, Gieber (1964) describes a situation which, despite the time that has elapsed, appears very similar to that of today:

The most powerful factor was not the evaluative nature of news but the pressure of getting the copy into the newspaper: the telegraph editor was preoccupied with the mechanical pressures of his work rather than the social meaning and impact of the news. His personal evaluation rarely entered into his selection process (Gieber, 1964: 175).

Clues, evidence and figures confirm the importance in Saudi Arabia of the internet, which has become an essential source of news, but this has not changed the policies of editors-in-chief of Saudi print newspapers towards news concerning the royal family or the government; they continue to treat these topics with the same caution and reticence. The researcher observed the journalists reading news of the attack on the interior minister’s palace in Jeddah through Twitter and various websites, but they were unable to change the communication routines that they had followed ever since the establishment of the 1982 publication code.

Mostyn (2002) asserts that modern technology and increasing exposure to the West appear to have strengthened controls and censorship in Saudi Arabia. His argument is that the pressure exerted by the internet on Saudi society has made the gatekeepers of its traditional newspapers eager to uphold their existing policy on sensitive news.

### 6.3 Social gatekeeping and women's issues

This section addresses the ways in which decisions concerning the inclusion of material related to women are made in Saudi Arabia, with particular reference to the social aspect of gatekeeping. Here, as elsewhere, there is considerable overlap between the political, social and religious domains. While the influences on gatekeeping of politics and religion are dealt with in separate sections below, we are concerned with these two domains here to the extent that they affect gatekeeping in the area of gender issues.

A crucial gender-related observation that the researcher made in the *Alriyadh* newsroom was that the editor of the arts section instructed a colleague to use Photoshop to cover the exposed flesh in a photograph of an Arab female singer before it could be published to illustrate a news item in the next issue. The gatekeepers of *Alriyadh*, in line with those of Saudi print newspapers as a whole, publish photographs of women with care. Indeed, Saudi print newspapers are very conservative when it comes to publishing pictures of females and to making references to females in general.

During the second observation of the *Alriyadh* print newsroom, the sensitivity with which news concerning females is treated in Saudi newspapers was made clear in the way that *Alriyadh* handled the participation in the London games of the first two women athletes ever to represent Saudi Arabia at the Olympics: Wojdan Shaherkani and Sarah Attar. The Ministry of Information had sent a letter to all print newspapers, explicitly stating that they were not to publish any news whatsoever about these female athletes, whether positive or negative, according to a key journalist in the *Alriyadh* newsroom and confirmed to the researcher by the head of the new media department at *Alriyadh*, Hani AlGhofaily. This event verifies the gatekeeping rule that the Ministry applies to Saudi print newspapers. The observational data that the researcher collected in the *Alriyadh* newsroom suggest that this significant position had not been weakened by the rise of the internet. The researcher noticed during his visits to *Alriyadh* that the strict gatekeeping rules applied there did not appear to apply to the two English-language Saudi newspapers: *Saudi Gazette* and *Arab News*. Some of the directions that these papers received from the information ministry appeared less strict than those applied to the domestic Arab language press. For example, with regard to the Olympic participation of Wojdan Shaherkani and Sarah Attar, they enjoyed the same freedom to

publish the news as the international press and were able to ignore the domestic ban imposed on this subject.

Abdullah AlAmri, who in 2000-2001 headed the arts section of *AlYaum*, a Saudi print newspaper, told the researcher that his former editor-in-chief had asked him to publish just three pictures of females in a whole week. AlAmri, who was responsible for filling one page daily in the arts section, received clear direction to publish only three pictures of females in his seven pages per week. He stated that he believed the editor-in-chief to be under pressure from the religious police and from religious leaders, who would visit him in his office and seek to influence his decisions, especially those related to pictures or news of women (Personal interview, 18 August 2012).

It is important to know how the decisions of newspaper gatekeepers are often affected by Saudi society, which has a long legacy of special traditions. An illustration of one such effect was given in a lecture delivered in October 2012 at King Saud University, Riyadh, by the former minister of Education, Mohammed Al Rasheed, recounting some of the difficulties he faced as education minister from 1995 to 2004. He stated that during almost his entire nine years as a minister he had repeatedly attempted to remove a reference in a religious textbook for Saudi students to a prohibition on taking photographs, but that he had been prevented from doing so by Saudi religious leaders, who warned against removing this text from Saudi curricula. The former minister claimed to have been obliged to abandon his attempts to remove the text because he was unable to overcome the power and respect accorded to such religious leaders by both the government and Saudi society (Alsharq, 4 October 2012).

Another more extreme examples of this effect is that the columnist Hussain Shobokshi was threatened with death for writing an article about allowing women in Saudi Arabia to drive cars (Aljsad, 2003). A related story regarding women's situation in Saudi Arabia appeared in 2013, when the religious police apparently began allowing them to ride bicycles. This news became a source of cynicism in much of the international media, especially since the world had been waiting for a decision to allow women to drive cars, rather than to ride cycles, reflecting the complexity of the situation of women in Saudi Arabia and the media in particular. As reported in the Passport blog of *Foreign Policy*, a Saudi daily, *Al-Yawm*, had cited an unnamed Saudi religious police official as

saying that women would now be allowed to ride bicycles in the country, but only for ‘entertainment’ purposes and if accompanied by a male guardian. Figure 6.1 shows a satirical response to this story by cartoonist Mohammad Sharaf (Hannun, 3 April 2013).



**Figure 6.1:** Cartoon accompanying the *Foreign Policy* blog post on Saudi women cyclists

Source: Hannun (3 April 2013)

A topic widely discussed inside and outside the country is the potential for Saudi clerics to change their language towards women and related issues, but in reality no such change is apparent. For instance, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah Al Sheikh, recently called for the personal photos of female university students that appear on their ID cards to be replaced by their fingerprints, on the grounds that the face (and eyes) of a woman are deemed to represent a great temptation for Muslim men (Ibrahim, 7 October 2012).

The strict censorship of Saudi newspapers is a reflection of what is happening in Saudi society. Thus, political and religious censorship play powerful roles in gatekeeping. National TV channels, for instance, prohibit the appearance of Saudi females except in accordance with strict conditions. In the same context, Marghalani, Palmgreen and Boyd (1998) investigate the utilization of direct satellite broadcasting (DBS) in Saudi Arabia, seeking to explain the preference of Saudis for foreign TV channels over national ones. Their study, in which questionnaires were administered to 495 Saudi

adults aged between 18 and 57 years and of both genders, indicates that a major causal factor was the strict censorship of the government-run TV channels. They found that this was similar to that applied to Saudi print newspapers, which in turn meant that Saudis favoured international newspapers as a source of news about their own country. On the subject of women, they state:

Another symptom of the religious and cultural censorship characterizing the government channels—the rare appearance of women on these channels—is at the root of the final DBS motive identified in this study, i.e., the desire to see females on television. This desire may be prompted among females by the need for more female role models with whom to identify, and among males by sexual curiosity (Marghalani, Palmgreen & Boyd, 1998: 312).

Saudi females are not only hard to find on national TV channels but invisible in Saudi newspapers. During his observation at *Alriyadh* the researcher saw no females on the premises. All of the staff were men and no female voice was heard. Like other Saudi newspapers, *Alriyadh* has a separate section for women, whose roles are superficial and intangible. One *Alriyadh* journalist, who preferred to remain anonymous, perceived the females in his newspaper as playing minor roles: “They work in remote areas from men. They don’t deal with the newsroom and approval procedure. They have been employed for decades by the newspaper, but in reality they are not working” (Anonymous interview, 4 August 2012).

Le Renard (2008: 612) reports a study conducted in Saudi Arabia, in which she illustrates the situation of females at work:

In contemporary Riyadh, women are rarely visible in “mixed” public places, which does not, however, mean that their activities are limited to the domestic sphere. In fact, the segmentation of Saudi society into different spaces, where access is restricted either to men or to women, should not be confused with a division between a male public sphere (for production) and a female private sphere (for reproduction) [...] Most of the female activities in Saudi Arabia have developed inside a “female sphere” consisting of a mosaic of new female spaces where entry is forbidden to men. Indeed, a large majority of Saudi women do not—at least officially—frequent male spaces except to visit their male relatives...”.

An incident clearly illustrating the gender segregation that exists in Saudi Arabia occurred during a trip to the Middle East by four American congresswomen in January 2012, described by ABC News as follows:

The congresswomen—Republican Reps. Diane Black of Tennessee, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, Kay Granger of Texas and Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia—traveled there with five congressmen to talk with government officials about how the region assesses the threat of a nuclear Iran. When the lawmakers asked to use the bathroom after a lengthy visit to the Saudi Defense Ministry, they ran into an unexpected challenge: no women’s restroom (ABC News, 25 January 2012).

The Saudi press did not cover the story, but Saudis received a flood of news about it from international news agencies and American TV news stations. While the incident itself illustrates the nature of segregation in Saudi Arabia, the failure of the domestic press to cover the story reveals bias in how Saudis receive certain news about politics or gender. The gatekeepers would not allow such news to pass through the gate under any circumstances.

Thus, the Saudi press deals with women’s issues with great sensitivity. This caution is related to the culture of a society which has strong reservations about the appearance of women in public places and their working outside the home, and which views with suspicion the subject of men mixing with women. In reality, a man in Saudi Arabia will rarely see women other than his relatives, since by tradition they live and work in isolation from men. This physical isolation is transferred automatically to their presence in the press. Indeed, Saudi culture influences the gatekeepers by preventing images of women from appearing not only in newspapers and on TV but even in shopping catalogues. The Swedish *Metro* newspaper (1 October 2012) compared the original version of an IKEA home products catalogue with the Saudi version, which showed exactly the same photographs of interiors and products, but with all pictures of women erased (Figure 6.2).



**Figure 6.2:** Above, a photograph widely published in an IKEA catalogue; below, the same photograph, distributed only in Saudi Arabia, with the woman's image removed

Source: Associated Press

The Associated Press news agency stated in its international coverage of this story:

Even a female designer from the company was airbrushed out of a cover picture on the Saudi edition, while her three male colleagues remained in the picture. Sweden's Minister of Trade Ewa Björling argued that the retouched images are a "sad example that shows that there is a long way to go in terms of equality between men and women in Saudi Arabia (The Telegraph, 1 October 2012).

IKEA regretted its decision to erase women's images from the Saudi catalogue, having received worldwide criticism of its policy towards "gender equality". While the company has not revealed its reason for altering the pictures, this event indicates the difficulties of publishing pictures of females in Saudi Arabia, where even an international company may find itself having to compromise its values in order to have its publication distributed in the country. The IKEA catalogue affair offers an example of the power of gatekeeping in Saudi society. Brown (1979: 579) substantiates the impact of society on publishing as follows:

Gatekeeping in the area, far from being a random process, faithfully mirrors the perceptions of society...The gatekeeper's decisions, while made subjectively, are closely attuned to audience interests and the environment which sparks those interests rather than being largely a product of random pressures of the publication process.

In Saudi Arabia, the gatekeepers in newspapers are sometimes less stringent than societal gatekeepers. A Saudi editor was attacked by three men in the street because of an article he had written in favour of empowering women in political life (Jpnews, 2009). Not only does society punish traditional print journalists because of what they have written; Saudi bloggers sometimes face similar reactions. Abdullah Al Rabeh, who publicised in his blog the campaign for Saudi women to be able to vote in the municipal elections of April 2011, received threatening emails telling him to stop covering this campaign, which he ignored until someone hacked his blog and deleted most of the posts that he had made in the last three years. Al Rabeh, a student of finance, admitted that the hacking of his blogs had forced him to change his way of covering events concerning females or indeed not to write about them at all, to avoid a repetition of the attack (Personal interview, 1 October 2012). In this way, societal gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia has forced many newspaper journalists, bloggers and microbloggers to stay



away from certain topics in order to avoid trouble. This confirms how influential societal gatekeeping remains in this traditionalist culture, notwithstanding the presence of the internet and the broad freedoms it offers. What happens at *Alriyadh* is a reflection of what Saudi society wants, whether the decision to modify photographs comes from inside or outside, illustrating the substantial nature of societal gatekeeping.

#### **6.4 Governmental gatekeeping**

The researcher also witnessed during his second observation of *Alriyadh* an illustration of the power of gatekeeping over contemporary journalism in Saudi Arabia, concerning the long process followed by a news item between the RAPID email system, which is the main source of news at the paper, and its eventual publication, as it passed from channel to channel. The item in question, as reported in section 5.2.5, concerned a fatal accident involving a bus carrying pilgrims. The story was sent by the newspaper's correspondent in Al Madinah, in western Saudi Arabia. When the reporter in the newsroom received the news, he called an official of the Directorate of Civil Defence to confirm it and to ask for a statement. This indicates that the newspaper would not publish news of this importance without the approval of a senior official, because it might affect the image of the country; this reticence in turn is evidence of a strong relationship between the government and the newspaper, which influenced the editor's decisions.

Later, after the newspaper had received official confirmation and a statement from the Directorate of Civil Defence, the local shift leader asked a reporter in his section to edit the item, making it ready for publication. The reporter did what he was asked to do, but the managing editor, who received the news from the shift leader, considered the item too lurid and asked him to tone it down. The leader therefore asked the reporter to join him in his room for a short meeting, where they considered two alternative headlines which would not be thought too explicit: "Accident on Al Madinah motorway" and "Speeding led to bus accident on Al Madinah motorway". The managing editor selected the first of these because it had nothing about it likely to encourage people to read the item and might even reduce its readership, in contrast to any headline giving an indication of the number of people killed and injured in the accident, which would be likely to attract more people to read it.

The process the researcher observed at work in the *Alriyadh* newsroom thus accurately reflects the classical description of gatekeeping given by White (1950) as constituting the steps involved in the filtering of information, which originates with a source and ends with the public, after passing through a number of different “gates”.

Filtering the news and toning down the material is common practice in journalism in Saudi Arabia, as part of gatekeeping process. A contemporary example is the resignation of Abdullah Jaber from *Al Jazirah* after six years of working for this print newspaper as daily cartoonist. He told the researcher that he had resigned after the newspaper made changes to three of his cartoons without consulting with him. On the third occasion, on 23 September 2012, the topic was Saudi National Day, which fell on the day of publication, and the cartoon showed a poor man waving two Saudi flags in the foreground, while in the background the two main components of the traditional male costume, a *thawb* and a *ghutrah*, are seen hanging on a coat-stand. The original artwork, reflecting the economic crisis facing Saudi citizens, showed these two items of clothing as patched and threadbare, but the gatekeeper changed the concept of the cartoon totally by replacing them with apparently new and unblemished ones, as shown in Figure 6.3. Jaber immediately resigned from the newspaper in protest. He claimed (Personal interview, 7 October 2012) that the gatekeeper often rejected his cartoons (at the rate of about one cartoon per week) without clear justification.

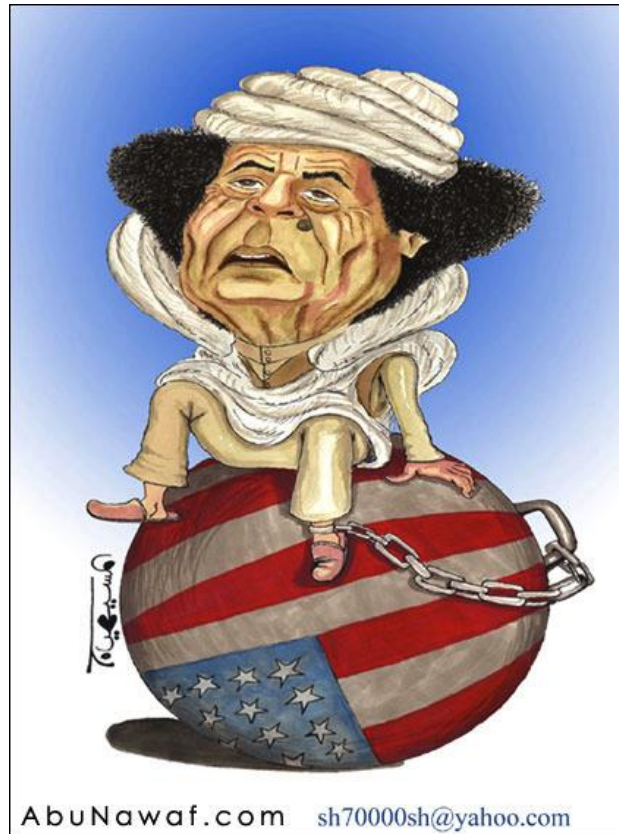
Jaber asserted that the personal attitudes of the gatekeeper lay behind many of his judgments, which is consistent with the argument of Shoemaker (1991) that personal attitudes strongly influence gatekeeping decisions. Jaber supported his claim regarding personal attitudes by stating that having once had a cartoon rejected, he resubmitted it without changes while the main gatekeeper was on holiday and had it approved and published without reservation (Personal interview, 7 October 2012).



**Figure 6.3:** A cartoon by Abdullah Jaber as published by *Al Jazirah* on 23 September 2012 (above) and as originally drawn by the artist (below)

Source: Abdullah Jaber, personal correspondence

However, Saudi gatekeepers are more likely to reflect the government's preferences than their own personal attitudes. For example, Jaber also described receiving direct instructions from the managing editor of *Al Jazirah* in 2006, at the beginning of his career with the newspaper, to not to submit sarcastic drawings of any Arab presidents. These instructions changed during the Arab spring, a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests beginning in the Arab world in December 2010, when the gatekeeper allowed him to draw President Bashar Hafez al-Assad of Syria and Muammar Gaddafi, then leader of Libya, because they had strained relationships with the Saudi government, whereas he was refused permission to draw Hosni Mubarak, former president of Egypt, or Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, former president of Tunisia, who were political refugees in Saudi Arabia. *Al Jazirah* refused to publish drawings he had made of these figures and warned him to not draw them again, because of their personal relations with members of the Saudi government, unlike al-Assad and Gaddafi, with whom Saudi leaders had had various conflicts throughout the years (Personal interview, 7 October 2012). Thus, a satirical drawing of Gaddafi was perfectly acceptable to the gatekeeper in 2011, but a decade earlier it would not have been. Indeed, the Saudi cartoonist Suliman Al Musiheej was banned from drawing for two months in 2000 because he had drawn Gaddafi in *Alriyadh*. The offending cartoon and a copy of the letter from the Ministry of Information banning him from drawing are reproduced in Figure 6.4. This evidence indicates that some of the changes which occur in gatekeeping decisions are affected by the political relations of Saudi Arabia and by developing political situations, which affect the gatekeeper's reactions to many topics and individuals.



٢١٢/١٤٢٠هـ  
٢١٤٩/١٠/١١

(عجل جذا)

**سعادة رئيس تحرير جريدة الرياض** المحترم

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته .. وبعد:

إشارة إلى الرسم الكاريكاتيري المنشور بجريدة الرياض في العدد رقم ١١٨٥٣ الصادر بتاريخ ١٤٢١/٩/١٠هـ للعقيد معمر القذافي بريشة الرسام الكاريكاتوري/ سليمان المسيهيج .

أمل إيقاف الرسام الكاريكاتوري / سليمان المسيهيج عن الرسم في هذه الجريدة أو غيرها لمدة شهرين وذلك اعتباراً من تاريخه مع لفت نظره إلى عدم تكرار نشر مثل ذلك مستقبلاً .

وتقبلوا خالص تحياتي .....

**وكيل الوزارة المساعد للإعلام الداخلي**

مسفر بن سعد المسفر

٥٩٠٣٨

صورة مع التحية لسعادة الوكيل للشئون الاعلامية

صورة مع التحية لسعادة المشرف العام على مكتب معالي الوزير

صورة لرؤساء تحرير الصحف/ الجزيرة - الاقتصادية - المدنية - عكاظ - البلاد - الندوة

الوطن - المسائية - الرياضية - اليوم - الجريدة - المساء - الصباح

صورة للصحافة المحلية مع الأساس

صورة للصادر

AbuNawaf.com

**Figure 6.4:** A cartoon of Muammar Gaddafi, then leader of Libya, and below it a letter from the Ministry of Information ordering the banning of the Saudi cartoonist, Suliman Al Musiheeji

Source: Abdullah Jaber, personal correspondence

The reasons for banning a cartoonist or writer from publishing in Saudi newspapers are sometimes clear and sometimes not. For instance, Qenan Al-Ghamdi, former editor-in-chief of the print newspaper *Alsharq*, claims that he was directed by a high government official, without explanation, to remove his name from the newspaper masthead for some months. He continued to exercise his powers as editor-in-chief during that period, but was hesitant to make decisions on major topics because of his uncertainty about his future as leader of the newspaper. Al-Ghamdi asserted that he had been recommended to the post by the minister of the interior (Alresalah, 2013).

