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Chapter

Do Independent Arab YouTube Broadcasters "Broadcast Themselves"? The Saudi Case Explored

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Abstract

The chapter discusses whether YouTube empowers professional amateurs (Pro-Ams) to build the agenda of their channels independently. It also explores the development of YouTube from being a user-dominated platform into an institutionalized medium in its post-Google era. In-depth interviews were conducted with a group of 19-Pro-Ams in Saudi Arabia, representing two YouTube video-producing companies to explore the business model of their channels, how they feel empowered, and how their work is affected by culture, business, and politics. Attempting to re-interview them after 4 years, only one respondent agreed to participate. The results show that the leading YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia attract millions of views monthly. The business model of the channels shows that they are run in a semi-professional style by using personal and advertising funding. The Pro-Ams feel empowered thanks to the routine-free, low cost, and easy-to-use popular platform. They launched their channels to "broadcast" themselves, but with the professionalization and monetization, they had to accommodate the agenda of the audience, the advertisers, and the regime. Eventually, the model was either discontinued or reduced to be an advertising/entrainment platform. The lack of regulations has been always a challenge for these Pro-Ams to get licensed and have a legal standing.

Keywords: YouTube channels, Saudi Arabia, Pro-Ams, user empowerment, user-generated content

1. Introduction

According to Matt Smith from Reuters, Saudi Arabia is "the biggest user of YouTube per capita in the world [1]." As of January 2015, the independent Saudi YouTube channel *Sa7i* has attracted more than 313 million views [2], with an average of 110 per capita views for just one channel. In 2013, more than 90 million videos were watched daily in Saudi Arabia, which were higher than any daily viewership of YouTube videos in any other country [3]. This translates into an average of each inhabitant watching more than three YouTube videos daily. These numbers indicate that these inhabitants seek on YouTube what they cannot find on free-to-air terrestrial and satellite channels. These statistics also underscore several pertinent aspects of the use of YouTube. First, YouTube captures the biggest share

of media audiences in some parts of the world, including Saudi Arabia. Second, YouTube provides an alternative outlet for its users to release their creativity and share it with massive audiences. Third, the use of YouTube by professional amateurs (Pro-Ams) in Saudi Arabia is a special case that is worthy of exploring. This growth of "independent broadcasting" in a long-time central, authoritarian country is not expected to be either encouraged or welcomed by the authorities.

The present study investigates the aspects and development of YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia by conducting in-depth interviews with a sample of Saudi YouTube broadcasters over the span of 3 years. This study also examines the business model of the leading YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia and how these young Pro-Ams chose and communicated their content. Finally, this study explores whether YouTube empowers these YouTube broadcasters to broadcast themselves or exposes them to a constant scrutiny from the authority.

2. YouTube: an empowering medium

YouTube has revolutionized televised mass communication since its launch in 2005. Simply put, it has turned mass communication from an organizational process into an individual initiative. The founders of the company have perfectly highlighted the democratizing power of YouTube in its slogan: "Broadcast Yourself." As PayPal employees, the creators of YouTube originally designed it as a platform for users to upload videos and provide additional content for eBay or share home videos [4]. YouTube users, however, "hijacked" the site by posting their own content and linking their posts to other social networking activities [5]. From then on, YouTube users have engaged in "mass self-communication [6]," wherein they can actively perform the role of the sender in the model of broadcasting communication, rather than merely being passive receivers mesmerized in front of the boob tube. The attractiveness of YouTube in its first year was not based on the quality of the videos uploaded, but rather on the empowering aspect of how it functioned. Ordinary users, with the help of a simple technology, could be their own camera operators, editors, producers, broadcasters, and media critics. YouTube liberated citizens to "broadcast themselves" and express their political orientations, religious beliefs, professional affiliations, and entertainment preferences. The amateur narrowcasters formed their own channels and networks on this user-dominated platform. According to Grusin, YouTube became the "remediation of television in the world of networked publics [7]." YouTube was classified as an "activity-focused site" [8] that presents user-generated content and allows for social networking. This opened the gate for the emergence of YouTube celebrities, such as Felix Kjellberg (known as PewDiePie on YouTube) who has garnered more than 70 million subscribers and scored 19 billion video views as of November 2018. In a survey conducted by Variety [9], teens considered YouTube celebrities as more authentic and approachable than mainstream celebrities.

