



FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN THE OMANI SOCIAL MEDIA: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN PRIVATE AND GOVERNMENT- OWNED MEDIA ON FACEBOOK

Yousuf Khalfan Al-Shamsi

Nizwa College of Applied Sciences, Oman

Scope of freedom of speech and expression in social media is an overarching debated issue that raises concern in Oman. Growth in the number of social media users in Oman recently made it possible for alternative media messages to engage in political discussions, increasing their opportunities of political expression and creating public opinions. This paper argues that, despite government's consolidated control of media outlets, social media and Facebook in particular have increasingly provided an arena for Omanis not only in exercising their right in expressing 'political opinions', but also in providing space for 'alternative journalism' in counter response to government-controlled media. Social networking sites growth, as a public sphere, in Oman was a manifestation of what became recently known as the " Arab Spring". Omani SNS users, influenced by the Arab spring wave, found in Facebook a wide influential platform to express and influence public opinions and facilitate organizing political activities on ground. The ever-increasing online presence enabled many social and political activists to log-in to Facebook, shifting their activism from writing in forums and blogs to exploit the new highly interactive features associated with Facebook and forming a counter alternative media.

Keywords: Public sphere, Freedom of speech, e-journalism, Alternative media.

Introduction

Public sphere is considered one of the critical concepts in understanding the interrelated yet symbiotic relationship between democracy, public opinions, and power. The notion 'public sphere' evolved in line with other concepts related to the social, economic, technological and political transformation of the bourgeoisie strata in Western Europe in the 17th century onward (Habermas, 1991, p. 1). It is the arena where normal citizens are able to engage in critical debates; criticizing, negotiating and discussing issues of public interest away from government surveillance, authority and control. Historically, elite people controlled this arena in Europe in the 17th century, but the German philosopher and researcher Jürgen Habermas in his book 'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere' (1962), stressed on the role of mass media, such as newspapers in the 18th century, in replacing and transforming the public sphere that was previously controlled by the elite (Calhoun, 1992; Sen, 2012). However, the rise of the Internet and the development of new technologies converging various mass media platforms have led to another transformation on the manifestations of 'public sphere'.

The increased extensity and intensity of communication resulted in high transfer and exchange of information that provided a great opportunity for owners of alternative media to present their views and

challenge the traditional imposed discourses on the public sphere (Dewey, Kaden, Matsushima, Zhu & Marks, 2012). Many marginalized voices have found in social networking site (SNS) a free and open arena that doesn't only work as a powerful amplifier for people's opinions, but also has a tremendous ability in influencing public opinions and organizing on-ground movements (Rane & Salem, 2012).

On the other hand, governments have exploited SNS also to uncover, shape, create and manipulate public opinions and, therefore, reformulate their relationship with the public accordingly (Kavanaugh, Fox, Sheetz, Yang, Shoemaker & Xie, 2012, p. 483). Inextricably, SNS assisted governments in introducing new policies and raising satisfaction level of citizens by persuading them to willingly accept those policies in order to achieve positive outcomes (Rane & Sumras 2012; Kavanaugh et al., 2012). In response to the level of high 'freedom of expression' provided by SNS, many undemocratic regimes worked to suppress alternative voices on SNS via various techniques to shape public opinions, maintain status-quo and stabilizing their authoritarian regimes (Rane & Sumras 2012; Dewey et al., 2012;)

Arguably, the recent political unrest that swept the Arab world, according to many researchers, could be attributed mainly to the high development in media communication technologies in addition to other factors including: globalization, tribal systems, lack of civil rights and social injustice (Dewey et al, 2012, Salamey & Pearson, 2012; Rane & Sumras 2012). Those 'new' globally open communication platforms and SNS, such as Facebook, contributed in raising people's "democratic consciousness", empowering them to organize crowds on the virtual world, campaign and then take on-ground actions (Gerbaudo, 2012). The number of Facebook users from 2011 to 2014 in the Arab region has increased by over 200% according to Arab Media Report published by Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government (2014). Such transformations on the number of SNS users in the Arab region should urge researchers to study, analyze and reevaluate the online political discourse. These studies are significant to explain the current manifestation of the public sphere in relation to the evolving political movements in the region. Therefore, this paper intends to analyze the coverage of 'freedom of expression' and 'human rights' issues by alternative Omani media available in SNS in comparison to government-owned media online.

Literature Review

Reporting on human rights issues is an important area that is considered by many journalism scholars an effective way to enable journalists to establish a free, empowered, open and informed public sphere (Shaw, 2012; Schultz, 1998; McNair, 2000; Sonwalkar et al. 2007; Orend, 2002) This is because the role of journalism is not limited on informing people, but it also plays an important role as a watchdog over the government, holding officeholders to account, educating the public, monitoring and investigating all corruption practices and human rights violations (Shaw 2012; McNair 2000; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). In many western 'democratic' governments, reporting on human rights violations is considered a core value for journalists and it have been given great attention in the last three decades (Ramos et al. 2007). However, coverage of human rights and 'freedom of expression' issues under authoritarian regimes is very limited and monitored due to the high government control over mass media (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001).