The interview with Al-Ghamdi cited above confirms that the Saudi government has a significant role in choosing editors-in-chief and in deciding newsroom policy. Removing an editor's name from the masthead acts as an indirect warning which undermines his power, weakens his decisions and deters him from taking bold positions, thus tending to make the newspaper's content safe, bland, conformist and free from controversial topics. Al-Ghamdi's evidence indicates that the government has the upper hand as a gatekeeper in Saudi newsrooms.

## **6.5 Audience gatekeeping**

The cartoonist Abdullah Jaber admits that he was also affected by audience censorship: "After the internet spread I avoided drawing any cartoons mocking religious leaders, in order to avoid direct and harsh reactions from the public. I won't change my beliefs and thoughts, but I don't want to clash with the audience" (Personal interview, 7 October 2012). This willingness to follow the direction set by the audience is not limited to cartoonists, but also applies to many Saudi bloggers, microbloggers and journalists. An observer of Saudi journalists will note a strong contradiction between their public products and their personal beliefs. Jaber's assertion that he avoided certain topics not just because of the newspaper's own gatekeeper, but because of audience whims, confirms the growing role of audience gatekeeping in the journalistic landscape of Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

The introduction of new technologies has granted the audience a new form of authority over the process of news selection which amounts to a kind of gatekeeping. Allen (2005) perceives the audience to have acquired a crucial influence in selecting the news

and dictating its content, so that it has become a new gatekeeper. The rating of particular news items encourages editors to give the audience what it wants and to focus on specific items that receive high ratings. Newsrooms follow the desires of their audiences and produce material accordingly. The use of ratings has developed in the digital age because of the speed which new technologies have brought to news production and the growing influence of ratings has granted the audience more power. Today's media is significantly different in that the audience is no longer content to view and consume content passively. People can participate by various means including ratings and comments, making the audience an ever stronger gatekeeper, as will be discussed in the remaining chapters.

It would indeed be difficult to deny the impact of the audience on Saudi writers, journalists and bloggers. The public plays a crucial role in the digital age as e-newspapers, blogs and microblogging create ever more space in which people can express themselves, but at the same time this weakens other rights that Saudis once enjoyed. For instance, prior to the growth of the internet in the country there was a large gap between media personnel and their readers. There was no direct and immediate communication between them except by telephone, mail, fax and other traditional channels of response. In the contemporary news creation industry in Saudi Arabia, the reality is very different. There is now a powerful set of tools by which the audience can respond, first via readers' comments in the electronic newspapers, then in blogs and later through Twitter, which is not moderated, so that the impact is immediate, direct and therefore much stronger than before. Ali Al-Dhafiri, a Saudi writer and presenter on the Aljazeera TV channel, told the researcher that he had deactivated his Twitter account many times because of the responses of his followers and other Twitter users to what he had written (Personal interview, 4 May 2012). He thinks that the space he has in the traditional media means that he is not forced to follow his followers, but is free to follow what he believes. He argues that the more followers a journalist has, the more of a self-censor he becomes. Al-Dhafiri, who is famous for criticizing the performance of Arab governments in his columns and TV programmes at Aljazeera, is much softer in tackling these issues through his contributions to microblogs. Nevertheless, he reports having deleted a few tweets after posting them, which indicates the influence of the

audience and the role of gatekeeping in microblogging, which is considered one of the primary news sources in Saudi Arabia (Gynn, 2012).

Deleting a tweet in response to audience reaction is a practice not associated only with Saudis; on the contrary, it has become an international or indeed a global phenomenon. For instance, Kim Kardashian, an American socialite and reality television star, tweeted on 16 November 2012 to her 16.6 million followers that she was “praying for everyone in Israel” following the news that Israelis and Palestinians were shooting at each other again, with rockets aimed at Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, air strikes on Gaza and a possible new ground war in the offing. When her first tweet produced a backlash of angry, violent tweets, including death threats, she added that she was “praying for everyone in Palestine and across the world!” More angry tweets and death threats followed. She then deleted both tweets, according to Twitchy.com, which archives deleted tweets, and directed her followers to a “message for you guys” on her blog in which she “owned up” and apologized in a thoughtful, even graceful, statement:

I decided to take down the tweets because I realized that some people were offended and hurt by what I said, and for that I apologize. ... I should have pointed out my intentions behind these tweets when I posted them. The fact is that regardless of religion and political beliefs, there are countless innocent people involved who didn't choose this, and I pray for all of them and also for a resolution. I also pray for all the other people around the world who are caught in similar crossfires (Puente, 2012).

Kardashian's reaction to the responses she received to her tweets can be seen as representing a new gatekeeping element, post-production gatekeeping, which Twitter creates and which is discussed in more detail in the final section of this chapter. Thinking of the potential for such angry audience responses will feed the socially governed self-gatekeeping that has arisen in the digital age. It can be expected that Kardashian will in future avoid discussing certain topics, following the flood of anger and threats against her when she expressed her feelings in this instance.

Marwick and Boyd (2011) conducted a study into Twitter audiences and found that some users simply would not broach certain topics on Twitter because they took into account the feelings of people close to them who followed them on Twitter. The study shows that some Twitter users did not engage in discussion of certain subjects,



including parents, employers and significant others. Some respondents assumed that anyone could potentially read their tweets, making it impossible to discuss controversial or personal topics. The authors conclude that followers have a very strong influence on the production of microbloggers and the ways in which they tweet.

The impact of audience gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia is obvious from the changes which have occurred in the style of writers and bloggers since Twitter has become a popular news vehicle in the country. Many Saudis who write for traditional newspapers change their selection of topics in order to try to please the majority of Saudi Twitter users, whom they perceive as conservative, by criticizing liberals and tweeting about the Hadith and Quranic verses. Ahmed Al Omran (SaudiJeans), describes such writers as “riding the wave” (6 January 2012). He offers Saleh al-Shehi as an example of those whom he calls the Wave Riders. Al Omran relates an incident that happened in December 2011 during the Second Intellectual Forum in Riyadh, which was organized by the Ministry of Culture and Information. The forum, which took place in the Marriott Hotel, included discussion panels and meetings with senior government officials. It also gave attendees a chance to meet and talk with each other. According to Al Omran, the forum passed almost unnoticed, until al-Shehi, a daily columnist with *Al-Watan*, tweeted this: “What happened in the Marriott lobby on the margins of the intellectuals forum is a shame and a disgrace. I believe that the so-called cultural enlightenment program in Saudi Arabia is centered on women” (Al Omran, 6 January 2012).

This tweet generated some angry responses from other people who attended the forum. Author Abdo Khal, winner of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, considered to be the Arabic equivalent of the Man Booker Prize, tweeted: “Your allegation has crossed the line. Either you prove it or face trial for libel. You should apologize before things get there” (Al Omran, 6 January 2012). Al-Shehi was thus subject to criticism, but he also received high praise from a religious leader and leading Arab microblogger, Mohammad Alarefe, mentioned in section 5.3.2. Alarefe visited al-Shehi at his home in Rafha (Figure 6.5), around 880 km from his own home in Riyadh, and offered support and recommendation on Twitter because al-Shehi had defended Islam and fought debauchery, according to a tweet by Alarefe. Al-Shehi’s followers soon tripled in number because of the support of this religious leader, reaching more 100,000 within

hours, after months during which he had struggled to compete with famous writers in Saudi Arabia who have hundreds of thousands of followers (Alweeam, January 2012).



**Figure 6.5:** Sheikh Mohammad Alarefe visits Saleh al-Shehi's house

Source: Alweeam

Al Omran (6 January 2012) argues that there has recently been a wave of conservatism that al-Shehi and his supporters seem more than happy to ride. The war to gain more followers means trying to please Twitter users and so be added to their following lists, which leads many Twitter users to abandon what they believe in and to follow what their followers believe in, in order to please the majority. This is a new element of gatekeeping which has come to prominence recently in Saudi Arabia, where it has become a social phenomenon. Marwick and Boyd (2010) report that some popular Twitter users have maintained that they have had to monitor continuously their output and responses to it in order to meet the expectations of their followers.

The desire to please the audience, to increase the number of followers and to gain publicity has led many microbloggers to explore high technology tools to help them to identify their followers' desires in order to fulfil their expectations, even if these do not match their own beliefs. Marwick and Boyd (2010) interviewed Soraya Darabi, the

social media strategist for the New York Times, who admitted that she followed her followers' interests with the help of technology which made her "constantly aware of my followers". She reported using tools including Twittersheep, developed by her company's research and development staff, to track what her 472,000 followers were interested in. Knowing that her audience was interested in media and marketing, she focused on those topics. At the same time, she tried to interject her own personality and passions, such as music, to retain an authentic voice. Marwick and Boyd (2010) quote her as saying:

Say you're an author, a book aficionado. Most [of your followers] have tagged music as a passion. You might want to throw them a bone about your favorite song. There are a lot of Venn diagram overlaps in this community. It's to your advantage to be as much as part of a community as possible, which means engaging with people's interests.

An indication of the complex relationships among audience, social, political and religious influences on gatekeeping is given by the present researcher's observation that both print and online editions of *Alriyadh* obeyed the instruction of the Ministry of Information not to publish any news whatsoever about the participation of Saudi female athletes in the London Olympics, whereas *Sabq*, as an independent electronic newspaper not officially under the control of the ministry, did cover their participation, but without pictures of the two athletes in question. Its editor-in-chief, Mohammed Al Shehri, offered the following justification for not following the normal journalistic practice of complementing the text of a story with images if available:

We are proud of our Islamic religion, which prevents us from publishing pictures of women. We are happy with what we are doing and the audience is as well. The statistics show that we are the most visited news website in the country and this gives us a mandate to keep going this way (Personal interview, 7 August 2012).

An analysis of this statement indicates the great impact of the audience on the gatekeeping process. The same editor-in-chief once worked for *AlWatan*, a liberal Saudi newspaper, which did publish pictures of females, but he had changed the way he handled the news according to the audience perspective, which the newspaper followed, on his own admission.

Remaining with the question of gatekeeping responses to gender issues, another current event verifies the influence of the audience on the gatekeeping process at *Sabq*, which as reported in section 5.3.2 first covered the faces of women in a photograph published to illustrate a story about the U-turn group, then felt obliged to remove the image entirely in response to audience criticism via Twitter and other platforms, including the *Sabq* comments section. This was the first time that *Sabq* had ever published a picture of women and it is notable that all of the females concerned were veiled. The incident confirms two significant facts emerging from this research into gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia: the growing impact of the audience and the rise of post-production gatekeeping. It is also clear that while electronic newspapers enjoy a wider margin of freedom outside the control of the Ministry of Information, they are nonetheless not free of gatekeeping. They are to some extent hostage to their readers' beliefs and vulnerable to great pressure if they publish material which does not match the principles of the majority of the audience, as happened with the U-turn group photograph.

Singer (1998) argues that gatekeeping in the new media environment is challenging, as there is some evidence that new media people see gatekeeping as evolving rather than disappearing. She offers a number of examples to show how gatekeeping continues to play an important role in the creation and circulation of news, such as via reader feedback on online stories, which might mislead the online journalist who takes such comments for granted and builds on them. Singer predicts that gatekeeping may shift during the digital era from the newsroom to the readers, who select stories indirectly. As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, the observations analysed here offer some evidence in support of this prediction, made fifteen years ago.

## **6.6 Religious gatekeeping**

During his visit to *Sabq* the researcher also observed that the comments sections were very closely monitored. *Sabq* employed ten comments controllers: four working in the office and six from home, where they had access to the website. This amounts to gatekeeping of the process of creating and circulating comments by moderating them. When the researcher asked the editor-in-chief if he had a list of topics or conditions regarding the comments, he replied that "the most important thing is religion. We do not

allow anyone to scoff at religion”. Religion also had a significant role in the application of gatekeeping to the creation and circulation of news at *Sabq*. The researcher observed, as illustrated in Figure 5.14, that the majority of its employees wore full beards, like most religious men in the country. Religious Muslims grow their beards in accordance with the Sunnah and consensus, according to islamqa.info (1997). One of *Sabq*’s managing editors, who chose to remain anonymous, claimed that “having religious staff at the newspaper is a plus. Society trusts them and our readers are part of this society. Their roles contribute to the high number of hits we receive” (Personal interview, 7 August 2012).

Indeed, Saudi people tend to trust clerics more than anybody else, making religion an essential gatekeeper in politics and in the newsrooms. Thus, Jamal Khashoggi, editor-in-chief of *Alwatan*, was reportedly dismissed in 2003 because of pressure on the government from religious leaders (Arab Press Freedom Watch, 28 May 2003; AlAwad, 2010: 84).

Religion plays a major role in many aspects of life in various countries, but in Saudi Arabia its power is particularly strong and effective. For instance, in 1964, Prince Faisal bin Abdulaziz al Saud seized power from his brother, King Saud, with help from the senior clergy. He had the crucial backing of the Ulama (religious leaders), including a fatwa issued by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, calling on King Saud to hand power to his younger brother. Indeed, Prince Faisal was backed by the entire religious establishment, with which he maintained a close relationship throughout his rule (Duncan, 1953).

The examples cited here and in earlier sections of this chapter, particularly that on women, offer anecdotal evidence that religious leaders play a substantial role in Saudi Arabia, that their positions are widely respected and that their pronouncements are seen to be difficult to ignore. Like any member of Saudi society, press gatekeepers will be directly or indirectly influenced by their opinions, whether they agree or disagree. It is difficult to stand against the eye of a storm. The education minister referred to above, who enjoyed considerable trust and power by virtue of his position, was unable to do so.

The utterances of religious leaders cited in this chapter and their effects indicate that religious discourse remains dominant and influential, that religious leaders adhere to the

same principles in which they have believed for many decades and that the press gatekeepers continue to be rigorously bound by the same traditional values, which are in turn inspired by the faith of these clerics, despite the major changes and developments that have taken place in the world around them.

The influence of religious preferences in selecting news is common gatekeeping practice around the globe, not just in Saudi Arabia, according to an international study by Okigbo (1990: 8-9):

About half of the journalists admit the effect of prejudice and personal tastes in their news selection. Four out of the six journalists from The Guardian and only one out of the five from National Concord admitted these influences; so did two each of the five people from the New Nigerian and the Nigerian Standard. Journalistic objectivity is an ideal which many aim at but only few achieve (Dennis 1978). Many journalists attempt to achieve it through balance and equal representation. In answer to the question on prejudice in news selection, the original Mr Gates had replied: "Prejudice in news is a constant, as long as I can come up with 'equal space' and 'play'. I have had to overcome some personal feelings as far as politics and religion are concerned by the 'equal' treatment. One should be strictly neutral and I feel that I am neutral."

## **6.7 Personal attitudes**

While most of the main factors influencing gatekeepers' decisions can be seen as external, it is important also to consider the effects of personal judgment. Berkowitz (1997: 53) points out that "news represents the outcome of a reporter's expert judgment and personal motivation", while White (1950) identifies the personal characteristics which may affect the gatekeeper's decisions surrounding selection or rejection of a news story as follows: age, gender, income, social class, education, religion and self-confidence.

Personal attitudes to religion are seen to have affected some of the decisions of the *Sabq* newsmen and are arguably also of momentous importance in the microblogging context. It is clear from the observation that Al Zamil was selective as to his participation in Twitter hashtags. His decisions to support some hashtags and ignore others indicate his adoption of the gatekeeping model as explained by Shoemaker (1991): a gatekeeper determines which items will enter the channel and pass through the gate and which will

not. In Al Zamil's case, he decided as gatekeeper which hashtags to pass on in his direct messages to his many tens of thousands of followers on the timeline and which to ignore. The observation reveals that he used his personal judgment by deciding to participate in his cousin's hashtag over the others. In other words, he was applying the gatekeeping assumption presented by White (1950) in his claim that Mr Gates's personal attitude had a great impact on his selection of news.

This is supported by a study which Flegel and Chaffee (1971, cited by Shoemaker, 1991) made of reporters at two newspapers, one described as Liberal and the other Conservative. The authors departed from traditional gatekeeping studies by asking reporters directly how much they were influenced by their own opinions and by those of editors, readers and advertisers. Reporters on both papers indicated that they were most strongly influenced by their own opinions, followed by those of their editors, readers and advertisers:

Thus we may say that they ignored external social pressures, including those within their own occupational bureaucracies, but did not ignore their own personal convictions—that this process was apparently a very conscious one... A professional reporter should recognize his prejudices so that he can take them into account in striving for objective reporting. Objectivity is no less of a goal in reporting because it is not invariably achieved (Cited in Shoemaker, 1991: 25-26).

During the observation, Al Zamil did not explain why he chose not to participate in certain of the hashtags that he was invited to support, but perhaps by not participating he was in fact exercising his power to achieve a particular goal. Lukes (2005) emphasizes that one can achieve the appropriate outcomes without having to act. In Al Zamil's case, by not contributing to some hashtags he was helping them to die sooner than they would otherwise have done.

The information which Al Zamil provided regarding his meeting with the Minister of Commerce, Tawfiq Al-Rabiah, also indicates the importance of microbloggers for Saudi officials and confirms how significant microblogging is for both the public and the decision makers, reflected in the aspirations of the latter to build relations with popular microbloggers. Thus, Al-Rabiah can be seen as seeking to influence the perception of his posts through personal emotion, which is part of the gatekeeping process.

The results discussed above support the hypothesis of the significance of gatekeeping in the process of microblogging, by employing its elements in tweeting or supporting hashtags. The observation of Essam Al Zamil shows that he was following the gatekeeping model, because he followed routine procedures which acted as guidelines for his Twitter operation. Shoemaker et al (2001: 233) define gatekeepers as “either the individuals or the sets of routine procedures that determine whether items pass through the gates”.

## **6.8 Hard versus soft-copy gatekeeping**

The focus of the third observation of *Alriyadh* was on the online edition, which was run differently from its older print sibling. The first indication the researcher had of this during the observation was that most of the members of the team running the website had IT backgrounds but little experience in journalism, unlike the print newspaper team, most of whom were journalists. The team was headed by Hani AlGhofaily, who as noted in section 5.2.6 was a specialist in programming and IT who had founded many successful entertainment and governmental websites. Since he joined the newspaper in 2008 he had built and developed a team of people with similar backgrounds. The nature of the online operation meant that the team had little involvement in editing, its role being to supply the website with design and to transfer the print material to the web. Nevertheless, the growth occurring in online editions of newspapers had given the team more space to exercise journalism and inject their input gradually. The impact became clear at the end of 2011, when *Alriyadh* replaced its existing site, which was merely an archive of the printed copy, by launching the *Alriyadh.net* website, which carried updated news around the clock. This step allowed the *Alriyadh.net* team to deal with the news from the wire agencies, editing items before posting them on the web. Later, they began to publish sports results with videos. Receiving no complaints from the newspaper management, they then began to write entertainment news items about programmes on their favourite TV channels, which received great attention on the web. The deputy head of the website team, Ahmed Al Swoilem, explained that not receiving criticism from the management had encouraged them to go beyond publishing agency news and football results (Personal interview, 5 August 2012).



The researcher observed that the team's way of producing the news on the web differed from that of the print newspaper team and that the process was shorter. The head of New Media Department could approve news items and sometimes no approval was needed, whereas those in the print newsroom had to go through a lengthy process involving a restrictive gatekeeping procedure, as explained above. The Alriyadh.net team thus appeared to enjoy the trust of the management, allowing them to take advantage of the speed of the news to steadily 'push the envelope'. Many studies have shown the influence of the internet on traditional gatekeeping processes. Its impact is obvious even in the case of one newspaper. The processes and restrictions applying to the print version are different from those affecting the online edition, which justified the decision to conduct an additional observation of the online edition, to explore the differences between them.

Cassidy (2006) argues that the advent of the internet offers the possibility that journalists' gatekeeping roles could change significantly. A survey of the online editors of 203 daily newspapers found that nearly all (98 percent) agreed that journalistic ethics and standards should be the same for both print and online editions. However, almost half (47 percent) said that the high speed at which a story can be posted online has cut down the time spent on verifying the facts of a story before it is published, while 30 percent felt that the online versions of daily newspapers were not as likely to follow the general ethical standards as were the print versions. These results indicate that the online gatekeeping process is less stringent than that applied to print.

Similarly, the researcher's observations of the *Alriyadh* print journalists and their online counterparts lead to the conclusion that the latter enjoyed a relatively relaxed gatekeeping process, which was clearly noticeable in the way in which they produced their material. An example is the use by the printed version of full titles whenever referring to members of the government or other officials, senior or otherwise, while the online version ignored this formal convention, giving only the person's position and name, without unnecessary titles. The deputy head of the website team explained that such breaks with the stylistic traditions followed by the print version were made in response to the need of the online version to cope with rapid changes as news was updated and to how digital readers wanted to read stories:

Copying the same process and style would drive the reader away from our web. The readers of the print newspaper are different. They hold the newspaper and read what catches their eye. The competition is between the topics in the newspaper they are holding, whereas on the web it's more threading. If readers are bored by a news item because of lengthy titles we may lose them, given the many choices they have online, while the print newspaper reader has limited choices and the possibility of keeping him or her is greater. That's why we don't follow the same conventions (Al Swoilem, personal interview, 5 August 2012).