The anarchic environment of narrowcasting on YouTube became more regulated after Google purchased the site in 2006 for $1.65 billion in stocks. The amateurish nature of the network began to acquire professional features with the legalization and commercialization processes that ensued. Media conglomerates wanted to preserve their copyrights, establish a YouTube outlet for their programming, and enhance their advertising revenues. Networks and cable sought to tame this new arena through enforcing the traditional rules of the game [10]. These media conglomerates identified two advantages for streaming video online: "retransmission of channels and interactivity-based advertisements [11]." YouTube began to play banner advertisements during video streaming [12], and the ad revenue is split between

YouTube and the video provider or copyright owners [13]. Kim calls the evolvement of YouTube from personal, to public, and finally to commercial as the "the road to institutionalization [11]." This institutionalization and encroachment of giant media corporations on YouTube have been expected to limit its revolutionary, liberating nature. For instance, the application of copyright regulations "weakens the reliability of YouTube as a stable online library… while advertising factors limit the genre of clips on YouTube [11]." Dylko et al. cautioned that "elite voices" would still dominate in the post-Google era of YouTube [14]. Dylko and his coauthors examined whether the news posted on YouTube came from elite online media, such as celebrities, political figures, and well-funded organization, or non-elite groups. They found that most of the political videos posted came from elite sources, as 56% of the content in videos came from traditional media. Dylko et al.'s study demonstrated the dominance of traditional media over the political content on YouTube in the 6 months prior to the American presidential election in 2008. Their results agree with Bakker's content analysis study of a sample of Dutch political blogs, which found that bloggers relied mainly on mainstream news media for content [15]. Bakker concluded that the relationship between politics, journalists, and citizens has remained unchanged, as "elite" news sources continue to dominate the dissemination of news and set the news agenda, both online and offline.

TV channels have also responded to the threat of losing their dominance over the market of entertainment by "offering their content on sites of their own or on joint sites such as Hulu [16]." Bergström [17] reported that UGC is more entertainment than news. Currently, YouTube offers full-length movies in different languages, as well as full episodes of television shows [17]. The networks have also developed a strategy of producing video content specifically for online distribution. The storyline of these video teasers are about successful TV shows, such as *American Idol* or the *Office*, or new properties generated for online distribution, such as ABC's *Squeegees* and NBC's *Gemini Division* [18]. Kim identified the entertainment capabilities of YouTube as a "stepping stone" for mainstream media, in which they have created a new format called a "Webisode," or a 3–5-minute episode produced for online viewing to promote TV shows [11]. Simonsen [19] notes that film and music producers, politicians, and TV stations use two strategies to distribute their videos online: primary or secondary distributions. Primary distribution encompasses videos produced exclusively for online viewing, whereas secondary distribution includes content that has been primarily produced for viewing through traditional media platforms [19]. Media companies came to quickly dominate the market of online entertainment. In December 2016, Netflix captured a share of 75% of the video streaming market [20].

Another aspect that limits the revolutionary aurora that initially surrounded YouTube is the professionalization of the entertainment content on the site. In the pre-Google era, it was amateurs who popularized YouTube as a video-sharing site. YouTube amateur Ryan Douthit, for example, managed to establish a thriving sports YouTube channel and made a significant profit via advertising revenue. The tide started to turn against him and thousands of other amateurs, however, as YouTube transformed from user-generated clips to professional content in the post-Google era. According to Shih from Reuters [21], many big-name talents, such as Tom Hanks and Amy Poehler, are backing YouTube projects. This influx of cash and celebrity "had left small "YouTubers" feeling alienated and shunted down [21]." YouTube seemed to be empowering the mainstream traditional media, advertisers, and celebrities, enhancing their gains, and extending their reach.

Not only did YouTube empower media companies to extend their reach, but it also enabled them to induce users to reproduce their TV production. Some media companies create the same video in different versions with different bandwidths to

accommodate the diversity of the streaming bandwidth in the world and ease the reposting of their videos. This leads to the existence of identical versions of a single video, what is called "content aliasing" [22]. YouTube users are therefore turned into "prosumers" or "peer producers" [23]. In his doctoral dissertation, Kim refuted the perspective of "user empowerment" and described it as a myth [24]. He suggested that the participation of YouTube users in reproducing materials is misleadingly conceptualized as user empowerment. He further argued that YouTube users represent a "cybernetic commodity" for media companies that utilize their demographic and biometric information for marketing benefits. YouTube users, according to Kim, selectively consume cultural commodities, but do not necessarily participate in the political or social life. The users, according to Kim, "know, but they do not act [24]." For Kim, therefore, involvement and power sharing are not identical.

Nonetheless, YouTube remains a liberating platform for citizen journalists and amateur entertainers. That the main producers of news and entertainment content on YouTube are mainstream media and major political parties does not negate the reality that YouTube is an open platform that welcomes amateur contributors around the clock. The term "platform" connotes availability, openness, and inter-activity. For others, a platform "facilitates user expression [22]." For Miller, this makes YouTube "a form of participatory culture [25]." The culture of participation and personal interaction explains why YouTube has worked so well [26]. Regardless of the content YouTube users decide to upload, they participate in producing or reproducing culture, rather than merely consuming it. Every uploaded video is an indication of a user's taste in culture, beliefs, and even sense of humor [4].

