

**The Saudi press and the Internet: How Saudi journalists and media decision makers  
at the Ministry of Culture and Information evaluate censorship in the presence of  
the Internet as a news and information medium**

**Ph. D thesis**

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## Abstract

The main aim of this study is to explore the opinion of Saudi journalists and media decision makers in the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information towards censorship of the national press in the presence of the Internet. To collect the data for this study, qualitative methods were used. The first method was the observation method, directed at two Saudi daily newspapers, '*Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah*'. A four-week observation was conducted of each paper. The second method was a fact-to-face interview with twenty-one Saudi journalists working for the two newspapers. The final method used in order to collect the required data for this study was face-to-face interviews with eleven decision makers at the Ministry of Culture and Information. The findings of this study indicate that censorship over the national press has been eased compared to three years ago, due to the pressure of multiple factors, which have stimulated the relaxation of censorship. Conversely, other factors play a major role in limiting the easing of censorship over the national press. The Saudi national press and the Ministry of Culture and Information are facing different pressures from two contradictory directions: on the one hand there are factors pressing for the easing of censorship and on the other there are factors pressing for strict censorship.



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## **Introduction**

In an era of globalization characterized by tremendous developments in information and communication technologies, it is becoming increasingly difficult for any country to control or monitor the flow of information. The Internet has succeeded in overcoming strict attempts by non-democratic countries to impose controls on news and information. The high level of interactivity characterizing the Internet, coupled with high quality mobile phones with cameras, have enabled individuals and organizations in any country to communicate and convey their local news to the outside world in spite of government censorship.

The events that took place in Iran during and after the presidential elections in July 2009 are an excellent example of the role that Internet websites and mobile phones play in overcoming government censorship. Reporters Without Borders denounced the "strict censorship" practiced by the Iranian government on the national media, including TV channels and electronic websites, banning any reference to speculations of vote rigging and the demand for a re-run of the election by Hossein Mousavi (June 13, 2009). RWB confirmed that the Iranian government had asked the national press to make an early announcement of victory of Ahmadinejad, while the government banned access to the official websites of other candidates who criticized election results and the premature announcement of results. RWB also confirmed that the government expelled foreign reporters and closed foreign newspapers and satellite TV channel offices to prevent coverage of the demonstrations that erupted following the announcement of election results (Reporters Without Borders, 13 June 2009).

Despite the restrictions imposed by the Iranian government on the national and international media, the Internet and mobile phones broke through and sent messages to international newspapers and satellite channels, enabling them to cover the events taking place inside Iran. For instance, Twitter.com covered the demonstrations on Teheran's streets to the outside world in several languages. Twitter is a social networking site that allows users to send short messages, images and videos to subscribers worldwide. Such messages and videos can be transmitted either through the website or in "SMS" form from mobile phones. The Iranian control authorities could not curtail Twitter as its design allows its users several options for receiving and sending messages and videos even without accessing the website. US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton stressed the importance of Twitter's continuation in covering and transmitting events in Iran to the world. Clinton said, "Twitter has been essential in allowing Iranian protesters, especially the young, to remain in touch in the aftermath of last week's disputed presidential election" (*Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 2009). Clinton said that it was a "line of communication open and enabling people to share information, particularly at a time when there [were] not many other sources of information . . . . It is a fundamental right for people to be able to communicate" (*Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 2009).

There are many levels to the conflict between globalization and localization in most societies. In Saudi Arabia, globalization creates a conflict between two clearly defined parties – those in who oppose it and those who favor it. The former consists of conservative and religious groups, along with the some seniors officials in the government, which opposes opening up to outside cultural influences. The other side calls for a greater degree of openness towards the outside world, not just economically but also in terms of culture. This group tends to consist of literate, educated Saudis and some senior officials including King Abdullah who call for reforms and changes. This view is also supported by massive technological developments which are not only considered an important factor pushing towards more openness towards the outside world, but which are also hard to censor and control.

Amid this flurry of conflicts between government censorship and Internet users, this study examines the state of censorship in Saudi Arabia in the presence of the Internet.

It examines the opinions of Saudi journalists towards censorship imposed by the Ministry of Culture and Information on the national press, and to what extent this censorship affects the Saudi press in competing with a news media which enjoys a relatively wider margin of freedom to discuss issues that the national press cannot touch due to censorship. This study also examines the opinions of the decision makers at the Ministry of Culture and Information on the effects of the Ministry's censorship of the national press in the presence of websites which are not subject to this censorship, and it focuses on the different factors which affect news decisions in the national press. In addition, it examines the main factors which pressure the Ministry of Culture and Information to practice strict censorship and how both the Ministry and the press respond to the pressure of these factors.

The study focuses on four overlapping aspects. Firstly, the Saudi national press. Here I examine the role of Internet websites in journalists' news decisions and how published news on news websites affects journalists' decisions. This section also examines the effects of censorship, both "official" and "editorial" on the Saudi press. Moreover, I examine how journalists evaluate the pressure on the national press to follow the same stories as are published online in the presence of censorship, which prohibits the publication of certain types of stories, such as those criticising the government's performance.

The second aspect examined in this study relates to the government. The focus in this section is on the effect of pressure from the government on what news is covered in the national press. This section also examines press-government relations and the effects of the Internet on these, and deals with methods that the government uses in order to affect the performance of the national press.

The third theme centers on the Internet, especially websites that focus on Saudi national and local news. The contradiction between the Ministry of Culture and Information's strict control over the national press and the accessibility of online news outlets which are to some degree uncensored, makes websites such as Sabq, Alweeam and Kabar very popular among Saudis. Alexa "the web information company" which

provides information on web traffic reports that in January 2009 of top sites in Saudi Arabia Sabq becomes the top visited Saudi news website even before *Alriyadh* paper's website, which comes second (Alexa, 2009). These websites report national news of which the national press cannot follow due to the strict censorship practised by the Ministry of Culture and Information. This part examines the effect of online published stories on the Saudi national press to follow stories, which used to be taboo and also on the Ministry to ease its censorship.

The fourth aspect of this study is censorship. This section examines the degree of censorship, and the effects of the presence of the Internet on Ministry decision makers and journalists' news decisions. It also examines whether or not the level of censorship over the national press has changed since King Abdullah assumed power in the Kingdom in 2005. This includes looking at the main reasons for censorship and factors pushing for the relaxation of the censorship. It also deals with the effects of the dissolution of the Supreme Council of the Media in 2003 on the Ministry's censorship.

This study depends on data gathered from a sample of two Saudi daily newspapers, *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah*. Four-week observations were conducted of each newspaper, in addition to face-to-face interviews with editors, reporters and journalists at both newspapers. Face-to-face interviews were also conducted with decision makers at the Ministry of Culture and Information.

From conducting the face-to-face interviews and the observation of the newspapers, this study finds that the Saudi press is going through a transitional stage. This stage is characterized by three main features, which the press has never witnessed since its birth at the beginning of the last century.

First is the ability of the Saudi national press to discuss issues which used to be taboo. Due to the easing of censorship over the national newspapers, they are starting to tackle issues which they used to avoid because of the Ministry's censorship. Since the Ministry eased its censorship, issues such as criticism of the government and religious leaders as well as women's rights have become publishable.

Secondly, Saudi press-government relations are going through a new stage. Close relations between the Saudi government and press have been one of the main characteristics of the Saudi press since its birth. However, in the last three years, there has been a shift in this relationship, which has forced the government to find new ways to influence the national press instead of relying mainly on censorship and punishment for journalists and newspapers.

Thirdly, the presence of the online news websites (free from the Ministry's censorship), places pressure on the national press to adopt new methods of news selection and news-making in order to stay relevant. Also, the presence of news websites which focus on Saudi affairs is forcing the Ministry of Culture and Information to rethink and revise its censorship in order to help the national press to survive in competition with these websites. The popularity of Internet websites as a source of news and information raises fears that the national press might be replaced as the main source of national news. When the national press ignores certain stories while the Internet follows them, the former runs the risk of losing its credibility, reliability and readership.

Despite the remarkable easing of censorship discussed in this study, press freedom in Saudi Arabia is still limited. This study concludes that the government should halt intervention in the national press. However, simply relaxing censorship does not mean that the Saudi press will become free or even partly free. Having a free press requires more than an individual decision by the Ministry of Culture and Information to ease censorship. The existence, continuation and widening of press freedom requires protection against any possible encroachments. Obvious threats to press freedom in Saudi Arabia come from governmental interference. There should be a law guaranteeing press freedom, and protecting press and journalists against interventions of the government and religious leaders. Additionally there should be an independent non-governmental organization to protect press freedom in Saudi Arabia and defend journalists. The existence of such an organization will help guarantee press freedom in the country. In the absence of such a law and such an organization, pressure by the government and religious



leaders on the press will continue, and the relaxed censorship witnessed in the past three years will remain threatened. Press freedom must be treated as a *right* for the national press; a right that no party can curtail.

### **The Importance of the Study:**

This study is designed to examine the opinions of Saudi journalists and decision makers in the Ministry of Culture and Information on censorship imposed by the Ministry over the national press in the face of the Internet. Saudi Arabia is an excellent case study due to the fact that the country has been experiencing a new government since 2005.

The orientation of King Abdullah towards openness gives this study more importance, because it is one of the first studies to examine the impact of the King's reforms on the national press, and whether such reforms include giving the national press more space to discuss issues which used to be taboo before King Abdullah assumed power.

Another factor giving this study added significance is that it is one of the first studies to examine Saudi gatekeepers in the national press. Such an examination provides an understanding of the dynamics of news making and the main factors which affect news decisions made by Saudi gatekeepers.

In addition, the relevance of this study is embodied in the fact that it sheds light on the impact of censorship on the press, which has received scant attention relative to its importance. Through reviewing the literature, it has become evident that there are few studies examining censorship in Saudi Arabia.

### **The Study Objectives:**

I hope to achieve several objectives through this study. The primary aim is to ascertain the opinions of Saudi press journalists around the pressure from the Internet on one hand, and pressure from the Ministry of Culture and Information on the other, on

news decisions made by the Saudi national press. A second objective of the study is to investigate the main factors affecting Saudi gatekeepers' news decisions. This study pays great attention to the effect the Internet has on those decisions.

A further objective of this paper is to ascertain the opinions of media decision makers at the Ministry of Culture and Information on the effects of censorship on the ability of the national press to compete with external news media which are to some degree uncensored.

### **Definition of Terms:**

The term "censorship" refers to official censorship, which is exercised by the Ministry of Culture and Information over the national press.

Easing censorship means that the Ministry of Culture and Information is starting to allow the national newspapers to cover issues and news that the Ministry used to ban.

Self-censorship refers to a journalist's censoring his/her own work out of fear of reprimand from the authority of the Editor-in-Chief, the Ministry of Culture and Information or some other political, religious or social authority.

The Internet is one of the words used frequently in this study. In this study the word Internet refers to Internet websites especially news websites which focus on Saudi national affairs.

Another key word that appears frequently in this study is "news". There are different definitions of news, which mainly define news according to the cultural and ideological concept of each study. However, for the purpose of this study, the term "news" is used loosely to refer to any reporting of recent events, incidents or information by a newspaper or on a news website.

## **Organization of the Study:**

The study is divided into eight chapters: The first chapter is a general background looking at Saudi government, religious leaders, society and culture, and press. The second chapter is a literature review of the study which discusses press freedom, censorship in Saudi Arabia and the Internet in Saudi Arabia. The third chapter is the theoretical framework of the study, which reviews two theories (gatekeeping and globalization). The fourth chapter focuses on research methods and includes the study questions and sample. The fifth chapter is an analysis of the data collected by the observation and interviews at *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah* newspapers. The sixth chapter is an analysis of data collected via interviews with four Saudi gatekeepers and observations of the two papers in order to examine the main factors affecting news decisions in the Saudi national press. The seventh chapter is an analysis of the data collected in interviews with twenty-one Saudi journalists. The eighth chapter is an analysis of interviews with eleven media decision makers in the Ministry of Culture and Information. Finally, the main findings of the study are presented, together with recommendations and a conclusion of the study.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Saudi Arabia: General Background

In order to understand the Saudi press, it is equally important to shed some light on the Saudi government, religious leaders and the society and culture of the Kingdom (see Al-Kahtani, 1999: Barayan, 2002: and Shaikh, 1989). The media system in Saudi Arabia, like those of other countries, is a construct that reflects the country's politics, society and culture. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the effects of the Saudi government on the national press. In order to develop such an argument this chapter is divided in five sections. The first section focuses on the Saudi government and the political system in Saudi Arabia. The second section discusses the role and power of religious leaders which affect the decisions of political leaders as well as press decisions. The third section looks at the main characteristics of Saudi society. The fourth section focuses on the history of the Saudi press. The fifth section reviews the five printing laws which have been issued since the birth of the Saudi press.

#### **Saudi Arabia:**

The population of the Kingdom is estimated at 27.6 million, and its size is 2,150,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Saudi Arabia is well known as the world's largest petroleum exporter. Baki points out that "Saudi Arabia is one of the richest countries in the world and a major economic and political influence" (June 17, 2004). The importance of the country, however, goes well beyond oil production. Saudi Arabia is home to the holiest places in Islam. When the world's Muslims perform their five daily prayers they face the Saudi city of Makkah (Mecca). Also, every Muslim has to visit Makkah at least once in his/her life to perform Hajj. The importance of the country as the land of the holy places means that the Saudi government's decisions affect the lives of millions of Muslims around the

world (Shaikh, 1989). Telhami et al. mention "the key role that Saudi Arabia plays psychologically and symbolically in the lives of Muslims worldwide cannot be underestimated" (November/December 2002). Baki points out that "[Saudi Arabia's] status in the Islamic world is very strong and has also led to an increase in its participation in international relations" (June 17, 2004).