Singer (1998) offers evidence that online journalists see their gatekeeping roles as evolving, rather than disappearing, with the advent of the internet. In a case study of online personnel at three newspapers, she found that online journalists saw themselves as interpreters of the large volume of information available to online readers. Similarly, Kovach and Rosenstiel (cited by Cassidy, 2006) note that because of the internet, the concept of journalists applying judgment as to what constitutes news is more important than ever. They argue that journalists no longer decide what the public should know, but instead help audiences to make order out of the information with which they are presented, a function which is essentially a combination of the interpretive/investigative and disseminator roles.

These findings provide encouragement to keep looking for the growing role of the audience in the digital era, as discussed above. Gatekeeping still occurs, but is shifting progressively from the author to the audience. The audience is the new gatekeeper, deciding what journalists write and what they delete as well. An anonymous member of the Alriyadh.net team reported that the team had deleted many items in response to comments from readers (Personal interview, 5 August 2012). Thus, while the original gatekeeping process was centred on the pre-production stage, with the advent of the internet it now also takes place after production. The researcher observed that *Alriyadh* had four comment controllers, two per eight-hour shift, who deleted and edited thousands of comments daily because of their importance for the newspaper. Notwithstanding the strict censorship applied by the website team and the significant investment in financial and human resources, many published comments were still found unacceptable to the security authorities and some were deleted by the team two or three days after publication.

During observation of the *Alriyadh* website team, the researcher witnessed a call from the managing editor to the team leader to discuss a published comment about which he had concerns. When the researcher asked the team leader if it was normal to receive such a call regarding a comment, he replied that he often received queries from his superiors about comments on the website. He acknowledged that his team removed some of these in response to the feedback that he received from the management and added another significant factor, which was the Interior Ministry's request for information, including IP addresses, enabling it to identify two people who had posted comments and published controversial information at different times (Personal interview, 5 August 2012). These observations evoke the theme of post-production gatekeeping, which is discussed further in the final section of this chapter.

As discussed in sections 3.9 and 3.10, some authors have insisted that gatekeeping is vanishing, to be replaced, for example, by what Bruns (2005) calls 'gatewatching'. However, there have been many recent indications that gatekeeping still operates in the digital age. The researcher's observations of various different new technological media forms suggest that in Saudi Arabia in particular, the gatekeeping model has actually been strengthened and provided with new elements in addition to the original format. The *Sabq* observation emphasizes that gatekeeping retains its key importance in the process of news creation and circulation in the online landscape in Saudi Arabia, as *Sabq* is one of leading electronic newspapers in the country. The findings are consistent with those of Singer (1997) concerning the importance of gatekeeping in online news production. She quotes the bureau chief of an online edition of a British newspaper as describing the process of selecting and creating news on the web in a way which confirmed that gatekeeping continued to influence this process: "We still have to gather the news; we still have to write it; we still have to edit it" (ibid: 79).

The remaining two sections of this chapter deal with aspects of soft-copy gatekeeping which emerge from the observations and the above analysis: blocking and post-production gatekeeping.

## **6.9 Blocking**

A contemporary gatekeeping mechanism which operates in the process of news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia and which applies specifically to soft copy is blocking.

The *Sabq* observation revealed that this e-newspaper had been blocked after publishing inaccurate information about the Ministry of the Interior. In Saudi Arabia, the blocking system is a key gatekeeping device in relation to the internet. Many online journalists, bloggers and microbloggers moderate their tone in order to avoid blocking and to ensure that their output remains accessible to the general public. The Saudi government controls the information its citizens can readily access on the World Wide Web through a sophisticated filtering system that draws upon commercial software from the United States (Secure Computing's SmartFilter) for technical implementation and site blocking suggestions, expert local staff for operations and additional site identification, and input by Saudi citizens to identify over- or under-blocking according to stated filtering criteria.

The OpenNet Initiative is a collaborative partnership among the Citizen Lab at the Munk Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto, the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School and the Advanced Network Research Group at the Cambridge Security Programme, University of Cambridge. In 2004, it conducted a study of internet filtering in Saudi Arabia, reporting the following:

Saudi Arabia achieves its control over the content users can access by placing proxy servers between the state-owned internet backbone and servers in the rest of the world. Requests from Saudi ISP users must travel through these proxies, where they can be filtered and blocked. The Internet Services Unit (ISU) of the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) maintains the firewall and its content filters. If a Saudi internet user tries to access a page blocked by the government, the requested page is "dropped"; instead of showing the page, the user's computer displays a "sorry, the requested page is unavailable!". Previous research by ONI collaborators identified Secure Computing's SmartFilter software as the commercial filtering technology Saudi Arabia uses as a source of "black lists" and method of blocking access. The Saudi filtering system uses default rules for blocking access – if a specific URL is not listed in the black list, but its parent domain or directory is blocked, the filtering system will block that URL (OpenNet, 2005).

Figure 6.6 shows the 'page unavailable' message referred to here.



**Figure 6.6:** The block message

Source: King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology

Laidlaw (2010: 267) suggests a modified definition of gatekeeping to take account of the advent of the internet: “A gatekeeping process might involve selecting which information to publish, or channelling information through a channel, or deleting information by removing it, or shaping information into a particular form. The gatekeeping mechanisms include, for example, channelling (i.e. search engines, hyperlinks), censorship (i.e. filtering, blocking).”

## 6.10 Post-production gatekeeping

This chapter has discussed a number of aspects of gatekeeping arising from the researcher’s observations, all of which confirm its significant role in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. Among these, however, it could be argued that one of the most significant themes, representing a major finding of the study, is that of post-production gatekeeping. This theme reflects the changes that the internet has introduced into the contemporary news process, leading the researcher to revisit the longstanding theory of gatekeeping and to amend the original model in order to accommodate recent developments in journalism.

The observations discussed above indicate that post-production gatekeeping now plays a substantial role as an innovation of the digital age which is activated after the story and comments on it have been produced and approved. It became clear during the *Alriyadh* observation that a blogger, microblogger or commentator might produce

whatever material without the intervention of a gatekeeper, but that the gatekeeper might appear after the event, requiring that the material be deleted and its author identified. This occurred, for instance, when in response to audience pressure the *Sabq* e-newspaper deleted a photograph showing females and when the security authorities asked *Alriyadh* to supply the IP addresses of people posting comments. Another example referred to in the observation chapter is that of Sheikh Mohammad Alarefe, who deleted his own tweets about the Emir of Kuwait in response to a strong official and public reaction. Likewise, the Saudi microblogger Hamza Kashgari deleted and apologized for his tweets deemed insulting to the Prophet Mohammed and was later imprisoned.

Many such cases of post-production gatekeeping have occurred in the digital era and deserve attention because of their recent impact on news production. Years ago, the news process focused on pre-selection, whereas nowadays there is a significant concentration on what happens both before and after production. This trend applies not only narrowly to Saudi journalism, but broadly to all media throughout the world. For example, The *Mirror* reports that X Factor singer Rylan Clark recently deleted a tweet in tribute to Margaret Thatcher, after being reminded of her role in introducing Section 28 and her general disdain for gay rights. Clark tweeted: “Getting a bit of backlash about Thatcher, maybe I’m not up on history” (Ledger, 2013).

Thus, deleting posts to microblogs and websites or editing them after production in response to various pressures can be seen as significantly influencing news creation and circulation today, to the point where post-production gatekeeping has become an important phenomenon in the digital age. Evidence uncovered during the present study draws attention to this gatekeeping theme and sheds light on it.

In Saudi Arabia, the phenomenon of post-production gatekeeping goes beyond the mere deleting and editing of online material: the Saudi authorities also pursue microbloggers and e-journalists through their postings and publications. In the original model, the traditional gatekeeper may be seen as protecting the producer by not publishing his/her material, thus helping him/her to avoid arrest or blacklisting in the country concerned, whereas the contemporary news producer in Saudi Arabia may be the target of direct punishment after production. Iman AlQahtani, a Saudi journalist, states on Twitter (14

February 2013) that the Saudi security authorities arrested a 28-year-old microblogger, Bader Thwab, “because he follows dissenting users and writes statements criticizing the royal family”.

In the digital era, people everywhere—in the West as well as the Middle East—notice radical changes in online published material from day to day. They may wake in the morning to find that the online version of a specific news item has changed overnight. People delete their posts or edit them and sometimes even remove a website or deactivate a microblogging account, for many reasons. On 19 January 2013, Robin van Persie, a Manchester United footballer, deleted his Twitter account because other users were tweeting abuse at him (Eta, 2013).

Prior to the rise of new media technology, a newspaper could hide its own mistakes or ignore angry reaction to them, because limited numbers of people were aware of them, but the wide availability of electronic discussion forums, followed by the prevalence of interactive website tools and of social network sites, have made it impossible to suppress such reactions and have forced many media outlets to respond hurriedly by changing or removing material in order to assuage public anger.

For instance, *Sabq*, considered a conservative Saudi e-newspaper, as discussed earlier in this chapter, has removed many items because of its mistakes and pressure from its readers. One such article, which was deleted eight hours after publication, was about a bag on sale in Saudi Arabia bearing a slogan written in English: “Girls want to have fun”. The newspaper wrongly stated in the article (reproduced in Figure 6.7) that the translation into Arabic of this slogan was a phrase meaning roughly “the girls want to be the target of fun”, in other words, to be toys for men. The author of the article considered this offensive and appealed to the government to prevent shops from selling such bags. The translation error was made into a hashtag on Twitter, which forced *Sabq* to delete the topic. The interesting point here is that before it was deleted, the article attracted no comments about the wrong translation; instead, all of the comments that were received focused on thanking the newspaper for paying attention to this subject, which confirms the powerful role of post-production gatekeeping at *Sabq*.



**فهد العتيبي- سبق- جدة:** فُوجئ أحد المواطنين بحقيبة نسائية تُباع علناً داخل أحد مراكز التسوق الأسري للملابس بمحافظة جدة، مكتوباً عليها عبارة خادشة للحياء باللغة الإنجليزية بعد تفسيرها عربياً، فيما صُدم بأن بين أحرف العبارة الخادشة "لفظ الجلالة"، في الوقت الذي تساءل فيه عن ضياع الرقابة من الجهة المسؤولة؛ ما دفعه لإعادتها إلى المركز ورفض شرائها.

وكانت الحقيبة المعروضة مع مجموعة كبيرة مماثلة تُباع بداخل مركز للتسوق بجدة، كشفها المواطن شاكر العتيبي، حيث تحمل عبارة "الفتيات تُريد أن تكون مُتعة"، باللغة الإنجليزية بعد ترجمتها عربياً، وبعد تدقيقه بحروفها اتضح له "لفظ الجلالة"، في استهانة من الشركة المُصنعة لوضعه مع تلك العبارة الخادشة للحياء. وتُمنى المواطن "العتيبي" من الجهات المسؤولة، إيقاف بيع تلك الحقائب النسائية، وتُتبع من تولى توزيعها وجلبها ومُحاسبته.

**Figure 6.7:** The illustration and text of an article which *Sabq* deleted on 6 March 2013 in response to criticism from microbloggers

Singer (1998) has suggested that academics should re-evaluate gatekeeping theory in response to changes brought about by internet technology. Although the interactive features of the websites might at first appear to eliminate the role of gatekeeping in the news media, the reality seems to be that it is evolving rather than disappearing. The evidence adduced by the present study confirms that certain changes which have occurred in the media landscape, such as post-production gatekeeping, do indeed require the modification of the original theory by the addition of an element to



accommodate the fact that these developments have become common practice in the media today.

## **6.11 Conclusion**

This chapter has offered an analysis of the observations reported in chapter 5, of the work of the print and online editions of *Alriyadh* and of *Sabq*, an e-newspaper, and of a microblogger, Essam Al Zamil. The findings identified various aspects of gatekeeping that influenced the process of news creation and circulation in both newspapers, including a set of communication routines, social influence, the audience, the Saudi government, blocking and religious belief. The study also found that a significant factor was the post-production gatekeeping activity of the national security authorities, requiring newspapers to provide them with the IP addresses and full details of people leaving comments on their websites. The analysis confirms the continuing relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, it appears to have increased in importance and in scope, as new elements have accompanied the advent of the internet, which reflects the growing role of gatekeeping in the digital era. The next chapter concludes the empirical part of the thesis by presenting and analysing data collected during a series of interviews conducted for the present study.

## Chapter 7

### Interview analysis

#### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter offers an analysis of the data collected by means of seven interviews that the researcher conducted with Saudi media producers who have contributed to the contemporary Saudi media landscape. The interviewees and the interview questions are listed, then the data analysis is presented in the form of a discussion of the following themes: online gatekeeping, Twitter gatekeeping, patriarchy and social gatekeeping, audience gatekeeping, post-production gatekeeping and globalized gatekeeping.

#### 7.2 List of interviewees

The interviewees are introduced in some detail in the methodology chapter (section 4.10.2), where their selection is justified. Here, they are listed with brief reminders of their relevant functions and experience.

**Ahmed Al Omran** of Saudi Jeans ([saudijeans.org](http://saudijeans.org)) is a Saudi blogger and microblogger.

**Manal Al-Sharif** is a Saudi columnist who used microblogging services in 2011 to help start a campaign for women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia.

**Iman AlQahtani** is a former print newspaper reporter and microblogger.

**Fouad Alfarhan** is a Saudi blogger.

**Salman Y Aldossary** is the editor-in-chief of the Saudi *Aleqisadiah* print newspaper.

A member of the **Saudi royal family** who wrote for a print newspaper and participated in a microblogging service agreed to participate anonymously.

An undersecretary in the **Saudi Ministry of Information** also requested anonymity.

### 7.3 Interview questions

In order to elicit their views on matters related to the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia, the researcher addressed the same set of questions to each of the journalists, bloggers and microbloggers, derived from his own experience in these three roles. In particular, he drew on the many gatekeeping activities that he had witnessed throughout his career, first as a full-time journalist for print newspapers and later for an electronic newspaper, allowing him to frame questions designed to investigate deeply this complex area. He also made use of ideas encountered during his reading of background material for the study, which allowed him to reflect perspectives different from those of his own experience but which have had a significant influence on the gatekeeping process as applied to newsrooms and to other media platforms. The questions included some inquiries related to participants' background and to their methods of creating and circulating the news, to confirm and challenge them in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomena under examination. Having been set out in chapter 4, the questions are repeated here for convenience of reference:

- Are blogs and microblogging platforms free of gatekeeping? Why do you think this? Do you write in them what you believe without hesitation or any sort of censorship, whether external or internal? Why is this/is this not the case?
- Have you ever changed your mind about posting a blog or tweet because you thought it would anger somebody, whether from your family or externally? Please provide examples if possible. Can you explain why you have or have not changed your mind in this way?
- Is the audience the new gatekeeper? Why do you think this is/is not the case? Does it dominate how and what you write? Either way, why is this the case?
- How do you produce your media work? Can you illustrate the usual routine you follow when you deliver an article, blog or tweet?
- Do you change your style of expression according to the platform you are writing for, whether a print newspaper, blog or Twitter? Why?

- Are you afraid of your account or site being blocked over a post you have contributed? Why?

## **7.4 Online gatekeeping**

Prior to analysing the interview data, it is important to indicate that online gatekeeping is a subject which has received attention from many researchers from all over the world, such as Barzilai-Nahon (2006), Hargittai (2000; 2003), Cassidy (2006) and Singer (1997; 2006; 2008). These authors and others assert that technology has introduced new gatekeepers into the media landscape, significantly changing the way that gatekeeping functions; but notwithstanding these changes, it continues to have a great influence on the processes of news creation and circulation. Among the new players in the gatekeeping function suggested by the above researchers are search engines, RSS and comments censorship, while the present study has identified further components such as post-production gatekeeping, patriarchal gatekeeping and Twitter gatekeeping, which will be discussed extensively throughout this chapter.

To begin this chapter it is appropriate to cite a resolution by the Council of Ministers regarding the gatekeeping of internet activities in Saudi Arabia, including the news media, as this puts into context the nature of state censorship as applied to media production in the country. According to the interviewee from the Ministry of Information (2 May 2013), the resolution was issued on 12 February 2001 and remains in force. The resolution (Council of Ministers, 2001) states:

All internet users in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia shall refrain from publishing or accessing data containing some of the following:

- Anything contravening a fundamental principle or legislation, or infringing the sanctity of Islam and its benevolent Shari'ah, or breaching public decency.
- Anything contrary to the state or its system.
- Reports or news damaging to the Saudi Arabian armed forces, without the approval of the competent authorities.
- Publication of official state laws, agreements or statements before they are officially made public, unless approved by the competent authorities.

- Anything damaging to the dignity of heads of state or heads of accredited diplomatic missions in the Kingdom, or harming relations with those countries.
- Any false information ascribed to state officials or those of private or public domestic institutions and bodies, liable to cause them or their offices harm, or damage their integrity.
- The propagation of subversive ideas or the disruption of public order or disputes among citizens.
- Anything liable to promote or incite crime, or advocate violence against others in any shape or form.
- Any slanderous or libellous material against individuals.

Furthermore, certain trade directives stipulate that all companies, organisations and individuals benefiting from the service shall observe the following:

- Not to carry out any activity through the internet, such as selling, advertising, or recruitment, except in accordance with the commercial licenses and registers in force.
- Not to carry out any financial investment activity or offer shares for subscription, except when in possession of the necessary licenses to do so.
- Not to promote or sell medicines or foodstuff carrying any medicinal claims, or cosmetics, except those registered and approved by the Ministry of Health.
- Not to advertise or promote or sell substances covered by other international agreements to which the Kingdom is a party, except for those with the necessary licenses.
- Not to advertise trade fairs or organise trade delegations, visits or tourist tours or trade directories except with the necessary licences.

All private and government departments, and individuals, setting up websites or publishing files or pages, shall observe and ensure the following:

- Respect for commercial and information conventions.
- Approval of government authorities for setting up websites or publishing files or pages for or about themselves.
- Approval of the Ministry of Information for setting up of media-type websites which publish news on a regular basis, such as newspapers, magazines and books.

- Good taste in the design of websites and pages.
- Effective protection of data on websites and pages.

The above resolution, issued by the Council of Ministers, which is the highest executive authority in the Kingdom, establishes state control of internet use and reflects the fact that in the digital age, the function of the Saudi gatekeeper has become more stringent and complex. Its monitoring is no longer limited to a narrow focus on the participants and contributors to the production of materials and news, as was the case in the past; the opening phrase “All internet users ... shall refrain from publishing or *accessing* ...” [emphasis added] makes it clear that its scope now extends to encompass the readers or viewers who consume that news.

Jawad (2013) asserts that the Saudi government “has some of the strictest internet practices in the world. Criticism of the government, the royal family, or religious leaders and their decisions tends not to be tolerated and does not pass the censors. In some cases, it can lead to journalists being banned and news offices closing.”

Norris (2004) reviews the press regulations in force in more than 135 countries around the world and notes: “Governments in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, among others, commonly place serious restrictions on press freedom through official regulations, legal restrictions, and censorship. This practice remains more difficult in cyberspace, but state-controlled monopolies exert control over access and content” (cited in Alghamdy, 2011: 21).

In the print age there were specific and clear sanctions against violators of policies, but the situation has changed since the internet revolution, as mentioned above, so that in the digital era the gatekeeper has more authority and power than was previously enjoyed. This has reduced the clarity of the legislation and resulted in the varying penalties for writers and journalists, bloggers and microbloggers which this research has revealed. Among the many events and names discussed in the previous chapter is the case of the microblogger, Hamza Kashgari, an example of those who have been arrested and imprisoned because of their online contributions, while others who have acted similarly have not been punished in the same way.

The resolution of the Council of Ministers cited above reflects a lack of clarity regarding the Saudi state's stance on internet users, mirroring the reality of the media scene in the digital age in Saudi Arabia and reflecting the dominant influence of gatekeepers over the mechanism of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. The themes emerging from the interviews discussed below indicate the growing role of gatekeepers and their importance in the country today.

### **7.5 Twitter gatekeeping**

The interviewees agreed that gatekeeping was taking place in the microblogging services and all of the participating microbloggers explained how they applied self-gatekeeping. Fouad Alfarhan, who was once jailed because of his blog posts and is now comparatively conservative when using Twitter, justified his performance by stating:

Twitter is 100% monitored and logged. You can contact Twitter to access data through the public stream service Twitter offers. I know for sure that the Saudi government has done that to monitor people's activities on the microblogging website. I also know for sure that you can buy all tweets by country since the first day Twitter was launched back in 2006 and I know they have done that. I tweet carefully because I know for sure my account activity is monitored and logged. This highly influences the way I phrase my opinions. Their monitoring has created a self-gatekeeping inside me without my intention to do that. It just happened over time (Personal interview, 15 September 2012).