A body of research has recently provided empirical evidence showing that using social media for social interactions fosters political expression and political partici-pation [27–29]. For Grönlund [30], online participation is a three-step ladder, the first step of which is e-Enabling, or giving access and information to participants. The second step is e-Engaging, wherein users interact and start a dialog. The top and final step of online participation is e-Empowering, or when users work together and acquire tasks to collaborate with organizations or political bodies [30]. According to Grönlund's model, online participation is not an all-or-none process, but rather a continuum that proceeds through time, practice, and engagement. At the end of the continuum, empowerment occurs. Accordingly, other authors, such as Gauntlett [31], Miles [32], and Soukup [26] suggest that YouTube fosters communities, as it encourages users to do more than just video-share. The users can link to other social networks and blogs, which gives YouTube the distinctive feature of expanded social connection [33]. Users can also make comments, give star ratings, add friends, send messages, and make videos in response to other videos [31]. In addition, users can also rate others' comments by using thumbs-up and thumbs-down buttons [34]. To Lange, the feature of commenting has a high premium—she suggested that this feature is a "crucial part of YouTube participation and social interaction [35]." The empowerment did not go unnoticed by authorities. In a survey study that used a sample of Canadian front-line police officers, most of those officers recognized the video-recorded documentation and social media dissemination of their actions as a "disciplining influence on their consciousness as they perform police work and as a significant deterrent against use of force misconduct [36]."

Building on this sense of empowerment, online participation has developed into cyber activism, as epitomized in the series of uprisings known as the Arab Spring that swept over five Arab countries, starting with Tunisia in 2010. Political activists used YouTube to show what state TV and private satellite stations were ignoring or concealing. Khalid Said, a young Egyptian blogger, posted a video on YouTube showing a group of police officers sharing confiscated drugs. In retaliation, two secret policemen attacked Said, resulting in his death. The police reported that Said

tried to swallow a packet of drugs and had choked to death—however, a photo of Said with a bruised and bloodied face went viral on social media after his death, and a Facebook page created for Said attracted more than two million followers. In response to these events, those social media users chose January 25 as the day of showing anger—and this day would begin The Egyptian Spring. Howard reported an Egyptian activist as saying, "we use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world [37]."

YouTube has even empowered minor political groups and small parties to be more vocal and have a wider reach. Emruli and his coauthors found that candidates with little funding in Macedonia were able to reach young voters through entertaining visual means on YouTube [38]. They also found that nine out of 13 political parties had official YouTube channels. In Malaysia, YouTube videos "were a popular choice for the competing parties to reach out to the voting public [39]" during the Parliamentary election of 2016. Being aware of its political communication potential, YouTube has launched a *YouTube for Government* page to offer helpful tips for nation states to boost their profile and communicate more effectively with their target audiences.

Knowledge in itself is an empowering tool. Kim argues that YouTube users might know but do not necessarily act upon their knowledge. He supports his argument with the hypothesis of narcotizing dysfunction of mass media coined by Lazarsfeld and Merton in the 1940s [24]. However, there is no empirical evidence showing a narcotizing dysfunction of social media that provides a totally different environment and communication model compared to traditional media. To the contrary, it is argued that a monopoly of knowledge is "the main reason for the failure of the enlightenment project [40]." Information technology has "revived pedagogically participatory democracy [40]." YouTube has broken the monopoly of political and social knowledge imposed by news media in the West and totalitarian, repressive regimes in other parts of the world.

The professionalization of YouTube did not completely stop empowering amateur users, as it compelled them to acquire new skills and develop new ideas to move toward professionalism. Those generators of content on YouTube have moved from producing and consuming content on YouTube individually (procumers) into producing content as a teamwork at an organizational level, which moves them into an area between amateurism and professionalism. According to Bosshart and Schoenhagen [41], media amateurs/citizen journalists are those who either contribute content to mass media by submitting images and posting comments on news media websites, or those who generate content outside of news media websites without any "involvement of professional journalists" (p. 139). Operating a YouTube channel is hardly a profession that has "institutional and ideological traits more or less in common" [42], yet it bears some of the professional characteristics identified by the theory of professionalism attributes, such as having "a specialized technique ... and a considerable autonomy to conduct their work" [43]. Accordingly, a hybrid of professional amateurs, or Pro-Ams, has begun to emerge on YouTube. They produce and upload video on YouTube from their homes to make a living. Dijck sees this convergence between usage and production as a source of empowerment for YouTube users [44]. Pro-Ams had a significant presence in the Arab World after the Arab Spring began. As an example, two young Egyptian activists started their political YouTube channel (Joe Tube) in January 2013 from their Cairo home to criticize the ruling military regime in Egypt. In less than a year, the channel scored more than 100 million views and more than 1.3 million subscribers. Another Egyptian satirist, Bassem Yousef, started his YouTube channel in 2011. He adopted the format of Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show*. Yousef's show gained tremendous popularity and was later turned into a weekly show on MBC—one of the leading Arab

media networks. Moving from YouTube to free airwaves, former Pro-Am Yousef turned into a full-fledged professional TV celebrity. However, the military regime in Egypt felt uncomfortable about the satiric tone of Yousef's show, and eventually, the program was pulled from the airwaves. It also never returned to YouTube.

