

# GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

*Focus on freedom of expression and association online*



*This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.*

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## SAUDI ARABIA

### SOCIAL NETWORKING AND THE WOMEN WHO AREN'T ALLOWED TO DRIVE CARS



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#### Simmering change...

What could have been the Saudi Arabian revolution continues to simmer. Dissidents and reformists have found a use for new media. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and online forums have become the new medium through which an agenda for change is being formulated. The ease in reaching the masses in relative freedom and anonymity afforded by digital media has bolstered the willingness for open discussion, largely free from fear of persecution.

The Saudi Arabian government was quick to realise the risk posed by such open and unchecked discussions, and proceeded to publish new regulatory restrictions for digital media, including blogs. The new rules, effective since January 2011, encourage all users to register officially with the government, and strictly prohibit criticism of Islam and all statements thought to compromise public order.

The new legislation sparked an outburst of criticism online. A petition was signed by over 6,000 Saudi Arabian citizens and sent to King Abdullah Bin Abdul-Aziz requesting the implementation of a constitutional monarchy. While the petition received no direct response from the King, the act of defiance catalysed a move to push for economic, social and political changes in Saudi Arabia. In late June 2011, a draft was leaked of a new anti-terrorism law that would allow the authorities to prosecute peaceful dissent as a terrorist crime, in partial response to the online demonstrations. This law, if enacted, would allow extended detention without charge or trial.<sup>1</sup>

On 18 March 2011 King Abdullah commended Saudi Arabians for their loyalty in the wake of the weeks of unrest, before issuing eighteen royal decrees stipulating the introduction of a national minimum wage and unemployment benefits. The nation has maintained its highly conservative attitude throughout the uprisings in North Africa. As a consequence of a new decree designed to further control religious dialogue, the government has pointedly issued official warnings, and ordered the closure of numerous websites and satellite television shows. The aim is to subvert the influence of fatwas<sup>2</sup> issued by clerics not sponsored by the state.

#### Introduction

In November 2010 a revolution began in the federal state of Tunisia. Revolutionary fervour soon spread throughout the Arab world, as political uprisings were ignited by a hope to emulate Tunisians' newly found freedom from oppression. The reign of tyrannical regimes, synonymous with the Arab world, was to be challenged. Perhaps surprisingly, the catalyst for this change was neither a political figure, nor an army of soldiers, but ordinary citizens armed with a new instrument of power: the internet, and Web 2.0.

In the midst of these developments, the western region of Saudi Arabia (in particular, Jeddah) suffered major floods, leading to widespread devastation and the loss of many lives. Victims of these tragic events blamed the government. They claimed that corruption within both government and private industry exacerbated the scale of the devastation.

Substantial funding for drainage infrastructure in the region had been set aside in 2009, but the planned projects did not materialise. In response to the catastrophic events that unfolded, the authorities in Jeddah said they did not have the capacity to prevent the floods, or to properly help those affected.

These sorts of incidents, combined with a high unemployment rate, created discontent amongst the public. The revolutionary contagion in North Africa looked certain to spread to Saudi Arabia. Some 40% of the population is under fourteen years of age, and unemployment hovers at persistently high levels. Consequently, the country did not escape radical protest, and political demands could not be circumvented. Ultimately, however, the "revolutionary fever" never quite gathered the momentum needed to seriously endanger the political landscape. During March 2011, an anonymous group called for a public protest to voice opposition to the political regime. In response, the Saudi Arabian authorities clamped down, violating the rights to freedom of expression.

<sup>1</sup> Questioning the integrity of the King or the Crown Prince would carry a minimum prison sentence of ten years under this new act.

<sup>2</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatw%C4%81](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatw%C4%81)

### Extremists online...

The growing presence, relevance and consequence of digital media and social networking have been further recognised within religious power circles. In an attempt to pre-empt further uprisings in response to censorship, Saudi Arabian clerics looked to use social media as a medium for influence and coercion. Sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have been used, attracting thousands of fans, dousing the fire of revolution.