Ahmed Al Omran expressed a similar point of view regarding Twitter. He described how he dealt with microblogging gatekeeping by explaining his experience with this platform:

I try my best to write without thinking about gatekeeping, internal or external, but I'm also aware that in a country that does not respect free speech I cannot be completely free to publish everything that I want. The question that I seem to tackle all the time with my writing is: how far can I go with this without landing in jail? I would always try to go as far as I can, I would always try to test the limits for free speech and I would always attempt to push the red line a bit further (Personal interview, 10 September 2013).

Similarly, the microblogger Iman AlQahtani observed that microblogging in Saudi Arabia was facing many forms of governmental gatekeeping. She claimed that the government had warned Saudis many times against drifting to Twitter and that the Grand Mufti had released a statement warning of the consequences of using Twitter. AlQahtani asserted that the Saudi government considered Twitter an imminent danger and that it had therefore decided to apply several forms of gatekeeping to it (Personal interview, 25 January 2013).

The government has confirmed its monitoring of Saudi Twitter users. The Saudi Minister of Information, Abdel Aziz Khoja, disclosed recently that his ministry was monitoring Twitter with other governmental partners and that the large number of users made this difficult (alarabiya.net, 14 February 2013).

Another microblogger, Manal Al-Sharif, asserted in interview that there were 300 full-time employees of the Saudi Ministry of the Interior acting as gatekeepers by monitoring Twitter, her source being a speech given at a conference in Ferrara, Italy in 2012 by an Emirati microblogger, Sultan al Qassemi. Al-Sharif claimed that the role of these employees was to submit reports about Saudi Twitter users whom the government suspected of posing a threat to the country or who criticized the government (Personal interview, 15 December 2012).

Al-Sharif further claimed in the interview that her own bosses at the state-owned oil company were also monitoring Twitter and gatekeeping her Twitter production by intervening to tell her what tweets she could or could not post:

When I was working for Saudi Aramco, the company was my Twitter account gatekeeper. My boss was always calling me to remove a tweet because he thought it was inappropriate and he asked me many times to close my Twitter account. One of the reasons I left the company was because of the way Aramco was gatekeeping my twitter account and deciding what I should post and what I should not post (Personal interview, 15 December 2012).

The member of the Saudi royal family whom the researcher interviewed confirmed that gatekeeping was applied to microblogging, but from a different perspective. While some bloggers and microbloggers criticised the government and certain organisations in both the public and private sectors for acting as gatekeepers, the royal interviewee, who



contributed to a print newspaper and participated only occasionally in microblogging, expressed a different point of view regarding gatekeeping and Twitter:

Twitter is full of gatekeepers. Before, as a writer for a print newspaper, I needed to convince the editor-in-chief of my idea to guarantee that my article would be published, whilst nowadays, especially in microblogging services, in Twitter, it's difficult to convince everybody about what you believe and think. The less serious gatekeepers in Twitter will let you publish what you want but see what happens later. The others will keep fighting you until they win. I admit I've deleted many posts because of negative reactions and pressure I received from readers. In the beginning I tried to discuss with them to reach an agreement, but they keep campaigning and bringing more supporters to the subject, then I lose the ability to reply and give up. The print newspaper which I write for is free by far, compared with Twitter in my opinion. There are no hashtags everyone can create, old or young, to destroy the name of anyone they hate or disagree with. Twitter in Saudi Arabia constitutes a strange phenomenon. It's supposed to be a source of freedom, but I see it as a space for limited ideas which please one category and anger the rest. If you want to enjoy a life of Twitter writing, covering, commenting freely, you need to register with Pseudonymous or lie by riding the same wave which mocks and criticizes the government. Personally, I rarely contribute to Twitter. Whenever I post anything, I face all manner of opposition. How do you think I could have the motivation to write and share anything in this kind of atmosphere? It's a deceptive freedom. I am sure that the print newspapers in this country don't allow people the freedom of speech they need, but nor does Twitter. I've tried many times to fit into the microblogging environment, but I couldn't. The hashtag is the modern Saudi gibbet and the more followers you have the more powerful you are. These are the contemporary gatekeepers who control the Saudi media landscape today (Personal interview, 2 February 2013).

Therefore, many Saudi microbloggers try to convince others who have more followers to participate in particular hashtags, thus strengthening their campaigns. This issue has been discussed comprehensively in chapters 5 and 6 in relation to the observation and analysis of the production of the microblogger Essam Al Zamil.

But the Saudi government has not remained unresponsive towards the Saudi hashtag movement. It has followed a dumping policy, by which it has loaded the hashtags with many messages to distract and divert their main message, according to Almohia (2013), whose research into a number of hashtags has revealed a number of suspicious facts. He

asserts that hundreds of accounts contributing to a particular Twitter hashtag named in Arabic *Buraidah Sit-in*, which supports Saudi detainees, had very few users, or only one. Almohia reports that most of the messages attacking detainees on that hashtag originate from a program called ‘yoono’, which according to its own website is free software allowing users to operate multiple accounts from one device, covering most social networks including Twitter. This means that a yoono user who participates in Twitter will be using multiple accounts at the same time, perhaps for the purpose of contributing to the same hashtag or the Twitter timeline via many accounts simultaneously on one device.

Almohia (2013) supports his claim by offering three pieces of evidence. First, he highlights the word ‘yoono’ which appears underneath each tweet criticising certain hashtags. He then draws attention to the pictures related to yoono accounts participating in the specific hashtag, claiming that the hundreds of accounts which carried the same message on the hashtag supported by yoono carried photographs of people unconnected with these accounts. In other words, Almohia identifies many pictures attached to yoono accounts which he states did not match the people named, indicating that the account users had not registered under their real names. These fake accounts, according to Almohia (2013), used pictures of Arabs copied from Google Images or other online providers, intending to deceive readers of the hashtag into believing that these false identities were real. His third piece of evidence as to the falsity of these accounts, illustrated in Figure 7.1, is the appearance of many identical messages on the hashtag from several fake accounts at exactly the same time. Almohia (2013) confirms the falsity of these accounts by identifying the persons pictured, who are not as named in the fake accounts. He also reports some glaring errors made by those falsifying the accounts: male user names were sometimes accompanied by pictures of females, while in other cases the name would be wrongly transcribed, reading ‘Mohammed’ in the Arabic script, for example, but ‘Ali’ in the Roman alphabet. Figures 7.2 and 7.3 illustrate some of these findings.



**Figure 7.1:** Identical messages posted simultaneously using yoono

Source: Almohia (2013)



**Figure 7.2:** A yoono account (Source: Almohia, 2013)



**Figure 7.3:** The column on the left shows the real identities of the people pictured, with correct information about them, while on the right are three fake yoono accounts using photographs of them to deceive readers of the hashtag. It is clear that these accounts are fake, because all three people are well known: the first two are Saudi writers and the third is the Saudi Deputy Minister of Education.

Source: Almohia (2013)

The Saudi government also appears to extend its reach to the list of people whom an individual follows on Twitter, as illustrated by the case of Mohammad Alarefe, the popular Saudi preacher whose deletion of tweets and support for Saleh Al-Shehi are discussed in sections 5.3.2 and 6.5 respectively. Alarefe was arrested on 21 July 2013 and released after a few days (Riyadh Bureau, 24 July 2013). The Saudi e-newspaper *Almowaten* claims that immediately after his release from detention, Alarefe unfollowed a number of Twitter users, most of whom belonged to or sympathized with the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood Party, which had lost power in Egypt earlier in the same month when Mohamed Morsi was deposed as president. The *Almowaten* article further claims that Morsi was prominent among those whose accounts Alarefe unfollowed (Seeaid, 25 July 2013). The perception that Alarefe was one of the most active Saudi supporters of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Party, whether on Twitter or in the mosque, appears to have provoked a strong response by the Saudi government, which had financially supported the Egyptian military action to depose the Brotherhood (Dickinson, 4 July 2013). It seems clear that the Saudi authorities not only interfere with what is published in Saudis' Twitter accounts but also with whom Saudis follow, presumably because they consider that following people means supporting them.

Scholars consider gatekeeping to be a crucial element in Twitter not only in Saudi Arabia but in general. This has been proved through studies of the role of gatekeeping in favouring certain hashtags and in determining who will be the most followed microbloggers. Bastos, Raimundo and Travitzki (2013) investigated the connection between Twitter network connectivity and message diffusion, by analysing the relationship between retweet networks, mention networks and followers-and-followees networks. Retweets are posts that Twitter readers forward with full attribution to those who follow them, while the user's followers-and-followees network comprises a list of users who subscribe to one another's activity streams. Mentions are messages in which a specific Twitter user is mentioned using the @ sign, and even though these messages address specific receivers, they are also posted on the recipient's public page. Message diffusion within Twitter is heavily dependent on retweets, and because most retweets posted by a user are of tweets originally posted by someone the user follows (which can themselves be retweets), retweet activity reflects how the social network furthers the

propagation of information. Bastos, Raimundo and Travitzki (2013: 263) found the following:

The more followers a Twitter user has, the more likely it is that their tweets will be retweeted. We tested this hypothesis with a dataset of Twitter political hashtags, which tend to be more persistent than other topics, thus assuring that once the message goes through the gate (once it goes viral), it remains in time and space.

They conclude from their analysis of gatekeeping in Twitter that the microblogging service resembles an information-sharing and news service, rather than a social network, given the impact its users have on the creation and circulation of information through the platform, which indicates that users with a high number of message exchanges are in a position to exert a strong selective influence on the information passing through the network. This conclusion is consistent with the results of the present study, as illustrated by the responses of the interviewees, indicating that gatekeeping influences the flow of microblogging traffic, helping to determine which messages will or will not receive more attention and be subject to more retweets.

The way Twitter users create and circulate their tweets is also consistent with the argument of Schramm (1949) that the importance of gatekeeping depends on the selection of the gatekeeper, which is the cornerstone of the process. He asserts that there is “no aspect of communication as impressive as the enormous number of choices and discards which have to be made between the formation of the symbol in the mind of the communicator, and the appearance of a related symbol in the mind of the receiver” (ibid: 259).

The theoretical discussion and empirical analysis above indicate that Twitter is subject to very significant gatekeeping activity. The Twitter gatekeepers are the government, the audience, society at large and the microbloggers themselves, acting as self-gatekeepers under direct or indirect political and social influence. The next section identifies Saudi society as an essential gatekeeper that plays a crucial role in the digital era, discussing in particular the importance of patriarchal and social gatekeeping. The responses of many interviewees reflected the significant impact of this element on digital media production in Saudi Arabia.

## **7.6 Patriarchal and social gatekeeping**

Social gatekeeping has affected the Saudi press since its birth, because editors have always avoided sensitive topics that might arouse anger in society, such as campaigns to empower women in the workforce, or supporting their right to drive cars or even obtain a good education. It would appear that in the digital era the effects of this aspect of gatekeeping have become much greater. Fouad Alfarhan gave this account of his personal experience:

Some of my relatives have joined Twitter and unfortunately they closely monitor what I say and exchange word-of-mouth analysis about what I mean and why I said this or that. Because of their presence and family influence, I try to be as clear as possible about what I say, so I leave no room for their assumptions and analysis. Also, the presence of some Islamist activists has played a noticeable role in the topics we discuss and how open and honest we can be. Before that, we used to discuss highly controversial topics with regard to Islamic Sharia. With their presence and their huge numbers of followers, it has become really hard for us to be like in the past. Now, I either don't join such a discussion or just make a simple statement that could minimize their intense feedback (Personal interview, 15 September 2012).

Interview responses indicate that one of the most important social forces affecting gatekeeping is patriarchy, which has a strong influence on every aspect of Saudi life, including the media. Patriarchy plays a major role in the creation and circulation of news and impacts the process of production. The answers of the interviewees reflect its influence on the contemporary Saudi media landscape, making it a significant social gatekeeper. In the past, the dominance of governmental gatekeeping tended to obscure the importance of this element in the process, but the diffusion of microblogging and social media have made it much clearer. The research participants offered contemporary examples which indicate the extent of its influence as a dimension of gatekeeping in the process of news creation and circulation in the country.

Manal Al-Sharif explained that her ex-husband had acted as a patriarchal gatekeeper by interfering in her writing. He had not allowed her to write freely during their marriage and had asked her to conceal her identity whenever she published any material, refusing to permit her to use her real name at all. She made her identity public as soon as she was

divorced from him, then later began her campaign for women to be allowed to drive, referred to in sections 3.4 and 4.10.2. She stated:

As a woman I used to get permission from my parents before doing anything whatsoever. We grow up with this habit, then patriarchy is transferred to our husband as soon as we get married. There is always a man to tell us what to do. He is our gatekeeper, who decides what to do and we are the news. Men are the gatekeepers who determine our destiny – which channels we can enter and which not to enter (Personal interview, 15 December 2012).

There were once many more female than male bloggers in Saudi Arabia, but they gradually lost interest or shut down their blogs in response to pressure from their families. For instance, Farah Al Sweel, a pioneer Saudi female blogger, began blogging under her real name, but was forced to quit by the social pressure on her father, Abdulaziz Al Sweel, who was a member of the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia. Her father came under heavy pressure from religious relatives after she had criticized a Saudi religious scholar, Sheikh Muhammad ibn Saalih ibn al-Uthaymeen. Many Saudi women have stopped blogging because of similar issues, according to Ahmed Al Omran (Personal interview, 10 September 2013). They sacrifice blogging in response to social gatekeeping, which reflects the patriarchal attitudes of the members of society. Indeed, patriarchy is a crucial component which significantly influences many aspects of Saudi life, one being the process of news creation and circulation.

Doumato (2000: 227) emphasizes that in Saudi culture, male domination over females is not limited to authority within the family, but encompasses almost all aspects of life:

Contemporary restrictions on women and the gender ideologies behind them are not merely the legacy of interpreters of religion and the daily practice they inspired. They are fully compatible with the particular tribal-Najdi culture that dominates in Saudi Arabia: this continuity in gender ideology is reinforced by the fusion of Wahhabi Islam with the values of family, honor, and patriarchy that stem from the country's tribal legacy.

The Saudi security authorities also apply patriarchal gatekeeping to bloggers. Thus, the interior ministry acts as gatekeeper by contacting the closest older male relative of a blogger, whose influence they will use to persuade the blogger to tone down his or her language. The blogger might perceive a direct approach from the government as an



instruction, while he or she would see an indirect one, via a relative, as advice. For example, Ahmed Al Omran stated in interview that when the Ministry of the Interior was unhappy with his blog posts in 2009, they contacted an uncle who was his closest older relative, his father having died, to transmit just such a message to the blogger. In Saudi culture, special respect is accorded to elderly male relatives, whose advice is usually followed. The Saudi authorities have successfully exploited this aspect of the patriarchal culture to apply pressure to many bloggers, according to Al Omran. In his own case, he responded to his uncle's advice by softening the tone and content of his blogs: "I kept my blog in low profile and stopped answering international news agencies, which used to contact me to ask me about various Saudi events." Patriarchy is thus a very powerful tool in the Saudi environment and serves a hidden gatekeeping function in the process of news creation and circulation in the digital age.

A similar technique appears to have been used effectively with a microblogger, Iman ALQahtani, who tweeted heavily to spread news of political detainees. She was warned many times by the Saudi security authorities to stop covering these stories but refused to stop supporting the detainees in this way (Personal interview, 25 January 2013). Then, suddenly, on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2013 she posted a tweet in Arabic (reproduced in Figure 7.4) which translates as: "My dear Mum, I will stop because of you. Goodbye." (ALQahtani, 4 March, 2013).



**Figure 7.4:** Print screen of Iman ALQahtani's tweet about quitting microblogging

The fact that AlQahtani had posted no further tweets at the time of writing indicates that pressure had been exerted on her parents to ask their daughter to cease tweeting. It appears that this is a unique technique used by Saudi officials to undermine the effectiveness of electronic journalists, bloggers and microbloggers. Parents and other close relatives are effectively playing a crucial gatekeeping role in the digital era. The effectiveness of the Saudi authorities in using this means to exert influence over the contemporary media landscape is evident from the number of Saudi writers, bloggers and microbloggers who assert that they have stopped writing or changed the way they process their production and distribution as a result. In other words, patriarchy is helping to redefine the procedures of gatekeeping and to confirm that the longstanding theory remains effective in today's practice.

In the same context, Kowther Musa Alarbash, a Saudi writer and member of the Shia Muslim minority in Saudi Arabia, claims that a group of elderly relatives visited her home to force her husband to divorce her because she had criticised a fatwa of the Iranian cleric Ali al-Sistani, the highest-ranking Shia marja (religious leader) (Alarbash, 19 March 2013). This additional example of patriarchal gatekeeping confirms the relevance and impact of social gatekeeping in contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. This form of gatekeeping affects every aspect of news production, as the researcher witnessed during his observations of print and online news production and microblogging, reported in chapter 5, and the interviews analysed here.

Fouad Alfarhan, whose blogging and microblogging activities have been subject to social and patriarchal influence, said in his interview:

I think we as a society accept and believe in patriarchy. Patriarchy has been practiced in our society on different levels – government, scholars, family, friends, intellectuals, normal citizens. People are moving towards rejecting patriarchy, but at a slow pace which will take years and years to succeed. It clearly dominates the Saudi social networking environment because of its origin in society itself. It's normal to be affected by this guardianship, but we are coming out of it slowly (Personal interview, 15 September 2012).

Thus, flowing from the social and cultural history of Saudi Arabia, patriarchy has set a foundation of informal and unwritten rules, restrictions and hidden guidelines that

influence the process of gatekeeping applied to the news production of all Saudi journalists, writers, bloggers and microbloggers. Whatever changes the platforms may undergo, the gatekeeping process is founded on Saudi social culture and its persistent behavioural boundaries.

## **7.7 Audience gatekeeping**

Laidlaw (2010) points out that the technology of the internet is generative, allowing the people on whom gatekeeping is exercised to participate in the sharing of content and code. The technology gives the audience new roles which they are not used to exercising, some direct and others indirect, which dominate comment and affect the direction of the news. Journalists and audiences are paying increasing attention to what commentators say and think. This encourages news outlets to follow the direction of the new contributors, whose voice is becoming ever stronger and clearer. Beam (2008) agrees that internet technologies are shifting the gatekeeping power of mainstream media directly to media consumers, creating a new era of creation and sharing of news.

Pool and Shulman (1959: 143) discuss how reference group theory may explain how audiences affect communicators: “The messages sent are in part determined by expectations of audience reactions. The audience or at least that audience about whom the communicator thinks thus plays more than a passive role in communication.” Today, it is no longer true that readers play the traditional role of silent consumers; instead, they now have a meaningful impact on the production process, as Salman Y Aldossary, editor-in-chief of the print newspaper *Aleqisadiah* affirmed:

The greater the number of followers, the more public pressure on the microblogger. The audience are leading the microblogger to write what they want him/her to write without feeling. The crowd are the driver in the digital age because of the direct relation with the producer. Twitter is a great example of how effective the audience are in digital production. I wrote a number of tweets on the conflict between political wings in Saudi Arabia and I deleted them based on advice I received. The audience is the new gatekeeper in the country (Personal interview, 24 April 2013).

The member of the Saudi royal family whom the researcher interviewed suggested that everybody in Saudi Arabia was now looking for popularity through Twitter. Supporting the government would not help in this, but would be more likely to backfire. Indeed, he

argued that the best way to gain publicity was to criticize the government and that mild disapproval would be ineffective, while strong criticism would gain a microblogger more followers and earn audience appreciation.

Audiences always play a significant role in news creation, but their influence is doubled or more in the virtual world. I think what people are creating in Twitter is not what they think is right, but what they think the audience wants. It is dangerous and terrifying. Writers, journalists and bloggers sacrifice their ideas and facts to please the audience. In the past, at least the editors set the standards, but now it's the audience who set them. It's a bazaar. I've seen microbloggers who would sell anything to be popular. They will trick a twitter user who has a high number of followers to get a retweet. I know people personally who hate each other but they compliment each other to get their message out through their foes. Remember that in Saudi some people judge people based on their twitter followers. Once, we used to show off by buying luxury cars. Now we boast about our number of followers. Therefore, the audience is the cornerstone of the process of producing tweets. If you want to be successful and powerful, write what the majority of people want. Hide the reality and bring up what you think will please them (Personal interview, 20 March 2013).

Evidence of the strength of the influence of the audience and its relevance to gatekeeping the production of material in the contemporary media landscape comes from the case of the writer Abdullah Al Shuhail, who recently published an article in *Al-Jazirah*, a Saudi print newspaper, praising King Abdullah. The article and its headline stated that the King could see what was, what is and what will be (Al Shuhail, 2013a). There was an immediate and strong reaction on Twitter, where users created a number of hashtags criticizing the article and its author. This audience resentment focused on three points: that the state media practised a lot of hypocrisy and flattery, that the author, by claiming that the king knew the unseen, had breached Islamic law and should be legally prosecuted, and that the newspaper should apologise and punish the official who had approved the article. Figure 7.5 shows one of these critical tweets.