### **The Saudi Government:**

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy; the King is the head of state and head of the Council of Ministers. This political system has been maintained since the founding of the country in 1932, when King Abdelaziz Al Saud announced the birth of his Kingdom. After the establishment of the country, King Abdelaziz was keen to obtain the support of the Saudi tribes and Saudi religious leaders who made him not only a political leader, but a social and religious leader as well. Wilson and Graham point out that "the reliance on Arab tribalism and Islam means that a Saudi king, besides being the head of state, is also viewed as the leader of the tribe, as well as the Imam or religious leader of the Kingdom's faithful" (1994, p. 36). They add, "Arab traditionalism is one of the two roots of the Al Saud's legitimacy. The other is Islam, specifically the Al Saud's vow to protect it and the two holy cities of Makkah and Medina" (Wilson & Graham, 1994, p. 36).

Dr. Najai, a former Deputy Minister of Culture and Information points out, "the mechanism that the king (Abdelaziz) used to unify the country could be described as one which sought to create and maintain an environment in which Islam could operate in all its manifestations for the pleasure of Allah" (1986, p.29). Since the death of King Abdelaziz in 1953, he has been succeeded by five of his sons. Saud Ibn Abdelaziz, Faisal Ibn Abdelaziz, Khalid Ibn Abdelaziz, Fahd Ibn Abdelaziz, and currently Abdullah Ibn Abdelaziz, who has ruled the Kingdom since 2005.

### **Religious Leaders:**

Najai defines the religious leaders (known as Ulema) as a "religious and very conservative group, traditionally conceived of by the government as the guardians of

Islamic orthodoxy in governmental-political decisions" (1982, p.34). The relationship between the house of Al-Saud and the religious leaders goes back to the first Saudi state when Mohammed Ibn Saud "the ruler of Dariya in Najd" welcomed the doctrine of Sheikh Mohammed Ibn Abdel Wahab in 1747 (AlMunajjed, 1997). Since then the religious leaders have played a major role in the government's international and national decisions. King Abdelaziz and his sons after him have given the religious leaders wide authority as a political and social partner. "The ruling traditions of the country may be seen as resting on three pillars: the King, his Council of Ministers and the Ulema" (Najai, 1982, p.37). Wilson and Graham mention that:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia remains a theocracy with little distinction made between religion and politics. The country's constitution is the Sharia, or Islamic law, and the al-Saud take care to couch all political decisions in religious terms (1994, p. 36)

The role of the religious leaders is to approve or disapprove of any acts or decisions of the government, individuals or groups by issuing Fatwas (religious rulings). Najai points out that:

Although Kuran and Sunna together are the obsolete frame of reference for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Fatwa is still highly sought after in cases of doubt as to the major legal enactments of the state in cases of constitutional decisions (1982, p.35)

Al-Kahtani argues that religious pressure is seen as one of the influential factors in news selection in the Saudi national press (1999). Arab Press Freedom Watch (2004) reports that the General Mufti (the highest religious authority in Saudi Arabia) criticized the Saudi press for publishing a photograph of Saudi women participating in the Jeddah Economic Forum. He complained that the women did not cover their faces in accordance with Islamic rules and warned that such a step could be followed by further steps under the pretext of freedom of women, which is geared towards the degeneration of Islamic values. The *Alwatan* and *Okaz* papers have launched campaigns against some religious figures, especially after the 9/11 incidents. This criticism was not accepted by religious leaders and extremists who began to issue Fatwas against the journalists and columnists who criticized the extremists. In addition, the General Mufti in Saudi Arabia has

criticized the press more than once and called for the boycott of *Alwatan* on the grounds that it was insulting Islam (Arab Press Freedom Watch, January 20, 2004).

### **Saudi Society and Culture:**

Shaikh points out that Saudis share four fundamental characteristics: religion, language, basic cultural traits and the importance of family in the social structure (1989). To Saudis, Islam is not only a religion, but also plays a significant role in their daily life. Shaikh agrees that Saudis not only believe in Islam, but they are also controlled by religious norms and principles (1989, p.5). Therefore, because of this overlap it is hard to segregate religious and social factors (Shaikh, 1989). "Islam plays a central role in defining the culture, and acts as a major force in determining the social norms, patterns, traditions, obligations, privileges and practices of society" (Al-Saggaf, 2004, p.1).

The family also plays a dominant role in the life of Saudis. Shaikh points out that "the family is the basic social unit; it is viewed as the centre of all loyalty, obligations, and statures of its members" (1989, p.5). Najai mentions that Saudi society is dominated not only by Islamic culture, but also by the prevalent traditions of the family (1982). He adds that although the family is less structured than Islamic culture, it is equally powerful and family members are expected to follow family rules, which might affect them financially, physically and socially. Al-Saggaf points out that:

A Muslim is expected to keep contact with his "Arhaam", people related to one through blood bonds all the time by visiting them often and offering them gifts and money if they are needed, and by being compassionate to them and showing them cheerfulness and respect that they deserve (2004, p21).

Another feature of Saudi society is gender segregation, which does not allow women to mix with men unrelated to them. Gender segregation applies to many different aspects of the daily life of Saudis. Al-Saggaf points out that segregation of the sexes profoundly influences every aspect of public and social life in Saudi Arabia (2004, p.2).

For example, women work in schools, banks and shopping malls which are strictly women only and they do not mix with men. "The practice of segregation and confining women to their own company is an institutional mechanism designed to regulate women", to protect their chastity and to "prevent other men from encroaching on the male honour of the family" (Al Munajjed, 1997, p.8 and p.34).

One of the most important features of Saudi society is the domination of the male over the female. Shaikh points out that traditionally and culturally, the male in Saudi society has authority over the female in the family (1989, p.6). The dynamics of male domination over females is not limited to male authority in the family, but encompasses almost all aspects of life. For example, no woman can travel abroad without a man's permission. Doumato points out that in Saudi families, older males are at the top of the hierarchy and women are at the bottom (2000). She adds that:

Contemporary restrictions on women and the gender ideologies behind them are not merely the legacy of interpreters of religion and the daily practice they inspired. They are fully compatible with the particular tribal-Najdi culture that dominates in Saudi Arabia: this continuity in gender ideology is reinforced by the fusion of Wahhabi Islam with the values of family, honor, and patriarchy that stem from the country's tribal legacy (Doumato, 2000, p.227).

In media level, Mellor points out that Saudi society "places a number of restrictions on the flow of publications and cultural products into the country: kisses and alcoholic drinks, for example, may not be shown" (2005, p. 8). The four Saudi channels (First, Second, Sports and News) do not show any sexual scenes, naked or semi-naked woman or any scenes including kisses, nor do they show any programmes contradicting Islam or discussing ideas from other religions. Social factors also play a role in news selection among Saudi journalists. For example, tribalism plays a significant role in Saudi society and this in turn affects the press. Al Shebeili (2000) points out that newspapers normally deal with Bedouin family origins and tribes with great caution, to avoid any possible conflicts between the paper and tribal groups.



## **Historical Challenges and Conflicts:**

Aarts and Nonneman have noted that “combining the roles of the world’s ‘swing’ oil producer, the guardian of the holiest places of Islam, and a crucial ally of the West in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia has acquired a high international profile which inevitably involves tensions” (2005, p. 1). Halliday says:

From the outside come images of the desert, of incarnate wealth, of unparalleled repression, and from the inside come from the often self-righteous and declamatory products of various officials ministers and diwans of disinformation, all under the aegis, and on the payroll, of a state that allows no resident independent foreign correspondents and where the press itself remains controlled to a fine degree (Ménoret, 2005, p. xi).

Saudi Arabia has faced serious political, religious and social challenges which affect the practice of journalism in the country. The country has passed through several stages since its birth that have contributed to making it a much misunderstood country. Halliday argues that “No country in the world has been the subject of such misrepresentation and mystification as Saudi Arabia” (Ménoret, 2005, p. xi). In order to understand journalism in Saudi Arabia it is important to discuss some of the challenges and turning points in the country’s history.

One of the most important turning points in Saudi Arabian history was the discovery of oil in the country. In 1933 the Saudi government signed a contract with an American company called Casocal, allowing it to prospect for oil in on Saudi territory. After five years of searching without success, the company finally struck oil in Dammam in 1938 (Cordesman, 2003). In May 1939, the first Saudi oil tanker left the country. However, the economic revolution did not occur until the 1960s, when oil prices rose sharply and became the principle driving force of the economy and almost the only source of growth (Ménoret, 2005, p. 139). Miller points out that “The colossal discoveries of the 1950s and 1960s at Khursaniyah, Safaniya, and the Ghawar complex would dwarf production figures of the earlier years and add global significance to Arabian oil” (1980, p. xiii). He adds:

Far more significant during these early years was the extent to which Saudi Arabian oil had come to shape American perceptions and policies toward the entire Middle East. Oil was only part of the increasing national stake in the area, yet it quickly became an important element in the broadening concept of national security which dominated Washington's view of the world in the postwar years (p. xiii).

In the 1970s, Saudi Arabia became the world's leading petroleum exporter. Simmons points out that "while Saudi Arabia became an oil producer in the late 1930s, the kingdom's rapid emergence as a global energy and economic power took place when U.S. oil production suddenly peaked in 1970" (2005, p.6). Montague (2007) mentions that Saudi Arabia quickly began to reap the economic benefits of oil price increases, as well as enjoying the increased international stature its oil resources provided (p. 27). Simmons points out that "By the beginning of 1970, less than 40 years after its founding, Saudi Arabia was suddenly thrust into assuming a major role in economic activities and political events that affected the entire world" (2005, p.2). "Of all the many nations that emerged into the harsh light of history and modernity during the twentieth century, none moved so rapidly from obscurity to glaring prominence as Saudi Arabia" (Simmons, 2005, p.1).

The massive revenues from oil and the ensuing wealth of the nation also affected the Saudi national press. Al Shebeili (2000) argues that due to the high revenues, the government became keen and able to help the national media. Rugh points out that the oil-producing Arab states have acquired some of the most modern equipment and some of the best personnel in the area (2004, p. 14). He argues that the ability of Saudi Arabia and UAE to afford to import foreign skilled labor retarded the training of indigenous journalists, helping the press in those countries to develop rapidly (2004, p. 78).

In 1949, the Saudi government established its first radio station. When radio arrived, there was great opposition to it. Religious leaders tried to press King Abdelaziz to abolish the service, which the religious establishment considered contradictory to Islamic teachings (Al Shebeili, 2000). However, they were not successful; the King insisted on providing a service in Saudi Arabia, while not forcing people to own radios.

The religious Mufti issued a Fatwa prohibiting the ownership of radios. Despite religious objections, radio became part of the daily lives of most people. However, for political, religious and cultural reasons the government blocked foreign radio stations as they felt that these would challenge the traditions of Saudi society and its government, while the local radio stations broadcast only what was in line with Islamic culture and government policy.

Another challenge considered one of the most important factors affecting the Saudi national media in general and Saudi press in particular was the conflict between Saudi government and the Egyptian leader in the 50s and 60s Gamal Abdul Nasser. Boyd (1982) argues that Saudi Arabia's international relations are an important key to understanding the development of the Saudi national media. Hebeeb argues that the Saudi-Egyptian conflict over Yemen is an excellent example of the role of the government foreign relations in shaping the Saudi national media (1985). He points out that the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Egypt was not only over Yemen. He adds that "The antagonism began when President Nasser of Egypt employed a propaganda war against all of the monarchical regimes in the Arab world. The Egyptian radio of the Arab Voice was the most dominant information medium of the region, a medium which mobilized the Arab audience and spread the ideology of the republican system in Egypt" (1985, p. 138). Al Shebeili (2000) points out that the conflict with Nasser made the Saudi government realize the importance of having a strong national media. He adds that government had the desire to develop a strong national press to attract Saudi readers and use the press against rival political forces at that time, particularly the secular Arab nationalist regime of Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser. The government was keen to develop the national press in order to counter such ideological threats and their possible negative effects on public relations at the height of Nasser's prominence in the Arab world.

"In response to Nasser's attack, Faisal reduced the effects of Nasser's claims at the domestic level by launching a ten-point social plan to lead the country toward modernization - introducing girls' education, the expansion of use of radio and interdicting a television system, as well as initiating a pro-Islamic

policy to develop an alliance composed of Muslim countries (Hebeeb, 1985, p.142).

One of the most important reforms that the Saudi government took in response to the conflict, as Al Shebeili points out, is the establishment of The Ministry of Culture and Information in 1963. Moreover, in the past, every newspapers and magazines in the country were pre-censored. This means that newspapers and magazines used to send a copy of the paper to the Censorship Department which determined what could and could not be published. However, this Act was cancelled in 1960 when King Faisal declared that pre-release censorship would be insufficient and would harm readership of the national press (Al Shebeili, 2000). Therefore, the responsibility of the Editor in Chief became the pre-control, and the Censorship Department in the Ministry of Culture and Information has been devoted to censoring newspapers post release – a development considered a major turning point in the history of the Saudi press (Al Shebeili, 2000).