Researches indicate that SNS for many people are not only important tools to share interests, activities and real-life connections, but they are also highly valued sources of news and information, despite that they are seen less reliable sources sometimes compared to other mass media sources (Marchi, 2009). Hundreds of videotapes covering the clashes between people and the police in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Libya in 2011 were firstly uploaded on YouTube and Facebook, before Al Jazeera and other international news channels rebroadcasted them on TV and mark them news bulletins. Particularly, this was driven by the rise of what is called "citizen journalism" as a powerful source for providing inside-out, alternative, and sometime countering views against the dominant, top-down 'government-controlled' media (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011; Allan & Snowalker, 2012, p. 375).

Social networking sites' effectiveness and influence is such a double-edged sword. There are numerous studies showing that SNS in the last decade have become a powerful agent in promoting

liberty, freedom and democratic ideologies (Shirky, 2011; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Ghannam, 2011; Diamond & Plattner, 2012). But on the other hand, it could turn to be a propaganda agent used by governments to manipulate public opinions and stabilize their oppressive regimes (Ghannam 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Several cases of dictatorial controls and censorship practices could be pointed such as North Korea's domestic-only network, Chinese firewall, Iranian ban on SNS during 2009 widely disputed elections and the Syrian and Egyptian ban on Facebook during the mass protests early 2011 (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). According to OpenNet Initiative report investigating global internet filtering by governments, stated that the "*Middle East and North Africa is one of the most heavily censored regions in the world*" (OpenNet Initiative, 2009, p. 2).

However, Ekaterina Stepanova indicated in her article "*The Role of Information Communication Technologies in the Arab Spring*" that as a reaction to the oppressive control over mass media in many middle eastern countries, people found in SNS a relative open platform to express their opinion, share information, organize campaigns and facilitate debates on political issues (Stepanova 2011, p. 2). Analyzing the online political engagement, Miryam Aouragh (2012) suggests in her research "*Social media, mediation and the Arab revolutions*" that although all conditions indicated to a near revolution prior 2011, the widespread presence of online political activism in the last few years was the catalyst that sparked Arab Spring (Aouragh 2012). Contextualizing the wider frame, Sakr (2006) concluded that the recent change in the role of Arab journalism in the Middle East driven by Al Jazeera have empowered young activists to create an alternative public sphere through social media.

Oman Overview

Sultanate of Oman, located in the southeastern area of Arabian Gulf, was not far enough from the impacts and repercussions of the political unrest that swept the North African countries early 2011, rolling like a domino to the Middle East. The "Green demonstration" on 17 February 2011, organized by a group of activists on local Omani forums "Al Sablah.net", was the first on-ground protest in Oman calling for economic and political reforms (Worrall, 2012). Learning from the lesson in neighboring countries, the Sultan Qaboos quickly reshuffled the cabinet, but the government on the other hand responded strictly to SNS activists, couples were arrested in accusations of calling for illegal demonstrations, insulting the Sultan and disturbing public security (Amnesty international, 2012).

Oman is considered "not free" country, scoring (5.5) out of (7) according to the Freedom House organization, as (1) representing the freest country, while (7) the least free (Freedom House, 2013). Despite the very little improvement in civil liberties from 2000 till today, government control over mass media and the high censorship has not proved any changes since then. In fact, in 2013 Oman "*received downward trend arrow due to arrests of human rights and political reform advocates and increased restrictions on free expression in online forums*" (Freedom House, 2013, p. 24). This is supported by other reports, such as Human Rights Watch, OpenNet Initiative, Unesco report of World trends in freedom of expression and media development, Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index 2014 and many others (Human Rights Watch, 2015; OpenNet Initiative, 2014; World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: Regional overview of the Arab region, 2014; Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index, 2014).

Although Oman has the second lowest percentage of Facebook users among the Arabian Gulf countries, U.A.E Social media outlook (2014, p. 7) indicated a rapid increase, jumping from 479,680 in 2013 to reach 880,000 in 2014, with a penetration rate of 29% of the total population of the country (Figure. 1). According to the report, youth between the ages of 15 to 29 represent around 64% of Facebook users in Oman. Gender differences showed that males outperformed females where they represented over two thirds (70%) of the overall Omani Facebook users, which goes against global trends (Mourtada, et al., 2012, p. 8). This, however, could be explained by the social and cultural constrains on women in Arab countries in general.