**Figure 7.5:** Copy of a tweet criticizing Al Shuhail's article, showing four hashtags

This campaign forced the newspaper to publish a clarification the next day, after around 140 000 tweets had been posted using these hashtags within 24 hours, according to Topsy (21 May 2013). The author also appeared on several channels to defend himself (Al Shuhail, 2013b).

A Saudi writer, Gasssan Badkok, tweeted (Figure 7.6) that what had happened should be a lesson to all Saudi writers, which confirms the immediate impact and subsequent audience that contemporary technology can bring.



**Figure 7.6:** Tweet by Gassan Badkok claiming that Al Shuhail's article and the reaction to it are a lesson to all Saudi writers

Many other microbloggers reacted by using these hashtags to tweet pictures similar to the one shown in Figure 7.7, of an Al-Jazirah subscription box in a rubbish bin. This shows the anger of many Saudi microbloggers towards a Saudi print newspaper, which led them to cancel their subscriptions to it.



**Figure 7.7:** Photograph of an Al-Jazirah subscription box in a rubbish bin.

Source: Al-Jazirah fault hashtag (in Arabic)

Such a strong, widespread and immediate reaction to Al Shuhail's article would not have happened in the print era. Not only was fawning to the king much more common in the past, but more significantly, this article was published in the digital age and the reaction to it indicates that cyberspace is much more controlled than was true of the sphere of ideas and their expression in the past. Furthermore, it is no longer a matter of official agreement or disagreement with what has been written, but one of attunement with what the audience likes or dislikes. If a majority does not like what an author

produces, he or she will be heavily criticized and often criminalized, which reduces the likelihood of the emergence of different opinions or new ideas, due to the fear which will be felt by potential authors of ideas of all kinds, whether writers, journalists, bloggers or microbloggers. This climate of fear in turn feeds the tendency for users of Twitter and other new platforms to operate under aliases to deceive the public.

In the digital era, not only does gatekeeping still exist, but the number of gatekeepers has even increased significantly, while audiences are able to exercise their authority as powerful gatekeepers. Manal Al-Sharif (Personal interview, 15 December 2012) explained her limited use of Twitter as being due to audience pressure:

I cannot write about the religious police and the clergy because a major audience considers them as sacrosanct. I find it difficult to write anywhere. They are open gates for you to write anything but they are closed as well. I feel that I was walking in a minefield. The audience is the new and powerful gatekeeper and I've changed my mind many times because I didn't want to get into conflict with them. You cannot imagine the kind of attack and threats I received regularly on Twitter.

She complained that people would even monitor her posts for any mistakes of language, spelling or grammar, whose importance they would then exaggerate. "They focus on these small errors and make you hesitant to write" (Personal interview, 15 December 2012).

Marwick and Boyd (2010) studied the relationships between microbloggers and their audience, reporting that some users would build overlapping audiences by strategically concealing information, targeting tweets to different audiences and attempting to portray both an authentic self and an interesting personality. Their study, which focused on the imagined audience of Twitter users and its impact on the production of tweets, offers many examples of users avoiding certain topics to distance themselves from problems with their superiors or family members. The work of Marwick and Boyd (2010) proves that many Twitter users around the globe utilize gatekeeping effectively in the contemporary media industry. Their evidence is consistent with the interview data from the present study in regard to the heavy influence of the audience on the creation and circulation of news in Saudi Arabia. This impact is thus not a local or even regional phenomenon, but an international one. There are slightly different components in each



environment, due the inevitable cultural and social dissimilarities, but all show evidence of the fundamental and growing influence of the audience as gatekeeper in contemporary media production, an influence of much greater magnitude than in the past.

Manosevitch and Walker (2009) report that some readers seemed to use comments intentionally to divert the discussion from one specific topic to another. They examined the comments in an online newspaper and discovered that some readers knew other readers and that these relationships helped them to work together, lobbying more effectively to change the subject and divert the discussion to something else. This again shows the power of the audience in the digital age. It can divert the subject to whatever its members want and draw attention away from the topic itself. Some discussion may attract the attention of the online editor, causing him/her to close the discussion or delete the comments. Ammar Bakar (2010) claims that the first comment posted on an online article can make the article or break it. He thinks that subsequent readers will be controlled by their emotions and perhaps biased towards the opinion of the commenter while neglecting the original topic; thus, the first commentary often sets the tone for a series of similar comments on that commentary, rather than addressing the original topic directly and independently.

This use of commentary is serious and can be considered to amount to kidnapping the subject from the author. It thus has an influence on the production of news, which reflects the impact of the audience on contemporary news creation and circulation. Such comments play a significant role in the news landscape today. They influence the readership and its perception of the relevance and reliability of the news; and the audience has the ability to control this influence. As this study has mentioned before, the difference between gatekeeping in the digital age and in its traditional form is that the function has moved from the hands of a few to those of the many. Now, the blogger who disapproves of a comment on his/her blog can delete or edit it. Microbloggers such as Twitter users can block accounts and report other accounts as spam, causing them to be suspended (Wang, 2010).

The role of the audience in news creation and circulation in the digital age has become gradually more influential on each new platform. The impact of the comment section

underneath an online article is great, but the microblogging equivalent has a much greater power. The Twitter audience can campaign by creating hashtags, forcing writers to retract or amend ideas, opinions or news items, as they did with the microblogger Hamza Kashgari, fuelling controversy about the prophet Mohammed until the author was arrested. This trend leads to a discussion of audience impact on published material under the following theme, which is post-production gatekeeping.

## **7.8 Post-production gatekeeping**

The longstanding theory of gatekeeping has been applied to pre-selection systems throughout the six decades since White (1950) founded it, but a revision is required in light of recent rapid developments which have introduced radical new technologies into the production and dissemination of news. This study has identified, on the basis of observations and interviews conducted by the researcher, a need to revisit the theory and to add a new component, that of post-production gatekeeping, to take account of additional variables that apply to the field of journalism. This is a significant finding of the present study. This section therefore discusses a newly identified component of gatekeeping that applies to contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, which has received relatively little attention from scholars of media and mass communication.

Some of the data presented and analysed in the previous two chapters concerned occasions where gatekeeping had taken place after the production of news. Examples given were the arrest of authors of news and tweets, the editing and removal of material after publishing, the intervention of the security authorities to obtain information, the editing of readers' comments and the use of hacking and blocking. All of these events constituted part of the functions of the gatekeeper or influenced them and thus the process of producing the news. The interview responses also provide data in support of the earlier findings, as discussed below.

Manal Al-Sharif admitted in interview that she had deleted many of her own Twitter posts:

I wrote once about the contradictions of Saudi society and that men were always citing the hadith which says that most of the people in Hell are women. And I posted 'I wondered why you ignored another hadith that

indicates that more people in Paradise are women too.’ I was accused of blasphemy by many microbloggers and received lots of threats due to my tweets about women in Hell. I felt that I was in hell myself and I tried to convince them and explain my tweets, but the more I tried, the more the anger increased, so I had to delete the posts related to that topic to defuse the anger. It wasn’t enough that I wrote an apology, which granted me temporary peace. I am afraid of my Twitter account being hacked. Everything is possible. The government blocked my blog, my Facebook page, many social media accounts. I try to utilize what I have learnt to protect my electronic accounts. I know I am threatened and at risk (Personal interview, 15 December 2012).

Despite the pain that can be caused by gatekeeping, it is considered necessary in the operation of the press to protect media institutions from legal problems arising from readers’ comments and blogs. Numerous meetings conducted by Hermida and Thurman (2008) with a number of leaders of British newspapers indicate that this policy was widely applied; some newspapers carried out such gatekeeping after publication and others before. The authors cite James Montgomery, editor of the *Financial Times*, as stating:

We are an organisation that filters all the news and then compresses it. We do that partly because we serve a busy audience who don’t have much time to read the paper, who don’t have that much time to read the website, and they look to us to have done the filtering and the compression for them (Hermida and Thurman, 2008: 345).

In a study of online comments, Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) confirm that gatekeeping is applied to such comments, regardless of the newspapers’ denial. Their discourse analysis of comments on the website of the *Sacramento Bee* (SacBee.com) leads them to assert the following:

Despite the acceptance of the subjective nature of the task of moderation, our findings indicate the newsroom culture was reluctant to release control of content moderation to “outsiders” who might not have the same editorial standards or locally meaningful understandings of issues to make the same kinds of hard subjective decisions that they do. While consistent with traditional norms of content control and gatekeeping in mass media, these findings highlight the tension between a desire to have better quality comments and a reluctance to accept outside help in editorial tasks (ibid: 7).

Alsairi (2013) interviewed the managing editor of *Al-Eqtisadiah*, who explained the gatekeeping process which his newspaper applied after production, in particular how it dealt with comments that had been posted, before putting them online:

When we receive readers' comments, they're passed to the editor for approval, then revised in case there's a need to remove some of the words. We do not require knowledge of the real names of the readers who use aliases. They have the right to put their aliases, provided they don't affect others. We modify some readers' comments before publishing and, in a few cases, we connect with the makers of these comments, whether for help or just to clarify. The newspaper prevents responses which encroach on the Islamic religion or the divine self, and prevents the publication of any response that affects anyone personally (Alsairi, 2013).

The steps taken by *Al-Eqtisadiah* reflect the nature of online gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia. They do not amount to a traditional approval process; instead, the newspaper implements a different format, which is to verify identity by contacting the commentator. The observation chapter of the present study discusses similar events, when the *Al Riyadh* newspaper editor provided the security authority with IP addresses and contact details in response to a formal request. This confirms that gatekeeping does not necessarily end with publishing, but may in some cases start there.

As noted in chapter 5, some bloggers have claimed that it suits the security authorities that Saudi citizens should tweet, as it reveals their plans and political orientations, allowing some of them to be arrested as a result of post-production gatekeeping.

The Saudi government does not stop there. Ahmed Al Omran reported recently in his Riyadh Bureau blog that an American software engineer had been contacted by a Saudi mobile operator and asked to monitor messages sent via apps such as WhatsApp, Twitter and Viber. Al Omran summarises the apparent relation between the mobile operator and the Saudi government revealed by this incident as follows:

Saudi mobile operator Mobily approached a US software engineer to help them organize a program to intercept messages sent via apps like WhatsApp, Twitter and Viber. Moxie Marlinspike wrote Monday on his blog that Mobily told him they already have a "WhatsApp interception prototype working" and that they were surprised how easy it was to make.

Saudi Arabia said in March that it could block several messaging apps because they do not meet the country's regulatory requirements and laws. The Communication and Information Technology Commission (CITC), the local regulator of telecoms, said in a statement it has asked licensed mobile operators in to work with developers of these apps to ensure that they meet the regulatory requirements.

This step by CITC raised concerns about government surveillance of communication on these apps. Local media reported at the time that CITC has asked the telecom companies to do what is required to monitor apps like Skype, Viper and WhatsApp, and that if communication through such apps cannot be monitored due to encryption then the telecoms will have to block access to them.

When Marlinspike told Mobily that he was not interested in the job for privacy reasons, a manager at the Saudi telecom company told him that the program to monitor users data on messaging apps was not about "freedom and respecting privacy" but rather about combating terrorism. The manager even went further to suggest that, by not taking the job, Marlinspike will be "indirectly helping" the terrorists "who curb the freedom with their brutal activities" (Riyadh Bureau, 13 May 2013).

This account confirms the determination of the Saudi government to impose strict censorship on all material produced by means of new technologies, which indicates that post-production gatekeeping is a key tool for the Saudi authorities, to the extent that it is difficult to interfere at the pre-publishing stage. The future will reveal more attempts to pursue producers in order to interrupt and track them by all the technological means available, whether legitimate or not. The spread of technology has no doubt helped to give birth to new platforms for new voices to be heard, but it also offers the government innovative ways to control freedom of speech in Saudi Arabia, leading to the arrest of journalists, bloggers and microbloggers and to the violation of the privacy of many individuals. The case of Marlinspike and Mobily is a clear example of the continuous attempts of the Saudi authorities to control information flow, whether by blocking websites or accounts, or by utilizing the various gatekeeping methods discussed previously.

Thumar AlMarzouqi, a Saudi writer and microblogger, recently made this comment about the Mobily affair on his twitter account (@thumam): "This is not a scandal for the

mobile company but the telecom companies in Saudi Arabia and the government and is proof of their continuous monitoring” (AlMarzouqi, 15 May 2013).

The allegation reportedly made by the American engineer in his blog about the Saudi approach for help to monitor messages on Twitter and other applications indicates that there are other movements in Saudi Arabia working in the same direction, viz. to undermine the freedom of expression that the Saudi population has begun to taste. This suggests in turn that post-production gatekeeping will have increasing influence on the Saudi media in general.

A privacy researcher, Hazim Almuhiemedi, reports another violation of privacy by the same Saudi mobile operator, the effect of which is that once a new customer has joined a service, the operator is able to monitor his/her twitter account and document all his/her communications on microblogging services, even if the customer later cancels his/her subscription to the service. He explains the service as follows:

In early 2012, Mobily developed a new service to speed up its customer service operations by taking advantage of the high prevalence of social networking sites such as Twitter. The service links Mobily’s internal customer service system with subscribers via Twitter. As a result, participants can submit queries (regarding connection problems, invoices, etc.) and follow these up through the famous social networking site. It is clear that the company’s customers welcomed this service warmly. However, while the service is primarily designed to speed up help to subscribers, it may – intentionally or unintentionally – do more than that. Leave aside the ability of the Mobily application to update your profile on Twitter on your behalf. After linking your account using this service, Mobily can collect tweets, replies, your information, your social network (people who are following you and who you follow), in addition to communicating with you to speed up your service and solve your problems. Some may not realise that the company continues to collect tweets after the completion of the service and can continue to do so even if you cancel the application (Almuhiemedi, 14 May 2013).

After Moxie Marlinspike published his blog about the intention of Mobily to monitor its customers’ accounts, many researchers around the globe began investigating the nature of censorship applied in Saudi Arabia. By the same token, Evgeny Morozov (2013), a researcher cited earlier (section 2.8) who studies the political and social implications of technology, relates in a YouTube video lecture an incident he witnessed involving two

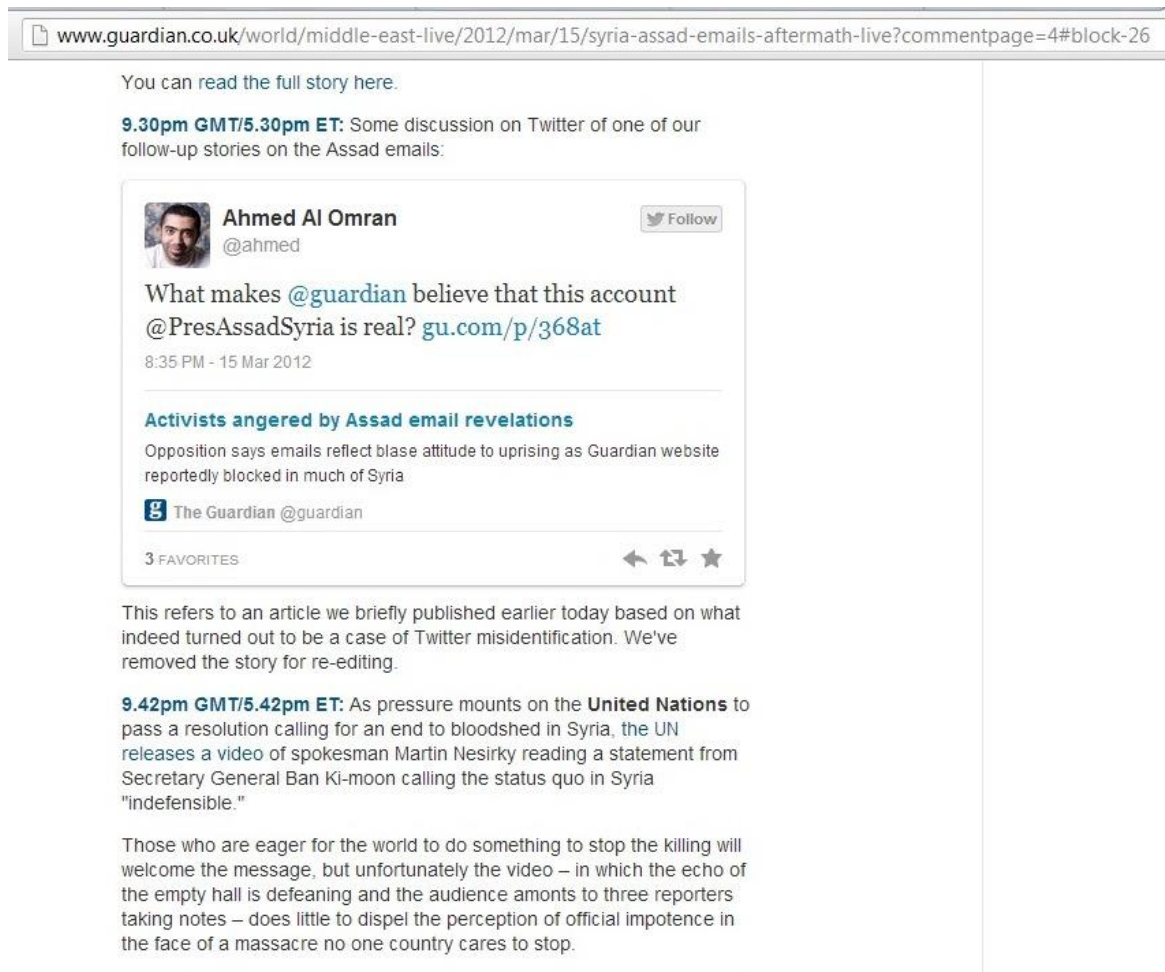
Saudis in cyberspace, which confirms how the Saudi government applies post-production gatekeeping by sending viruses to a Saudi website in order to prevent others from accessing it, thus ruining any potential online projects for its content producers. The following partial transcript of the YouTube video describes how governments have found new ways to harass internet campaigners and dissidents

... in such a way that you cannot actually accuse the government of sanctioning this harassment. Cyber-attacks, for example, have become a very prominent tactic in which governments and other structures of power actually try to exert psychological pressure on dissidents. Since we are at a philosophy festival I will give you a related example. I managed to uncover an interesting online forum for discussing philosophy in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia the academic discipline of philosophy is actually banned, so you cannot talk about it in the universities, so cyberspace was a very natural place for people to get together and actually talk about it. Immediately, that online forum began attracting the attention of many Saudis. It was started by two middle-class Saudis [...] One was working in the banking industry, one was working in the retail industry. No affiliations with the opposition, no affiliation with any jihadi movements, just two regular Saudi middle-class guys. Their forum became a place for talking about geopolitics and current affairs, not just philosophy, and it became a really prominent platform for discussing issues. And of course, immediately the Saudi government tried to ban them, so they would ban access to the website. And that didn't however do anything to the community, because in Saudi Arabia censorship is so widespread that people know how to use anti-censorship tools. So you can install some software on your computer and you'll be able to bypass censorship, even though it may take you a little bit more time to load the page, but you would be able to bypass the ban. But then the government didn't stop. What they decided to do next was to launch cyber-attacks against the site. And of course we cannot attribute the attacks to the Saudi government because cyber-attacks work in such a way that they come from usually thousands of computers [...] Once you get a malware virus on your computer, a third party can actually direct your computer to attack websites and online targets that it wants, and you wouldn't even know about it. So the way it worked was that suddenly, the Saudi website was a victim of cyber-attacks which basically were so heavy that they made the website unavailable for extended periods of time. It didn't knock it out completely, but if you wanted to visit it, chances are that one day out of seven the website would be unavailable, which of course has a very corrosive effect on the online community, because it more or less erodes the social capital that these two Saudi guys have created in the two or three

years that they've been running the site. But even more, it creates additional pressure, because the internet companies that host your website don't like when you are a target of cyber-attacks, because then they have to do the clean-up. So for them, once they know that you are a target of cyber-attacks, they don't want to do any business with you. It's in a sense like having a pre-existing condition and then trying to ask for insurance. As long you are a known dissident and you already have cyber-attacks which try to get you, no hosting company wants to deal with you. That's the rule of thumb. So of course the company in America said "Leave, we don't want you here. You've broken your..." I guess it's somewhere in their contract that you cannot be a victim, or you cannot attract cyber-attacks, or the hosting company can delete you. They had to move to another hosting company, where of course cyber-attacks continued and the company also kicked them out. Essentially, a third company came in. There is now an entire business where basically, at a fee, they can protect you from cyber-attacks, and it costs seven, eight thousand dollars per month, which of course, for a website about philosophy, was not the kind of money they wanted to pay. So [...] they had to live with the consequences of their website not being available at least one week out of a month (Morozov, 15 March 2013).