The active and dynamic use of Twitter has been utilised to disseminate the perspective of a conservative Saudi majority and religious scholars, in this case with reference to the permissibility of women driving cars. Egotistical and extreme religious-orthodox “scholars” such as Al-Ahmad maintain their own Facebook fan pages and use their online presence to revile any call for open discussion on reforming the role of female rights in the country.

Nevertheless, internet-based initiatives continue to serve as a useful instrument for political pressure. A simple campaign was created, calling for the human rights of Saudi Arabian women to be upheld. As a result, 17 June 2011 saw more than 29 Saudi Arabian women drive their cars in protest against the kingdom’s de facto ban on female driving.

### The story of Manal al-Sharif

Women in Saudi Arabia have had limited freedom of movement for a long time. In practice they are not allowed to drive motor vehicles (period), nor are they allowed to leave Saudi Arabia without consent from their male guardian – and in some cases, a woman’s son is her guardian.

In 1990, 47 brave Saudi Arabian women from Riyadh’s intelligentsia were arrested, dismissed from their jobs, and banned from travelling after staging a defiant protest. Disgust at the unwritten “law of convention” prohibiting women from driving was carefully surfaced publicly as the women drove in a convoy of fourteen cars into the capital. Despite the consequences for the women in 1990, defiance was rekindled in the wake of the Arab world revolutionary uprisings in 2011. This time, the protest had global reach, as images and videos of women driving through Saudi Arabia were posted on Facebook and Twitter.

One of these women, Wajeha al-Huwaider, co-founded the Association for the Protection and Defense of Women’s Rights in Saudi Arabia in 2007 with Fawzia al-Uyouni, another women’s rights activist. Together they created a petition that was signed by 1,100 Saudis and sent to King Abdullah asking for

women to be allowed to drive. The petition was not officially responded to, yet Huwaider did not waver. On International Women’s Day 2008, she filmed herself driving and received international media attention after the video was posted on YouTube. Yet again, the Saudi government did not react.

In 2011, inspired by the Arab Spring, a group of Saudi activists started a campaign on Facebook called “Teach me how to drive so I can protect myself”,<sup>3</sup> as well as under the hash tag #Women2Drive<sup>4</sup> on Twitter, in an attempt to raise the issue publicly once more. In a matter of days, over 12,000 signatories showed their support on the Facebook campaign page. One of the founders of the page, Manal al-Sharif, drove her car in Khobar, one of the prominent cities in the Eastern Province, with Huwaider filming the protest. She posted the video on YouTube and Facebook, saying in the video: “This is a volunteer campaign to help the girls of this country [learn to drive]. At least for times of emergency, God forbid. What if whoever is driving them has a heart attack?”

She had also invited all women in Saudi Arabia to start driving on 17 June. After posting the video, she was detained by the religious police on 21 May, and released six hours later. Two days later, around 600,000 people had watched the video.

The response this campaign had created worried the authorities and they arrested her again on 22 May, causing international news agencies to focus the world’s attention on the issue. Her lawyer Adnan al-Saleh said that she was charged with “inciting women to drive” and “rallying public opinion”. In reaction to al-Sharif’s arrest, several Saudi women published videos of themselves driving over the next few days. In response, the authorities stated that al-Sharif would remain in detention until 5 June 2011, according to lawyer Waleed Aboul Khair.