Hebeeb mentions that King Faisal realized that in order for the kingdom to get its message and ideology across to its own people and the Arab world at large, the country had to have influential and developed media broadcasting worthwhile content (1985, p.50). Al Shebeili (2000) points out that national television was introduced two years after the establishment of the Ministry of Culture and Information, as a medium to reach the public. However, social and religious opposition was witnessed during the introduction of the television service in the Kingdom. Rugh (2004) mentions that the Saudi government did not set up a television service until 1965, delayed by social resistance to such a service. He adds that “conservative elements strongly resisted introduction of the new medium altogether, and the government hesitated to push because of unpredictable social consequences” (2004, p. 192).

Al-Shebili (2002) mentions that demonstrations took place in several cities across Saudi Arabia against the television service in the Kingdom. Religious and conservative groups tried to pressure King Faisal into rescinding the establishment of the first Saudi television channel, but the King insisted upon the availability of television in the Kingdom as “a substitute for public cinemas (which were and still are banned)” (Rugh,

2004, p. 192). Kamalipour and Mowlana argue that “despite the strong opposition of religious leaders, television continues to be a very popular medium of communication” (1994, p. 251). After a few years of social and religious opposition to TV, it became part of daily life for most Saudis. The objections however continue to be raised towards every new mass medium because religious and conservative societies consider them a threat to the unity of the culture. However, the acceptance of television as a new medium does not necessarily mean the acceptance of the content thereof. The television is owned by the government, and imposes strict control on the content of TV programs. The four Saudi channels (First, Second, Sports and News) do not display any sexual scenes, naked or semi-naked woman or any scenes including kisses. Also, it doesn't display any program contradicting with Islam or discussing any ideas from other religions. In addition, no program is allowed to criticize the government or any of its institutions.

One of the turning points not only in Saudi media but also in the Saudi Arabian history is the siege of Mecca. On November 20, 1979 Juhaiman al Uteybi led 225 of gunmen to attack and takeover the Grand Mosque in Mecca (the holiest place in Islam). Yaroslav Trofimov in his book *The siege of Mecca*: “Armed with rifles that they had smuggled inside coffins, these men came from more than a dozen countries, launching the first operation of global jihad in modern times” (2007). Quandt mentions that “The Mecca affair was largely the work of a small band of religious zealots, coupled with a few leaders who had tribal and personal reasons for opposing the House of Saud” (1981, p. 93). Trofimov points out that Juhaiman and his followers believed that the “Saudi royal family had become a servant of American infidels and sought a return to the glory of uncompromising Islam” (2007, p. 93). Globalsecurity.org (a leading source of background information and developing news stories in the fields of defense) expands:

“Juhaiman said that his justification was that the Al Saud had lost its legitimacy through corruption, ostentation, and mindless imitation of the West--virtually an echo of his grandfather's charge in 1921 against Abd al Aziz. Juhaiman's accusations against the Saudi monarchy closely resembled Ayatollah Ruhollah Musaui, Khomeini's diatribes against the shah.”

Quandt mentions that the Saudi government sought the support of the Ulama (religious scholars) in order to use force to break the siege. He adds that "The Ulama agreed but set conditions that would limit damage to the mosque and would minimize casualties, especially among the many hostages being held" (1981, p. 94). After two weeks of siege, the military effort succeeded, but left 255 killed and 560 injured (Trofimov, 2007). Wright points out that after the attack, the Saudi government implemented stricter enforcement of Islamic principles (2001, p.151).

With the Mecca uprising of 1979 such discussions came to a halt. Saudi Arabia arrived in the 1980s with a more complex society, eager to enjoy the fruits of advancement on all social and economic levels. At the same time there was a determination to preserve the country's religious and social traditions. This balance between the two has been difficult to maintain, especially with regards to women's professional space (Hamdan, 2005, p.43).

Quandt argues that "Greater deference was paid to conservative social strictures, and the new Five-Year Plan was designed to emphasize social investments rather than new massive construction projects" (1981, p. 96). Al Kheraigi (1992) argues that Mecca siege affected not only the government's national security policy but also media policy. Hamdan mentions that "a year before the siege, newspapers and magazines were publishing articles written by both men and women discussing women's rights to participate in public life. Issues such as women's right to drive, where women could and should work, and the types of education appropriate for women were all hot topics" (2005, p. 44). However, after the siege not only women's freedom was affected but also many other aspects of life (Hamdan, 2005).

As a response to Mecca siege, in 1982, the government announced the establishment of the Higher Council of Media under the Ministry of Interior (Al Kheraigi, 1992). Al-Shebili (2002) points out that the Council was established to lay out information on policies pertaining to Islamic law and also to follow up the execution of media policies. Another responsibility of the council, which made it one of the tools of censorship was to supervise the content of radio, television, books, magazine, newspapers, films, recorded materials and any and all materials related to government or the private sector, inside and outside the county (Hebeeb, 1985, p. 53). Hebeeb argues

that the Council is composed of conservative and progressive members. Hebeeb mentions that Ulama approved of the new media policies, and that some of them shared in process of defining these policies by serving as members of the council (1985 p. 53)

Another turning point in the Kingdom's history was Gulf War I. After the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq on 2 August 1990, American troops along with other nations who joined the coalition in its mission to liberate Kuwaiti deployed to Saudi Arabia. Such war created a conflict among Saudis for two main reasons. First, the war cost the Saudi government more than US\$60 billion. Second, the demands of the religious zealots in Mecca siege rose again, accusing the government of becoming a servant of American interests in the region. Montague argues that "The Saudi royal family, facing its own fundamentalist Islamic population, had been under considerable pressure from its public for its increasingly close relationship with the United States" (2007, p.34). Such demands led to a series of terrorist attacks inside the Kingdom in the 1990s and contributed to the establishment of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in 2003. Cordesman mentions that such tensions "led to a number of low-level incidents, and then to two major terrorist attacks: the bombing of the Saudi National Guard Training Centre in Riyadh on November 13, 1995, and the bombing of the U. S. Air Bar-racks at Al-Khobar on June 25, 1996" (2003, p. 42)

In terms of the media, Gause (2002) mentions that the first Gulf War in 1990-1991 opened a small window of freedom in general and for press freedom in particular in Saudi Arabia. He adds that the Saudi government "is more concerned about its own public opinion than it has been in the past, and it has allowed the Saudi press more freedom in recent years than at any time in the past" (2002, p. 42). Rugh argues that "in the late 1990s, the Saudi government relaxed restrictions on the press somewhat and it promulgated a new press law" (2004, p. 67). He adds that "observers concluded that the royal family decided that a more liberal press was in their interest, in light of rapidly expanding global information from satellite television and the Internet" (2004, p. 67). He points out that the Saudi press used to avoid publishing any criticism of Islam, the royal family or the government, but that this trend has changed since 1990, when the

government started to give the national press the right to criticize the government and any internal policy adopted by the government, through publishing articles or caricatures.

With the appearance of satellite channels in 1991, there was a great opposition from religious and conservative groups in Saudi Arabia. The religious groups fought their case by issuing *Fatwas* (religious rulings) prohibiting satellite dish ownership and watching non-Saudi channels. The reason for this opposition is the perceived threat to Islamic principles and the some peoples' fear of adopting foreign habits which might conflict with the dominant Arabic and Islamic culture in the country. Religious and conservative groups persuaded King Fahad, who was ruling the country at the time, to issue a law prohibiting the sale and purchase of satellite dishes. At this point, the Saudi government teamed up with religious groups, because they thought satellite channels were not only a religious and cultural danger, but also a political threat.

International channels are considered a threat to the national media owned by the Saudi government. Radio and television channels in the country are owned by the government and most newspapers and magazines are owned by the private sector but loyal to the government. The presence of foreign channels could be seen by the Saudis means that the government has lost its domination of information. For decades, Saudis had been watching, reading and listening to one type of "loyalist media". The Saudi media represents the government's voice rather than that of the people, and those media were the only sources of news available to the Saudi public before the arrival of satellite channels.

Despite the alliance between the government and the religious authorities this time, satellite dishes spread throughout Saudi Arabia. Even though the Saudi government does not permit the ownership of satellite dishes, this ban has become obsolete and unenforceable. Satellite dishes have spread all over the kingdom and become an easily affordable, high quality part of the average Saudi household's furniture. Various local factories started producing satellite dishes and selling them on the black market, taking advantage of the luxurious life-style that most Saudis enjoy which allowed them to buy these dishes even at inflated prices. In 1999 the number of satellite dishes in Saudi Arabia was estimated at over one million (Khazen, 1999). Sakr points out that in the Gulf region,



“contrasts in government responses to satellite television were belied by the uniformly high rate of popular access” (2001, p 20).

Although the Saudi government had dealt with many challenges and conflicts in its history, the September 11 attacks were another major turning point in the country’s history. Cordesman mentions that the al Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which involved fifteen Saudis out of nineteen direct participants, brought Saudi-U.S. tensions to the point of crisis (2003, p. 43). Aarts and Nonneman (2005) argue that “after 9/11 Saudi Arabia became seen in some quarters not so much as a victim but as a cause of the problem”. They add:

In the aftermath of ‘September 11’ much comment was directed at the alleged clash between Islam and the West. As a long-time ally of the United States and a figurehead of Islamic politics, Saudi Arabia was caught in the middle. Because fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were of Saudi origin, and with accusations about Saudi co-responsibility for the direction which radicalised Islam had taken, the royal family was placed in the awkward situation of being called to account for the behaviour of a few Saudi citizens who were in fact simultaneously taking aim at the Al Sa‘ud themselves.

Not only Saudi-American relations were affected by the September 11 attacks, but also the image of the country globally. Linking al Qaeda attacks to Saudi Arabia or Islam is a complete misunderstanding of the event. Ménoret argues that “to see the Saudi kingdom as the real power behind 9/11 because of the Islam professed there, is to operate more as an inquisitor than a researcher; it is to name a guilty part, instead of seeking an explanation for what happened” (2005, p.3). In a matter of fact, since the 1990s Saudi Arabia has suffered from al Qaeda attacks more than any country in the world. The historical conflict between Bin Laden and the Saudi government which led to a several terrorist attacks since the 90s till the present time including a suicide bombing by a militant on the security chief, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef in August 2009. Ménoret argues that accusing Saudi Arabia of funding and supporting terrorism is the main reason behind the misunderstanding of the country and its role globally and regionally.

After 9/11 and with huge pressures nationally and internationally, the Saudi government dealt with these challenges with flexibility and willingness to make massive social, economic and political changes. Cordesman points out that “while this need for

change has been broadly recognized by the senior members of the royal family, Saudi technocrats, and Saudi intellectuals, it will not come easily and will involve massive investment and substantial risks" (2003, p. 3). Walsh mentions that "Al Saud family has demonstrated new levels of vigilance and self-scrutiny and some recognition of the serious economic and social problems that pervade every level of Saudi society. This may be the start of a period unprecedented in Saudi history" (2003, p8)

Presently, Saudi Arabia is experiencing new political leadership. After King Abdullah Ibn Abdelaziz assumed leadership of the Kingdom in August 2005, he promised rapid and substantial reforms and greater openness. Indeed, he had been leading the reform effort since 1995, when King Fahd suffered a heart attack and could no longer perform his full duties as King. King Abdullah supports openness on many different levels. Even according to Western press outlets, "The King has embraced the spirit of *infatih*, or openness that is sweeping Saudi society" (The *Washington Times*, October 10, 2007).

For example, in 2004 King Abdullah established the King Abdelaziz Centre for National Dialogue, which allows Saudi citizens to discuss subjects previously taboo. One of the purposes of founding this centre is to enlarge the participation of various members of society in order to help achieve justice, equality, and respect for different points of view (see <http://www.kacnd.org/>).

In 2009, King Abdullah made major changes to the Saudi government, which included the dismissal of the chief of the religious police and a cleric who condoned killing the owners of TV networks that broadcast 'immoral' content (Abu-Nasr, February 14, 2009). However, the biggest change that the King has made in the government was the appointment of a woman, Noura al-Fayez, as Deputy Minister of Education - the first woman ever in Saudi history to be appointed as a Deputy Minister. Jamal Khashoggi, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Alwatan* daily, comments on King Abdullah's changes thus: "The people now in charge are not being ordered to implement reform; they believe in reform" (Abu-Nasr, February 14, 2009).

## **The Saudi Press:**

The Saudi press has gone through several stages since its inception. Before the unification of the Kingdom, some parts of the country were under the control of the Ottoman Empire. At that time there were already newspapers in the Hijaz, the Western region of Saudi Arabia. These included "*Hijaz*" and "*Shams Al Haqiqa*" ("The Sun of Truth") in Makkah and "*Al Eslah*" in Jeddah. In the early days of the Kingdom, the nascent Saudi government was keen to establish national Saudi newspapers to replace the ones that had existed under the Ottomans. Although the history of printed media in the country goes back to the year 1908, when the weekly paper *Hijaz* was first published, it was not until the 1950s that the first Saudi dailies were launched in their modern formats (Alshamikh, 1981).

Although the Saudi press, from its birth until now, has passed through several different stages in terms of practice and regulation, the Saudi government has always played a major role in issuing printing laws and influencing content (Al Shebeili, 2000). The history of the Saudi press can be divided into two major stages; the "individual press" from 1924 to 1964, and the "institutional press" which has dominated from 1964 to the present time. Rugh points out that newspapers in the first stage "were originally a family enterprise, published not so much out of financial considerations but as a symbol of family pride" (2004, p. 76). He adds, "today the press is largely a business, more market-driven" (Rugh, 2004, p. 76). The two stages of the Saudi press are discussed in depth below.

