

Fourth Annual Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies Forum

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Background Paper

Media has played a leading role in the process of social change witnessed in Gulf society over the past five decades. These changes have had a far-reaching effect on the cultural, economic, and political life of not only the Gulf but also the Arab world more broadly.

Like its counterparts locally and globally, media in the GCC states has gone through several identifiable stages. Beginning with radio broadcasting, Saudi Arabia first hit the airwaves in 1949, Kuwait in 1952, Bahrain in 1955, Qatar and the UAE in 1961, and Oman in 1970. The appearance of media at this period was linked with the modernization process underway following the discovery of oil. The media became a key plank of the economic and social development process launched by Gulf governments in the mid 1950s. The Gulf states had not been isolated from developments in the world of media prior to this, however, with Great Britain—which had imposed its protection on the eastern shores of the Arabian Peninsula—introducing and controlling a number of print and audio media on what would become the Gulf states.

By the 1960s, a number of factors coalesced to promote the spread of the printed press in the Gulf region. These included an improvement in the level of education and its expansion; the proliferation of printing presses; the arrival of a professional class of journalists from Arab countries outside the Gulf; and the development of the newspaper industry. These Gulf newspapers replaced Egyptian (*Al-Ahram* and *Al-Hilal*) and Lebanese (*An-Nahar* and *Al-Kifah*) newspapers which had hitherto been widespread throughout the Gulf. Television was also introduced to the region in the same decade: the Gulf countries witnessed their first state-sponsored television broadcasts, with Saudi Arabia following quickly on from Kuwait.

In 1976, efforts were made to create a GCC-wide media landscape which took concrete form in the Joint Gulf Programming Institution. The Institution was born of a prior agreement by the Ministers of Information of the six member-states of the Gulf Cooperation Council and contributed to the strengthening of the cultural identity of the Gulf states across a variety of fields in the fine arts and letters¹.

Gulf Media in Europe

It was another confluence of factors that saw Gulf media organizations expand production to Europe. Diplomacy and a growing awareness of the importance of media was key, as was the availability of

¹ Similarly, the 31st GCC Summit, held in Abu Dhabi in 2010, approved a Gulf-wide media strategy for the six member states which aims to enhance cooperation and cultural ties between Gulf peoples and to strengthen the Gulf-based, Arab and Islamic identities of the GCC countries. See "Milestones in Joint Media Action", The Gulf Cooperation Council, last accessed on 26 March, 2017 (Arabic): <https://goo.gl/xl0BHL>

material resources (oil and investments), and the desire to break free of mainstream media restrictions (legal, political, and social restrictions), the *Al Sharq Al Awsat* newspaper was launched in London in 1978, and the Lebanese *Al-Hayat* resumed publication in London in 1989 under Saudi ownership. By the early 1990s investment in the visual media sector was also expanding. Healthy competition also drove growth. Led by Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states soon followed in competing to outdo the other in terms of coverage, popularity, and scope. These Gulf sponsored satellite television stations soon outdid non-Gulf and non-Arab television broadcasters who targeted the region. In September 1991, Saudi investor Walid bin Ibrahim launched MBC from London; in January 1994 the Saudi businessman Saleh Kamil launched the ART package of channels from Rome; and in May 1995 Prince Khalid bin Abdullah bin Abdel-Rahman launched the Orbit bundle of channels from London, before opening up a number of channels in other regions.

Al-Jazeera's satellite channel was launched in April 1996 from Qatar, becoming the first Arab satellite channel dedicated to news. In 2000 the UAE launched the Abu Dhabi and Dubai group of channels. During 2002 and 2003 some Arab television stations based outside of the region began broadcasting from Arab cities as well, such as Dubai, Cairo, and Beirut. The reasons for this move were in part financial and in part the desire to be close to an Arab audience in light of the successful experiences of some Arab channels broadcasting from within the Middle East and North Africa.

The rolling out of the Internet and the growth in Gulf private investment in media helped bring about a major leap forward, with 2004 marking a key milestone. There was a doubling in the number of channels, increased specialization and the emergence of satellite channels dedicated to sport, economics, social issues, and politics.

The domestic Gulf press was not unaffected by these developments. Despite its late appearance compared with its counterparts in Egypt and Lebanon, the growth of the Internet and investment from both government and the private-sector, and the expertise of a vast number of professionals from across the Gulf, the wider Arab region and the West, enabled a media revolution in the printed press and online in the GCC.

