Media Capital: A New Pathway to Civic Participation in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Formal and informal social networks are known to be important foundations for civic action, but less well understood is the role of social media in building new forms of participation. The political capacities of social media show particular promise in Saudi Arabia, a nation where civil and human rights—especially for women—have long been deficient. Arguing that social media can play an important role in fomenting social ties, this paper claims that “bridging social capital” generated from social media interactions is as important as face-to-face interpersonal social capital in shaping individuals’ choices to participate (or not) in collective action. The case of a successful, digitally orchestrated campaign to protect two women convicted for driving automobiles shows that social media has begun to stimulate civic engagement in new ways in Saudi Arabia. The paper outlines the significance of social media—in particular the “media capital” it generates—as a tool of empowerment for exerting bottom-up pressure on national leaders to change policies and implement reforms.

Key words: social media, social capital, civic engagement, women’s rights, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

“Because my mother couldn’t change my present, I decided to change my daughter’s future” (Manal Alshreef, arrested for driving in K.S.A)

“Alphabets were confiscated. words were suffocated in our throats. We have been deprived from writing, but now we have Twitter” (Alhodhaif. Human Right Activist)

The above quotes, taken from the social media profiles of two Saudi; women’s rights and human rights activists, capture the sense of fairness, justness, and appropriateness that social media represents for Saudi citizens. In this paper I discuss how social media has begun to play a significant role in influencing a meaningful transformation of civic participation in Saudi Arabia. Interviews and locally gathered documents provide evidence of the capability of social media to generate “bridging social capital” and a public sphere that enables free discussion of societal problems, and a mechanism for influencing political action. I call this digitally mediated social capital “media capital.”

The paper argues that social media networks can be the causal agents or moderators of social capital. I distinguish three main causal ideas: (1) social media generates positive
externalities for users; (2) these externalities are achieved through offering a new public sphere arena to discuss and debate societal problems; and (3) informal, digitally-integrated organisations generate trust, norms, and values that affect the expectations, behaviour, and opportunities of individuals and communities.

**Saudi Arabia: Nothing Like the Past**

Two days after Saudi King Abdullah promised to protect women's rights and decreed that women would be allowed to participate in municipal election in 2015, two Saudi women were punished for breaking the ban on female driving. When a mid-30s housewife broke the taboo and defied the ban by driving around Jeddah (city in Saudi Arabia) in 2011, she appeared at Jeddah court twice before the sentencing. She was sentenced to ten lashes by a court and forced to sign a pledge not to drive again. This incident highlighted the continuing disparity between traditions and the rights of women in the kingdom. The mixed signals stressed the challenge for the King, who is known as a reformer, in pushing gently for change without antagonising the powerful clergy and conservative segment of the population.

The reaction of the Saudi public and media has for the most part been supportive. Twitter, Facebook, Blogs and many other social media were dynamic, forceful, and influential. Saudi public in general and activists in particular saw sentencing as a retaliation of sorts from the hard-line Saudi religious establishment that controls the courts and administers the intrusive religious police, in order to oppose the king’s approach to women’s status. Activists claimed that the law should not prosecute women, not only because there are no written laws that restrict women from driving, but also because the drivers legally held international drivers’ licenses. Furthermore, activists criticised the judgmental system and demanded to overturn this law. This ensured that the religious justification was irrelevant to such restrictions and the ban was embedded in conservative traditions. Many perceived the court's sentence as an aggressive, unfair law that contradicted the (Sharia) law. Formerly, an active princess posted on twitter that the woman would be protected from lashing. Two days later the sentence was cancelled after the King intervened. A Saudi official confirmed the decision to the Associated Press news agency, but did not elaborate on the reasons for the reversal of the sentence. The use of the internet was striking in this incident. More than 12,000 users supported the campaign of ‘women2Drive’ on Facebook during the first day of its launch. The Facebook page and Twitter account of this campaign were deactivated, which only led to other activists to create online groups asserting their support for the cause and to see an end of the driving ban. One of these groups had up to 14,000 members in only a couple of days.

Since that time, dozens of women have led campaigns such as ‘My Right My Dignity’, ‘Baladi- women’, ‘Women2Drive’, and ‘Saudi Women’s Sports’ in attempting to break the taboo (of women) and impose a new status quo. Twenty years ago was the last time a group of women publicly defied the driving ban. This occurred in 1990, when U.S. troops massed in Saudi Arabia to prepare for the war on Iraq. At that time 47 women were accused of promoting an external agenda. They were arrested and punished for driving,
excluded from their jobs, barred from foreign travel for five years, and forced to sign a pledge not to drive again. Criticism was publicly subdued; instead, the women were denounced by name as immoral and out to destroy Saudi society. More obligations were imposed on women, as were limits on freedom of mobility and participation in society. The government at that time was able to control and orient the media toward a favourable portrayal of its policies.