### **A) The Individual Press:**

This stage lasted from 1924 to 1964, during which time around forty publications were established, most of them owned by individuals or families. In 1924, *Umm Al Qura* was the first official newspaper in Saudi Arabia, which only published the state's decrees and news about the government. "In Jidda and Makkah, in the Western (Hijaz) region of Saudi Arabia, newspapers such as *al-Bilad* and *al-Madina* were flourishing as early as the

1930s, and the newspapers *Okaz* and *al-Nadwa* were appearing there by 1960” (Rugh, 2004, p. 67). Al Shebeili (2000) points out that the newspapers and magazines during this period were characterized by a poor quality of news and analysis, and that they lacked clear agendas and journalistic standards. He adds that the news stories the press used to cover mainly focused on the activities of the King and of government officials. Al Shebeili (2000), Abbas (1971) and Alshamikh (1981) mention that only seven publications of that era have survived up until now.

1. *Umm Al-Qura* paper, founded in 1924, eight years before the unification of the Kingdom. Considered an official gazette where all government decrees, resolutions, regulations and announcements are published. The paper is still the official paper of the government to this day, and is now issued by the Ministry of Culture and Information.
2. *Sout Al-Hijaz* paper, established by Saudi writer Mohammed Nasef in Makkah in the year 1932. Many Saudi writers were involved in the running of this paper. Printing of the paper stopped during the Second World War and later resumed under the new name of *al-Bilad*. It is considered to be the first daily newspaper and the first that used photographs and opened branches away from its head office. *Al-Bilad* remains in circulation and is now published by the al-Bilad Press and Publication Foundation.
3. *Al-Madina* paper launched by writer Othman Hafiz at Madina in 1937. In the beginning it was established as a weekly publication, it was suspended during World War II and later re-established as a daily paper. It is now published by the Al Madina Press Foundation in Jeddah.
4. *Al-Yamama* magazine, founded by the famous Saudi intellectual Hamad Al Jaser was the first publication in the city of Riyadh to break the monopoly of publications based in the Hijaz region. It was first issued in 1953 under the name *Alriyadh*, but this was later changed to *Al-Yamama*. It is now published by the Al-Yamama Press Foundation.

5. *Al-Nadwa* paper, founded by the writer Ahmed Al Subaye in 1958 in Makkah. In the beginning it started as a weekly paper, it converted later to a daily newspaper and is now published by the Makkah Printing and Information Establishment.
6. *Al Jazirah* paper, established by the writer and poet Abdullah Ibn Khamis in the city of Riyadh in 1960 began as a monthly paper and later became a daily. It is now published by the Al Jazirah Printing and Publication Establishment in Riyadh.
7. *Okaz* paper, launched by Ahmed Al Attar in 1960 in Jeddah was originally a weekly paper, but became a daily paper after two years. It is currently published by the Okaz Establishment for Press and Publication.

Al Shebeili (2000) summarized the main characteristics of the individual press stage as follows:

1. Despite meagre financial capabilities and a lack of professional journalists, the press during the individual-owned press period performed well in handling and discussing the prevailing local issues at that time with objectivity, courage and without fear of the authorities.
2. The individual newspapers were owned by writers, intellectuals and poets who influenced the writing style of the press at that time. The press at that stage was characterized by a literary style based on descriptive language and rhyming sentences rather than journalistic wording. Most stories' headlines were derived from Arabic poetry and proverbs and newspaper items were devoted to literary topics rather than news stories and political analysis. The papers lacked professional journalists, particularly for news, for which they relied on stories transmitted by news agencies.
3. The individually owned newspapers endured difficult financial conditions despite government subsidies, and failed to develop and achieve significant progress in terms of news and editorial production. Therefore the government opted to dissolve the individually owned newspapers and issue new regulations for the institutional press in 1964.

## **B) The Institutional Press:**

The Institutional Press Directive was issued in the year 1964, voiding individual ownership of newspapers and paving the way for established press organizations. Al Shebeili (2000) attributes this decision to four major factors:

1. A scarcity of financial resources for individual newspapers due to inadequate revenues generated from advertisements and distribution.
2. Most newspapers were owned by non-professional individuals who along with the Editors-in-Chief steered their papers in a highly personal manner and were not guided by journalism standards in writing and reporting.
3. The establishment of the Ministry of Culture and Information and the appointment of Jamil Al Hejailan in 1963 as the first Saudi Minister of Culture and Information was a turning point in the history of the press in the Kingdom. Al Hejailan had been enthusiastic and devoted to developing the press and converting it to an institutional structure.

The new Directive provided for the cancellation of all previous individual press licences and the establishment of a more institutionalized press system. The Directive focused on ownership, management and editing matters. Through this framework the Ministry of Culture and Information granted exclusive press and publication licences to only nine companies. The Ministry also began to provide annual subsidies to the nine establishments and granted each paper a plot of land to establish its premises. The Ministry also rendered other kinds of support such as subsidized printing presses and paper, and exemption from customs duties. There was also indirect government support rendered to the daily papers through the publication of government advertisements with high fees and the purchase of a remarkable number of newspapers for distribution (free of charge) to government employees.

Licences were granted only to the following nine organizations:

1. Makkah Establishment for Printing and Information. Founded in 1964, based in Makkah and publisher of *Al-Nadwa* newspaper.

2. Al Madina Press Establishment: set up in Jeddah in 1964 after the issuance of the press Directive. Publisher of *Al-Madina* daily newspaper.
3. Islamic Dawa Establishment: sponsored and promoted by Shaikh Mohammed Al Shaikh, the Mufti of the Kingdom at that time. This organization is concerned with Islamic affairs and publishes the weekly *Dawa* magazine.
4. Al-Yamama Press Establishment: founded in the capital city of Riyadh in 1964. Publisher of the weekly *Al-Yamama* magazine and *Alriyadh* daily newspaper as well as the English-language *Alriyadh* daily.
5. Okaz Organization for Press and Publication: Established in Jeddah in 1965. Publisher of *Okaz* daily newspaper and the English-language *Saudi Gazette*. Okaz was the first Saudi publisher of a sports magazine, *Al Nadi*.
6. Al Jazirah Press, Printing and Publication Establishment: Founded in 1964 in Riyadh. Publisher of *Al Jazirah* daily paper.
7. Al-Bilad Press and Publication Establishment: Established in Jeddah in 1964. Publisher of *Al-Bilad* daily newspaper and the weekly *Aqra'a* magazine.
8. Dar Al-Yawm Press and Publication Establishment. Set up in Dammam, in the eastern region of the Kingdom, in 1965. Publisher of *Al-Yawm* daily paper.
9. Assir Press and Publication Establishment: Licensed in the year 1978 but its establishment was delayed, due to financial reasons, until 1998. Its foundation stone was laid by King Abdullah in the city of Abha (in the south of the Kingdom). It started publishing *Alwatan* paper in the year 2000.

### **Newspapers Operating outside of the Institutional Press System:**

Despite the fact that the Institutional Press Directive restricted licences to the above-mentioned nine organizations, there are other newspapers and magazines operating, including some issued by government bodies and influential individuals who can obtain exemptions in order to establish press organizations. The most prominent is the Saudi Research and Marketing Group. This group was founded in Jeddah in 1972 and launched its first publication, the *Arab News* daily, in 1975 as the first English-language daily in Saudi Arabia. Then in 1978 the Group launched *Al Sharq Al Awsat* newspaper from London and printed simultaneously in three cities in the Kingdom. Later it

published the daily *Aleqtisadiah* and *Al Riyadiah* as well as the weekly magazines *Al Majalah* and *Seyidati*.

In 1999 the Ministry of Culture and Information allowed foreign newspapers and newspapers owned by Saudis and licensed outside the Kingdom to be printed in the Kingdom. *Alhyat*, based in Beirut – and owned by Prince Khaled Ibn Sultan – is allowed to be printed inside the Kingdom.

### **Printing Laws:**

The Saudi government has issued five printing laws, the first in 1929 and the most recent in 2000. The first printing law was sanctioned by the Shoura (consultative) Council. Al Shebeili (2000) points out that the law was derived from the Ottoman publication law applied in the Hijaz area before unification of the Kingdom. He adds that the Saudi printing law copied the Ottoman law, merely inserting slight amendments in the wording of some articles, without adding any new items.

This law was enforced for ten years before it was replaced by the second printing law, issued in 1940. The second law was more detailed and elaborate than the first (Alshamikh, 1981). It consisted of 62 articles, while the first contained only 36. Alshamikh points out that the most notable article in the second printing law was the attribution of responsibility for articles in part directly to the writer, with the Editor-in-Chief of the publication bearing the other half. However, this article was cancelled by further printing laws which put the complete responsibility for any materials published in the newspaper on the respective Editor-in-Chief. The second printing law survived for twenty years. In 1953, the General Directorate for Broadcasting, Press and Publication was established, which became the Ministry of Culture and Information in 1963.

The third printing law was issued in the year 1958 in 57 articles and contained no marked differences from the previous law, except the clear concentration and enhancement of the role of General Directorate for Broadcasting, Press and Publication as a sole reference for information and press activity in the Kingdom (Al Shebeili, 2000). Six years later, in 1964, the Institutional Press Directive was issued. It focused on



newspaper ownership, cancelled individual press licences and vested the right of licensing press organizations in the Ministry of Information. This Directive was not concerned with publication and editing matters, which remained controlled by the third printing law of 1958 (Abbas, 1971).

In 1982, the fourth printing law was issued, in 46 articles with some notable amendments:

- (1) Confirmation of freedom of expression within Islamic law and the State constitution.
- (2) Elimination of the prior restraints and censorship imposed on newspapers before printing, (previously, newspapers used to send a draft copy of the paper to the General Directorate for Broadcasting, Press and Publication for approval).
- (3) Attribution of prime responsibility for any material published in each newspaper to the respective Editor-in-Chief.

The fourth law specified seven prohibited topics that the newspapers should not cover:

1. Anything contradicting Islamic rules and general norms.
2. All matters not conforming to State security and its general fundamentals.
3. All confidential information, unless prior consent is obtained from the relevant authority.
4. Reports on and information connected with the Saudi armed forces.
5. Laws, regulations, treaties, agreements or other official statements prior to their announcement by the government.
6. Anything deemed detrimental to heads of States or diplomatic missions in the Kingdom or that may otherwise harm the relations of Saudi Arabia with friendly countries.
7. Any defamation or calumny against individuals.

In 2000 the fifth printing law, which is presently in force, was issued. This law comprises 49 articles (for a complete version of the law see the Appendix). Only 11 articles are devoted to the national press, while others are concerned with general terms for organizing the printing of books, folders and foreign publications. The printing law

allows for a journalists' association to be set up and for foreign newspapers to be printed in the Kingdom.

For the purposes of this study, nine articles of the fifth printing law are relevant:

**Article Three:**

Of the objects of printed materials shall be the call to Islam, good moral standards, guidance to all that is good and right, and the dissemination of culture and knowledge.

**Article Eight:**

Freedom of expression is guaranteed through all means of publication within the provisions of Shari'ah [Islamic Law] and law.

**Article Nine:**

For approval, the printed material shall observe the following:

- (1) Not be in violation of the provisions of Shari'ah.
- (2) Not jeopardize the country's security or its public order or serve foreign interests in conflict with the national interest.
- (3) Not lead to inciting feuds and spreading dissent among citizens.
- (4) Not lead to encroachment on a person's dignity and freedom or to their extortion or defaming them or their trade names.
- (5) Not lead to the encouragement of crime or its incitement.
- (6) Not be detrimental to the country's economic or health status.
- (7) Not disclose facts of investigations or trials, unless permitted by the competent authority.
- (8) Be committed to objective and constructive criticism leading to the public good, based upon true facts and evidence.

**Article Twenty-Four:**

Local papers shall not be subject to censorship, except under extraordinary circumstances, as determined by the President of the Council of Ministers.

**Article Thirty-One:**

Publication of a paper shall not be banned except under extraordinary circumstances and with the approval of the President of the Council of Ministers

**Article Thirty-Three:**

- (1) The Editor-in-Chief of the paper or whoever acts on his behalf in his absence shall be responsible for whatever is published therein.
- (2) Without prejudice to the responsibility of the Editor-in-Chief or whoever acts on his behalf, the writer shall be responsible for the content of the text.

**Article Thirty-Five:**

Any paper that attributes to someone an incorrect statement or publishes incorrect news shall rectify that by publishing the correction free of charge, upon the request of the party concerned, in the first issue after the request for correction, and it shall be in the same place where the news or statement was published or in a prominent position in the paper. Those harmed shall have the right to claim compensation.

**Article Thirty-Six:**

The Ministry, when necessary, may withdraw any issue of a paper without compensation, if it includes any violation of the provisions of Shari'ah, pursuant to a decision by the committee provided for in Article Thirty-Seven.

**Article Thirty-Eight:**

Without prejudice to any other harsher punishment provided for by another law, anyone who violates any of the provisions of this Law shall be punished by a fine not exceeding fifty thousand riyals, the closure of his place of business or establishment for a period not exceeding two months, or by permanent closure of his place of business or establishment. A decision as to the punishment shall be issued by the Minister pursuant to a proposal by the committee provided for in Article Thirty-Seven of this Law.

An analysis of the fifth printing law reveals that there are some ambiguities. The Articles are characterized by generality, lacking clear details of what is allowed and what is not allowed for publication. The law uses broad language; for instance Article Eight states that freedom of expression is guaranteed for all publications within the Islamic Shari'ah and constitutional rules, yet there is no clear definition of freedom of expression within the Islamic and constitutional rules. There are in fact several interpretations of Islamic rules and the Quran. Therefore, it is hard for journalists and editors to identify precisely which stories can be published or which may be prohibited by relying on this Article.