Social media

Social media has witnessed steady growth in the Gulf states. Online social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have provided a wide space for heated discussion with the participation of a large public. These networks play an important role in the formation of public opinion on societal, cultural, and political issues. According to the 2017 Arab Social Media Report, the number of Twitter users in the Arab region has reached 11 million, 49% of whom are in the Gulf states, with Saudi Arabia having the largest proportion of users in the Arab world. By 2014, the Kingdom also had 5.8 million Twitter users. Facebook remains; the number of users in the Arab states has rose to 156 million in 2017, compared to 115 million the year before. In proportional terms, users in the Gulf states represent 25% of all Arab users of Facebook, with Saudi Arabia accounting for the lion's share at 52% of these Gulf-based users of Facebook. Active Instagram users now number 7.1 million in the Arab world, 61% of whom are in the GCC countries, with Saudi Arabia again representing the highest proportion. As

the Arab Social Media Report indicates, Gulf states enjoy the largest share of social media users, taking the top five places for penetration across all platforms.

While social media help to strengthen public engagement, increase interest in public affairs and political participation, and to open Arab cultures to the world, it also imposes a series of challenges. Foremost among these are the loss of control over information flows and the merging of reality and rumor, facts and fiction, in addition to the impact of “digitalization” on the professionalism of Arab media workers, and the growth of challenges posed by new media to Arab cultural identity. More broadly, there is a risk of the superficialization of knowledge, and the long periods of time spent on social media which in some cases lead to symptoms similar to addiction.

Political and Social Transformations and the Gulf Media Landscape

The political and social transformations experienced by the Gulf region—which reflect wider pan-Arab and global shifts—have created large challenges for the media in the GCC countries. These Gulf media must create awareness and knowledge and develop policies at a rate which meets the demands of growing public interest and engagement. Social media, satellite television and web-based news have all opened broad horizons for knowledge and the development of awareness while at the same time highlighting the dangers of populism and the spread of ignorance. As a result of the lack of control over information flows, the media began to play a major role in creating public opinion by non-traditional methods to the benefit of new actors that have entered a competitive arena. Recent technological advances have allowed large sections of the public unprecedented influence on the public sphere by opening up a larger space for debate of issues, some of which continue to be “off limits” to traditional media.

Equally, these developments have driven social, political and religious/sectarian polarization forward. The growth of social media has in fact allowed for changes to the value systems of Gulf societies, giving social media platforms the ability to change the balances of power within societies in one fell swoop.

GCC governments may continue to impose strict censorship codes on domestic and state-sponsored broadcasters, but their ability to control the flow of information more generally no longer stands. A case in point is the Gulf-owned, privatized broadcasters who operate outside the borders of the GCC, and which are not subject to the same codes. Indeed, some domestic, privatized broadcasters within the Gulf are given wider margins of freedom. One reaction by Gulf governments has been to try and impose stricter censorship, with the UAE’s expansion of legal restraints on local media—traditional and “New”—reported by the US’ Congressional Research Service Bureau in a February, 2017 report. .

All this has amounted to what analysts call the “Al-Jazeera Effect”—the media network benefited from information flows and new communications to achieve its political program by influencing the public sphere with a new form of political and social diversity that it helped institute. Undoubtedly, the Al-Jazeera network of channels contributed to the creation of a new era of Arab media with regards to censorship. It gave voice to large swathes of the Arab public, opposed to the old regimes and their media apparatus, to express their opinions on a wide range of topics with unprecedented freedom. The growth of new media opened the door to unprecedented change in the Arab world, particularly with the

development of new media and the information and knowledge explosion that helped change some traditional structures that underlie Gulf societies.

Given the importance of the subject and the need to cast light on issues that concern the people of the Gulf states, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) will hold an academic conference, will dedicate the fourth annual Gulf Studies Forum to the theme of “Media in the Gulf States”. On this basis, the Forum invites Gulf, Arab, and international researchers interested in visual, audio, print media, and social media to take part in the conference by presenting research papers for peer-review with a concentration on the following themes:

1. The media and development in the GCC states
2. The effect of media on social and political transformation in the GCC states
3. Gulf media and the Arab Spring revolutions
4. Creating awareness (blogging) on social media
5. The meaning of “post-truth” and the manufacturing of facts and fantasy on social media
6. Gulf media and cultural subordination
7. The role of modern media in formulating identity in the Arab Gulf states
8. The effect of modern media on socialization
9. The information revolution and the future of Gulf media
10. The ethics of working in media in the Gulf states
11. Media and professional training in the Arab Gulf states
12. The role of the media in fostering entrepreneurship in the Arab Gulf states

Submission Procedures

In preparation for this event, the Forum’s Academic Committee invites Arab academics, researchers, and media workers to prepare and submit abstracts of around 400 words by **May 1, 2017**. Research papers accepted by the Academic Committee of the Forum should be ready for peer review, no later than September 1, 2017, and must meet ACRPS specifications for research papers. The Forum’s Academic Committee will notify researchers of their acceptance or otherwise, and may make suggestions for revisions if deemed necessary.

All correspondence should be directed to gulf.forum@dohainstitute.org.

ACRPS will cover travel expenses and accommodation in Doha during the Forum.