

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2020

*Technology, the environment and
a sustainable world: Responses from
the global South*



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

Global Information Society Watch 2020

Technology, the environment and a sustainable world: Responses from the global South

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Rabiya Jaffery

Introduction

Saudi Arabia possesses around 17% of the world's known petroleum reserves.¹ The oil and gas sector accounts for about 50% of the country's gross domestic product, and about 70% of export earnings.

However, in 2016, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman launched the country's Vision 2030,² which aims to strategically transform the country's economy and reduce "its dependence on oil." Among the goals is also to become a "a global investment powerhouse [...] to stimulate our economy and diversify our revenues" and "a global hub connecting three continents: Asia, Europe and Africa."

It is, right now, very important that the new, alternative industries that Saudi Arabia fosters prioritise the sustainable development of the country. Sustainable development, particularly in the context of the Saudi economy, would mean focusing on actions that limit harm to the climate and the environment and also, where possible, focusing on combatting the climate crisis and its impact.

And for these values to be instilled in the new Saudi economy, the people who will be working in it need to have a thorough understanding of the importance of sustainable development, the climate crisis, its impacts, and actions that need to be taken to combat it.

This report will look into what roles the internet and social media spaces can potentially play in creating Saudi voices that prioritise the sustainable development of the kingdom and the challenges they currently face.

Always online

The advent of social media platforms has been particularly revolutionary for Saudi Arabia. The country's social norms enforce gender segregation in most public places, which are also not equally

accessible to everyone. For instance, due to cultural restrictions, the ban on driving that was only very recently lifted³ and the lack of alternative public transport, only Saudi women who could afford personal drivers or those who had a male guardian available to drive them have historically easily been able to commute at all.

The result, as social media platforms came to be, was Saudi youth turning to them as a much more easily accessible alternative to a physical space. The numbers prove this. For the past few years, Saudi Arabia has ranked among the countries where people spend most hours online. And according to Crowd Analyzer's *State of Social Media 2018*,⁴ Saudi Arabia has the largest number of users on Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat in the Arabian Gulf region; the country also has the world's highest percentage of people on YouTube and Twitter relative to its number of internet users – 71% and 66%, respectively.⁵

For many people in Saudi Arabia, social media is not just a complementary way of connecting to others – it is the only way. And in a country with one of the highest mobile phone and internet penetration rates in the world, as well as a population that is primarily very young (more than half the population is younger than 25),⁶ social media is particularly significant.

Even though Saudi Arabia is one of the few remaining absolute monarchies in the world, which allows no room for dissent, Saudis are very active in discussing policies that directly impact them and often have their concerns heard and even answered online.

Social media platforms have also allowed Saudis who are concerned about sustainability and the climate crisis to discuss and become better informed on the topic. However, country-specific

1 OPEC. (2020). *Annual Statistical Bulletin*. https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/publications/202.htm

2 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (2017). *Vision 2030*. https://vision2030.gov.sa/sites/default/files/report/Saudi_Vision2030_EN_2017.pdf

3 BBC. (2017, 27 September). Saudi Arabia driving ban on women to be lifted. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41408195>

4 Crowd Analyzer. (2018). *State Of Social Media 2018*. <https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/2391971/SOSM18-report-online-.pdf>

5 Geronimo, A. (2018, 6 May). UAE, Saudi Arabia users among most active on social media. *Tahawultech.com*. <https://www.tahawultech.com/news/uae-saudi-arabia-users-among-most-active-on-social-media>

6 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (2017). Op. cit.

information easily accessible online is limited and focuses more on choices and decisions to make individual lifestyles more sustainable and less on wider-scale policies.

As the country attempts to diversify away from oil and gas and is working on fostering a variety of different industries, the extent to which environmental sustainability is accounted for in the new economic plans will partly be influenced by how relevant and important the issue is to the Saudis who are to enter these industries. This is because the plans for long-term economic and social development will require that the country can retain the best minds for its soon-to-be increasingly diversified workforce.

Not enough information

Abdullah, a native of Jeddah, graduated in 2016 with a bachelor's in petroleum engineering from a Canadian university and within months of moving back to Saudi Arabia, got a job at Saudi Aramco. Saudi Aramco, officially the Saudi Arabian Oil Company, the multinational Saudi petroleum and natural gas company, is the most profitable company in the world⁷ and considered one of the best companies to work for in the country when considering job benefits and perks.⁸

Field work trips to oil drills in the Arabian (or Persian) Gulf or to the Red Sea quickly introduced him to the extent of pollution resulting in the water bodies surrounding the country due to deep water drilling – to the extent that he decided he would never again step foot in the waters at a beach in Saudi Arabia.