In Saudi Arabia, the leading and fastest growing YouTube channels are those created and operated by young Pro-Ams who have decided to shy away from direct political messages because of the restrictions on free speech in Saudi Arabia. They invested their talents in producing entertaining content and comic videos and managed to gain massive popularity. The channel *EyshElly* (Saudi colloquial for *What is it?*) has attracted more than 393 million views for its 109 videos, with an average of more than 3.6 million views for each video. However, this channel posted its last video in 2016 and seems to have remained inactive in its production since then. In the next section, we will analyze the unique use of YouTube in Saudi Arabia and the short-lived success of the YouTube Pro-Ams in this conservative country.

3. The Saudi society, TV, and Internet

Religion, geography, and economy give Saudi Arabia a unique status in the Arab world. Not only does it host the holy Islamic sites in Mecca and Medina but it also boasts the largest land mass area and largest economy out of the 22 Arab nations. The official title attached to the king of Saudi Arabia is "The Servant of the Two Honorable Holy Sites." The country's religious identity translates into a distinct level of conservatism, where women are not allowed to drive until very recently and freedom of expression is ranked by the Freedom House in 2017 as the fourth lowest in the Arab world, after Yemen, Sudan, and Syria [45]. Both religion and oil significantly influence Saudi society [46].

Upon its formation as an independent kingdom in 1932, the dwellers of its capital of Riyadh used to live within a fence that was built to protect the city. Although the fence was removed in 1959 to enlarge and modernize the city, Saudi Arabia's real opening to the world had to wait until information technology made its way to the kingdom. In 1965, Saudi Arabia began its national TV service [47], but the programming was strictly censored to guarantee adherence to Islamic teachings. All imported cultural commodities, such as books, magazines, and videos, were also closely scrutinized by the Ministry of Culture and Information. In the 1990s, the government of Saudi Arabia opened free-to-air satellite TV by granting its citizens the right to own dishes and receivers. Members of the Saudi royal family invested extensively in satellite TV networks. The giant MBC network was established in 1991 with the support of King Fahad Al Saud [48]. The governments of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, such as United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Egypt, maintained their power over free-to-air satellite TV stations through direct ownership or connections with the other owners who come from the same circles of elite businessmen.

The state-run company Saudi Telecom began providing Internet for the public in 1998, and at this point, the Saudi cultural fence started to get thinner. Nonetheless, the government imposed legal restrictions and filters on the Internet. In 2002, a study examined 63,000 websites and found that the Saudi government had blocked 1353 sites—most of which were related to drugs, alcohol, explicit sex, bombs, gambling, or pages insulting the Islamic religion or Saudi regulations [49]. The government continued to monitor blogs, websites, chat rooms, social media sites, email content, and mobile phone text messages. Even today, it has the authority to obtain personal data from service providers without a court order. The Saudi blogger Ahmad Al-Farhan was jailed for 4 months for violating "non-security regulations." According to

Al-Farhan, he was arrested because he "wrote about political prisoners in Saudi Arabia" [50]. In 2011, a legislation aimed at ensuring Saudi bloggers are licensed was issued to pressure bloggers to self-regulate their posts and materials. In 2013, the Freedom House identified the media environment in Saudi Arabia as one of the most repressive in the world.

Despite these restrictions, the Internet became attractive in the Kingdom. As of December 2017, the Internet has reached 90.2% of the Saudi population [51]. In a country where movie theaters used to be forbidden and unrelated men and women were not allowed to converse in public places, the Internet is a place to socialize and seek entertainment. The Internet made it possible for the Saudis to live a "double life" as they comply with the conservative lifestyle publicly while engaging in a more liberated lifestyle online [52]. This might explain why "Saudi Arabia is the world's top YouTube nation [53]." The widespread usage of cell phones in Saudi Arabia, with more than 44.04 million mobile subscriptions and a penetration ratio of 138.7% in 2016 [54], could be a facilitating factor for accessing YouTube. According to a report in 2014, 50% of YouTube views in Saudi Arabia were via mobile devices [55].