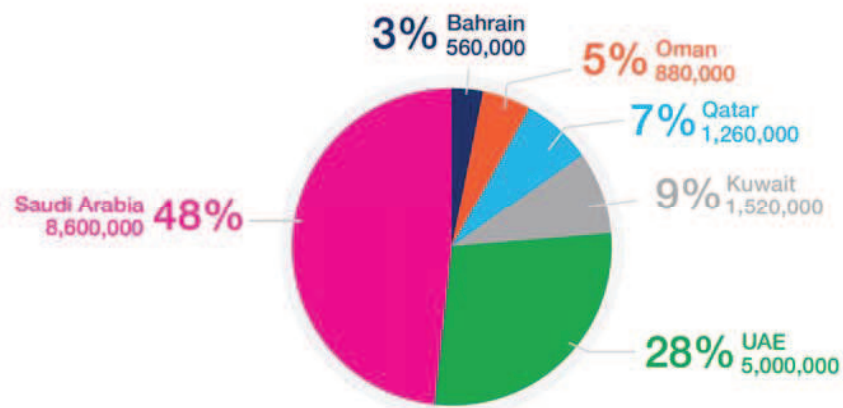


Figure 1. illustrates the number of Facebook Users and Percentage of Users in the GCC - October 2014.
Source: Arab Social Media report 2014, p. 7.

Arab Social media influencers Summit (2015) conducted the largest research on social media usage in the Arab World, implementing qualitative and quantitative methods with over 7000 respondents. According to the research, 67% of the respondents said they believe that Facebook is a “*trusted instant platform for the latest news*” (Arab Social media influencers Summit 2015, p. 2). Similarly, “*Social media in the Arab world: Influencing Societal and Cultural Change?*” (2012) Indicated that 46% of Omanis believe that social media has empowered them to contribute in social changes, while 58% said they became more receptive to new information and ideas on Facebook (Mourtada, et. al, 2012, p. 5). Saba Mahmoud’s research also provided similar results regarding social media usage of young Omanis, concluding that the rate of the usage and SNS penetration has profoundly raised people’s awareness and sense-making, enabling young Omanis to take action on ground and extending their engagement on social issues (Mahmoud 2013, p. 121). However, her research disregarded the political dimension in the way Omanis use SNS, and in fact, most of the researches on SNS usage in Oman comes from Non-Omanis and sometimes non-Arabic researchers, which increases the uncertainty margins on such qualitative researches.

Omani news environment is highly controlled by the government, despite that eight newspapers are privately owned (Worrall, 2012). In addition to government subsidies to private media organizations, the longstanding pro-government voice and the laws of Press and Publication have created a type of self-censorship within privately owned local media organizations, hindering their watchdog role and investigative reporting style. Therefore, basic elements of journalism are missed and ignored in most of the government and private media outlets. Nevertheless, due to the rapid growth of Internet users recently in Oman, couple of online newspapers emerged and Omanis turned to SNS, online forums and blogging to establish a substituent public sphere allowing them to discuss, comment, criticize public issues and express their opinions freely away from government censorship.

These alternative media platforms have rapidly increased during the last five years, influenced by the Arab spring wave, and many Omani Facebook pages emerged, opening a wider space for political engagement and discussion. In fact, some online news pages followed a counter-government line, jeopardizing themselves to concurrent arrests and police investigation (Amnesty, 2014). Therefore, this paper intends to measure the level of freedom of expression by conducting a comparative analysis between official (government) media agencies and public-owned news agencies on Facebook.

Methodology

This research is a comparative study between government and private Omani news pages on Facebook. It follows quantitative and qualitative content analysis method focused on news framing of human rights issues in four Facebook pages: two illustrating private media (AL-Balad and Mowatin Oman) and the others (Oman TV general and Oman Daily) representing government-owned media.

These are the selected Facebook pages:

1. AL-Balad is an online newspaper managed and operated by a number of young Omani activists: <https://www.facebook.com/albaladoman>
2. Mowatin Oman, electronic newspaper run by a group of university students: <https://www.facebook.com/mowatinOman?fref=ts>
3. Oman Daily (Arabic print newspaper) owned by Oman Establishment for Press, Publication and Advertising : <https://www.facebook.com/pages/%D8%AC%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86/549149515147643?fref=ts>
4. Oman TV General (Government-owned media channel): <https://www.facebook.com/OmanTvGeneral?fref=ts>

To distill and analyze news framing, this research used the Tankard's approach (2001, p.101) that suggests a list of eleven elements to identify and measure news frames, among of which; headlines, subheads, concluding statements and paragraphs, photos, photo caption, lead, sources, quotes, statistics and charts (Vreese, 2005, p. 54).

Sample of data was collected based on the selected issues (Human rights and freedom of expression), while timeframe was set from the 1st of August 2013 to 20th May 2015. Setting appropriate limitations was important to better analyze specified research problem. Quantitative data was reported, such as the number of comments, likes, sharing, but it remains peripheral in this analysis due to its insignificance in tackling our problem as it requires taking many other factors in consideration, which needs further deeper research and study.