In 2018, Abdullah quit his job and decided to pursue a career that would be less directly harmful to the planet and also to raise more awareness on the issue in his community.

Because groups of people organising or coming together for any political purposes is not easy in Saudi Arabia due to the different extents of gender segregation imposed in many public spaces, most of these discussions are initiated online. Twitter particularly has many Saudi youths actively taking part in various public discourses – typically discussing and even criticising social norms. However, even online, any conversation that can imply criticism of the country's political leadership, or most of their

policies, can have serious consequences, including being sentenced to death.⁹

To avoid potentially transgressing as a group that could be held legally accountable, the community he initiated focuses on actions that individuals can take to live a more sustainable and climate-friendly life, with little to no discussions on policies.

The group was first launched on Meetup, which has become particularly popular among Saudis and expatriates based in Saudi Arabia who are looking online to find like-minded strangers nearby.

The community now has three dozen members – with at least 15 very active ones – based all over the country that communicate through a Facebook group and have an Instagram account that encourages and discusses sustainable living.

It is not the only online Saudi-based community focused on bettering individual actions to address the climate crisis. Eman is a 16-year-old student who also runs a climate awareness group for Saudi-based youth that was first formed via Twitter and now has a WhatsApp and Instagram circle. The group of 17 high school students, based in Jeddah, Dammam and Riyadh, are working to make their families and friends more environmentally conscious such as by regularly recycling and avoiding single-use plastic.

A lot of these conversations and groups operate in English, however, and consist of expatriates or Saudis who have studied or lived abroad at some point. As a result they are not that accessible to the larger majority that spends its time online in exclusively Arabic-speaking parts of social media platforms.

Musab, a Saudi undergraduate student at Princeton University in the US who is involved in its Energy Association, points out that the difference in the awareness on the climate crisis among youth he meets and interacts with in the US, in comparison to those at home, is “very obviously different.” There is simply not enough information easily accessible on the internet to engage local Saudi youth on the topic.

Musab, who hosted the 2019 Energy Conference at Princeton, says that he was inspired by the theme “Alternative Agents for an Energy Future”, and the information he could potentially gather through it to improve his understanding of the policies needed to shape Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which, as mentioned, aims to diversify the economy away from oil. Musab, just like Eman, is also now involved in a

7 Reed, S. (2019, 1 April). Saudi Aramco Is World's Most Profitable Company, Beating Apple by Far. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/01/business/saudi-aramco-profit.html>

8 Damanhour, L. (2017, 30 November). Aramco, Apple, Microsoft, Google among most attractive employers for Saudi business and engineering graduates. *Saudi Gazette*. <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/523131>

9 Fanack. (2020, 6 March). In Saudi Arabia, No Let-up in Brutal Policies Against Dissenters. *Fanack*. <https://fanack.com/saudi-arabia/human-rights/brutal-policies-against-dissenters>

small online community of Saudi and Saudi-based youth discussing the climate crisis.

They both point out that most of the information they have gathered to understand climate change and sustainability has been from “international”, or English-speaking, media, and because it lacks a nuance and context that is more region-specific, the group is often struggling to understand the issue. While, in recent years, there has been some reporting on environmental protection and sustainability – especially in areas where the government is working on solutions – there is no coverage on policies, particularly on energy, and particularly from a local context in the Saudi or Gulf-based media. Climate change continues to be covered with a focus that is generic and is typically limited to press releases shared by international news agencies.

Right now, both Musab and Eman are only disseminating information and ideas within their online communities, not just because they lack a larger audience but due to the repercussions that could possibly come with it.

Neeshad Shafi, founder of the Arab Youth Climate Movement (AYCM),¹⁰ states that many Arab countries, particularly the Gulf states, which include Saudi Arabia, share a “semi-authoritarian media system” and this seems to aggravate this tendency to “push climate change down the agenda of both public opinion and news outlets.” He points out that because “sensitive issues concerning inadequate governance” are seldom to never covered by local media, climate reporting from a regional or national context is sparse, which is why it has “limited relevance to the regional readership.”

The AYCM, which is based out of Qatar, is a non-governmental body that works to “assess and support the establishment of legally binding agreements to deal with climate change issue within international negotiations” and to “create a generation-wide movement across the Middle East and North Africa to solve the climate crisis.” It was launched in 2012,¹¹ the year of the 18th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP18) which was held in Doha, Qatar. Chapters were eventually formed across the region, including Saudi Arabia and, just ahead of COP18, approximately a dozen Saudi youth involved in the organisation took to the

internet¹² to share pictures of themselves holding up posters stating slogans such as, “We do care!”