4. Saudi YouTube channels

YouTube users in Saudi Arabia are avid uploaders. In 2013, 35% of the YouTube users there have uploaded their own content [56]. Some young Saudi talents have decided to practice their TV skills on YouTube. As of February 2013, around 100 Saudi YouTube channels were active on YouTube, attracting more than two million views per week [1]. The leading Saudi YouTube channels were the following: *EyshElly*, *Al-Temsah* (The Crocodile), *La Yekthar* (Not Too Much), and *Sa7i* (Awake). The *EyshElly* channel is a part of the UTURN network that holds several channels on YouTube. **Table 1** provides the leading channels and shows the date each channel joined YouTube. The raw data was retrieved from the YouTube site of each channel. The *Sa7i* channel is operated by a group of young comedians who present social satire in their programs.

These leading channels describe their content using broad categories on their YouTube pages. *EyshElly* and *3ala6ayer* are comic channels with a satiric tone. *3ala6ayer* criticized social norms and traditions by mixing real scenes with staged scenes. However, it was forced to shut down in July of 2013 due to political and social pressures. *Al-Temsah* identifies itself as the best, most successful comic channel. The *Al-Temsah* and *La Yekthar* channels are part of the C3 Company, which was founded by young Saudis to stimulate creativity and provide opportunities for talented youth. *Sa7i*, *Aram TV*, and *Reality We Live* have a variety of playlists, but they have the same comic nature with a social reformist tone. *Alaa Wardi*, on the other hand, has two distinct features: it is named after its founder and sole operator, and it specializes in music.

These channels mix humor with social criticism while attempting to remain politically neutral. Although Saudi law does not have any stipulations about the content of social media, the government keeps an eye on any online taboo-breaching content. In 2011, Manal Al-Sharif posted a picture of herself driving a car on YouTube in order to encourage Saudi women to pursue the right to drive. Manal was arrested for several days and her picture was taken down, but the incident attracted global attention, demonstrating the power of YouTube in the kingdom. Even in the face of governmental restriction, many YouTube Pro-Ams in Saudi Arabia have managed for a substantial period to maintain their channels, upload videos regularly, attract a substantial share of YouTube's audience, and attract influential

Channel	Total views	Number of subscribers	Number of videos	Date started	Average views per video
EyshElly	256,219,244	2,317,191	83	Feb. 24, 2011	3,086,979
El-temsah	196,184,240	1,784,682	108	Jun. 5, 2012	1,816,521
La Yekthar	85,324,100	856,607	48	Sep. 13, 2010	1,777,585
3ala6ayer	67,332,398	854,653	57	Sep. 8, 2010	1,181,270
Alaa Wardi	51,543,685	406,519	44	Oct. 2, 2008	1,171,447
Sa7i	314,943,193	1,934,537	390	Jan. 1, 2012	807,547
A Reality We Live	23,770,816	270,110	35	Apr. 12, 2012	679,166
Aram TV	154,776,026	1,107,954	595	Aug. 8, 2010	260,128

Table 1.
Leading Saudi YouTube channels on the date they started in a descending order according to average views per video.

advertisers, such as McDonald's, Pepsi, and Doritos. The next section presents the results of a field study that explores how some of these Pro-Ams define their YouTube business and perceive the opportunities and threats they experience.

5. Method

Using a longitudinal design, the authors sought to interview as much Saudi Pro-Ams as possible over two separate periods of times to see how this practice evolved and survived this strict political environment. We contacted 25 YouTube Pro-Ams in Saudi Arabia in 2013 and 2014 for in-depth interviews. We successfully completed 19 interviews with 18 males and one female using an unstructured questionnaire. The average number of questions asked in each interview was 24 questions.

Because of the lack of a sampling frame, we used the snowball sampling method to reach these Pro-Ams by starting with an acquaintance Pro-Am and asking him for help in contacting additional Pro-Ams. This industry was still unstructured and there was no data available about the number of either the companies or the staff working in these companies. Of the 19 Pro-Ams interviewed, 10 were Saudis and the rest were non-Saudis. We have decided not to identify the companies to keep the anonymity of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted at the work place of an interviewee's respective company. The location of each work place is a rented house with offices and production rooms. There was no gender segregation at these work places, which is not common in the Saudi conservative environment. Workers at these companies were observed communicating by mixing Arabic with English. Some interviewees tended to respond in Arabic and English, even though they had received their education in Saudi Arabia. All interviewees reported that they had no job other than working for a YouTube channel, but some of them originally retained their former jobs until they were able to produce an adequate income from their YouTube business. Four years later, the authors contacted the same respondents for another interview in order to track down how this business model evolved and perhaps took turns. However, only one Pro-Am accepted to participate on strict conditions of anonymity. The other previously interviewed YouTubers expressed their desire not to participate because "it is better to stay out of trouble" or they "have quit this business already." Others just excused themselves without giving apparent reasons. The political climate in Saudi Arabia seems to have changed dramatically from the first wave of interviews to the second wave, as the persecution and detention of activists and scholars are intensifying.