One of the new Articles, which had not appeared in previous printing laws, is Article Three of this law, stipulating that no local newspaper shall be subject to censorship or control except in extraordinary circumstances, as per a ruling by the Council of Ministers. However, the Ministry still exercises censorship over the national press as it did before the publication of the fifth printing law. Moreover, the article does not elaborate or give details or definition of the term "censorship". Presumably, the

“censorship” mentioned in this article could mean *prior* restraints on newspapers, as all newspapers are subject to post-publication censorship.

This also applies to Article Nine, which stipulates that newspapers must abide by objective constructive criticisms based on solid evidence that serves the public interest. Again, these are broad general terms that can be interpreted in different ways, as there is no specific definition given for objective criticism or for the public interest. Indeed, there is no indication of who decides what constitutes the public interest.

In a similar vein, Article Thirty Six of the fifth law gives the Ministry of Culture and Information the right to withdraw any issue of a newspaper without compensation if the newspaper has violated Islamic rules. The article does not specifically mention the items that may be considered as violating Islamic rules. Moreover, this article contradicts Article Thirty One, which states that the Ministry does not have the right to ban any issue of any local paper without the consent of the Council of Ministers. Banning an issue and withdrawing an issue without compensation is the same action, unless the Article means that the ban has to be for more than one issue while the withdrawing is only of one issue. Article Thirty One also contradicts with article Thirty Eight which gives the Ministry the right to punish any establishment who violates the printing law “by a fine not exceeding fifty thousand riyals, the closure of his place of business or establishment for a period not exceeding two months, or by permanent closure of his place of business or establishment”.

Additionally, Article Thirty Three mentions that the Editor-in-Chief is the person responsible for all materials published in the newspaper, without releasing the respective writer or journalist from responsibility. This provision completely contradicts the principle of freedom of expression, printing and publication, as stated in Article Eight. There is no chance to practice freedom of expression while the Editor-in-Chief is held responsible for writers’ and analysts’ opinions. On the other hand, this article gives the Editor-in-Chief additional tasks of controlling and censoring, making him similar to a representative of the Ministry of Culture and Information at the newspaper premises.

The ambiguous formulation of the printing laws has given the Ministry of Culture and Information the opportunity to interpret the articles, as it deems appropriate. Such wording appears intentionally formulated in unspecific and broad general phrases in order to grant the Ministry flexibility and allow it to suspend publication of any item, even for reasons not specifically stated in the law. It is clear that the law serves the Ministry's interests and enhances its control over the national press. The law grants the Ministry a free hand to determine which topics conform to or break the law and which topics are not relevant or do not comply with the Islamic, constitutional or public interest rules. Freedom House Report (2008) says, "the Basic Law does not provide for press freedom, and certain provisions of the law allow authorities to exercise broad powers to prevent any act that may lead to disunity or sedition". Therefore, the national press has no choice but to rely on the Ministry's guidelines, which are regularly distributed to instruct the papers what not to publish, in order to fill the gaps left by the imprecise and ambiguous printing law.

Although the fifth printing law was issued in 2000, it does not take into account global developments in information and communication technology including the Internet and satellite channels. There are no major differences between the fifth and the fourth printing laws, which makes the fifth out of touch with developments in the media field. Since 1991 satellite channels have become accessible to Saudis and the Internet has been accessible in Saudi Arabia since 1999. However, the fifth printing law treats the national press as the previous printing laws did; ignoring the presence of global media.

Saudi Arabia has carried out only modest changes in printing law and regulations. Despite the fact that the Saudi market has been open to foreign investors and companies since 2005, none of those foreign investors and companies are allowed to invest in the media industry. The media industry is still under the authority of the Ministry of Culture and Information and not under the Ministry of Trade or the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA). Also, the Ministry of Culture and Information has rejected issuing new licenses for national newspapers. The Ministry of Culture and Information also owns all national TV and radio channels and no individuals or companies are allowed to invest in this field.

This situation has compelled some Saudi businessmen interested in investing in the media to establish newspapers and Satellite TV channels outside the Kingdom. Although channels such as MBC, Alarabiya, ART and Orbit are owned by Saudi businessmen and mainly directed at Saudi viewers, they are based in Arabic or European countries. Also, due to the refusal of the Ministry of Culture and Information to issue new licenses, there are some newspapers and magazines compelled to get licenses from outside the Kingdom; such as Alriyady newspaper which is printed in Bahrain and distributed daily in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is still not regarded as a country that exercises press freedom. No remarkable changes or reforms have occurred as a result of the presence of the Internet and satellite channels.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

#### **Introduction:**

Examining the state of censorship and asking Saudi journalists and media decision makers in the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information to evaluate such censorship, gives a clearer picture of where the Saudi press stands in the globalization process. Amin argues that "Arab journalism has begun to face forces of change; globalization processes have had a significant impact on Arab media by providing transnational Arabic and non-Arabic print and broadcast options for Arab audiences" (2002, p. 125). That point is also developed by Mellor who mentions that "time and globalization will contribute to modernizing Arab journalism" (2005, p.143). By the same token, Amin predicts that "the technological changes sweeping the world will increase the pressure for change and make issues of censorship obsolete as journalists find outlets for reporting among transnational media" (2002, p. 125). In order to develop a deeper understanding of the states of censorship over the Saudi national press in the presence of the Internet this chapter is divided into three major sections:

- The concept of press freedom and the main obstacles to having a free press in Saudi Arabia
- The Saudi press and censorship imposed by Ministry of Culture and Information
- The Internet in Saudi Arabia.

## **I-Press freedom and Saudi Arabia:**

In order to understand press-government relations and censorship in Saudi Arabia, it is necessary to discuss the concept of press freedom. Ansah argues, "Debates and discussions of media-government relations in academic literature have usually centred on freedom of the press, that is, freedom from government pressure and interference" (1997, p. 11). Therefore, this part is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on press freedom in general and the second focuses on press freedom in Saudi Arabia and the main obstacles to it.

### **The concept of Press freedom:**

Historically, press freedom started and developed in the West. Van Belle points out that "if there is anything about press freedom that can be said with absolute certainty it is that its merits, values, and domestic political effects have been a prominent, long-standing aspect of both political and philosophical discourse throughout much of Western history"(2000, p. 2). Ansah mentions that "The free press system is deeply rooted in the liberal political tradition which dates to the seventeenth century" (1997, p. 12). Haule points to "The seventeenth century England and the American colonies, where the philosophy that looked upon man as a rational animal with inherent natural rights gave rise to the libertarian press theory" (1984, p. 13). Lidsky and Wright, point out that "English law had long repressed speech and publications critical of religious or political authorities" (2004, p. 2).

In his book *Printing and press freedom: the ideology of early American journalism*, Jeffery Alan Smith (1990) points out that "With remarkable uniformity but only a little use of history, some scholars have identified certain "underlying principles" or "values" embedded in the press clause of the First Amendment" (p.4). He adds, "These have been discussed in terms of functions served by freedom of expression and include the discovery of truth, the maintenance of democratic processes, and the



facilitation of necessary change and personal fulfillment” (1990, p.4). Ansah points out that “Without a doubt, Jefferson's views have influenced the debate on freedom of expression, spilling over into the First Amendment rights in the American Constitution” (1997, p. 13).

Merrill defines press freedom as “autonomy - that is, freedom from outside control” (1981, p. 25). Smith defines press freedom as “freedom of licensing and censorship” (1990, p. 4). Weaver offers three definitions of press freedom: the relative absence of governmental restraints on the media; the relative absence of governmental and other restraints on the media; and not only the absence of restraints on the media, but also the presence of those conditions necessary for the dissemination of a diversity of ideas and opinions to a relatively large audience such as enforced right of access to newspapers and radio stations” (Cited in Lidsky & Wright, 2004, p. 15).

Eribo and Jong-Ebot point out that “The concept of press freedom abhors government control, censorship, interference, and unidiomatic regulations aimed at abridging the freedom of opinion, expression, and transmission of information or ideas through the mass media and other channels of communication” (1997, p.52). They define press freedom as “the availability of a free marketplace of ideas and information for all the citizenry without fear, favor, intimidation or obstacles” (1997, p.52). Similarly, Stein defines a free press as the press that “acts as a market place where ideas, opinions and theories are served up to citizens for their acceptance or rejection’ without a government censor hanging ‘over the shoulder of the editorial writer”(1966, p.11). Ansah points out that freedom of the press is generally taken to mean the freedom to disseminate information and ideas through the mass media without government restriction. A free press system is expected to provide a factual account of what is happening in society and to present, analyse and clarify the goals and values of society. It should also provide a forum for an exchange of comments on and criticism of the nation's affairs and thus serve as a watchdog of the people's rights (Ansah, 1991, p. 3).

Sunwoo Nam and Inhwan Oh define press freedom based on its role; “press freedom is freedom of the media to engage in the adversary role, being a vigilant and

independent watchdog of the government, free to criticize the policies and personnel of the power elite without fear of arbitrary sanction” (1973, p. 744). The watchdog metaphor suggests that the press prides itself on protecting the public interest by overseeing the actions of political leaders and exposing wrongdoing (Davis and Owen, 1998). Scanmell & Semetko point out three different duties of media in democracy: to act as a watchdog on the government, to supply accurate and sufficient information and to represent the people in the sense of adequately reflecting the spectrum of public opinion and political competition (2000, p. xiii). Rosen, however, argues that informing the public and acting as a watchdog are not enough; the media should try to strengthen the political community's capacity to recognize itself, converse well, and make choices (cited in Fraser et al, 1998).

The Hutchins Commission identified five responsibilities of a free press: (1) the press should provide a truthful account of the day's events in context; (2) be a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism and carry public discussion; (3) project a representative picture of constituent groups in the society; (4) present and clarify the goals and values of the society; (5) provide full access to the day's intelligence and serve the public's right to be informed (cited in Baker, 2002, p. 154).

In a similar vein, Powe argues that ‘editorial autonomy from government’ and an ‘inability of government to dictate coverage’ enables the press to perform its Fourth Estate role – ‘a role more secure than the nebulous and inconsistent possibilities in the public’s right to know” (1991, p. 285). Eribo and Jong-Ebot point out that “Direct and indirect devices employed by governments, organizations, and individuals to impede the free flow of news, information a, thought, and opinion in media and society are considered infringements on the freedom of press” (1997, p.52). Nixon differentiates between a controlled press and a free press describing the first as “a permanent censorship or a constant and general control of the press, while a free press is one characterized by the absence of such censorship or such constant and general control” (cited in Ansah, 1997, p. 15). Van Belle classifies the press in the world into four categories. First: *free* press in countries where ‘the news media are capable of functioning

as an arena of political competition'. Second, *controlled* press in countries where the government directly controls the press. Third, *imperfectly free* press where 'press freedom is compromised by corruption or unofficial influence. Fourth, *restricted* press, where the press 'is not capable of functioning as an arena of political competition or debate' but not directly controlled by the government (Van Belle, 2000, p.141-142).

Freedom House classifies the press in world into three categories: *free*, *partly free*, and *not free*. In its annual survey about freedom of the press, Freedom House measures media independence in 195 countries and territories. The annual index contains the most comprehensive data available on global media freedom and is a key resource for scholars, policymakers, and international institutions (Gunaratne, 2002). The index assesses the degree of print, broadcast, and Internet freedom in every country in the world, analyzing the events of each calendar year. Country narratives examine the legal environment for the media, political pressures that influence reporting, and economic factors that affect access to information (see [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)). The maximum score that any country possibly gets is 100 and the lowest score is 0, with 0–30 defined as free, 31–60 as partly free, and 61–100 as not free. The survey uses four criteria to measure the extent to which the endogenous print and broadcast media can keep their content free: 1) the influence of laws and regulations, 2) political pressures and controls, 3) economic influences 4) and repressive actions (see [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)).

### **Press freedom in Saudi Arabia:**

Press freedom in the Arab world in general and in Saudi Arabia in particular, is still restricted. Nossek and Rinnawi point out that the "Media structure and policy in most Arab states are determined by the political elite, where the mass media are directly centralized in the hands of the state regime leadership" (2003, p 184). Arab national media have been facing a big challenge due to the presence of international media which have become accessible to Arab people. Amin (2002) argues that at the advent of the new millennium, which has been characterized by vast developments in information communication technology, the Arab countries found themselves in a "mess", standing

on a cross road. After September 11, 2001 the national media in the Arab World reluctantly underwent a change because of the availability of international live-news channels such as Al-Jazeera, MBC and Alarabiya to provide live news to the Arab audience. As a result, Arabs have turned to the international channels and left the national media to play a secondary role in the media industry (Sakr, 2003). Sakr argues that “Whereas satellite channels and pan -Arab newspapers have opened the way to more incisive coverage of pan-Arab affairs, it cannot said of national or terrestrial media that they have moved equally far towards probing issues affecting a specific locality or community” (2005, P. 153). Similarly, Amin further attributes the failure of the national media to keep pace and compete with the international media to the national media policy and regulations.

Despite the fact that several developing countries in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and South America have granted a greater degree of press freedom during the past few years, Arab and Islamic countries are still reluctant to alleviate the strict controls imposed on their local media (Vogt, 2002). Vogt argues that press associations and boards in the Middle East and North Africa need more independence from governments in order to perform their duties without pressure, as a separate and independent entity. He adds; “Where state monopolies prevail, it will be the state itself that controls rather than regulates”(Vogt. 2002, p.212). Despite the significant technological developments witnessed in the media in most Arab countries, the political and legal frameworks in which they operate are lagging behind as notangible changes are being made to keep pace with these developments (Vogt, 2002).