During the period between August 2013 and May 2015 couple of 'human rights' stories were presented in the selected Facebook pages, which required the researcher to report the most popular events covered by the selected media Facebook pages in order to conduct the comparative analysis. Therefore, two cases only were studied. Firstly, covering the arrest of Omani blogger Said Jidad. Secondly, covering public schools teachers' strike.

Results

Selected issue	Facebook Page	Posts	Source	Framing	Date of fist coverage
Arresting blogger because of publication in the internet.	AL Balad	7	Lawyers, public prosecution representative, relatives, activists	Human rights, semi-oppositional frame	24 ^h February
	Mowatin	4	Lawyer, public prosecution	Conflict frame	23 ^h February
	Oman Daily	2	Public persecution	Court frame	9 ^h March
	Oman Tv General	0	_____	_____	_____
Public schools Teachers' strike	AL Balad	6	Officials, teachers, parents, human writes activists	Human rights, victim framing	1 st September
	Mowatin	5	Official sources, human writes activists	Conflict, Human rights	2 rd September
	Oman Daily	2	Official sources	Conflict frame	7 th Spetember
	Oman Tv General	1	Official sources	Conflict frame	25 th September

Discussion of Results

Mowatin

Analyzing the coverage on the arrest of Said bin Jidad, Omani blogger, **Mowatin** magazine reported four stories clearly revealing “human rights” frame-building. While in few case, especially in the later reports, Mowatin resorted to “conflict” framing when covering the arrest of the Omani blogger because of publications in the Internet. The first story was published on the 23rd of February, one of the earliest reports on this issue among the 4 selected Facebook pages.

The headline stated “*Omani Citizen arrested by authorities for his publications on Facebook and writing a letter to Obama*”. It illustrates the philosophy of the newspaper, following a counter-government angle. The language used and the word selection is clearly directed to present a conflict framing for the event packed by the human-rights angle used to illustrate the arbitrary actions of the “*authorities*”. The word itself infers also a sense of control, unlike the official and pro-government media where the word “*government*”, or “*Royal Oman Police*” is usually being used instead of “*authorities*”. Such framing is justified by the growing confrontational tone in social media, particularly after the wave of political unrest that hit the Arabic region early in 2011. Oppositional voices were banned on official media, thus, SNS and especially Facebook played a major role to circumvent government control (Worrall, 2012).

Emphasizing the conflict framing followed in the heading, the lead and introduction reveal a sense of sarcasm by trivializing the accusations of the public prosecution, listing the number of charges “*including a letter from the citizen to Barack Obama on Facebook, 40 posts on Facebook, inciting people during Friday prayer..*”. The second paragraph gives more attention to the humanitarian side of the arrested citizen who;

“...suffered from human rights violations, jailed for 7 days without arrest warrant, his Identity card and passport were held without court’s decision and whose son was killed in Salalah hospital but he couldn’t get justice” (Mowatin 2015, Translated by Yousuf Al Shamsi).

The rest of the paragraphs relied on two sources from two conflicting sides; the lawyer of the arrested citizen and the public prosecution representative. Again, this reinforces the conflict framing adopted by the newspaper, although it could add a kind of fairness in covering the story. However, the lawyer was quoted in four paragraphs refuting all the charges on his client. While on the other hand, public prosecution representative was quoted only in one short paragraph, which illustrates an imbalanced coverage that, according to Kovach & Rosenstiel (2007), degrades the newspapers’ journalist professionalism.

Mowatin’s report attached also one picture of Said bin Jidad, the arrested citizen, sitting in an informal interview, while his hand gestures and non-verbal cues illustrate a sense of seriousness, exclamation and questioning reaction (Figure. 2). This type of newswriting is apparently targeting the young generation who are looking for a different voice other than the government-controlled media. Almost all the writers in Mowatin are from the young generation. In fact, the writer of this story, who is also a journalist at an oppositional print newspaper Al Zaman, is from the young generation and one of the arrested citizens in 2011 accused of forming an illegal gathering, which could explain Mowatin’s philosophy in framing local issues in that sense (Al-Hashmi, 2013).

Although Mowatin’s coverage could be criticized in terms of its credibility for not presenting opinions or voices other than the public prosecution representative and the lawyer of the arrested citizen, however, under such suppressive regimes it becomes quite difficult to add voices and comments of citizens as the trust-relationship between media and citizens in authoritarian systems is often poor, jeopardizing both; the newspaper and the citizen’s freedom (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011).



Figure 2. Mowatin Facebook page, February 2013

Al Balad Online Newspaper

Al Balad, which literally means ‘The city’ in Arabic, is one of the earliest online newspapers in Oman. The logo “and you’re free in this city” which is also a verse from the Holly Quran, is clearly drawing the newspaper’s philosophy and representing the ‘liberal’ line followed by Al Balad journalists. The coverage on Said bin Jidad’s arrest illustrated this revolutionary “conflict” framing, with seven reports from 24rd of February to April 15th, more than any other newspaper from the selected Facebook pages.