This indifference to participate in this longitudinal study limited the scope of the results. The authors expected that a private media enterprise operating within a state-run media system will be targeted by authorities to be either regulated or controlled. The indifference of most of the interviewees to participate in the second wave of interviews made it hard to examine this expectation empirically. The sole Saudi YouTuber who agreed to a second interview explained that all first-generation Saudi YouTubers have been put under the control of the security apparatus in the kingdom.

6. Results

From a close examination of the responses we recorded and the notes we took in the first wave of interviews, three themes emerged that summarize the phenomenon and the interviewees' perceptions. These themes are the following: the business model, the empowering components, and limitations to empowerment.

6.1 Theme 1: The business model

There were four strategies to securing funding for the interviewees' YouTube channels. Self-financing was the initial source of funding for most interviewees. One Pro-Am said that he had to borrow money from friends to start his project. Many Pro-Ams chose to rely on personal resources to remain independent from the influence of businessmen or major merchants. As a second strategy, a young businessman supported a channel financially in its first year until the channel began to make advertising profits. Advertising was the third and the most important strategy to raise funds. The fourth strategy was to secure funds through sponsorships of programs and underwriting. One sponsoring company repaid all the funds given to a channel in its first year by the young businessman.

Some interviewees turned down other sources of funding, including the refusal of an offer from MBC network to buy their channel and merge it into MBC. In another case, several young investors offered to buy shares of a channel—however, desiring to remain independent, the Pro-Ams turned down the offer. One interviewee mentioned that some politicians offered to sponsor political satiric programs, but he did not want to enter this controversial area.

Funding remained an issue despite the revenues from YouTube advertisements. All interviewed Pro-Ams were full Pros who depended solely on their income from YouTube. One interviewee said, "This is my only job, and at the end of the day, I need to put food on the table." The cost of producing one episode ranged from $3500 to $19,000, with an average of $7700. Multiple ideas as to how to diversify sources of funding have been introduced. Some interviewees have thought of selling gadgets and t-shirts bearing the logo of the channel. Other interviewees have thought of using their talent and investing in their fame to perform as stand-up comedians in commercial theaters. Two interviewees said they thought of opening a bank account under the name of their channel and then making a national call for citizens to deposit donations into the account. They had to drop the idea because of legal complications. In a similar fundraising idea, a musician launched a donation campaign, asking his listeners to fund his songs on YouTube. The campaign was discontinued for a similar legal obstacle.

Despite their struggle with securing funds for their channels, most of the interviewees reported that they were always ready to pay out of the pocket when the income coming from other sources was not enough. One interviewee said that he did not expect any financial gains at the beginning—the main drive for him was to

practice his hobby. Such responses demonstrate that some of the interviewees have kept their amateurish spirit even though what they were doing became a job, not merely a hobby. Their production started to take an organizational structure, emulating the programing of traditional TV stations. For instance, they started to produce talk shows that comment on the coverage of Saudi newspapers and TV broadcasts and dramas that reflect the struggles of the Saudi youth [57]. When asked whether they were willing to follow Yousef's model of taking their programs to a mainstream TV network (also known as crossing over to traditional media), most of the interviewees said they would follow this model with one modification: retain the YouTube version of their program. One interviewee said, "YouTube is like our baby," showing how passionately he was attached to his YouTube experience. Another interviewee identified himself as a "YouTuber." A third interviewee reported turning down the model completely. He explained that they had received an offer from a satellite TV channel, but the revenues they made from YouTube were higher than the offer.

In the second wave of interviews, it was evident that this financial model did not survive the political and economic reality in the kingdom. Some YouTubers were persecuted and jailed, and with his imprisonment, the channel had to freeze. In another instance, one producer bought the shares of all other partners at the UTURN company but could not afford the cost of production and eventually switched gears and became an advertiser rather than a content generator on YouTube. Eventually, this business model could not survive the political and economic context and was replaced with the "independent content creators" as termed by the only interviewee in the second wave of data gathering. This group work disintegrated into individuals working independently by creating simple content, such as social experiments, and making revenue through garnering massive views and sharing the income with YouTube. This model gained popularity after YouTube had changed the policy of its Partner Program (YPP) in January of 2018. According to this policy, "the eligibility requirement for monetization became 4000 hours of watch time within the past 12 months and 1000 subscribers [58]." According to Kaswara Alkhatib, CEO of UTURN, "most of the revenue is from advertising. It comes from brand integration, product placements, and branded content [59]." UTURN is the current market leader with more than 50 channels, 33 million followers, and 102 million monthly views. This company has now partnered with the Emirati media incubator *In5 Media* to transition into being a multi-channel platform and a market leader across the Arab world.