Saudi Arabia’s authoritarian government is widely criticized when it come to human rights and personal liberties. It is one of the few countries in the world that enforces gender segregation in public, limits the establishment of civil society organizations, constrains political engagement, and constrains the rights of free speech and expression. When social media was first introduced into Saudi society, a new civic attitude began to shape the interrelationships of users. In the context of the Arab Spring, Saudi authorities considered campaigns on social media as a rallying call for youths anxious for social change. For conservatives and religious scholars, changes to the status quo are viewed unfavourably, raising the political stakes around the use of social media.

Media Capital: Digitalised Social Capital

“The best practical reason to think that social media can help bring political change is that both dissidents and governments think they can. All over the world, activists believe in the utility of these tools and take steps to use them accordingly. And the governments they contend with think social media tools are powerful, too, and are willing to harass, arrest, exile, or kill users in response.”

(Shirky, 2011, p.40)

Contemporary theories of social capital owe much to the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1983) and James Coleman (1988). Bourdieu defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu 1983, p.248). Likewise, Coleman describes social capital as “a variety of entities with two elements in common: They all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether personal or corporate actors – within the structure.” (Coleman1988, p. S98) Political scientist Robert Putnam has assumed a central place in considerations of social capital, stressing that the “core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value” (Putnam 2000). He initially defined social capital as a set of “features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (Putnam 1993, p.167), and later refined this to “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam 2000). A key distinction in Putnam’s work is “bonding social capital,” which binds members of a given group together through mutual obligations of responsibility and trust, and “bridging social capital,” which extends beyond the reference group in order to build external
linkages and alliances.

Both Bourdieu and Coleman emphasise the relational character of social capital relative to other forms of capital. Whereas economic capital or human capital can be possessed and demonstrated by individuals, social capital inheres in the structure of relationships. Neither Bourdieu nor Coleman were alive to examine the association between social capital and media capital. Although Putnam (2000) found that people who access news from the Internet are likely consume news from traditional sources and are less likely to be civically engaged (Harrison 2004), social media sites did not exist. The core idea of social capital, however, is straightforward: it is comprised of the resources generated by social interactions that enable people and communities to create public (and private) goods (Lin 2001; Putnam 2000). Social capital is described as capital because it is assumed to be productive, facilitating, generating things that would not be achieved without its existence (AlSarogy 2009). To possess social capital, individuals must be interconnected to others with a large and diverse network, which is the actual source of individual’s advantages.

A cursory review of the literature on social capital shows that researchers have defined the concept in terms of social networks, trust, civic engagement, and life satisfaction (Bourdieu 1983; Coleman 1988; Lin 2001; Putnam 2000). While social capital is an elastic term with a variety of definitions in multiple fields (Adler & Kwon 2002), most research concurs that at its core, the concept captures of a simple idea: interaction in social networks enables individuals to develop norms of trust and reciprocity, which are necessary for successful engagement in collective activities.

The proliferation of broadly accessible technology for digital social networking provides cause for reflection on the ways social capital is accrued, used, and understood. Early writing about digitised social bonds was highly speculative and often pessimistic; many criticised the idea that social media could foment social capital (e.g., Nie 2001)(Ellison 2007). The “digitalisation” of the public sphere seemed far-fetched. However, for members of virtual communities, this is exactly what has happened as connections become based on common interest regardless of geographical location. Today’s social connections are instantly established across vast distances, boosting the spread of information and ideas. Networks deepen existing relationships and facilitate meetings (virtual and corporeal) with new individuals. Keith Hampton and Barry Wellman’s work supports the notion that computer-mediated interactions have had positive effects on community interaction and social capital formation by facilitating interrelationships—often in tandem with face-to-face interactions—that over time become more honest (Ellison 2006).

For Putnam (2000), one of the main causes of social capital growth is long-term participation in voluntary associations, including his emblematic bowling leagues, where members can have conversations and communicate with others. Some researchers have claimed that online interactions may supplement or replace those interactions that previously were formed in voluntary organisations (Wellman et al, 2001). Since social network relationships may be supported by technologies like recommender systems, distribution lists, and search capabilities that involve users from different social and
political sectors (publics, elites, governmental and nongovernmental organisations, issue-driven activists, etc.), new forms of social capital could conceivably emerge from social media. Indeed, given its promotion of cross-network interactions, social media is arguably a quintessential expression of bridging social capital. As Wellman et al. (2001) argues, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter allow users to create and maintain long-term networks that simultaneously reach out to new members and consolidate internal bonds (Wellman et al. 2001). This dual capacity is suited to the mobilisation of collective action, particularly in a conservative hierarchical society such as Saudi Arabia.

Owing to a confluence of entrenched tribal interest groups and religious custom, interaction between distinct Saudi Arabian social strata has long been weak, resulting in limited civic participation in policy design and a lack of transparency about the mechanisms of executive power. This problem is especially acute in relation to gender segregation. Although official and unofficial women’s representative groups exist, until the introduction of social media none have been able (or willing) to extend tight bonds of internal allegiance outward to engage prospective external supporters. That is, bonding social capital has long united women more powerfully than bridging social capital. Social media has provided new channels for communication, narrowing the interactive gap across gender and class. Resulting connections and the resources drawn from them—what I call media capital—are breaking the ice in ways that previously were not possible.