To return to the self-imposed aspect of gatekeeping referred to above, it is not only Saudi journalists, writers and bloggers who have deleted and edited their own production; many international newspapers do the same, which requires rethinking to accommodate a new component of gatekeeping theory. In March 2012, Ahmed Al Omran responded in a tweet to a Twitter reference by the *Guardian* newspaper to its own article that day about the president of Syria, Bashar Al-Assad. Al Omran suggested that the article should be revised because he had evidence that the source which the newspaper had used was false. The *Guardian* responded to him via Twitter and on its website (Figure 7.8) by editing the article and stating: "This refers to an article we briefly published earlier today based on what indeed turned out to be a case of Twitter misidentification. We've removed the story for re-editing" (Weaver, 15 March 2012).





**Figure 7.8:** Print screen of the *Guardian*'s reply to Al Omran, indicating that the British newspaper had withdrawn a news item for re-editing in response to the Saudi blogger's tweet

In the same context, *Forbes* carried the following story:

American actor, Ashton Kutcher heard that Penn State coach Joe Paterno was being fired. He tweeted to his 8 million followers, "How do you fire Jo Pa? as a hawkeye fan I find it in poor taste," along with the hash tags #insult and #noclass. This set off an uproar on the internet, as Kutcher seemed to be voicing his support for a college football program that covered up Jerry Sandusky's decades-long sexual molestation of poor, intercity children. Kutcher wasn't making that endorsement, though. Instead he was simply behind the news—or rather, entering the news at the wrong moment. He thought Paterno was being fired for poor performance and for being ancient. When he realized the actual horrifying reason the next day, he deleted the tweet, writing: "As an advocate in the fight against child sexual exploitation, I could not be more remorseful for all involved in the Penn St. case. As of immediately I will stop tweeting until I find a

way to properly manage this feed. I feel awful about this error. Won't happen again" (Hill, 11 November 2011).

Having realised his mistake, Kutcher ceased tweeting and asked his management to operate his Twitter account (Giusti, 11 November 2011).

The global importance of this component of gatekeeping is further illustrated by the case of Jennifer Love Hewitt, an American actress, producer and author who felt compelled to deactivate her Twitter account after receiving a flood of negative messages. She is reported by the Entertainmentwise website as stating:

Unfortunately with all the negativity people choose to send on Twitter as well as threats to their own well being... I'm sad to say Twitter is no longer for me. I have enjoyed all the kindness and love that came my way, as well as support. But this break is needed.

Life should be filled with positivity and holding each other up, not making threats and sending bad vibes. To those of you who made it a joy, Thank you from the bottom of my heart (Rajani, 2013).

Other microbloggers have not simply deactivated their Twitter accounts but have deleted them totally. In January 2013, Robin van Persie, a Manchester United footballer, deleted his Twitter account because other users were tweeting abuse at him (Eta, 19 January 2013). The *Telegraph* reports that an increasing number of people are quitting Twitter, including singer Sinead O' Connor and Manchester City footballer Micah Richards. Former England footballer Stan Collymore is also reported to be considering abandoning his Twitter account after receiving between 150 and 200 insulting message from other users. In addition, BBC Radio presenter Richard Bacon has told the paper that he has suffered severe abuse by Twitter trolls (Barnett, 25 March 2013).

Post-production gatekeeping thus has a crucial global influence on news creation and circulation today. The interviews and observation data reported in this thesis provide evidence of its significant role in the media landscape, affecting every online user in the world. The most crucial findings of this study have shed light on this feature, which as discussed in this chapter has a vital role in the production of news, whether manifested by removing, deleting or editing material, by blocking, hacking or cyber-attacking sites and accounts, or by arresting people. In all these ways, it has a major effect on the future

production of people who have been subject to the new element of gatekeeping, which is no less important than the traditional elements that operate on selection before publication.

## **7.9 Globalized gatekeeping**

The interviews conducted for this study produced significant evidence of political influence on the application of gatekeeping in the creation and circulation of news in Saudi Arabia. The responses of participants concerning the way the gatekeeper dealt with their contributions reflected the effect of this component on their production. The most significant political factor emerging from the interviews is the power of globalization to affect the operation of both the traditional elements of gatekeeping, regarding the selection process, and its new post-production manifestation as identified by this study. The impact of globalization is illustrated and analysed in the following discussion, in order to clarify its role in the contemporary creation, circulation and post-production of news in Saudi Arabia.

Ahmed Al Omran, whose blogs *Saudi Jeans* and *Riyadh Bureau* appear in English, stated in interview that the government cannot block them for political reasons:

My profile has become high enough to the point where blocking my website or account would create a backlash and cause embarrassment to the censors. I could be wrong, of course, but this is how I feel. They cannot arrest me now or even block my blog. I am not aggressive and also I've become high profile because I write and work for many international agencies such as NPR and Foreign Policy and others (Personal interview, 12 March 2013).

Al Omran stated that he had obtained a scholarship to study journalism at Columbia University in the USA as a result of the visit to Saudi Arabia of a former US senator, Joe Lieberman. Al Omran had tried unsuccessfully to obtain sponsorship from the Saudi government through its scholarship programme, under which approximately 100 000 Saudi students study abroad. Then Senator Lieberman visited the country, where he met a number of Saudi bloggers and journalists writing in English, to whom he distributed his business card. Al Omran contacted him to request help in obtaining a scholarship from the American embassy in Saudi Arabia, but the chief of staff who replied promised to secure him a scholarship from the Saudi government, relying on the close relations

between Senator Lieberman and Adel al-Jubeir, Saudi Ambassador to the USA. He was indeed awarded such a scholarship and described during our interview his first visit to the Saudi Cultural Bureau in Washington, which is responsible for Saudis studying in the USA: “The attaché was waiting for me in front of his door after the assistant had told him I was outside. He said: ‘We have been waiting for a while to serve you’” (Personal interview, 12 March 2013).

This story indicates the much stronger position of Saudi bloggers who write in English, thanks to their connections outside the country, which affect their relations with the Saudi authorities, so that the governmental gatekeeper will be much more reluctant to block their blogs compared with those of Saudi bloggers who write in Arabic. The government is concerned with international pressure and there have been many events involving Saudi journalists and bloggers which illustrate the effectiveness of this element of gatekeeping. The case of Ahmed Al Omran provides evidence of that influence. He stated in interview that he felt himself to be granted more freedom than his colleagues who write only in Arabic and that this feeling guided his production of material. He declared a belief that the Saudi gatekeeper would not block his blogs or arrest him as might happen to many others, simply because of his celebrity within the international media. He believed that this globalised profile shaped his immunity and protected him, thus positively influencing his creation and circulation of news.

In another relevant case, CNN reported that in October 2009 a Saudi court sentenced a female journalist, Rosanna Al-Yamami, to 60 lashes for her work on a controversial Arabic-language TV show that had aired an episode in which a man bragged about his sex life. The court in Jeddah also imposed a two-year foreign travel ban on Al-Yamami, identified as a fixer, who helped journalists to obtain stories, and a coordinator for Lebanese Broadcasting Corp., the network that had aired the offending programme. The Saudi man who had boasted about sex was sentenced to five years in prison and 1,000 lashes. However, the sentence imposed upon Al-Yamami received great attention from the international media, which criticized the Saudi government for restricting the freedom of the press. Responding to this pressure, King Abdullah used his power to overturn her sentence (CNN, 27 October 2009).

This event also confirms the post-production role of globalized gatekeeping in the contemporary creation and circulation of news. The Saudi gatekeeper is affected by the pressure applied by the international media in some cases. The royal family member who participated in this study claims that many Saudi journalists, human rights activists and more recently, bloggers and microbloggers, have cultivated relations with senior international journalists so that they will be able to call on them to defend them and help them if anything bad happens to them.

I know many journalists who have been banned from writing or travelling outside the country but when they publicise their stories they are given amnesty by the king or the interior ministry. I still recall many stories and I know what happened exactly. I admit that politics plays a crucial role in gatekeeping. The country wants to soften the wrath of the international press (Personal interview, 2 February 2013).

AlAwad (2010: 180) points out that globalization has increased the political pressure on the government, citing the case of a Saudi blogger who was arrested and later released:

The case of the Saudi writer Fouad Al Farhan was a local issue but swiftly became an international issue discussed by international TV channels, newspapers and internet websites. The international coverage of this case helped organizations such as Reporters Without Borders publicise their demand for the immediate release of Al Farhan. These international organizations are considered an integral part of globalization and can turn local cases such as suspension of press and jailing of journalists and writers into international issues. They have forced the Saudi government to seek new means of pressure on newspapers – ones that do not attract the attention of such international organizations.

In the digital era, this influence will gather strength due to the rapid spread of news via hashtags and other express information vehicles that hit the international media very quickly, without the need to have close relations with powerful figures in the Western media. Many microbloggers will serve this function, which means that this type of gatekeeping will grow and will influence the decisions of the Saudi authorities, making the global media itself a critical gatekeeper within the country.

Fandy (1999: 127) argues that globalization has a great influence on the creation and circulation of news and information, causing the government to lose control of incoming and outgoing information:

It is no longer analytically useful to think of Saudi Arabia as a closed system. New technologies and new means of communication have provided opposition groups as well as the state with an intermediate space and new means of disseminating information in a virtual space beyond their limited conceptual and physical spaces. But more for the opposition than for the state, the internet and other media, such as fax machines, cellular phones, satellite dishes and cassette tapes provide a new space for airing grievances with minimal risk.

By the same token, Amin (2002: 125) argues that “Arab journalism has begun to face forces of change; globalization processes have had a significant impact on Arab media by providing transnational Arabic and non-Arabic print and broadcast options for Arab audiences”.

This section has discussed and analysed evidence provided by participants of the importance of globalized gatekeeping in the contemporary creation and circulation of news in Saudi Arabia. It has demonstrated the key function of this kind of gatekeeping in the Saudi media landscape, how this particular element affects news production and how technology makes it more influential and powerful, by offering illustrative examples of events which show its importance and significance.

## **7.10 Summary**

One of the most significant findings discussed in this chapter and in the study in general concerns the importance of the emergent role of post-production gatekeeping. The interview data analysed here indicates that this element now plays an essential role during and after the production of news, representing a change in many traditional features of the longstanding theory of gatekeeping, which prior to the widespread influence of the internet and related technology was limited to the pre-production selection process. This chapter has discussed many significant components that affect the gatekeeping functions operative in the contemporary media landscape in Saudi Arabia and the wider world. The individual accounts of participants and relevant research have produced much evidence to confirm the existence of new gatekeeping

elements and players related to the emergent roles of new technologies, such as blocking, cyber-attacks and hashtag disputes. This chapter has also analyzed social gatekeeping, audience gatekeeping, Twitter gatekeeping and globalized gatekeeping, reinforcing the importance of all of these aspects of the phenomenon under study. The next chapter concludes the study.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Conclusion**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

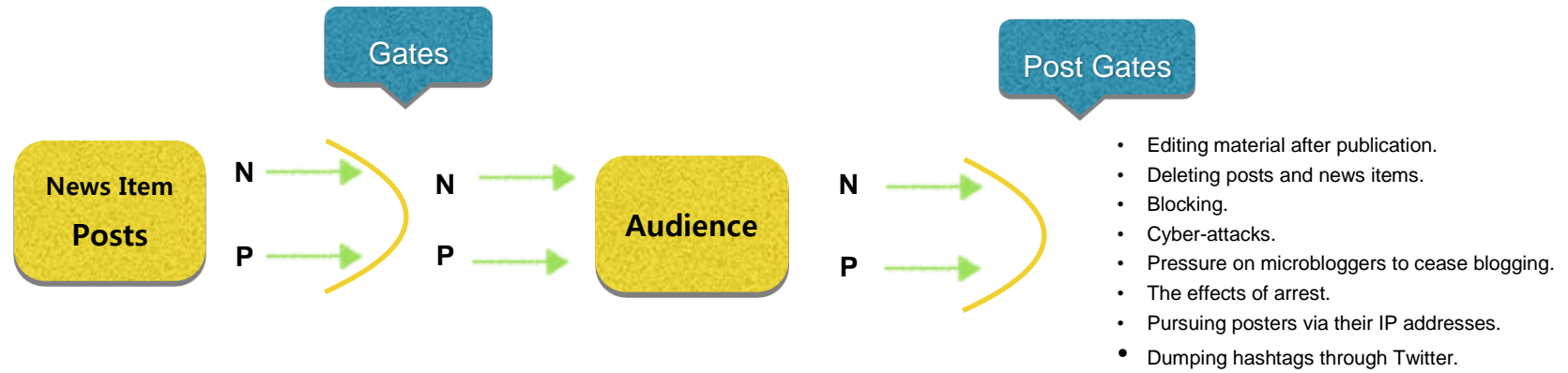
This chapter begins by highlighting the main contribution of the study, which is its novel identification of an important component of contemporary news gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia, viz. post-production gatekeeping. It illustrates the importance of this element to the field of journalism and considers its present and future effects, not only in Saudi Arabia but internationally. More specifically, it discusses eight aspects of post-production gatekeeping identified throughout this study as applying to the process of contemporary media production. These are: editing material after publication, deleting posts and news items, blocking, cyber attacks, pressure on microbloggers to cease blogging, the effects of arrest, pursuing posters via their IP addresses and dumping hashtags through Twitter. The chapter then reviews the research findings concerning the relevance to the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia of four other aspects of gatekeeping: social gatekeeping and women's issues; patriarchal gatekeeping; religious gatekeeping; and hard-copy versus soft-copy gatekeeping.

#### **8.2 Main contribution of the study**

Figure 8.1 depicts the new model of gatekeeping developed during this research.



## Gatekeeping Model



**Figure 8.1: New model of gatekeeping**

The main contribution of the study is its identification of the importance of post-production gatekeeping to the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. The research has shown that far from becoming irrelevant in the digital era, gatekeeping theory has had a growing influence on the recent media landscape, while gatekeeping practice has not weakened but grown in strength. Analysis of the data gathered by interviewing 13 participants and by observing the production of the print and online editions of *Alriyadh*, of the *Sabq* electronic newspaper and of a microblogger, Essam Al Zamil, has shown that post-production gatekeeping is a new component which has a considerable impact on contemporary news creation and circulation, not only in Saudi Arabia but around the world. The significance of this finding is that it runs counter to the many recent predictions that gatekeeping was becoming irrelevant and would soon vanish (Bruns, 2008; Gillmor, 2004; Hoffman, 2006; Lowrey, 2006; McCoy, 2001; Robinson, 2007; Ruggiero and Winch, 2005; Williams and Carpini, 2000). The present research has both confirmed its continuing existence and demonstrated its evolution and growing relevance, substantiated by evidence of eight specific factors:

- Editing material after publication
- Deleting posts and news items
- Blocking
- Cyber attacks
- Pressure on microbloggers to cease blogging
- Effect of arrests
- Pursuing posters via their IP addresses
- Dumping hashtags through Twitter.

Gatekeeping theory was originated by White (1950) and has been found to require revision in the intervening six decades, particularly in light of recent rapid developments in the production and dissemination of news, in response to which it has become essential to introduce new elements into the theory. This study has identified many of these, on the basis of data collected by the researcher during observations and interviews. In particular, it has demonstrated the necessity to reconsider the theory and to add a new component, that of post-production gatekeeping, to take account of

additional variables that apply to the field of digital journalism. This is consistent with the recognition of scholars such as Quandt and Singer (2009) and Thurman (2011) that gatekeeping has been explicitly affected by technological developments.

Gatekeeping in its traditional form is defined by Shoemaker (1991: 1) as the process “by which billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day”. This research has demonstrated that in the digital age the same filtering occurs after the production of news and that the longstanding assumption that it functions only before publication no longer holds true. Post-production gatekeeping must now be seen to operate alongside its traditional pre-publication form. The research thus supports the argument of Shoemaker and Vos (2009) that gatekeeping continues to play a key role in news creation in the digital age, taking new forms consistent with the new technology associated with the growth of the internet and with the corresponding new players in the gatekeeping process. Most of these new players have been found to have post-production roles; the following subsections summarise the findings of the study regarding their contributions to the eight aspect of post-production gatekeeping listed above.

### **8.2.1 Editing material after publication**

The most straightforward application of post-production gatekeeping identified in the course of this research is the editing of news after its publication. Many news platforms in both the East and the West re-edit material after the fact, in response to comments, feedback or pressure of some kind. Traditional gatekeepers had no influence over material once it had been published; at best, they would be able to initiate or influence the content of any clarification which appeared in the next issue of the same periodical. In the print era there was simply no possibility of the editor or the gatekeeper being able to edit anything after publication, except in the sense that a later edition could include a modified version, which did not make the earlier version unobtainable because it had already been printed, whereas the reality of the digital world is that gatekeepers continue to have access to the material and can make themselves heard after publication. During the observation phase of the present study, the researcher witnessed the making of many amendments to original material which had been posted electronically on various news platforms. Shirky (2009: 98) points out that modern technology allows

many journalist to produce materials more easily and also grants them the facility to modify and correct what they have written after having published it, frequently in response to feedback from the audience, in a process which he refers to as “publish then filter”.

An example of this technologically enabled post-production gatekeeping is that referred to in section 7.8, where the *Guardian* newspaper admitted editing material which had been published on its website, in response to a tweet claiming that the paper’s source was false. The ease of creating and circulating content in the digital era makes the internet rife with rumours and inaccurate information, a problem which affects mainstream news agencies. Noam (2005: 57) emphasizes that “gatekeeping power is bad news, but so is disinformation. Screening and branding of information helps audiences. When information comes unfiltered, it will create community-based media but also lead to rumor and last minute political ambush.”

The importance of gatekeeping in the digital age is determined significantly by its application after production, due to the spread of inaccurate information that has been expanded by new technology and the speed with which news is created, all of which affects the quality of the news. The main research finding, of the importance of post-production gatekeeping, is thus crucial to an understanding of the subsequent filtering of content. Adding the post-production component to the main elements of gatekeeping theory makes it an appropriate umbrella to accommodate the new elements arising from technological developments in the field of journalism.

### **8.2.2 Deleting posts and news items**

Hamza Kashgari, a 23-year-old Saudi microblogger and former columnist of *Albilad* newspaper, caused controversy in February 2012 by posting a series of tweets on the birthday of the prophet Mohammad, treating him as an equal and stating that while he admired many of the Prophet’s characteristics, there were others that he hated. Readers posted nearly 30,000 tweets in response in less than 24 hours, accusing Kashgari of blasphemy, atheism and apostasy. Some contained death threats. The Saudi minister of information posted a tweet condemning Kashgari after Saudis asked him to comment. Angry reaction continued even after Kashgari deleted the controversial tweets, published an apology and repented. He fled to Malaysia and incensed the Saudi public

by appearing to suggest that his apology had not been sincere and that he had made it solely to gain time so that he could escape. The Malaysian authorities agreed to extradite him to Saudi Arabia, where he was jailed (Kazi, 17 February 2012). A Malaysian blogger, Asma Qadah (Personal communication, 10 March 2012), states that she had sheltered Kashgari in Malaysia for a few days and had helped him to seek asylum in New Zealand, believing his life to be in danger in Saudi Arabia if he were arrested.

This anecdote, recounted in greater detail in chapter 3, indicates the power of the digital audience as a post-production gatekeeper in Saudi Arabia. The audience has in effect become a major gatekeeper of digital information: an audience which disagrees with what has been written or posted will do whatever it takes to make the author delete it, using a number of different techniques to achieve this end. In the Kashgari case, the audience not only accused him of blasphemy but forced him to delete the offending tweets, then made it clear that they were not satisfied with his retraction and apology, many going so far as to call for him to be executed. The strong demands of this virtual crowd that Kashgari should be punished can be said to have gone well beyond gatekeeping, in that they were no longer concerned with simply filtering, editing or otherwise controlling the publication of news or comment. In any case, the strength of the response clearly embarrassed the Saudi government into securing the arrest of Kashgari and then jailing him, fearing that if it did not do so, the demands would continue and the virtual rage would move onto the street (Saudi Now, 7 February 2012; Giglio, 2012). Thus, what began with Kashgari could lead to something worse for the government. In order to avoid such situations developing, deleting posts has become the norm in Saudi Arabia under the threat of audience anger, thus underlining the significant role of post-publication gatekeeping.