Unlike Mowatin’s report that identified the arrested man as “*Omani citizen*”, Al Balad presented over five headlines identifying the arrested citizen as a “*blogger*”, stressing the human rights and freedom of speech dimension of the story, such as in the following headlines;

“Human rights center condemns the arrest of the blogger Said bin Jidad”, “Omani police investigates with bloggers for their posts and publication in the internet”, “Blogger Said bin Jidad faces charges of incitation and insulting Oman’s status”, “3 years imprisonment for the blogger Said bin Jidad because of publications in the internet”, “Salalah court sentences blogger Said by Jidad in jail because of a post on Facebook” (Al Balad Facebook page, March 2015, Translated by Yousuf Al Shamsi).

From the journalistic style and words selection it could be deduced that Al Balad tended to be less confrontational in its coverage of human rights cases compared to Mowatin’s reports. Al Balad avoided to use the word “*authorities*” and used “*Omani police*” instead. Likewise, Al Balad seemed more balanced in terms of the quoting and sources included in its coverage of the event. This semi-conflict framing illustrates the ideology of the e-newspaper, which is operated by a group of young volunteered journalists who were eager to present an alternative journalism to counter the hegemonizing government-owned media (Al-Balushi, 2014). It is worth noting that in 2012 the Omani authorities carried a campaign against e-media bloggers and journalist, where over 27 bloggers were arrested and accused of violating the Press and Publication’s Law according to Al Jazeera (2012), which set Al Balad and other online newspapers under pressure. This urged Al Balad in 2012 to establish its own “code of ethics” (Vaidya 2012), which avoided direct opposition, yet clearly drawing new moderate journalism model as an alternative medium for Omani readers.

On the 4th of March 2015, four days ahead of the second court hearing, Al Balad Facebook page carried another in-depth report titled “*Blogger Said bin Jidad faces charges of incitation and insulting Oman’s status*” (Al Balad Facebook page, March 2015, Translated by Yousuf Al Shamsi). Clearly, Al Balad’s human rights framing tends to direct public opinions in order to sympathize with the blogger’s case. The report added quotes from Said bin Jidad’s brother talking about Siad’s poor health situation, two Omani lawyers defending the bloggers’ case and two human rights activists. Despite that the voice of

the public prosecution representative wasn't given much space in the coverage, however, objectivity – according to Al Balad's codes of ethics (2012)- is always above balance.

Al Balad online newspaper provided a larger background to the story, emphasizing the “victim” framing sometime when quoting the brother of arrested blogger expressing his worriedness about his brother's health in prison. Similarly, the reporter elaborated on the blogger's struggle with the Omani authorities “*after the death of his son by the hands of the doctors at Salalah hospital according to his brother*” (Al Balad Facebook page, March 2015, Translated by Yousuf Al Shamsi). The report also gave more details about the wide educational background of the blogger and his long experience in serving the country, stressing on the nationalistic and humanitarian side of the personality while amplifying the empathic tone of the story.

Oman Daily

On the other hand, government-owned media covered the blogger's case with an oversimplified details, where only two stories were reported with less than four short paragraphs each. Moreover, the Oman Daily coverage of human rights issues and freedom of expression were very limited in comparison to the other e-newspapers. This is directly related to the poor level of press freedom and lack of democratic environment where journalists are unable to operate, report and investigate freely away from government control.

This could be justified by the way Oman Daily covered the arrested blogger's case, as it totally ignored the sources from the blogger's side and presented one-sided coverage from the public prosecution's angle. According to Media sustainability index (2008), the censored media environment in almost all Arab countries, which is highly packed by the Laws of Press and Publications since early 1980s till today, has greatly influenced workers in the journalism profession, producing highly self-censored journalists. This created an environment where “change” in the journalistic philosophy is seen extremely difficult, and any coverage that might disturb the “status quo” is considered highly avoided (Social media outlook, 2014).

The first story was run on 25th of February, after the first court hearing, under the headline “*Muscat court adjourns hearing in the case of the violators of P&P Law*” (Oman Daily Facebook page, February 2015, Translated by Yousuf Al Shamsi), and the second headline states: “*Salalah court sentenced a citizen 3 years in prison for violating Press and Publication Law*” (Oman Daily Facebook page, March 2015, Translated by Yousuf Al Shamsi). In both stories, Oman Daily avoided to use the word “blogger” to identify the arrested person. In fact, it tended to frame the story as a normal ‘court case’. This type of ‘court’ framing illustrates the inactive journalism philosophy practiced by most pro-government media, as they extensively rely on government public relations offices to cover internal stories. Therefore, it could be deduced from the tone of the report that Oman Daily's coverage was merely a copy of the public prosecution's report that was distributed to media on that day.