Different news organisations attributed the long duration of al-Sharif’s detention to the Saudi authorities’ fear of protest movements in Saudi Arabia generally. *The National*, a government-owned English-language daily newspaper published in Abu Dhabi, said al-Sharif had written a letter to King Abdullah and that 4,500 Saudis had signed an online petition to the King. The article described “an outpouring of indignation and disbelief by both Saudis and critics abroad that Ms al-Sharif was jailed for something that is not a moral or criminal offence.”<sup>5</sup>

3 [www.facebook.com/pages/Teach-me-how-to-drive-so-I-can-protect-myself/132205866854879](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Teach-me-how-to-drive-so-I-can-protect-myself/132205866854879)

4 See Twitter hashtag #Women2Drive for photos, videos, and commentary.

5 [www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/middle-east/saudi-woman-driver-released-from-jail-after-nine-days](http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/middle-east/saudi-woman-driver-released-from-jail-after-nine-days)

On 30 May al-Sharif was freed, under conditions that included bail, returning for questioning if requested, not talking to the media and not driving.

### Can social media help Saudi Arabian women drive?

While not a reflection of the general public's perspective, there has been vocal opposition to the protests by conservative groups. An anti-driving group on Facebook has called for "real men" to physically attack those women choosing to drive. Female activists were dubbed "Westernised whores" on Twitter. It is clear that the far-reaching immediacy of social media is now recognised by both the orthodox conservatives and revolutionary activists.

Those in defence of the right of women to drive argue that widespread support of the issue is immaterial; instead it should be considered an issue of constitutional morality, a matter of individual rights.

While positive, statements by the social media activist Eman Al Nafjan such as "We need to do it again" are somewhat misguided. Protests that endanger the well-being of women should not be considered an event – rather a means to an end. The campaign should remain active and ongoing supporters should build momentum in order to galvanise change.

Social media have given voice to the masses, and inspired young, forward-thinking progressive Saudi Arabians to ambitiously chase their aspirations. Many appealed to United States (US) Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to emphasise her support for the issue. In response, she openly praised the actions of protesters, while stressing that their actions were not motivated by outsiders.

There remains a new sense of hope for constitutional reform in Saudi Arabia. The relative conservatism and diplomacy of the kingdom's media have been circumvented through access to the internet. People from all over the world have contributed to the "Honk for Saudi Women" viral campaign.

It has become apparent that times are changing, that the rules of engagement are now relevant to the 21st century, but that the question still remains as to whether social media can help change legislation in practice.

### Thoughts towards action steps

This discussion represents only a small part of a complex and evolving debate over the role of virtual and civil freedoms in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, online censorship reflects draconian laws in the "offline" world. The fact that Manal al-Sharif's campaign was kept alive by her supporters online, even after it was deleted from various social media channels, shows the dramatic impact social media have in Saudi society. As seen in previous cases, today's socially engaged audience likes to discuss things; and once an incident goes viral, there is not much government censorship can do in terms of controlling what follows. Uploading al-Sharif's video on YouTube empowered her cause in a smart way that enabled the message to impact on internet users directly.

Although the 17 June movement saw several women drive around the country, it will be interesting to see how much additional support and attention the #Women2Drive social media movement will draw in the coming months. According to raw data, the male population, especially on Twitter, has been very active in discussions on the issue. However, as the campaign continues to gather support, more and more women tweet about their successful driving experiences in Saudi Arabia. As the momentum continues to build, we can expect to see an increase in the number of women using social media to make their voices heard.

The Saudi social media scene has been exceptionally active in the last few months following the Arab Spring. This has created an anti-autocratic movement amongst the Saudi youth to voice their concerns, knowing that the Saudi government can do little to censor dialogue. While the government needs to introduce laws on privacy and individual rights, online as well as offline, young activists all over the kingdom are engaging in dialogue with the Saudi youth through social media and people are becoming more aware of the political and social changes in the region.

We have yet to reach the peak of the social media phenomenon, as there is so much more to expect from the tech-savvy youth of Saudi Arabia. Governmental perspectives have yet to become a central part of the debate. The potential of technologies to contribute to broader dialogue using Web 2.0 tools can be felt – and the youth are now more capable and qualified to identify their liberty and rights. It is now time for the government to choose, either to be part of the debate, or part of the problem. ■

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

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**GISWATCH** is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

**GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH**

2011 Report

[www.GISWatch.org](http://www.GISWatch.org)