Indeed, deleting news items or tweets in response to the new gatekeeper is not limited to Saudi Arabia; it is a global phenomenon driven by technological developments which now occur continuously everywhere. Thus, as detailed in chapter 7, Kim Kardashian, an American socialite and reality television star, reacted to news of renewed violence in Israel and Palestine by tweeting that she was “praying for everyone in Israel”, then felt it necessary to respond to the anger and violence of the Twitter reaction by adding that she was “praying for everyone in Palestine and across the world”. When this failed to

stem the strength of audience bad feeling, she deleted both tweets and apologised on her blog for having “offended and hurt” some people (Puente, 2012). The reaction of Kardashian’s audience and her actions in response reflect the globally significant role of the audience in post-production gatekeeping; it is evidently not a phenomenon limited to Saudi Arabia but one with impact on producers of news and comment everywhere. This indicates that the research findings themselves are not restricted in their application to any particular area; on the contrary, their scope extends to contemporary media production in general, in a reflection of the importance of gatekeeping theory as it evolves. The new element suggested by the research has an essential effect on the long-standing theory of gatekeeping and an influential role in media production in the digital age.

In the same context, as reported in section 6.10, in April 2013 a singer, Rylan Clark, deleted a tweet in tribute to Margaret Thatcher, after being reminded of her role in introducing legislation prohibiting the promotion of homosexuality and her general disdain for gay rights (Ledger, 2013). This reflects how gatekeeping has begun to intervene significantly in the matter of personal feelings, thus exceeding traditional self-censorship. Their direct and instantaneous contact with their audience can lead microbloggers around the world to delete their own material, whether voluntarily as in the case of Clark, or under threat of retribution as was the case with Kashgari. It is difficult, however, to predict whether a particular post will stand or be deleted. Audience pressure and the ease with which material can be deleted make everything possible in the digital era.

The ease of dissemination of news in the internet age often leads to carelessness in applying a commitment to professional and ethical standards, whether by individuals or by news organizations, which makes post-production tools crucial in amending what has gone wrong. For instance, the Saudi electronic newspaper *Sabq* has removed many items because of its mistakes and pressure from its readers. One such article, as explained in chapter 7, wrongly complained about the English slogan on a bag on sale in Saudi Arabia, a mistake which arose because the author had mistranslated the text as being offensive (Sabq, 6 March 2013). The translation error was made into a hashtag on Twitter, forcing *Sabq* to delete the topic. Importantly, the article attracted no comments about the wrong translation before it was deleted. The fact that commenters all thanked

the newspaper for addressing subject can be said to confirm the powerful role of post-production gatekeeping at *Sabq*.

### **8.2.3 Blocking**

The Saudi government continues to exercise a strong influence on the media, both traditional and modern. It imposes official policy before publishing (pre-selection) via the traditional gatekeeping system, as indicated in chapter 6 and throughout this study, to ensure that print newspaper editors observe government policy and to prevent the dissemination of any material that might be a source of nuisance to the national authorities. As mentioned in chapter 3, the selection of Saudi print newspaper editors depends on the approval of the Ministry of Information in coordination with the Ministry of the Interior, a method of choice that reflects the nature of the relationship between the editor and the leadership of the state, which is engineered to ensure that editors will not publish material of which the state disapproves. As to e-newspapers, the Saudi government takes a significantly different approach which applies specifically to soft copy, relying principally on a post-production component of contemporary gatekeeping identified as crucial by the present study: the blocking of websites. As reported in chapter 5 and discussed in the following analysis chapter, the *Sabq* website was blocked after publishing inaccurate information about the Ministry of the Interior. The blocking system is a key post-production gatekeeping device in relation to the internet in Saudi Arabia, where e-newspapers are not much different from print ones in the margin of freedom within which they operate. Both are subject to gatekeeping, which operates in the traditional pre-selection form for printed news and through post-production means in the digital media.

The practical equivalence of these two control mechanisms means that Saudi e-newspapers have no real advantage over the print ones except in the speed of dissemination of news. This discussion of the differences between print and online newspapers in Saudi Arabia in terms of control of information shows that they are similar to those between blogs and other platforms, because the government always finds ways of gatekeeping and filtering published information. The old gatekeeper would not allow news items inconsistent with its policy to appear in print and if a newspaper somehow managed to publish such material, the traditional gatekeeper would simply shut down the newspaper for a while. Nothing has fundamentally changed

in the contemporary media landscape. The new gatekeeper continues to exercise its authority after publication if an e-newspaper, blog or website publishes material inconsistent with its policy. Such post-production gatekeeping is applied in the digital era by triggering an established blocking system which prevents the domestic audience from accessing a given platform. This method of imposing guardianship on the news leaves editors and proprietors thinking carefully about which items to publish and which to suppress, by fuelling their insecurities concerning the potential for significant financial and moral losses if the government should block their websites. This confirms the power of post-production gatekeeping to influence the process of news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia.

This influence is clearly illustrated by the account given by the editor of *Sabq*, reported in chapter 5, of an occasion when an item it published offended the Ministry of the Interior, which blocked the *Sabq* site until a suitable apology had been made. Far from complaining of this restriction to its editorial freedom, *Sabq* subsequently reported prominently an official letter it had received from the Ministry thanking it for “progress in journalism” (Al Shehri, personal interview, 7 August 2012). The editor’s admission about blocking and the apology that he and his general manager made in a meeting with a deputy minister reflect how gatekeeping dominates the creation and circulation of news in Saudi Arabia and how post-production techniques in this case play a key role in controlling content. The Saudi official delivered a clear message at the meeting: *Sabq* (and other sites) must post what the government requires them to post or face being blocked. Thus, the new gatekeeper exercises a (post-production) power unavailable to the traditional gatekeeper, as the fear of blocking will prevent online newspapers from addressing many potentially sensitive issues. This clarifies how such governments can use the blocking system to achieve their goals without hiring permanent gatekeepers as they do to control print newspapers.

E-newspapers are not the only targets of blocking in Saudi Arabia, where even blogs are subject to this technique of post-production gatekeeping. As discussed in section 7.8, Manal Al-Sharif said in interview that she had been subjected to blocking of her blog and social media accounts and was worried about the future of her cyber-activities, feeling herself under threat and at risk. Saudi Arabia is one of countries with the largest number of banned websites in the world. Reporters Without Borders points out in its



2010 report that Saudi Arabia's Telecommunications and Information Technologies Agency claims that blocking requests apply to many hundreds of sites daily, averaging some 300,000 sites per year. This estimate confirms that the Saudi government is blocking many websites every day, which in turn indicates how easy it is to block a website in the country (Alkhataf, 2010).

Blocking is not only ordered by governments, but is sometimes done by site owners in response to their audience. In September 2012, Google, which owns YouTube, blocked access to a YouTube video ridiculing the Prophet Mohammed in two countries in turmoil, Egypt and Libya, but did not remove the video from its website. Google, which is reported to have taken this action following a strong negative reaction by Muslims to the video, released a statement to explain its action, reported by the *New York Times* as follows:

Google said it decided to block the video in response to violence that killed four American diplomatic personnel in Libya. The company said its decision was unusual, made because of the exceptional circumstances. Its policy is to remove content only if it is hate speech, violating its terms of service, or if it is responding to valid court orders or government requests. And it said it had determined that under its own guidelines, the video was not hate speech (Miller, 2012).

This “unusual” decision by Google can be seen as an indication that the audience has great power in the era of the internet and can force companies and governments alike to comply with its demands, even if these are not consistent with the applicable laws or regulations, thus reinforcing the significance of blocking as a post-production gatekeeping device in the digital age.

Many newspapers around the world have blocked certain pages or comments under particular circumstances. In April 2013, a few hours after the announcement of the death of former British Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher, the *Daily Telegraph* decided to shut down all comment sections on related articles because of “abuse” by posters discussing both positive and negative stories about Thatcher. The paper's editor, Tony Gallagher, tweeted: “We have closed comments on every #Thatcher story today -- even our address to email tributes is filled with abuse”. In response, one of Thatcher's detractors complained: “And yet you protest for freedom of

speech?” (Hall, 9 April 2013). This shows how the ideologies and internal regulations of newspapers affect the post-production gatekeeping role they play in blocking comments. For instance, the *Daily Telegraph* could have filtered the comments it received, rather than completely closing down all opportunity for posters to express their feelings, but ideology appears to have influenced its decision, given that the newspaper “has been politically conservative in modern times” (Curtis, 2006). The fact that this orientation will have made it politically sympathetic to Thatcher may have contributed to its decision, reflecting the tendency for post-production gatekeeping to have traditional motivations. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) argue that journalists and the media in general tend to take decisions based on ideology and personal beliefs, which confirms the existence of gatekeeping.

The individual is the new gatekeeper. A microblogger can block users on Twitter by not seeing what they post and preventing them from communicating with him or her by clicking a block button in the Twitter user account which he or she wishes to block. An individual can also report a Twitter user as sending spam by clicking on ‘Report @username’ for spam. Once the ‘report as spam’ link has been clicked, Twitter will block the user from following or replying to the complainant. Reporting an account for spam may result in suspension if many users report a particular user (Twitter, 2006). Twitter is likely to have quite a complicated algorithm for calculating how risky a user is. The system could decide whether or not to suspend the reported user based on how “spammy” the suspect account looks and on the reputation of the users reporting the alleged spammer (Quora, 7 January 2007). This means that a Twitter user who has millions of followers might succeed in having an account suspended by campaigning against it.

The observation of a Saudi microblogger conducted by the researcher revealed details of many events in which the microblogger had affected the process of contemporary news production and played a crucial role in blocking people and in preventing their information from being heard. At a conference in Qatar, another Saudi journalist and microblogger admitted to having blocked 1600 Twitter users within two years (Khashoggi, 2013). Saravanan (2011) asserts that any person who controls access to something and decides whether a given message will be distributed by a platform is a gatekeeper: “Individuals can also act as gatekeepers, deciding what information to

include in an email or in a blog.” This study has found that such gatekeeping has additional features which need to be considered: reporting a username for spam and blocking accounts. The more advanced the technology, the greater the controls which can be applied.

#### **8.2.4 Cyber attacks**

Another vital component of post-production gatekeeping is the use of cyber attacks. The Saudi government has launched such attacks to prevent the audience from accessing certain information, using various methods to hack websites. Evgeny Morozov is cited in chapter 7 as describing in a lecture how it has sent viruses to a Saudi website in order to prevent others from accessing it. Morozov describes in great detail the ways in which the Saudi government deals with its cyber-opponents, working hard not just to destroy their websites but to prevent them from repeating their attempts to disseminate their material. His lecture illustrates the challenges faced by Saudi websites owners due to such attacks, which leave them unable to find companies to host their websites because they have become a source of concern and inconvenience to these companies. Such cyber-attacks prove that contemporary gatekeeping (including its post-production component) has a greater impact on the media landscape than traditional gatekeeping, which simply prevents officially undesirable material from being published. In the past, any material or news rejected by one platform might be approved by another without the moral and financial losses that are often occasioned by post-production gatekeeping. Morozov (2013) claims that cyber-attacks make the digital era less free and democratic than the past.

This vision is consistent with Ristow (2013), who argues that there is

... a darker side to digitization. At one and the same time it liberates information—and makes it possible to spy on it, to track it, to control it, to manipulate it in ways never possible before. And it leaves effective control of all these things not just in the hands of governments, but more and more, in the hands of the computer engineers and corporate executives.

Freedom House (2012: 1) reports that Saudi Arabia is among those countries that have taken the most repressive steps against websites:

Concerned with the power of new technologies to catalyse political change, many authoritarian states have taken various measures to filter, monitor, or otherwise obstruct free speech online. These tactics were particularly evident over the past year in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Uzbekistan, and China, where the authorities imposed further restrictions.

The report also notes that Saudi Arabia has supported hackers in transmitting viruses to disable certain sites and made cyber-attacks on several websites which have published material criticizing the government.

### **8.2.5 Pressure on microbloggers to cease blogging**

In a study of US journalists' attitudes to selecting the news, Kim (2002) found that some journalists ignored international stories in order to satisfy an audience which preferred domestic news, using audience preference as a justification for disregarding world events. Similarly, Fahmy (2005) examined the production of photojournalists on the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Afghan war, reporting that these journalists followed the audience interest in terms of their coverage and of the material they produced. These studies indicate that an audience can have a substantial impact on the gatekeeping process applied by journalists and photojournalists.

While the gatekeeping role of the audience in creating and circulating the news production of traditional media outlets is very powerful, the current study has found that its contribution to gatekeeping has become stronger in the digital age, through the post-production component in particular. Nor does this component operate only by influencing the editing of content after it has been posted on websites, as discussed earlier in this chapter, or indeed its deletion, as in the cases of Hamza Kashgari and Rylan Clark; the study also found that the audience effect extends to sending persistent negative messages which may lead microbloggers to deactivate their accounts and cease posting altogether. Indeed, many microbloggers were found to have deactivated their accounts in response to audience pressure, which further supports the significance of post-production gatekeeping in contemporary media production, both in Saudi Arabia and in the wider world.

As discussed in section 6.5, Ali Al-Dhafiri reported in interview having deleted a number of tweets and indeed having deactivated his Twitter account many times

because of the responses of followers and other users to his posts, pointing out that the more followers a journalist has, the more pressure he is likely to receive. Al-Dhafiri responds to this pressure by taking a much more moderate political line via Twitter than in his columns and Aljazeera TV programmes. The direct and immediate contact between microblogger and audience in Twitter makes the process of production more difficult. It may seem to make it easier, but the reality is otherwise. Al-Dhafiri, for instance, stated that he was not enjoying Twitter because of its atmosphere, which this study would classify as post-production pressure. The new component introduced by technology limited his participation in microblogging to the promotion of his television programmes and articles; despite this restriction, he felt that continued attacks and insults from the audience were likely to force him to quit microblogging altogether.

This case further illustrates the post-production power that can be exercised by those members of a microblogger's audience who disagree with his or her content. Their campaigns can amount to a kind of psychological warfare which often ends in the surrender of the microblogger in the form of an announcement that he or she intends to cease tweeting. This is not a uniquely Saudi phenomenon, but an international one, as illustrated by the cases of Ashton Kutcher, Jennifer Love Hewitt, Robin van Persie and others discussed in section 7.8. The increasing number of people suspending or completely abandoning their microblogging activity because of the abusive messages they have received gives a clear indication that the post-production component of gatekeeping identified by this study is dominant today and has a growing impact on contemporary media production in the form of negative and insulting messages used to prevent content from appearing.

#### **8.2.6 Effect of arrests**

This study has confirmed the impact of arresting writers as a gatekeeping technique and its relevance to the process of contemporary news creation and circulation. The analysis of data collected during personal interviews with three Saudi bloggers and microbloggers, Fouad Alfarhan, Manal Al-Sharif and Feras Bugnah, all of whom had at some time been arrested, shows that this experience caused them to change their way of producing material, in that they became more hesitant to produce any content publicly. Thus, the post-production action taken by the government gatekeeper is shown to have affected their methods and hence the production of future material, which further

corroborates the extent and complexity of the role of gatekeeping in the process of media creation and distribution. The new territory of cyberspace affords many platforms unregulated by the traditional gatekeeper, who pre-selected material before publication in print, but it is far from being free from gatekeeping. The researcher's interviews with Saudi bloggers and writers make it clear that gatekeeping is still strongly influential in every aspect of processing the news and other media content today.

The effect of arrest is an essential element of post-production gatekeeping in that it has a crucial influence on the potential material produced by people who have been arrested. Fouad Alfarhan was one of the first bloggers to be arrested in Saudi Arabia. As detailed in chapter 3, he was detained on 11 December 2007, for having listed in his blog the ten Saudis that he most disliked and least wished to meet. He was jailed for more than a month. Alfarhan claims that while he was not physically maltreated during his detention, he was subjected to psychological torture, spending more than 30 days in solitary confinement. He is reported to believe that the government was playing with his mind, seeking to influence his future decisions. In the digital era, the Saudi government cannot practice physical abuse, for fear of the spread of information that might damage its image, so the authorities adopt different techniques, whose powerful influence is illustrated by Alfarhan's reported experience.

As discussed in chapter 7 (section 7.6), another Saudi blogger, Ahmed Al Omran, stated in interview that when the Ministry of the Interior was unhappy with his blog posts in 2009, officials successfully used his uncle as an intermediary to put pressure on him, persuading him to keep a "low profile" and not to respond to contacts by international news agencies. This is evidence that the government used the fear of arrest to make bloggers and microbloggers think very carefully before publishing anything that the authorities might not be happy with. Perhaps its impact varies from one person to another, but the study confirms that it has a significant impact on the process of creation and circulation of news and other media content. It also further substantiates the finding that the government is responsible for many developments in post-production gatekeeping which contribute to undermining the power of news producers.

A recent corroborating example is that of Mohammad Alarefe, reported in section 7.5, who, having been released from arrest, unfollowed a number of Moslem Brotherhood

sympathisers under pressure from the Saudi authorities. Alarefe's case confirms that the Saudi government's gatekeeping activities go beyond message content to the list of followees, providing evidence that modern gatekeeping is more stringent than the traditional form, in that a microblogger may be subject to arrest and accountability simply for following a user against whom the government has a negative attitude. The Alarefe case is a clear example of the lengths to which the government can go in contemporary gatekeeping.

#### **8.2.7 Pursuing posters via their IP addresses**

Another action of the Saudi government which identifies the post-production component of gatekeeping as essential in contemporary media production is its pursuit of those who post comments of which it disapproves on the websites of Saudi newspapers. The observation phase of this study revealed, as noted in chapters 5 and 6, that the Saudi authorities identify such commentators by obtaining information on them from the newspapers concerned. In addition to the filtering of all comments by a special group in each newspaper, the security forces track any commentator who posts something that they perceive as criticising the government, which further confirms that the new gatekeeping, including the post-production component identified by the present study, is stronger and more stringent than its traditional form of a pre-selection procedure. According to the website manager of *Alriyadh* (Personal interview, 5 August 2012), the security authorities at the Saudi Interior Ministry had asked him, via the editor-in-chief, to provide them with all available information on two people who had posted comments and published controversial information at different times. The *Alriyadh* website team was able to supply full details, because the website required each commenter to provide overt personal information, while also retaining the IP address from which each comment had come.

It is not only Saudi newspapers which provide information to governments on participants in their online platforms; Twitter does it too. In July 2013, following a long legal battle with the French government, the US-based company agreed to hand over data on people who had posted racist and abusive messages on its microblogging site (Chrisafis, 12 July 2013). The actions of *Alriyadh* and Twitter in complying with the demands of the Saudi and French governments both offer evidence of the crucial function of post-production gatekeeping in today's media landscape.

### **8.2.8 Dumping hashtags through Twitter**

The observation of Essam Al Zamil, reported in chapter 5, shows how effective and powerful were his contributions to a particular Twitter hashtag. The research found that the number of mentions rose very sharply when he participated in that hashtag, due to his number of followers and reputation on Twitter in Saudi Arabia. Al Zamil and other Saudi microbloggers are shown to apply pressure on the government because of their power and influence through the hashtags they create or participate in. Their ability to fuel these hashtags has been shown to have forced the government either to stop or to start initiatives due to the enormous audience pressure that can be sparked by a successful hashtag. But the Saudi government has not remained unresponsive to the Saudi hashtag movement. It has followed a dumping policy, by which it has loaded hashtags of which it disapproves with many messages to divert attention and detract from their main message.

The study found the dumping of hashtags through Twitter to be a key component of post-production gatekeeping. Recent research provides evidence that the Saudi government uses computer programs in order to dump hashtags created or supported by Saudis who oppose certain government policies. The Saudi authorities have discovered that to censor content in the traditional way by pre-selecting material is impossible in the digital era, leading them to use the alternative methods of gatekeeping discussed above, such as blocking and cyber-attacks, to which can be added the dumping of hashtags. Flooding hashtags with messages supporting the government distracts the audience, blurs the focus of the original campaign and reduces it to a noisy exchange of invective between supporters and opponents. Such intervention by the authorities in the Saudi Twitter environment can be detected by the observation that there are certain usernames which participate only in subjects whose original aim was to criticize the government and that they post identical tweets carrying the same typographical and grammatical errors, obviously intended to weaken the effectiveness of active hashtags against the government (Almohia, 2013).

Such new methods adopted by governments to control the spread of information and the imposition of restrictions confirm that post-production gatekeeping continues to evolve as technology develops, strengthening the contribution of this research with the implication that this component will have a long-term impact on the field of journalism.



Throughout history, as discussed in chapter 2, the emergence of new communication technologies—from Gutenberg’s invention of movable-type printing to the latest microblogging service—has been resisted by governments, clerics and other parties who have feared that it will undermine their power or authority. However, when these reactionary forces fail to prevent the growing prevalence of any such technology, they will start to use it themselves, seeking a suitable direct or indirect method of gatekeeping the information concerned, which once more confirms the present and future importance of the post-production component. As Shoemaker and Vos (2009) argue, governments will always try to control the flow of information in any way they can, which strengthens the impact and effect of the study’s main finding, that in the digital era they will always use post-production gatekeeping to this end.