Additionally, Oman Daily didn't provide pictures or statistics in its coverage. The report was decontextualized, without referring back to the background of the case, neither to the background of the arrested blogger. The lack of depth, sources, background and the one-sided angle are another indication to the poor press freedom and professional journalism in government-owned media.

Oman TV General

Although Said bin Jidad's arrest was covered by couple of regional newspapers and news agencies such as Gulf News, Al Kaleej, Al Watan, Al Shurooq and Misr Al-Youm and Al-Rayah, however, Oman TV Facebook page ignored totally the case during the period of collecting the data of this research. Researches indicate that government control over mass media through the Press and Publication Law has contributed in increasing the level of self-censorship, lowering the quality of news reporting while raising the level of alternative media credibility among social networking sites members (Al-Hashmi, 2013, p. 45).

Oman TV General could be considered as the mouthpiece of the government. On 21st February 2015 -two days before the bloggers trial- Oman TV presented an interview with Ibrahim AL-Habsi (General persecution spokesperson) talking about Freedom of expression laws and regulations in Oman, which could be regarded as pre-emptive step to subvert the human rights angle of the blogger's case and ensure gaining high public opinions' support later on. This wider picture of the clash between government-owned media and the private-owned media in human rights and freedom of expression issues is noticeably prevalent even on upper levels. In fact, this pushed over five members of the Shura "Consultative council" on 28th February 2015 to question the Minister of Information regarding the authoritarian and censorship policies the Ministry is practicing with regard to issues of freedom of expression (Al-Tamimi, 2015).

Teachers Strike Coverage

The second case is about public schools teachers' strike on 2013, calling for higher salaries, fair holiday period, less work hours and general reforms in the Ministry of Education (Sablat Oman, 2013). Such cases are considered very sensitive for Omani reporters, raising the level of self-censorship, lest they get accused of "*inciting people for civil disobedience*", hence violating the Law of Press and Publication (Worrall, 2012).

Sablat Oman -the largest Omani forum in the Internet with over one hundred thousand members- was the electronic ground where teachers from all around the country organized their strike. Al Balad was one of the first e-newspapers to cover the strike, posting its first report on the same day of the strike under the headline "*Oman public school teachers on strike today*" (Al Balad Facebook page, September 2013, Translated by Yousuf Al Shamsi). It was sourced to Sablat Oman and reported from different angles, including quotes from public schools teachers, young students, parents and officials from the Ministry of Education.

However, it wasn't until Oman Daily covered the story from pro-government angle, other local print newspapers joined the bandwagon. Oman Daily carried the headline "*Public schools' teachers stopped from working*" (Oman Daily Facebook page, September 2013, Translated by Yousuf Al Shamsi). The word "strike" was carefully avoided in pro-government media to decrease the negative impact. Moreover, Oman Daily resorted to conflict-framing in its coverage, victimizing students and blaming school teachers. Such framing was necessary to avoid the situation from being escalated. In particular, the government was worried that 2011 scenario of protests and strikes will be repeated (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Therefore, pro-government media tended to highlight the negative consequences of the strike. Muscat Daily for example focused on the negative reaction of the parents of the students, while marginalizing the demands of the teachers (figure. 3). In addition, other government-owned media, such as Oman TV General, reported that the strike was lifter as the Ministry of Education reached an agreement with the teachers' representatives, promising that their demands will be achieved in the coming weeks.

Furthermore, Caricatures were used to support each newspaper's reaction toward the strike, where pro-government media, in particular Oman Daily Facebook page, depicted a teacher lying on bed and seeing in his dream that he's been given a candy, with a comment saying "Candy increase", ridiculing the "salary increase" demands of the striking teachers (Figure. 3). Other alternative media, such as Al Balad, criticized Oman Daily's "*unethical*" caricature, as it insults Omani teachers who are depicted as "lazy" dreamers who want something but give nothing (Al-Balad, 2013). In reaction, Oman Daily apologized on the next day and ran another caricature praising the "sacred mission" of teachers, with a famous quote from Ahmed Shawky, the great Arabic poet, saying: "Teachers in prophets' status by their mission". Therefore, SNS and alternative media clearly played a powerful role in diverting public opinions, redrawing the lines of ethical journalism, getting closer to citizens' issues and influencing the level of freedom and journalistic style of government-owned media.