There was, however, little nuanced media coverage (both digitally or in traditional media) and, as a result, little meaningful public discourse online about Saudi Arabia’s stances during the COP.¹³

Even though relationships between Qatar and Saudi Arabia (and other Gulf states)¹⁴ have been dissolved since 2017, AYCM Saudi is still operating digitally, but with the same limited capacity as before. Its Twitter account,¹⁵ established in 2012, currently has fewer than 1,200 followers and its activity typically focuses on sharing international climate-related news articles.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) hub of Climate Tracker,¹⁶ an NGO that supports and mentors young climate communicators and activists and is involved in information dissemination on climate issues digitally that is aimed at the youth, has received just 15 applications from Saudi-based youth from a total of 1,823 for any and all projects it has launched in the region since 2015. Greenpeace MENA also has just one contact based in Saudi Arabia, Eman, in its entire network.

Conclusion

Due to increasing media coverage internationally on climate change, a small number of Saudis, particularly the youth, are now also engaging with climate activism and actions to address the climate crisis – despite the lack of local reporting on the issue.

Social media platforms have played a very important role in allowing these youth to organise and communicate with each other, because the country’s strict social and legal barriers, such as gender segregation or the inability for women to commute (even though the ban on licences has recently been lifted, it is still a social taboo among many), do not make organising or gathering in public spaces equally accessible to all.

However, the lack of easily available information that is relevant to them, that focuses on the impact of climate change on Saudi Arabia, as well as how the country’s policies are influencing the crisis, and what Saudis can do, serves as a serious obstruction to their well-intentioned efforts to protect the climate and the environment.

10 <http://www.climate-network.org/profile/member/arab-youth-climate-movement-aycm-qatar>

11 Nawaat.org. (2012, 10 November) Arab Youth Climate Movement launches across more than dozen countries. *Earth Journalism Network*. <https://earthjournalism.net/stories/arab-youth-climate-movement-launches-across-more-than-a-dozen-countries>

12 <https://www.facebook.com/350arabic/posts/373847059369667>

13 <https://www.climatechangenews.com/category/policy/cop18/>

14 Atalayar. (2020, 05 June) Qatar and the Gulf countries: chronology of a diplomatic conflict. *Atalayar*. <https://atalayar.com/en/content/qatar-and-gulf-countries-chronology-diplomatic-conflict>

15 https://twitter.com/AYCM_Saudi

16 <http://climatetracker.org/tag/mena>

With Saudi Arabia's plans of economic diversification away from oil in the coming decade, as sketched out in its "Vision 2030", and as policies of the diversification plan, which intends to create new industries, jobs and business opportunities in the country, come together in the coming months and years, it is more crucial now than ever before that the youth of the country are aware of the climate crisis and sustainability and that it is a priority to be considered in the new Saudi economy.

The lack of any dedicated online campaigns that focus on disseminating information to Saudi and Saudi-based youth, which could also provide a common platform for them to come together, is a major obstacle to tangible progress and development in grassroots climate-related Saudi communities online.

Regional civil society organisations that focus on climate, independent media companies, and even individuals with influence need to focus on producing and disseminating information online, especially in Arabic, that caters to Saudis and works on filling the existing gap.

In a country where the traditional press subscribes to severe self-censorship due to government-imposed restrictions, the internet is the only gateway, for most, to access any and all information that, at all, challenges the status quo.

Action steps

The following action steps are suggested for Saudi Arabia:

- Saudi Arabia needs to foster a free media that can accurately and without state support report on issues like climate change and energy policies.
- Saudi Arabia needs to create a culture and environment that allows youth to freely gather and organise publicly to discuss issues on their own accord.
- Regional and international civil society bodies and independent media need to actively produce and share information online, particularly in Arabic, that highlights climate- and energy-related issues that the local Saudi media is not reporting on.
- Regional and international civil society bodies and independent media need to work with Saudi and Saudi-based youth to increase their own capacities to organise on climate issues. International donors need to donate more funds to the currently existing youth groups and enable capacity building for them.

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The world is facing an unprecedented climate and environmental emergency. Scientists have identified human activity as primarily responsible for the climate crisis, which together with rampant environmental pollution, and the unbridled activities of the extractive and agricultural industries, pose a direct threat to the sustainability of life on this planet.

This edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) seeks to understand the constructive role that technology can play in confronting the crises. It disrupts the normative understanding of technology being an easy panacea to the planet's environmental challenges and suggests that a nuanced and contextual use of technology is necessary for real sustainability to be achieved. A series of thematic reports frame different aspects of the relationship between digital technology and environmental sustainability from a human rights and social justice perspective, while 46 country and regional reports explore the diverse frontiers where technology meets the needs of both the environment and communities, and where technology itself becomes a challenge to a sustainable future.

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2020 Report

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