Sakr (2003) emphasizes the importance of granting more freedom to the Arab media, curbed by strict laws and lobbies that work to constrain/curtail press freedom. Sakr (2003) mentions that:

It is important to recognize that censorship is achieved not only through direct suppression of content, but also by more fundamental and less visible means, including regulation of media ownership, regulation of entry to the profession of journalism and regulation of printing and distribution, as well as extra-judicial intimidation of media practitioners and bars on access to information (p35).

In Saudi Arabia, the national press is subject to government interference and censorship imposed on the national press. Despite the remarkable decline in suspension rates of journalists and newspapers between 2004 and 2008 (see Freedom House Report 2004-2008), the existence of the government's right to practice such suspension poses a threat to press freedom. Freedom House reported that there is no protection for press freedom in Saudi Arabia as the state constitution provides no guarantee of press freedom or freedom of expression and the Ministry of Culture and Information is still authorized to punish newspapers and journalists. Freedom House attributes the lack of press freedom in Saudi Arabia to the intention of the government to make the role of the press to serve the government's purposes. This resulted in Freedom House classifying Saudi press as "not free" and placed it in the global press freedom rankings table as No. 175 among 195 countries (see Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders Reports, 2008).

The main obstacles hindering press freedom in Saudi Arabia can be summarized as follows:

First: Press freedom is a Western concept; historically and gradually evolved and developed by Western intellectuals and philosophers. Al Bisher (1994) explains that not only press freedom, but freedom of expression, freedom of religion, human rights and women rights are not attractive concepts in Saudi Arabia as they are not linked to historical or cultural context. He argues that the concept of press freedom in Saudi Arabia remains "as a foreign concept and a product of a foreign culture" (1994, p. 32). Al Kheraigi (1992) indicates that opposing press freedom in Saudi Arabia is connected with the fears of the government as well as religious groups of diminishment of the rights and norms of group concepts. Therefore, as Al Beshr (1994) explains, the concept of freedom in general, and press freedom in particular, is linked with anarchy, chaos and disrespect for political and religious leaders. Al Shamari (1992) elaborated that the lack of historical and cultural background supporting the concept of press freedom has led to a misunderstanding of the actual objectives of press freedom and other associated freedoms. This misunderstanding not only makes the government and the religious leaders oppose such a concept but also makes the Saudi journalists fear the implications

of the concept (Al Shamari, 1992). Al Shamari highlights this as one of the major obstructions to press freedom in Saudi Arabia.

Second: There are no laws protecting press freedom in Saudi Arabia such as those that exist, are protected, and are often enshrined in the constitution of Western countries. This institutional protection forces governments to respect and avoid breaching press freedom. This protection also grants press and journalists the confidence to publish news and information without fear of government punishment. In Saudi Arabia there is neither legal provision in the constitution nor in any other laws stipulating freedom of expression or press freedom. The only law mentioning freedom of expression is the printing law discussed in the previous chapter. The printing law mentions the term "freedom of expression", but does not outline any mechanisms to protect this freedom. The same law granted the Ministry of Culture and Information the right to censor and suspend newspapers and journalists. Moreover, publication cases where a newspaper or a journalist is involved would not be brought to court, but referred to the Ministry of Culture and Information to issue the final decision. In this regard Al Shamari (1992) argues that the publication law is considered one of the major issues facing Saudi newspapers in terms of legalizing control, censorship and restrictions on press freedom.

Third: a major hindrance to press freedom in Saudi Arabia is government interference in press activities. A free press is one that is independent from the government. Al Shamari mentions that the Saudi government fights press freedom and backs censorship in order to maintain political stability.

Fourth: interference by religious leaders. The religious leaders exercise a large amount of influence in Saudi Arabia. They use this power to pressure political leaders and national newspapers to curb news or information harming their beliefs and reputations. Al Shamari (1992) mentions the strong influence of religious leaders on the government as one of the major elements limiting press freedom. He argues that the barrier to press freedom actually comes from the influence of religious leaders rather than from the government itself. When newspapers publish materials not acceptable to the religious leaders, they resort to issuing Fatwas prohibiting the purchase of newspapers or accusing respective journalists of being nonbelievers. Freedom House considered pressure by

religious leaders as one of the reasons for ranking Saudi Arabia among the countries enjoying the least press freedom in the world (see Freedom House Report, 2006).

Fifth: the role that the Saudi press currently plays. A free press should play the role of watchdog, but the Saudi press is reduced to playing the role of cheerleader for the government (Kheraigi, 1990; Al-Kahtani, 1999). In its report, Freedom House says, "The lack of a theoretical framework for freedom of the press in Saudi Arabia is due largely to the government's position on the role of the press in society" (2007). The report adds, "The press, according to the government and the conservative religious establishment, is a tool to educate the masses, propagate government views, and promote national unity".

Sixth: censorship imposed on the press leading to self-censorship. Al Shamari (1992) argues that the censorship imposed by the Ministry on national press is the main reason behind the existence of self-censorship by journalists. Sakr (2003) calls self-censorship the worst type of censorship and says that it is difficult to reverse it. Amin (2002) further indicates that the long history of censorship experienced by the Arab press has created a "censorial culture". This means that censorship is not only accepted by journalists, but that they will always err on the side of caution for fear of censure. Amin finds that "press freedom in Arab countries and the performance of Arab journalists is still threatened by a censorial political culture, one that develops in an environment usually dominated by a single political party" (2002, 125).

## **II-Censorship and the Saudi Press:**

Müller argues that although in the past studying censorship did not seem "to belong to the intensely disputed topics featuring in debates about, or involving, new and controversial theoretical or methodological approaches to the arts and humanities, this has changed. Nowadays, we see a proliferation of publications on censorship. Internationally known scholars work in the field (2004, p. 1). Müller adds that censorship has recently become a very attractive, interesting, and productive area of research (2004, p. 2).

Müller defines censorship as “an authoritarian control over what reaches the public sphere by someone other than the sender and the intended receiver of a message - operates on the basis of official regulation (if not legislation), institutionalization, and administration of the control procedures in place” (2004, p. 12). Lambert mentions that censorship serves the government's principal concerns of maintaining the integrity of its foreign policy, preserving public order, and protecting the monarch from libel (Clegg, 2001, p. 3). Müller differentiates between two types of censorship: pre-publication, which includes licensing and the control of materials before publication; and post- publication, which means curbing the dissemination and reception of material after publication (2004, p. 4). Alshamiry (1992) mentions that there are three types of censorship that the Saudi press suffers from. First type of censorship is the official censorship or the state censorship. The Saudi government practices the following techniques for interfering in the national press:

- It is not permitted to practice any journalistic activities without obtaining a prior license from Ministry of Culture and Information.
- The Ministry of Culture and Information appoints Editors-in-Chief, or at least approves their appointments.
- The government provides financial subsidies to the national newspapers in the face of financial difficulties.
- The Ministry circulates guidelines and instructions to the newspapers about publishable and non publishable materials and subjects.
- The Ministry inflicts punishment on the newspapers and journalists when news or information not acceptable to the Ministry is published.

The second type of censorship is editorial censorship, which Editors-in-Chief practice over their own papers. After being notified of Ministry decisions on a particular issue, the Editor-in-Chief of any newspaper or a magazine is held fully responsible for any infringements of Ministry guidelines. Moreover, as mentioned above, the Ministry of Culture and Information appoints Editors-in-Chief of the national press, making the latter keen to have a close relationship with the Ministry. Therefore, some editors practice



ensorship stricter than that of the Ministry of Culture and Information, in order to protect themselves as well as to keep their position (Al Shebeili, 2000).

The third type of censorship is self-censorship. This is the type of censorship that journalists practice themselves as a reaction to official or editorial censorship or other pressures. De Baets argues that “self-censorship is the most efficient, widespread, but least visible form of censorship” (2002, p. 10). Khazen points out that self-censorship is the most prevalent form of censorship in Arab world (1999, p.87). He adds that when journalists face the possibility of being arrested, murdered or suspended, they have no choice but censor their own work.

In this study the Arabic term *riqaba* is used in the interviews with the journalists and decision makers as translation of the English word censorship. Atlas English/Arabic dictionary translates the word *riqaba* as the practice or system of censoring something. Rugh translated the Egyptian television program *Bidoon Riqaba* as “Without Censorship” (2004, p.242). Maddy-Weitzman translated *Jihaz al-Riqaba al-Sha'biyya* as People’s Censorship Body (1998, p. 513). In his doctoral dissertation Al Kahtani (1999) translated “*Riqaba el-Matboat*” as Censorship over Printing Matters. Al Kheraigi (1990) mentions that *riqaba* can be translated as either censorship or as monitoring/supervision. He adds that in Saudi press such term links to *Riqaba el-Matboat* (the Printed Matters Censorship Body in the Ministry of Culture and Information) which used to censor the national press pre-publication before the establishment of the Ministry of Culture and Information. Moreover, since the Ministry was established in 1963, the Printed Matters Censorship Body started practicing post- publication censorship. The Printed Matters Censorship Body now assumes the responsibility of censoring what is published in the national press. It also shoulders the task of providing the press with the decisions taken by the Ministry of Culture and Information pertaining to prohibiting the publication of some news and issues.

Governments in Arab countries claim that *riqaba* (censorship) is a legitimate action to protect the public from foreign ideas and cultures - despite the fact that journalists get arrested, suspended and physically and mentally abused. Al Shamary

(1992) mentions that the government is exploiting "protection of society" as a pretext to impose and legalize censorship on the national press. Al Kheraigi (1990) argues that the Saudi government not only uses censorship over foreign media, but also over the national media. He adds that censoring the national press does not have anything to do with protecting the public from foreign ideas; it is mainly because the government does not believe in the independence of the press. Al Shamy mentions that it is understandable to impose censorship on the foreign press brought into the Saudi Arabian market to ensure that it contains no ideas or thoughts contradicting the values and principles of Saudi society, but it is not acceptable to apply censorship for the concealment of local news and issues.

Although the press in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries is privately owned, the government plays a major role in controlling and censoring the national press. Rugh argues that "the governments in Arab countries have certain rights and powers that they can use to influence the press even though it is in private hands" (2004, p. 71). Similarly, Kamalipour and Mowlana argue that "a common characteristic noted in all the Middle Eastern countries is the historically close relationship between the mass media and political system" (1994, p. xvi). Amin further attributes the failure of national Arab media to keep pace and compete with international media to the policy of censorship.

Press freedom as a concept in the Arab world witnesses a "tug-of-war" between internal and external forces (Al-Kasim, 1999). Amin argues that Arab journalists still find themselves unable to express and write freely because they are scared of their governments, whilst other journalists working for the foreign media enjoy considerable freedom. Al-Kasim (1999) argues that the Arab national media focus in an exaggerated manner - which he describes as "buffoonery" - on news stories connected with the King, Prince or President. Al-Kasim calls the Arab national media the media of "receive and see-off" in view of the fact that most news stories are centered on detailed accounts of reception and farewell ceremonies put on by the ruler for his guests, while publishing or broadcasting critical materials are considered none of their business or concern.

Therefore, he argues that "most Arabs have depended on foreign media for real information and analysis of events in their region" (Al-Kasim, 1999, p. 93).

Rugh (2004) categorizes the Arab press, into four major groups according to its relations with governments and its role in political life. The first he calls the "Mobilization Press". This category prevails in countries such as Libya, Syria, Sudan and Iraq under Saddam Hussein. The press in such countries plays a similar political role despite geographical and historical differences. Although most press institutions are owned by the private sector, their relations with the government are very complex. The major characteristic of this type of press is that it refrains from criticizing government policies, particularly foreign policy and government relations with other countries. However, it can criticize policies adopted and shortfalls in public services at the local level; such as power cuts, water shortages and problems with drainage services, which are the responsibility of local government or municipalities. This means criticism is confined only to subordinate officials in the government. The press classified in this category avoids criticizing key government officials or publishing negative commentary on their conduct or private life, even if such information is well known. In general, the press in the above-mentioned countries is merely a tool for the government to streamline and enhance its policies and to combat opposition.

The second category in Rugh's typology is the "Diverse Press," which prevails in Kuwait, Lebanon, Yemen and Morocco. This type is characterized by diversity in content and style as well as in political and social trends. The diverse press is distinguished by diverse content and a wide margin of freedom, which allows it to heavily criticize the government. It is also characterized by quality and professionalism, created by competition and an environment of comparatively limited government interference.

The third type of press is the "Transitional Press" which is in evidence in Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Algeria. It is named "transitional" because "it is not clear which way they are headed or indeed that they are in fact in transition to a different type of system that will stabilize and remain for a long time" (Rugh, 2004, p 134). Nonetheless, the

process of change - as a subject in itself - is still a topic for heated debate, and as yet unresolved in these countries. That is because each political party tries to influence the press. In these countries, there are conflicts between the press and the government regarding the level of freedom. Despite constitutional provisions for press freedom, the government intervenes when the press publishes critical pieces. Also, there is diversity in the ownership of media; some outlets are owned by the government, others by the private sector and some by political parties. Disputes between the government and opposition newspapers and journalists are normally settled in courts, which issue rules in favour of or against the government.