Figure 3. Muscat Daily News Facebook page, 2013

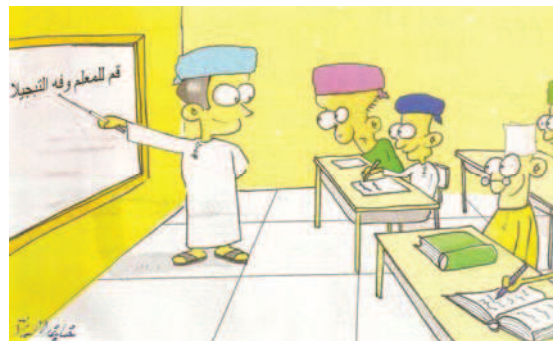


Figure4. Oman Daily Facebook page, 2013

Interactivity in Omani newspapers' Facebook pages

It is important to point here that most of the articles published in all the four selected sample showed limited interactivity by SNS members. What could be noticed clearly is the two-step flow of distribution and popularity of those media outlets on Facebook. For example, private media like Al Balad and Mowatin were not as popular as some political activists, local writes and popular Omani personalities on Facebook. They share those articles and news on their Facebook personal pages, enabling larger area for comments, analysis and discussion, such as on the following activists' Facebook pages: Habiba al Hinai, Muawyah Al Rawahi, Al Mukhtar Al Saifi, Ismaeil AL Maqbali, Mohamed Al Fazari, and others. Said Jadad's arrest is one of the issues that illustrate how the two-step flow was much more effective is providing the "distribution" and "negotiation" role than the Facebook page of the selected newspapers.

An example is the article written by Basma Al Kyumi, Omani lawyer and political activist, in Al-Falaq electronic newspaper (Mubarik, 2015). The article was mainly a critical opinion regarding the

current shapes structuring the relationship between the government and citizens, where the writer called for another “Fifth” shape that could lead the ‘ship Oman’ safely to the shore. However, on his Facebook page, Suliman AL Mamari -Oman Radio presenter- shared the article from Al Balad Facebook page, posting an introducing comment that praises the writers’ opinion, calling for an “open ears” from government to listen for the benefit of both sides.

Conclusion

‘Human rights’ and ‘freedom of expression’ activism in social networking sites has noticeably been growing in Oman. As the number of social media users increases, alternative media messages become very important in influencing public opinions, expanding opportunities for expressing peoples’ political opinions and raising taboo topics for open discussions.

Through analyzing four online Omani newspapers on Facebook, this research showed that despite the current limited media control in Oman, Facebook has increasingly provided an arena for Omanis not only for expressing their opinions and raising ‘freedom of speech’ level, but presenting also an alternative journalism to circumvent the social, organizational and juridical limitations. Consequently, to cope with the change, government media has noticeably raised its level of freedom, but still beyond the fast momentum other private ‘alternative media’ is going through.

Growth of SNS usage as a public sphere in Oman is a new phenomenon that has been widely evolving due to many global, regional and local factors. Omanis therefore increased their online presence, shifting their social and political activism from public forums and blogging to find on Facebook a new widely-reaching space for expressing their opinions.

References

1. Al Balad online newspaper. (2010). In Facebook [Fan page]. Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/albaladoman>[Accessed 12/04/2015]
2. Al-Balushi, T. (2014, Novemeber 28). *How a team of journalists created the first online news outlet in Oman*. International journalists network. Available from: <http://ijnnet.org/en/blog/how-team-journalists-created-first-online-news-outlet-oman> [accessed 22/03/2015]
3. Al-Hashmi, S. (2013), *The man and power in Oman, An introductory reading to understand the Omani political scene*, Beirut: Centre for Arab unity studies.
4. Al-Tamimi, F. (2015). *Majlis Al Shura to discuss Oman media scenario with minister of Information*. Times of Oman. Available from: <http://timesofoman.com/article/46816/Oman/Majlis-Al-Shura-to-discuss-Oman-media-scenario-with-minister-of-Information> [Accessed 21/03/2015]
5. *Amnesty Intl.* (2012). Oman. Available from http://files.amnesty.org/air12/air_2012_full_en.pdf [Accessed 12/04/2015]
6. Aouragh, M. (2012). Social media, mediation and the Arab revolutions. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 10(2), 518-536.
7. Arab Social Media report. (2012). Social media in the Arab world: Influencing societal and cultural change?, *Dubai School of Government’s Governance*. Available from: <http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/Facebook/LineChart.aspx?&PriMenuID=18&CatID=24&mnu=Cat> [Accessed 03/04/2015]
8. Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index (2014). Oman Country Report, *Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung*. Available from: http://www.bti-project.de/uploads/tx_itao_download/BTI_2014_Oman.pdf [Accessed 02/02/2015]
9. Caers, R., De Feyter, T., De Couck, M., Stough, T., Vigna, C., & Du Bois, C. (2013). Facebook: A literature review. *New Media & Society*, 15(6), 982-1002.
10. Calhoun, C. (1992). *Introduction: Habermas and the public sphere*: MIT Press.