Interactions with others, whether in person or on screen, play a pivotal role in establishing and spreading social norms and ways of cultivating reputations so that people find it easier and more reasonable to engage in cooperative behaviours. Trust derived over time from social media conversations, like other forms of social capital, implies reciprocity. Whether obligations play out over the short term (“balanced reciprocity”) or long term (“generalised reciprocity”), social media users proactively seek out others who are able to enter into and repay commitments (Chambers 2013, Harrison 2004). Highly politicized contexts like Saudi Arabia therefore give rise to complex and sometimes risky exchanges of social, economic, and political resources. This is especially the case when interactions revolve around the sensitive prospect of civic engagement.

**Media Capital and Civic Engagement**

Conventional mass media has been shown to exert a strong impact on public opinion, but this impact is unilateral and lacking interaction (Shirky 2011). By contrast, social media generates interaction while reducing the time needed to debate, formulate, and spread ideas. Shirky emphasises that the processes of creating social media networks consolidates opinions and empowers them with strategies for affecting political change. As Shirky argues, “it [social media] ultimately allows people to privately and publicly articulate and debate a welter of conflicting views” (Shirky 2011). The “network public sphere” thus offers a new arena for political debate through the expansion and enrichment of the traditional public sphere. Public opinion formed through a bottom-up process of deliberation has potentially more capacity and opportunity to influence the civic agenda. As Lielah (2007) argues, social media is well oriented to consolidate values, beliefs, and norms to facilitate participatory civic behaviour.
The rapid expansion of social media in Saudi Arabia has deepened political awareness. As illustrated above by the campaign to protect a woman from punishment for driving, more assertive approaches to human rights, civil society, and justice have begun to emerge from social media interactions. Distributing ideas through social media makes them more accessible to common people. Reciprocal exchanges of ideas enable greater engagement in public debates, and expand citizens’ ability to participate in collective action. Opinions and expectations are challenged and developed by the direct contact of ideas (sometimes in agreement and sometimes at odds), allowing forms of learning that are unlikely through the hierarchical structures of Saudi society (and others). While social media cannot substitute for other forms of interaction, for instance those that prioritise emotional support, it can enable issue-driven constituencies to relatively easily “bridge” out to new contacts and potential supporters (William 2006).

The mass adoption of social media in Saudi Arabia in the early 21st century, the interaction of different social, political, religious, and cultural perspectives has encouraged independent thinking and transcendence beyond traditional stances. Many young Saudis, particularly women, are increasingly questioning religiously justified restrictions on their personal freedoms, such as gender segregation, civil rights, guardianship rules for women, and the ban on women driving. Similarly, Saudi youth are calling for better accountability and effectiveness of institutions. They are looking for reforms to the criminal justice system, reduction of corruption, freedom and fairness, reduction of discrimination on the grounds of gender, expression, and social participation. Like the women’s advocacy networks noted at the article’s outset, other unofficial associations have begun to use social media to expand their bases of support to oppose perceived violations of their rights. Using social media as a mechanism to recruit like-minded people, many successful unofficial campaigns have developed tailored agendas to fight against specific injustices, and have in this way shed light on a wide range of social and political imbalances in Saudi society. At the core of these actions is a new capacity and disposition to build broad linkages that go beyond the “bonding social capital” of specific interest groups: a “media capital” suited to the civic agenda of the 21st century.

**Conclusion**

Social media is enabling Saudi Arabian citizens to share information, debate sensitive issues, and push for change in ways never before possible. While this is generating a new mode of collective cooperation, digital networking will not, on its own, deliver social and political change in Saudi Arabia. Rather, social media is a means to increase information flows, communicate, and at best mobilise users to advocate for change. Platforms such as Facebook or Twitter were not the main proponents or vehicles underpinning instances of unrest over the past years in the Middle East. That said, social media is the only public forum in which Saudi citizens can legally and unreservedly express their interest, needs, demands, and wishes without being easily accused of collusion with conspirators—or with the opposite sex.

Freedom of speech and expression are components of the long-term goal of strengthening
civil society. Social media’s real potential lies in supporting civil society development through a public sphere that is conducive to free discussion of societal problems. The consolidation of trust and “media capital” generated by this process has already begun to influence political action in specific cases. The future ability of citizens to successfully confront the entrenched conservative power structures of Saudi Arabia will depend largely on how effectively such cases can be replicated and generalised.

Footnotes

1 National society for Human Rights (2008), Conformity of Saudi Law and Regulations with Basic Human Rights Conventions, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

2 According to a survey conducted by Ian Simpson, 36% of social networking site users say they are “very important” or “somewhat important” in keeping them informed about political news. 25% of users say the sites are “very important” or “somewhat important” in identifying people who share their views about important political issues. One third of self-identified Democrats and Liberals who use social networking sites say their activities on the sites have led them to become more politically active, compared with 24% of site-using Republicans and Independents. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/04/social-media-political-impact-poll_n_1853224.html

3 According a recent study of Internet users in the gulf region, 13,000,000 million are Saudis and more than 40% are women https://www.globalwebindex.net/twitter-now-the-fastest-growing-social-platform-in-the-world/ http://www.internetworldstats.com/me/sa.htm

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