Rugh terms the fourth category of the Arab press the "Loyalist Press". This prevails in the Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. The loyalist press plays a similar political role in all of these countries. It is characterized by total loyalty to the government and to government decisions. The content of these types of newspapers is similar to that of the "mobilization press". The difference is that the loyalist press sometimes criticizes government performance and some key figures, while the mobilization press does not. Governments in the Gulf countries do not exercise direct control over domestic newspapers, but instead use their close relationships with owners and Editors-in-Chief to influence the content of the local press.

Some newspapers in Saudi Arabia are beginning to criticize their government, although such criticism is not common. *Alwatan* and *Okaz* criticize the government, particularly the Ministries of Trade, Education and Labour.

Rugh divides Saudi daily newspapers into four groups:

1. Classical conservative newspapers such as *Al Jazirah*, *Al Bilad* and *Al Nadwa*.
2. Moderate and semi-government newspapers such as *Alriyadh* and *Al-Yawm*.

3. Conservative Islamic newspapers like *Al Madina*.
4. The liberal stream, led by *Okaz* and *Alwatan*.

The Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information exercises censorship over the national press and owns the national television and radio stations. Rugh argues that the loyalty of the Saudi press to the government, coupled with a lack of clear print laws, forces journalists to practise self-censorship. Rugh argues that "the most common mechanism ensuring newspapers' loyalty to the basic policies of the regime and to its top leadership is anticipatory self-censorship based on sensitivity to the political environment" (2004, p. 82).

The Saudi press law says the press is private and the government has no right to interfere except to preserve the "general welfare," which is not defined, but in 1991 the Information Ministry said it is anything that might cause friction between the government and citizens, or adversely affect "each citizen's duty towards his religion, country and community (Rugh, 2004, p. 71)

The ambiguity of the printing laws as discussed in Chapter One causes Editors-in-Chief and journalists to adopt caution, avoiding the discussion of topics that may irritate the government. Many journalists and writers have abandoned the profession of journalism or prefer writing about general topics that do not lead to such questioning (Al Shebeili, 2000). Mansour Al Nakidan, Fawaz Turki and Hussein Shubukshi are some of the journalists who have abandoned the national Saudi press and started writing for foreign newspapers. Taking advantage of the vague and general regulations, the Ministry distributes guidelines to the national newspapers, advising them to follow or ignore certain issues. The Ministry contacts the Editors-in-Chief of the newspapers who, according to the printing law, are responsible for anything published in the paper, including columns. If a newspaper publishes any news or opinions that irritate the Ministry, punitive measures may be taken against the paper and the Editor-in-Chief.

The Ministry's power to appoint and dismiss Editors-in-Chief of the national newspapers makes the latter very keen to satisfy the government in order to keep their positions. Rugh points out that "the newspaper board submits the names of three

candidates to the Information Minister who picks one of them, or can reject all three and name another person" (2004, p. 75). Therefore, Editors-in-Chief have two choices - either have a close relationship with the Ministry and follow its guidelines and decisions, or lose their jobs. Al Kheraigi argues that:

The government has been able to create a "loyalist press" largely by influencing the selection of editors and capitalizing on the homogeneity of Saudi society. For example, the Ministry of Culture and Information is capable, by law, of rejecting any candidate for the board of directors of a news establishment, and can also veto any nomination for chief editorship. Journalists who venture in the netherworld of journalism risk the ultimate punishment of expulsion, which is quite often done secretly in order to generate a minimum of friction (1990, p.178-179).

As a result, editors such as Turki Al Sedeiri and Hashim Abdu Hashim have remained in their positions as the Editors-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* and *Okaz* respectively for more than 25 years. In an interview on the Alarabiya news channel, Hashim Abdu Hashim talked about his long experience as Editor-in-Chief of *Okaz* (Alarabiya, December, 2006). The interview reports that he had held the post of Editor-in-Chief of *Okaz* for 25 years and that when he attempted to resign two years ago, his resignation was not accepted and he was compelled to remain in his post. Because of his loyalty to the government and his intimate familiarity with the Ministry's orientations, the Ministry apparently does not want him to resign.

On the other hand, there are Editors-in-Chief who have been dismissed after only a short time in the job, such as Jamal Khashoggi. Similarly, in March 2002, the Ministry of Culture and Information dismissed *Al-Madina's* Editor-in-Chief, Mohammed Al-Fal, "after the paper published a criticism of Islamic judges as being corrupt" (Rugh, 2004, p. 72). Arab Press Freedom Watch mentions that this occurred 53 days after Khashoggi took up the post of Editor-in-Chief. He joined what Saudis call "The Fired Journalists' Club" which also includes Mohammed Al Mukhtar, ex-Editor-in-Chief of *Al Medina*, Ginan Al Ghamdi, the first Editor-in-Chief of *Alwatan*, Ahmed Mohamed Mahmoud, ex-General Manager of Al Medina Establishment, Abdelaziz Al Khamis, ex-Editor-in-Chief of *Al*

*Majallah* magazine, Salah Sendi, former deputy Editor-in-Chief of the same magazine and Mansour Al Nakidan - the Islamist former columnist for *Alwatan*.

Ali Al Mosa, a daily columnist on *Alwatan*, says that censorship led to the confiscation of his articles for three weeks and increased the number of his articles that remained unpublished (Al Mosa, 2003). He attributes the inability of Saudi journalists to secure wider margins of freedom to their editors. He argues that Editors-in-Chief use their power in a brutal manner not compatible with the freedoms granted by the government in recent years. He adds that Editors-in-Chief are engaging in censorship which goes beyond that imposed by the Ministry of Culture and Information, which he described as more relaxed and flexible than the Editors-in-Chief.

In its 2004 report, Arab Press Freedom Watch reported that the Saudi authorities often dismiss Editors-in-Chief from their positions or place pressure on them to suspend publication of the articles of certain columnists or writers. Some writers and journalists have been entirely prevented from writing in national newspapers. Fawaz Turki was unceremoniously dismissed in April 2006 by *Arab News*, a leading English-language Saudi daily. He had been a senior columnist on the op-ed page for nine years. After he was dismissed he started writing for *The Washington Post* and the first article he wrote was entitled "How to Lose Your Job at a Saudi Newspaper" (Turki, 2006).

Similarly, the annual report of Reporters Without Borders (2008) describes Saudi Arabia as a country with very strict censorship, and claims that journalists are suspended from writing because they overstep the limits set by the government. The report indicates that the government imposes severe controls on the media in general and particularly restricts news connected with the government's performance. The report mentions that the censorship imposed on the media means that many Saudis seek news and information from foreign media. It also points out that suspension of Ginan Al Ghamdi from writing for *Alwatan* newspaper in 2007 reflects the actual intention of the Ministry of Culture and Information to reject wider press freedom. The Ministry also suspended for one month

the daily *Shams* newspaper for publishing the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, first published in the Danish press in 2007 (Reporters Without Borders, 2008).

The famous columnist Saad Al Dossari complained in an interview with Alarabiya news channel (February 5, 2007) about the strict censorship imposed on the Saudi national press. He commented that censorship is not limited to the Ministry of Culture and Information, but also includes some officials such as the Chief of the Municipality. Al Dossari pointed out that he was stopped from writing for children in *Al Yamama* magazine after the Editor-in-Chief received pressure from groups not affiliated to the government.

Additionally, the Saudi academic and intellectual Dr. Abdullah Al Fawzan accuses the Ministry of Culture and Information of being the major element blocking freedom of the press by continuous censorship and control of the press (Al Fawzan, 2005). He complains about Ministry censorship and says that he has lost count of the number of times he has received calls from the newspaper to inform him that his article is not acceptable to the Ministry. He describes the Saudi press as a child adopted by the Ministry of Culture and Information and claims that censorship of the press is not carried out after publication, but rather via hotlines between the Ministry of Culture and Information and the newspapers to issue instructions about what should and should not be published.

Al Kheraigi's PhD dissertation (1990) was one of the first studies in the field of press censorship and press freedom in Saudi Arabia that pointed to freedom of expression as a gateway to press freedom. The study addressed two aspects of press freedom, the first being the concept of freedom in Islam, evidenced by the historical study of freedom practised in the early period of Islam and then compared freedoms in Islam against Western concepts of freedom. The second part of the study took Saudi Arabia as a case study to investigate press censorship.



Al Kheraigi claims that "the failure of press freedom to thrive in the Muslim world has caused many orientalists and religious historians to equate Islam with despotism and label it as intolerant faith" (1990, p.2). He argues that:

The state of press freedom in the Muslim countries is a sad reminder of the preponderant conviction among the ruling coterie that exposure of official malpractices will instigate mistrust and foment seditious sentiments though religion is by no means solely responsible for the press being controlled, it can be argued that some interpreters of religious law, regarding obedience to invigorate the state's iron hand by claiming that Islam has given obedience to authorities' precedence over man's freedom of expression (1990, p.3).

In the second part of his study, Al Kheraigi relied on questionnaires to collect the study data, which focused on the views of journalists, media decision makers in the Ministry of Culture and Information and academics towards press freedom in Saudi Arabia. The study sample contained 117 males. Disappointingly, from 117 selected samples to whom the questionnaire was distributed only 39 individuals responded; 19 of them journalists, 6 of them government employees in the Ministry of Culture and Information and 14 replies were from staff members in the Mass Communication Studies Departments of the University of King Saud and the University of Imam Mohammed Ibn Saud. It is worth mentioning that a prominent Editor-in-Chief refused to take part in the study or allow any of the journalists working for his newspaper to do so. The same attitude was also taken by the staff of the Department of Communication Studies at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, who refused to participate in the study due to the sensitivity of the topic of press freedom.

Al Kheraigi argues that Saudi culture is mostly reluctant to accept change, and those advocates of change in Saudi society risk sacrificing their good pay and careers by such demands, which are rejected by both government and some religious and social groups. Furthermore, he adds that it is not easy to gain press freedom in the face of government interference and control and Saudi society's rejection of such trends. He argues that journalists themselves are responsible for many of the present constraints due to their exaggerated praise of the government. Additionally, Al Kheraigi points out that the loyalty of the Saudi press to the government makes practising fair and balanced

journalism impossible. He concludes his study by calling on the Saudi government "to loosen its stringent regulations in order for the press to become more than cheerleaders or, worse yet, an opiate of the people" (1990, p.178).

### **Censorship and Content:**

Although the Saudi press has achieved tremendous developments in terms of printing facilities and the use of technology, this progress has not been coupled with remarkable advancements in content (Al Shebeili, 2000). Al Shebeili argues that despite the technical progress, the Saudi press cannot discuss local issues to the satisfaction of its readers and must still avoid certain topics even though they are of great interest to its readership. In this context, he claims that the level of desire to challenge the status quo varies from one newspaper to another. Indeed, he argues that the Saudi press in the mid-1950s was more daring than contemporary newspapers in discussing local issues. He attributes the lack of courage in tackling certain issues to the ambiguities of the printing laws, which have in turn thrown up varying attitudes and responses among Editors-in-Chief towards the raising of certain issues. He adds that Editors tend to steer clear of controversial issues in order to avoid harming their relations with the Ministry. The degree of courage to tackle taboo topics, according to Al Shebeili (2000), depends on the Editor's self-confidence and sometimes on his close relations with the authorities concerned. In addition, he argues, the reluctance of some columnists and journalists to tackle certain matters of interest may be attributed to the restraints imposed by the Editors-in-Chief.

The Ministry of Culture and Information's censorship affects news selection by the national press in two main ways. First, the Ministry distributes guidelines prohibiting the national press from publishing certain stories. Second, the Ministry advises the national press to follow certain stories and give them special attention. Reporters Without Borders (2006) indicated that the Saudi media is under the total dominance and control of the Saudi government and any criticism of the government or the royal family, religious leaders or even a government official in a friendly country may lead to punitive measures

against the newspaper and the writer responsible. Any positive news about the government gets special attention from the national press, however. Rugh points out that:

If the king or crown prince makes a public statement or takes a public action, such as making a trip or receiving an important visitor, that news will be the top story on most front pages and the treatment will probably be verbatim from the government-controlled Saudi News Agency (2004, p. 66).

The loyal Saudi press is generally passive in character and refrains from discussing sensitive topics in order not to irritate the government or the religious leaders. Such a situation forces the Saudi press to ignore some breaking news stories nationally and internationally, largely due to the fear of punishment by the Ministry of Culture and Information. As a result, the press's coverage of events such as the 1990 Iraq War, the Iranian nuclear programme and even some domestic issues such as the resignation of the Saudi ambassador to the United States in 2007 has been slow and selective. However, since the beginning of the twenty-first century the press has started to criticize some governmental bodies. Rugh also points out that "newspapers publish on sensitive subjects such as crime or terrorism only after news has been released by the government through the official Saudi news agency SPA, or from a government official" (2004, p. 71).

The Saudi newspapers rely on the SPA to provide them with the government's news and decisions. SPA releases news stories from the government's point of view. After the national newspapers receive news stories from SPA they publish them as they receive them, without any changes. For example, there has been tension between the Saudi and Iranian governments since the latter announced its nuclear programme in 2002. Although the tension between the two countries is covered by the international media, the Saudi press still treats this type of news with caution. In March 2009, the Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki visited Riyadh after Prince Saud, the Saudi Foreign Minister, called for a joint Arab strategy to deal with what he called the "Iranian challenge" (APF, March 15, 2009). *Alriyadh* published the story relying on SPA and in the manner in which it usually publishes this type of story, ignored all tension between the two countries:

The custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz received a message from Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadi Njad. The message was conveyed by Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki during an audience with the king here today. The Minister also conveyed the greetings of Iranian leaders to the king, who in turn sent his greetings to them. The audience was attended by Prince Saud Alfaisal, the Foreign Minister, and Iranian ambassador to the Kingdom Dr. Sayed Mohammad Hosaini" (*Alriyadh*, March 16, 2009).