11. Diamond, L., & Plattner, M. F. (2012). *Liberation technology: Social media and the struggle for democracy*: JHU Press.
12. De Vreese, C. H. (2005). News framing: Theory and typology. *Information design journal+ document design*, 13(1), 51-62.
13. Dewey, T., Kaden, J., Marks, M., Matsushima, S., & Zhu, B. (2012). The impact of social media on social unrest in the Arab Spring. *International Policy Program*.
14. Downey, J., & Fenton, N. (2003). New media, counter publicity and the public sphere. *New Media & Society*, 5(2), 185-202.
15. Eickelman, D. F., & Anderson, J. W. (2003). *New media in the Muslim world: The emerging public sphere*: Indiana University Press.
16. Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210-230.
17. Ghannam, J. (2011). Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011. *Center for international media assistance*.
18. Gerbaudo, P. (2012). *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*: Pluto Press.
19. Howard, P. N., & Hussain, M. M. (2013). *Democracy's fourth wave?: digital media and the Arab Spring*: Oxford University Press.
20. Internet filtering in the Middle East and North Africa (2009). *OpenNet Initiative*, Available from: https://opennet.net/research/regions/mena_ [Accessed 12/04/2015]
21. Johnson, T. J., & Kaye, B. K. (1998). Cruising is believing?: Comparing Internet and traditional sources on media credibility measures. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 75(2), 325-340.
22. Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business horizons*, 53(1), 59-68.
23. Kavanaugh, A. L., Fox, E. A., Sheetz, S. D., Yang, S., Li, L. T., Shoemaker, D. J., & Xie, L. (2012). Social media use by government: From the routine to the critical. *Government Information Quarterly*, 29(4), 480-491.
24. Khamis, S., & Vaughn, K. (2011). Cyberactivism in the Egyptian revolution: How civic engagement and citizen journalism tilted the balance. *Arab Media and Society*, 14(3), 1-25.
25. Kovach, B., & Rosenstiel, T. (2001). Are watchdogs an endangered species?. *Columbia Journalism Review*, 40(1), 50.
26. Kovach, B., & Rosenstiel, T. (2007). *The elements of journalism*. Three Rivers Press.
27. Loader, B. D., & Mercea, D. (2011). Networking democracy? Social media innovations and participatory politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(6), 757-769.
28. Marchi, R. (2012). With Facebook, blogs, and fake news, teens reject journalistic "objectivity". *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 36(3), 246-262.
29. McNair, B. (2000). *Journalism and democracy*. London: Routledge.
30. Mourtada, R., & Alkhatib, F. (2014). U.A.E Social media outlook: Increasing connectivity between government and citizens, *Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government*, Available from: <http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/Facebook/LineChart.aspx?&PriMenuID=18&CatID=24&mnu=Cat> [Accessed 27/02/2015]
31. Mowatin Oman. (2013). In Facebook [Fan page]. Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/mowatinOman?fref=ts> [Accessed 12/04/2015]
32. Mubarik, B. (2015, January 27). 'Towards a fifth choice for the sake of the homeland', Translated by Yousuf Al Shamsi, *Al-Falaq electronic newspaper*. Available from: http://xml.adventurefeeds.com/click?i=91RD1wAlZys_0 [Accessed 12/02/2015]
33. Oman Daily newspaper (2011). In Facebook [Fan page]. Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/%D8%AC%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86/549149515147643?fref=ts> [Accessed 12/04/2015]
34. Oman TV General. (2012). In Facebook [Fan page]. Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/OmanTvGeneral?fref=ts> [Accessed 12/04/2015]
35. Orend, B. (2002). *Human rights: Concept and context*: Broadview Press.

36. Rane, H., & Salem, S. (2012). Social media, social movements and the diffusion of ideas in the Arab uprisings. *Journal of international communication*, 18(1), 97-111.
37. Schultz, J. (1998). *Reviving the fourth estate: Democracy, accountability and the media*: Cambridge University Press.
38. Shaw, I. (2012). *Human rights journalism: advances in reporting distant humanitarian interventions*: Palgrave Macmillan.
39. Shirky, C. (2011). The political power of social media. *Foreign affairs*, 90(1), 28-41.
40. Stepanova, E. (2011). The role of information communication technologies in the “arab spring”. *Ponars Eurasia*, 15, 1-6.
41. Tang, G., & Lee, F. L. (2013). Facebook use and political participation: The impact of exposure to shared political information, connections with public political actors, and network structural heterogeneity. *Social Science Computer Review*.
42. Tankard, J. W. (2001). The empirical approach to the study of media framing. *Framing public life: Perspectives on media and our understanding of the social world*, 95-106.
43. World trends in freedom of expression and media development: Regional overview of the Arab region (2014). France, *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*. Available from: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002277/227736e.pdf> [Accessed 15/03/2015]
44. Worrall, J. (2012). Oman: The “Forgotten” corner of the Arab spring. *Middle East Policy*, 19(3), 98-115.
45. Zhang, W., Johnson, T. J., Seltzer, T., & Bichard, S. L. (2009). The revolution will be networked: The influence of social networking sites on political attitudes and behavior. *Social Science Computer Review*.