The number of team members that was needed to produce and market one episode before the demise of those YouTube channels ranged from one to 30, with an average of eight crew-members. The monthly episode production of a channel ranged from one to 10 episodes, but the average for each channel was four episodes per month. However, the interviewees appreciated the flexibility of their business model. They were not under the pressure of deadlines or fixed schedules of programming. They set themselves apart from ground and satellite TV stations by appealing mainly to the youth and presenting pure local content. The model allowed them more flexibility for emulating Western formats. Most of the interviewees reported that specific American shows were inspirational to them. They also reported that they had in mind several show hosts, such as George Carlin, Dave Chappelle, Stephen Colbert, and John Stewart, when they were planning their own productions. Some Pro-Ams had also produced Saudi versions of Western rap music. One interviewee said that all their ideas came from other sources as "there are no original ideas under the sun anymore."

6.2 Theme 2: The empowering components

The majority of the interviewees realized at one point that they had a talent, but no public outlet for it. According to what they said, YouTube empowered them to

have public access and exposure. They wanted to "experiment," "work without any filtrations," "stay away from the 'enslaving' work environment of traditional TV stations," and "have no red lines." They have also realized how widespread YouTube use was, as well as the high percentage of Internet connectivity in Saudi Arabia. YouTube provided them with a low-cost, easy-to-use, un-mediated, routine-free, and popular public outlet.

The freedom to think, create, and break away from old formats was an essential component in empowering these YouTube talents. There is no outside authority to "dictate what to write and produce." They wanted to decide their own content and make it relevant to the youth in the Kingdom. Initially, YouTube helped them to express their own views in the format of their choice and the colloquial Saudi they prefer, thus setting them apart from traditional TV. According to one interviewee, i have never watched any [Arabic] TV channel in the past 5 years. i have lived for 29 years in Saudi Arabia and never had a feeling toward the programs or episodes on any channel. What is presented on national TV is the production of an old generation, which does not suit us or portray our real lives.

Most of the interviewees think that their channels have empowered them to change the industry and make people know and think more about the illnesses of their society. One interviewee was confident that their YouTube experiment will determine "the future of television and the industry at large." The interviewees have their own visions about their impact on their Saudi society. According to one Pro-Am, "YouTube helped us shed light on social problems and give people the chance to form opinions and think of solutions." Another Pro-Am thought that their content is entertaining, but it "has a message and makes people think." Some interviewees feel they have become "YouTube celebrities" in society, just like sports and TV stars.

6.3 Theme 3: limitations of empowerment

The Pro-Ams interviewed shared a similar perception of their experimental approach to YouTube. They sought to broadcast their own agenda of topics, thoughts, and convictions without having to follow a particular agenda. Moving into the threshold of professionalism, however, their agenda could not remain independent. One Pro-Am observed that some of their YouTube channels had started to adapt to the demands of the advertisers. He predicted that they were turning into commercial entrepreneurs who are ready to "produce what they are paid to produce." Another Pro-Am said, at the beginning, we tried many things and learned by trial-and-error. With time we learned how the market works and what the audience needs... there were many things that determined what to produce and how to produce it, but the most important factor was the commercial success of the show.

It is not only the market and audience's needs that contributed to setting the interviewees' agenda, but also politics and religion. According to one Pro-Am, "The red lines for us are politics and religion." Most of the Pro-Ams wanted to make sure that they did not aggravate the government or offend any religious figures in their brainstorming sessions. Some interviewees said that they had to remove some of their already uploaded shows because of receiving either an angry feedback from the audience, a notice from the government, or a legal advice from lawyer acquaintances. According to Daoudi [57], the Saudi Ministry of Interior sent a letter to one YouTube channel reminding them that one of their episodes offended Egyptian nationals, to which the Egyptian Consular in the Kingdom has objected. The team operating the channel decided to take the episode down. One Pro-Am adopted the policy of not presenting any content that was critical of the government. In one show, the hard life and low wages of sanitation workers in the Kingdom were portrayed; however, the

producer did not criticize governmental officials. Another Pro-Am had an idea for an episode about animal rights in the Kingdom, but the channel turned down the idea because the topic would not be welcomed by other Saudis.

Some interviewees mentioned that they were under police surveillance, which led them to use caution while talking over the phone. One interviewee thought that "it is normal to be monitored by the government." For those who did not think they were monitored, they assumed they had never aggravated the government nor did anything that would "invite this kind of a surveillance."

The lack of specific regulations or guidelines about operating YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia was a daily challenge for the interviewees. They had to guess what was tolerated and what was frowned upon by the government when writing their scripts. In one instance, the police arrested a camera crew and confiscated their equipment when they were shooting an outdoor scene without having permission from the Ministry of Information. Yet at the same time, YouTubers are not recognized by law as reporters or TV professionals who must seek licensing from the Ministry. Several other interviewees reported similar encounters with the police during their outdoor shoots. Most interviewees stated that it is confusing to be "regulated" without explicit regulations. In other areas, such as the U.S., Pro-Ams are protected by the law. In 2011, a U.S. court ruled that "even though someone might not write for the institutional media, they are entitled to all the protections the constitution grants journalists" [60].