### **8.3 Other contributions**

Beside the main finding discussed at length above, the present study makes a significant contribution to knowledge of the relevance of gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia by its findings concerning the following four themes, which are dealt with in turn below:

- Social gatekeeping and women’s issues
- Patriarchal and social gatekeeping
- Religious gatekeeping
- Hard-copy versus soft-copy gatekeeping.

#### **8.3.1 Social gatekeeping and women’s issues**

For every Saudi woman there is at least one man, referred to as a male guardian, who acts effectively as a gatekeeper of her everyday life. No Saudi female can travel freely without the permission of her guardian, just as no news item can be published by the mainstream media without the approval of the editor. A Saudi female microblogger, Eman Al Nafjan (2011) describes Saudi women’s situation:

By law, every Saudi woman has a male guardian. At birth, the guardianship is given to her father and then upon marriage to her husband. If a woman is a widow, her guardianship is given to her son – meaning that she would need her own son’s permission for the majority of her interactions with the government, including the right to travel abroad.

Social restrictions imposed on Saudi women are reflected in their image in the news and their role in newsrooms. Indeed, women are not allowed to work in Saudi newspaper newsrooms and all Saudi gatekeepers are male. The prevailing traditional culture imposes strict sexual segregation in various aspects of life. Gender segregation in Saudi Arabia, which keeps wives, sisters and daughters from interacting with male strangers, follows from the extreme concern for female purity and family honour (Porter and McDaniel, 2009). This aspect of culture has a major impact on the presence of women in the Saudi workplace, where they must always work in separate rooms or buildings, without direct contact with their male colleagues. The researcher visited two newspapers and found no women working there. All female journalists were confined to their own buildings, obliged to communicate with male workmates by email. Their absence means that they are unable to participate in media decision-making and policy formulation.

The first female film director in Saudi Arabia, Haifaa al-Mansour, confirms that the traditional culture of gender segregation controls male-female interaction in the country. During the making of her first feature-length film, “I could not be outside with the actors, I had to be in a van using a walkie-talkie to direct, because men and women are not supposed to mix in the workplace, especially in public” (Liston, 2013). These constraints on relationships between men and women apply to all walks of life in Saudi Arabia, including journalism. As discussed in chapter 6, the former head of the Art section of a Saudi print newspaper told the researcher that he had been limited to publishing just three pictures of females each week and that on this and other matters related to the depiction of women, he believed his editor-in-chief to be under pressure from society, from the religious police and from religious leaders (AlAmri, 18 August 2012). Thus, the Saudi press deals with women’s issues with great sensitivity and caution, reflecting the culture of a society which has strong reservations about the appearance of women in public places and their working outside the home. Ghista (2011) cites the guidance given by a Muslim scholar, applicable in many Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia:

She should stay at home and not go out often, she must not be well-informed, nor must she be communicative with her neighbours and only visit them when absolutely necessary; she should take care of her

husband and respect him in his presence and his absence and seek to satisfy him in everything.

Saudi gatekeepers, influenced by this culture, prevent women or their images from appearing freely not only in newspapers and on television, but even in shopping catalogues. Chapter 6 discusses the Saudi version of an IKEA home products catalogue, visually identical to the original but with all images of women erased. This case shows how societal gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia has not merely forced newspapers to restrict the depiction of women, but even requires foreign media and other organizations to change their policies to satisfy Saudi society, even if this means sacrificing their principles. The IKEA catalogue is an example of how powerful gatekeeping is today, both inside and outside the country, when it comes to topics related to women.

### **8.3.2 Patriarchal gatekeeping**

A key finding of this study closely related to the above topic concerns the phenomenon of patriarchal gatekeeping. This element has a crucial impact on mainstream media but perhaps an even greater one on digital media, as bloggers and microbloggers appear to suffer its effects most markedly. The interviews and observations revealed many events which make this element particularly significant and relevant to gatekeeping in the contemporary creation and circulation of news in Saudi Arabia. For example, Manal Al-Sharif, whose campaign for Saudi women to be allowed to drive is referred to in chapters 3 and 4, stated in interview (section 7.6) that before this, her husband had practiced male domination, acting as a patriarchal gatekeeper by his interference in her writing and by refusing to allow her to use her real name in any publication, so that she could not begin her public campaign openly until they had been divorced.

The Saudi male plays the part of patriarchal gatekeeper in many situations, undermining the power of females by imposing restrictions on their media production, and the study has provided examples of female microbloggers and bloggers who have abandoned blogging in response to patriarchal pressure. In Saudi culture, special respect is accorded to elderly male relatives, whose advice is usually followed, by subordinate males and females alike. The successful use by the Saudi authorities of this cultural effect, in order to place indirect pressure on bloggers, is illustrated by the case of Ahmed Al Omran and his uncle discussed above. If any blogger angers the Saudi

Ministry of the Interior, officials will ask his/her father to punish him or her on the ministry's behalf. The authorities know that in some situations they can achieve their goals of controlling information flow in the digital era by applying patriarchal gatekeeping, which has been shown to have a vital role in the contemporary Saudi media.

### **8.3.3 Religious gatekeeping**

A third culturally related aspect of the findings concerns the effect of religion on gatekeeping. During the observation reported in chapter 5, the researcher found that the *Sabq* electronic newspaper applied religious gatekeeping muscularly, which made its website the most visited in the Arab world, receiving seven million hits per day. The editor-in-chief stated that the newspaper had never published any picture of a woman or broadcast any video containing music. He affirmed that *Sabq*'s commitment to an Islamic identity made it the leading purveyor of news in Saudi Arabia and beyond (Al Shehri, 7 August 2012). His interview made it clear that the newspaper's editors filtered the news by format and religious character, selecting material compatible with an Islamic approach. The editor-in-chief admitted that his team of editors used religion to market their news product and did not want to abandon this privilege, despite its incompatibility with professional standards. The study found that *Sabq* went beyond merely applying religious gatekeeping in the selection and presentation of the news: it tended to select bearded men to work in the newsroom, reflecting the ascendancy of religious personnel at the newspaper.

The success of *Sabq* in this context appears to have led other Saudi e-newspapers to adopt similar policies in order to win public trust in the market. Although not all Saudis are totally religious, religious leaders continue to have a strong position in Saudi society, cemented by the government, education and beliefs over the past decades, so that any product displaying a religious character is likely to be more successful than an equivalent one which does not. More widely, Dennis (1978) claims that religion is an essential factor in selecting news in the least democratic countries. Thus, many Saudi editors appear to select and reject news based on religion factors. The researcher's observations and interviews provide evidence that religion has a great impact on news creation in Saudi Arabia, as a key gatekeeping element not only in newspapers but as common practice in microblogging sites. The observation of Essam Al Zamil indicated

that he depended on religious criteria when producing tweets and contributing to hashtags.

The evidence reviewed here show that religious gatekeeping of a traditional character is influential and will continue to be effective in Saudi Arabia in the future, despite the prevalence of technology which offers new platforms to news producers.

#### **8.3.4 Hard-copy versus soft-copy gatekeeping**

Notwithstanding the apparent persistence of gatekeeping in Saudi Arabia and of its social and religious aspects discussed above, albeit with a new post-production focus which has evolved to accommodate the features of news production in the digital age, it is important to note a final significant feature of contemporary gatekeeping. This is that greater sensitivity seems to be applied to what is published in print newspapers compared with their electronic counterparts, even where the two platforms are run by a single organization. This finding emerged from the researcher's observations of the production of the two versions of *Alriyadh*: the print newspaper and its online edition, where different procedures were followed. One example was the use in the printed version of full official titles, while the online version referred to people, however senior, by position and name alone. A senior member of the *Alriyadh* online team is cited in chapter 6 as outlining some of the challenges facing the online version in contrast to the print one: once print readers have a newspaper in their hands, they will read what catches their eye, while the web audience will follow threads. The much greater competition among online content means that to "follow the same conventions" would risk readers being "bored by a news item because of lengthy titles", for example (Al Swoilem, Personal interview, 5 August 2012).

Other differences noted in chapters 5 and 6 reflect a more relaxed approach to gatekeeping in the online version than the print copy. One of the factors behind this leniency is the internet illiteracy of the *Alriyadh* editor-in-chief, who was found not to deal with the internet at all, relying on assistants to print out any digital material that required his attention. Many other Saudi gatekeepers appear to suffer a similar lack of technological experience compared with their full understanding of traditional platforms, which may make them more powerful and influential in gatekeeping mainstream media production.

Cassidy (2006) discusses the occurrence of disputes in contemporary newsrooms around the globe between journalists working on the print versions of newspapers and members of their online teams, which reflect the different methods of news creation applied to the two editions. The researcher's observations at *Alriyadh* indicate that the two teams were not in harmony, each believing that the other lacked certain required capabilities. More specifically, the print team felt that members of the digital team were not qualified as journalists, while on the online side the feeling was that the hard copy journalists were not keeping pace with rapid technological changes that required technical expertise and greater openness.

This conflict between the electronic and print versions will continue to be renewed in Saudi Arabia and will undoubtedly continue to affect the creation and circulation of news in the future. While newspapers around the world have become increasingly dependent on the income derived from electronic copy, Saudi publishers are still hostage to the ability of printed newspapers to generate the profits. Many large advertisers in the Saudi market still do not trust the online medium and place few advertisements on digital platforms, so that print retains a greater influence; this means in turn that the traditional gatekeepers in Saudi Arabia tend to maintain their control of content, both offline and online, and appear likely to continue to do so.

Qhatani (2011) points out that the Saudi government is well aware of the importance of extending its control over the information in print newspapers, leading it to continue to support them by helping them financially in order for them to survive, even if their readers are progressively deserting them. The government also encourages businessmen to support newspapers by buying advertising space, because the death of print newspapers would deprive the government and the establishment of an important platform from which to circulate their messages and positions.

All of this constitutes evidence that the Saudi government is trying in various ways to control the spread of information in the country and is working to strengthen the power of print newspapers and mainstream media, while attempting indirectly to undermine the efficacy of online platforms to broadcast dissenting voices. In other words, it would appear that the government retains confidence in its own ability to exercise firm control of the traditional media while at the same time developing the means to censor digital

information, whether through traditional gatekeeping (pre-selection) or by the various post-production methods identified and analysed by the present study.

## **8.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has identified post-production gatekeeping as the cornerstone of the contribution of the study, due to its significance to contemporary journalism. It has discussed the importance of this finding in light of the impact of post-production gatekeeping on the present and future of media production in Saudi Arabia and beyond. This study has answered questions raised by many scholars about the future of censorship in the digital era. Against a background where few existing studies have discussed the new gatekeepers, the researcher has developed a framework of understanding of recent developments by introducing the notion of post-production gatekeeping and identifying many activities which fall within this umbrella term, thus contributing to a broader understanding of the recent past, the present and the future of censorship in the online age. This chapter has also presented findings concerning the important role played by various forms of social gatekeeping in the process of contemporary news creation and circulation in Saudi Arabia. Finally, it has considered the significant difference in the strictness with which gatekeeping is applied in Saudi Arabia to hard-copy and soft-copy news output.

It is recommended that future research should examine a particular element of post-production gatekeeping on which this study has shed light, viz. the use of cyber-attacks, because it is a crucial area of digital journalism which has considerable potential for growth, as the present research has shown. If academic study is to keep pace with developments in the real world, is vital to explore this and other new approaches which governments globally employ to gatekeep information. While the technology companies attempt to create smart platforms for producers to contribute rapidly without gatekeepers' intervention, the present study has revealed that governments work hard to invent new ways to limit this freedom and to turn technological progress to their own advantage.

The identification by the current research of a new component—post-production gatekeeping—suggests many potential avenues of further investigation and

demonstrates the importance of this study not only for Saudi Arabia but for the field of digital journalism worldwide.



## Appendix: Translation of Arabic text in figures

**Figure 2.1:** Saudi radio licence, 1939

Saudi Arabia

General Directorate of Post and Telegraph

Licence for Wireless Receiver

Full name and address of the licensee: Ali Taha Radwan      Nationality : Saudi

City where the composite device operates: Jeddah      Region: Sham

Device Type: Philips      Expiry date of the license AH : 23/07/1960 (Gregorian)  
August 18, 1941

Under the Public Prosecution Order No. 8833 dated 07/29/1358 (Gregorian: 14  
September 1939)

This allows Ali Taha Radwan to use the device mentioned earlier only in the place  
specified above and to receive only the public channels under the conditions described  
on the back of the licence.

Accounting Manger

Director General of Post and Telegraph

Official Seal

Secretary of supply in Jeddah Radio

Chief Administrative Officer

**Figure 3.2:** Tweets posted by Princess Aljawharh AlSaud

- I will quiz you. The prize is 30 thousand riyals [around £5000]. I hope the prize will go to people in need. #retweet #Salaries not enough
- There are no enough reactions. Anyway, there are a prize to those who re tweeted my tweet. They are 6. I will follow you. Send me your IBAN (International Bank Account Number) prefer alahli, and Al-Rajhi Banks.

**Figure 3.3:** Most retweeted Saudi tweets

25: Faisal Almaghlooth

@f9oo

They wanted to honour the boxer Muhammad Ali by adding his name to the Hollywood Walk of Fame but he insisted that his name should be on the wall instead of the pavement. Ali justifies: The name of Mohammed should not be placed on the ground to be prone to being trodden on and desecrated.

24: Abdulaziz Al-Tarefe

@abdulaziztarefe

Jenadriyah [a yearly cultural festival held in the Riyadh City] represents heritage through buildings and pots, but events such as mixing [women and men], dance and music are the heritage of the West and not the heritage of Arabs and Muslims.

23: Abdulaziz Al-Tarefe

@abdulaziztarefe

The separation of religion and politics emerged in the West because their religion is corrupted and would spoil politics, but the separation occurred in the East because the politicians are corrupted and religion would spoil their policies.

22: Fahad Albutairi

@Fahad

Prince Khaled Al-Faisal: “On this earth there is a miracle named Saudi people”. It’s really a miracle because Saudis are everywhere on this planet. (Picture attached)

21: Faisal Bin Turki

@faisalbinturki1

Ettifaq club agreed to Al Nassr club’s offer to buy the remaining period of the contract of the player Yahya al Shehri.

20: Ali AlDafiri

@AliAldafiri

Islamists (with their flaws) are the only political movement that accepts the democratic system, while others limit their options between tyranny and the military.

19: Naser Alomar

@naseralomar

If the celebration of the National Day is Permissible shall be forbidden after the attendance of religious offences, what if it is forbidden already? There is darkness on top of each other.

18: Alwaleed Bin Talal

@Alwaleed\_Talal

During my tour of the Kingdom Centre (attached picture)

17: Tawfiq Al Rabiah

@tfrabiah

Prevent the use of goods which are sold but not refundable and not replaced, starting from the month of Muharram.

16: Omar Almuqbil

@dr\_almuqbil

Riyadh explosion awakened half the population of Riyadh and frightened those who were close to it. What about when the earth is shaken with convulsion in the hereafter? On the Day the blast [of the Horn] will convulse [creation], There will follow it the subsequent [one].

15: Nawaf Altemyat

@altemyat

To whoever started the rumour of my death, you are the cause of my mother's illness. God and yes agent. Do not worry, I will die someday.

14: Naser Alomar

@naseralomar

A young man was told to prostrate himself for Bashar but he refused. Later he was tortured severely. He was asked why he refused to worship. He said 'I have never prayed and I didn't want my first prostration to be for Bashar'. This young man has now become a prison muezzin.

13: Ayedh Alqarnee

@Dr\_alqarnee

Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return. My father (78 years old) passed away tonight. Blessings will be held tomorrow at the Grand Mosque after Friday prayers. God forgive him and all deceased Muslims.

12: Salman Alodah

@salman\_alodah

Salary is not enough. Prices are high and half of our salary goes to pay off the debt. Our priority is to support our relatives.

11: Mohamad Alarefe

@MohamadAlarefe

Young people at traffic lights distribute a bag containing this to break the fast for people in the street. Excellent job. (Picture attached).

10: Mohamad Alarefe

@MohamadAlarefe

Kraft cheese, Lipton tea, Pantene shampoo and Galaxy chocolate. I have started to boycott these products because they advertise on the MBC TV channel, which is a corrupt channel. I swear I will never let these enter my house.

9: Ahmed Al Shugairi

@shugairi

Get angry for the prophet but by his morals. #except\_of\_the\_Messenger\_of\_Allah

8: Abdulaziz Al-Tarefe

@abdulaziztarefe

The greatest endorsement of the soul is frequent mention of God with frequent prayer. He has certainly succeeded who purifies himself and speaks the name of his Lord and prays.

7: Ahmed Al shugairi

@shugairi

I hope not to publish an episode of my programme, as I wished to publish this episode.  
Please circulate it (link attached).

6: Salman Alodah

@salman\_alodah

Thankfully Mohamad Alarefe and Mohsen AlAwajy have been released.

5: Turki Homaidan

@Turki\_Homaidan

There is no power except with Allah. The committee decided to reject the request to release. We will wait to see if we can try again.

4: Mohamad Alarefe

@MohamadAlarefe

I just came out of the Emirate of Riyadh after spending two hours there. Then I signed a pledge not to raise money for Syria. I hope those who planned to come to the AlBawardi mosque will not come.

3: Mohamad Alarefe

@MohamadAlarefe

In short: I love you.

2: Abdulaziz Al-Tarefe

@abdulaziztarefe

If at the time of prophecy, the hypocrites only met there [Al-Arabiya channel], and Banu Qurayza [a Jewish tribe which lived in northern Arabia] only spent their money on it.

1: Tariq Alhabeeb

@Talhabeeb

My son, Abdu Alelah, is wearing the new thawb made by reckless people. (Picture attached).

**Figure 5.14:** The effect on the hashtag ‘meeting of shame’ of contributions by Essam Al Zamil, starting at 11 pm

@SaudiLawyer:

Shame on attending a meeting of shame. Boycott the Russians who have blood on their hands.

@malyahya2:

The announcement and invitation of a meeting of shame.

@Sauditurki:

Picture of the message showing the cancellation of the meeting of shame.

@Abu\_riman:

Who will contribute by attending and provide us with the names of traders attending the meeting of shame?

@Essamz:

We call on the Chamber of Commerce in Riyadh to cancel the meeting of shame to show respect for the blood of the Syrians.

@abdullaalalmi:

Tomorrow Riyadh Chamber of Commerce will be contaminated because of the meeting of shame. Syria will chase you.

@tuwrqi:

Any businessman who participates in the meeting of shame will be on the blacklist.

@azizmutairi:

Our businessmen have proven their integrity and responded to our call by cancelling the meeting of shame. Thank you to those who contributed.

**Figure 6.4:** Letter ordering the banning of a cartoonist

Urgent

To the editor-in-chief of *Alriyadh* newspaper

Greetings,

In reference to the cartoon published in *Alriyadh*, issue 11853, 6 December 2000, drawn by cartoonist Suliman Al Musiheej, of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, leader of Libya, we ask you please to ban the above cartoonist for two months with a pledge not to do such things again.

Best regards

Misfer Saad Almisfer

Undersecretary of Internal Media

Ministry of Information

**Figure 6.7:** The illustration and text of an article which *Sabq* deleted on 6 March 2013 in response to criticism from microbloggers

A citizen, Shaker Al-Otaibi, was surprised to see a woman's bag sold in a Jeddah shopping centre with the word of God on it.

The newspaper is shocked that the shop was allowed to sell a product belittling the word of God by putting it on a bag. Another issue which the newspaper has identified is that the bag has on it a slogan which states that "the girls want to be the target of fun", in other words, to be toys for men. The newspaper considers this offensive and appeals to the government to prevent shops from selling such bags.

**Figure 7.1:** Al-Hilal plays with Al Nassar tomorrow in the Saudi Professional League (Zain League). Repeated three times.

**Figure 7.2:** For your information. We do not accept people acting against our country and our leadership. Our leaders are our fathers.

**Figure 7.3:**

- Debate on the issue of detainees is not intended to protect the security and interests of the homeland.
- Lessons and lectures for Sheikh Sultan AlUwayd.
- 94 Emiratis accused of trying to overthrow the government.

**Figure 7.4:** Print screen of Iman AlQhatani's tweet about quitting microblogging

My dear Mum, I will stop because of you. Goodbye.

**Figure 7.5:** Copy of tweet criticizing Al Shuhail's article, showing four hashtags

Abdulmohsen Altaweel

@aaaboTurki

God please do not punish us because of what our dinosaurs did wrong

#Abdullah\_AlShuhail\_writer

#Sack\_Almalik\_because\_he\_has\_dementia

# the\_King\_could\_see\_what\_was\_what\_is\_and\_what\_will\_be

# Al-Jazirah\_abuse

**Figure 7.6:** Tweet by Gasssan Badkok claiming that Al Shuhail's article and the reaction to it are a lesson to all Saudi writers

Gasssan Badkok

@gbadkook

Dr Fahad, What happened should be a lesson to all Saudi writers and media outlets.



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