Those who stayed in this business focused on creating entertaining content, especially after the arrest of the team of *Telfaz11*, another Saudi YouTube channel established in 2011, for 10 days in 2017. The interviewee of the second wave of data gathering reported that Ahmed Alshokairy, consultant and presenter at Aram Media House in Saudi Arabia, was under a travel ban for 1 year until it was eventually lifted in 2018.

7. Conclusion

YouTube invites its Pro-Am users to "broadcast themselves," but Pro-Ams, either consciously or unconsciously, broadcast the expectations of their society, advertisers, and government along with "broadcasting themselves." The interviewees provided conflicting reflections on how free and uncensored they felt. Those contradictory perceptions ranged from perceiving "no outside authority dictating what to produce" to being cognizant of "the red lines imposed by both politics and religion." Such inconsistent views might be referred to how those YouTubers were perceived as a threat by the state apparatus. Tackling political and religious issues would bring those Pro-Ams under scrutiny, or even lead to their imprisonment. For those who stayed away from "red lines," the sense of freedom was normally heightened. With the evolving of this phenomenon of independent Saudi YouTube channels and the change in the political leadership in 2015, the grip of the government became tighter and the scope of red lines became wider. According to Human Rights Watch, the number of those detained under investigation for more than 6 months without trial rose from 293 people in May 2014 to 2305 detainees in May 2018 [61].

Some of the citizen YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia have turned into professional ventures, attracting many fans, a significant amount of advertising dollars, and an identifiable amount of governmental scrutiny. These channels established the niche of localism in the TV market. They have gained their popularity through focusing on local topics and using a local dialect in a highly connected society. The staff of these channels started out with the spirit of amateurs, but over time, they have acquired the mentality and approach of professionals. In the initial stages of

their YouTube experience, they desired to present their talents, views, and stories to the public. Eventually, however, they felt driven by the public and "the elite to professionalize" [62] and institutionalize their YouTube productions. In some cases, a 30-member crew was used to produce one episode. The results of the present study show that the average size for producing any content for YouTube was 6 crew members. Previous research also showed the complexity of genres that those Pro-Ams have adopted. More importantly, they had to modify their agenda to accommodate the dictations of the market, the public's taste, and the political regime.

Technology has empowered these Pro-Ams to gain a public platform without having to follow the traditional, routine-shackled path of traditional media. Pro-Ams felt they were empowered to provide knowledge and help their audience to think and form opinions. The liberating power of technology has been limited, however, by the nature of the business model, the Saudi culture, and the security concerns of the regime. This supports previous research that has shown that the potential of "YouTube for fostering civic cultures is significantly impeded by security issues [63]." In the Saudi case of YouTube channels, the lack of regulations limits the empowering quality of the technology. The interviewees had to practice self-censorship, seek unofficial legal advice, and filter or sometimes delete their own shows according to their expectations of the governmental reactions—not to their understanding of the working regulations. Such political and financial pressures resulted in forcing some of those Pro-Ams out of the market and made others switch into the model of single content creators. The first stages on Grönlund's model [30] seem to fit the case of Saudi YouTubers, but the last stage of empowerment on the model is not equally compatible. Those YouTubers created their own niche, but the political environment limited their empowerment.

This limited empowering force of Internet technology in the case of Saudi YouTubers supports the criticism directed toward the theory of technological determinism (TD). According to this theory, technology is either ascribed with omnipotence (hard determinism) to shape society and provide the necessary conditions for social change, or deemed capable of facilitating change (soft determinism) according to other social and cultural factors [64, 65]. This linear cause-effect relationship between technology and social change was critiqued for its simplified formula. According to Murphie and Potts, it is rather an intertwining relationship where "technology does not determine [change] but "operates and gets operated upon in a complex social field" [66]. Both politics and culture suppressed, rather than facilitated, the capability of technology of fostering radical changes in the media landscape of the Kingdom. Instead, the political regime reinvented its control over all local media outlets and redirecting those YouTubers toward specific genres of programming. The results of the present study suggest that the online digital technology in a state-run media system drives the regime to create a controlled environment for the public use of this technology. Instead of creating new venues for creativity and free expression, communication technology alerts power groups to model mass communication through the digital media according to the model of state-run, traditional media.

This study has explored some aspects of the citizen YouTube channels in Saudi Arabia, yet it calls the attention to the important transformations that YouTube, in specific, and digital media, in general, is producing in politically rigid and socially conservative societies. The study also highlights the importance of using different methodologies to examine the legal, aesthetical, organizational, and ethical aspects of this phenomenon and its ramifications.

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