Similarly restrained press coverage was witnessed during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Franklin (1991) mentions that no report was released by the Saudi media and press for two days after the invasion. As a result, Saudis turned to foreign radio stations such as BBC Arabic and to the TV channels of neighbouring countries to find out what was going on at the Saudi borders. He adds that on the third day some papers published brief reports about the invasion while other papers mentioned "in passing" that there was tension at the border between Iraq and Kuwait. Franklin, an American journalist and scholar, (1991) interviewed Saudi editors and asked them about the complete silence of the Saudi media. The first interview was conducted with Jaser Al-Jaser, the deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Al-Jazirah* daily newspaper, who expressed his satisfaction over his decision to suspend publication of news about the invasion until an official statement had been issued. He mentioned that the paper took the decision to delay publication pending clarification of the government's reaction toward the invasion, and denied any pressure from the government. Al-Jaser said, "In Saudi Arabia we have an understanding." As Franklin argues, he was implying that as far as the Saudi press is concerned, no sensitive issue should be mentioned until the government has expressed its viewpoint on the issue.

Franklin (1991) also interviewed Turki Al Sedeiri, Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* newspaper, who said that he cannot defy any official decision because he wants to keep himself away from potential problems - he has a house, a car and a high-salary position. "Why would I look for trouble?" Al Sedeiri wondered. Al Sedeiri claimed that the Saudi media, despite the government control imposed on it, is still better than that of some other Arab countries where the control over the press goes as far as questioning and putting journalists in jail, which does not happen in Saudi Arabia (Franklin, 1991).

Similarly, Al-Kahtani (1999) in his doctoral dissertation discusses the Saudi press and its performance during wartime. His study focuses on the performance of the Saudi local media during the Gulf War of 1990-1991. Al-Kahtani used three different methods to collect the data: questionnaires, interviews and content analysis. The study also highlights the main factors which impacted on Saudi press coverage of the Gulf war.

Al-Kahtani adopted semi-structured interviews to explore the viewpoints of academics and journalists working in the Saudi press. He also used content analysis of stories published over three separate weeks - a week before the Iraqi invasion, a week during the invasion and a week after the liberation of Kuwait. The interviews with academics and journalists revealed that Saudi press coverage had been inactive in the crisis due to a lack of information from official sources. In addition, the political awareness and caution rooted both in Saudi society and among journalists made the Saudi press reluctant to cover the crisis in its first days, during which only some brief comments were published. The three-week content analysis of the Saudi press shows that the Saudi press depends on foreign media and international news agencies. Despite the fact that the Gulf War took place at the Saudi borders and sometimes inside Saudi territory, it was notable that the national Saudi press had no correspondent to cover the crisis when it erupted; hence their reliance on other media.

An analysis by Al-Kahtani notes that most interviews conducted by the Saudi press during the crisis were with foreigners, particularly officials in the American and British armies. He finds that most news stories covered the efforts to find a suitable solution to the crisis. The military news stories, which were the core events, ranked second, followed by crimes committed by the Iraqi soldiers in Kuwait during the invasion, while the news published regarding UN resolutions and decisions against Iraq was positive. Editorial columns also engaged in condemning Iraq and other countries which backed Iraq, such as Palestine, Jordan and Yemen.

Al-Kahtani finds that 74% of the academics and journalists interviewed were not happy with the Saudi press's coverage of the Gulf War. They believe that the Saudi press failed to cope with the event, particularly during the initial stages. Al-Kahtani contends that the Saudi press failed to fulfill its duties and lost the trust of Saudis by its complete ignorance of events in the first days of the crisis. He further indicates that this inactive position did not change markedly, even after the end of the war and the liberation of Kuwait. He summarizes the reasons behind the weak coverage as follows: lack of a professional press plan, lack of trained and talented journalists, and overall to the relations between the press and the Ministry of Culture and Information. He adds that official censorship always makes the press cautious of covering certain topics, whether in times of war or peace.

Al-Kahtani (1999) goes on to argue that by supporting all the government's decisions, the Saudi national press plays the role of a cheerleader. He believes that the Saudi press still plays the same role, in spite of the fact that there are external media which are accessible to the Saudis via satellite channels and the Internet. He concludes his study by stressing the importance of eliminating the dominance and control practised by the Ministry of Culture and Information over the Saudi press. He calls on journalists and reporters to envisage a new printing law that considers the role of the press as a watchdog in society, and emphasizes the critical need to develop the Saudi press in terms of management and editing, as well as in terms of training journalists, reporters and correspondents, and selecting talented people for the journalism profession.

Furthermore, he advises the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information to adopt new ways of thinking, commensurate with the world in the new millennium. The advice reflects the fact that personnel in the Ministry and the Supreme Council of the Media were not at that time aware of the consequences and effects of information communication technology developments which were to come in the near future, nor able to forecast the possible influences that new media might have on the local press and media (Al-Kahtani, 1999). He mentions that the Saudis are abandoning national media

outlets and relying increasingly on foreign satellite channels, due to the strict censorship and the lack of professionalism in Saudi journalism.

Based on the above, my study concentrates on the extent of awareness among decision makers in the Ministry of Culture and Information of the possible effects of contemporary accessible news media, especially the Internet, on the Saudi public. According to Al-Kahtani (1999), media decision makers in the Ministry were not enlightened enough and were used to dealing with the national press without any consideration of the impacts of global developments in media and communications.

In line with this, Jihad Khazen (1999), former Editor-in-Chief of the daily *Alhyat* newspaper, mentions that during his long career in the press in Beirut, Jeddah and London he was never asked to publish a certain news story, but he was asked several times *not* to publish certain news stories. He reveals, "I have been asked not to publish something more times than I care to remember" (1999, p. 78). Furthermore, he describes the Ministries of Information in the Arab world as departments for "denial or praise" - they deny some news and praise the rules. "Never believe the news until it is officially denied," he says (1999, p. 78).

Khazen (1999) also indicates that a journalist who criticizes the government is considered treacherous if he does so in national newspapers, and as having committed high treason if he does so in the international press. He mentions that a number of journalists have lost their lives for expressing their opinions, notably the founder of *Alhyat* newspaper, Kamel Mrowa who was killed in 1966. Khazen adds that the worst type of press control in the Arab world is that practised by journalists on themselves. He claims that before publishing any negative story about a particular Arab country, the first problem to bear in mind is whether the paper will be allowed into that country or not. He admits that he can accept the prohibition of his paper in a country like Sudan, where distribution is limited, but he could not afford suspension in Saudi Arabia even for one day, as that would mean losing thousands of US dollars as well as the revenue from major advertisers.

Khazen points out that there are no standard media laws and each Arab country has its own sensitive issues. He says that, for instance, Morocco has the Polisario front and Algeria does not accept writing about Islamic fundamentalists. Egypt is sensitive towards the Muslim Brotherhood, while Saudi Arabia has a number of sensitive issues such as religious, military and gender issues. He points out that despite the self-censorship practised in *Alhyat* newspaper, it was prohibited several times from entering Saudi Arabia.

In an examination of news in the Saudi media, Barayan (2002) discusses the performance of Saudi TV, as compared to three Arabic news channels. He reports in his doctoral study that the news coverage transmitted by Saudi TV is not satisfactory for most Saudis, who have now found alternatives such as Aljazeera and MBC. He interviewed 48 people from eight different groups; academics, officials in the Ministry of Culture and Information, farmers, students, sales merchants and unemployed of both genders and conducted a content analysis of 497 news stories from four TV channels (the Saudi TV "Channel One", Aljazeera, MBC and ANN). He states that two decades ago people within Saudi Arabia would view only Saudi government-run TV because there were no other TV channels available. However, now Saudis can view a variety of channels and the government channels are no longer able to compete with private and international channels, which enjoy considerable freedom (Barayan, 2002). As a result, he adds that Saudi viewers have abandoned national channels and watch satellite channels such as Aljazeera and MBC instead.

Barayan (2002) also mentions that since 1991, Saudis have been able to receive several satellite channels not under governmental control. He argues that the accessibility of satellite channels with a wider margin of freedom to discuss issues that the national channels cannot touch makes channels such as Aljazeera and MBC very popular among Saudis. He finds that "Saudi viewers like to watch other satellite channels, especially those specializing in news services, in preference to the Saudi television" (2002, p.106). He adds that although the presence of alternative news channels can be seen as a major



factor in the dissatisfaction of Saudi viewers with the news service of Saudi Television, the dissatisfaction is not new and is mainly because the news service is so poor. An interviewee points out that:

There are economic and sporting events that take place inside the Kingdom which we do not see on Saudi television, and the interested viewer can see them on the other channels. This is sad because the events take place in our region and they are covered by outside sources (Barayan, 2002, p.102).

Barayan argues that the lack of local correspondents covering local events inside Saudi Arabia, together with the length of the news period, which is not fixed by a certain time limit are the main weaknesses of Saudi TV. Based on a questionnaire concerning the satisfaction of Saudi viewers with the news bulletins broadcast by Saudi TV, Barayan confirms that Saudis are not content with the news presented there. One of the interviewees says:

When I watch a piece of news on Saudi television, especially international news, I try to verify it by watching Al-Jazeera channel because I believe that unlike Saudi Television, this channel is more convincing and it would show all points of view (Barayan, 2002, p.93).

The main criticism directed by the interviewees towards news coverage on Saudi TV is that news is characterized by a "lack of analysis of news content and the presence of too much domestic (protocol) news in the bulletins" (Barayan, 2002, p.216). An interviewee expressed his dissatisfaction, saying:

We love to follow the news and activities of national leaders, but the basic problem when the television shows this news, they are difficult to understand and they are not clear. For example, if a news item says: King Fahd Bin Abdelaziz has received a British envoy and during the meeting he discussed with him aspects of bi-lateral co-operation, as a viewer I would not understand, given this presentation of the item, what the news item really means. In other words, in this form the item is ambiguous and from my point of view they must say what has taken place in the meeting and why there was a need for this meeting (Barayan, 2002, p.97).

Barayan finds that 28.6% of the news stories he analysed focus on the Saudi King and 36.0% of the stories focus on government officials. He argues that although the duration of the main news bulletin on Saudi Television is 55 minutes, compared to 30

minutes on Aljazeera, 20 minutes on MBC and 15 minutes on ANN, Saudi Television ignores important international and national news. Barayan attributes the problems facing Saudi media in general and the news services in particular to the overwhelming dominance of the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Supreme Council of the Media. These two bodies are blocking the development of Saudi media, even though their function should be to assist and develop the national media so it can take its role in a society that is witnessing enormous changes in the wake of the emergence of satellite channels in 1991 (Barayan, 2002). He adds that these satellite channels have changed the attitudes of Saudi citizens towards local and international issues, and argues that such changes should lead to the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information taking up the challenge of developing Saudi media to satisfy the Saudi public.

The Ministry should, he believes, make other major changes, especially in view of the present environment where most sophisticated new media, including the Internet, are accessible in Saudi Arabia (Barayan, 2002). He argues that a Saudi media curbed by censorship and restrictions cannot keep pace with other media, which do not suffer from government interference. He argues that Saudi Arabia is a rich country, but linking TV budget allocations with the overall budget of the Ministry of Culture and Information has imposed constraints which prevent TV from developing in terms of quality or attracting and training journalists and reporters.

In the same vein, Marghalani, Palmgreen and Boyd investigate the utilization of direct satellite broadcasting (DBS) in Saudi Arabia (1998). They focus on the reasons behind the preference of Saudis for foreign TV channels over national channels. They rely on questionnaires from 495 Saudi adults of between 18-57 years and of both genders. Their study shows that the severe restrictions and censorship on the local media are the major reason behind Saudis' abandonment of local, government-run TV channels.

They add that the political and religious control of state-run TV in Saudi Arabia makes Saudis turn to other channels to watch news reports produced in a transparent manner not affected or influenced by the government's viewpoint. In addition, they

attribute the dissatisfaction of some Saudis with local channels to the lack of women on their TV screens.

Another symptom of the religious and cultural censorship characterizing the government channels--the rare appearance of women on these channels--is at the root of the final DBS motive identified in this study, i.e., the desire to see females on television. This desire may be prompted among females by the need for more female role models with whom to identify, and among males by sexual curiosity (Marghalani, Palmgreen & Boyd, 1998, p. 312)

In the same vein, Yamani (2003) points out in her study that Saudi journalists are not content with the narrow margin of freedom granted to them. The widespread foreign media criticism of Saudi Arabia following 11 September 2001 affected Saudi journalists. She classifies Saudi journalists as either pro or anti-press freedom, or afraid of crossing the red lines set by the censorship authorities. Yamani mentions that new media such as satellite channels and the Internet have weakened the government's hitherto solid grasp on the national press. Also, the availability of satellite TVs and Internet has clearly shown the wide differences between the national Saudi media, incapacitated by government control, and the international media, which enjoys a wide margin of freedom. This situation affects Saudi people who have started to seek reliable news from the international media (Yamani, 2003). Yamani argues that new media such as the Internet, satellite channels and mobile phones grant Saudis the opportunity to become familiar with viewpoints that conflict with the government standpoints put forward by the local media.

Nevertheless, she adds that the government still insists on incapacitating the national media with laws and regulations restricted by political boundaries. She argues that new media, particularly the Internet, challenges the Saudi government, which "presents itself to the world as a traditional, stable, homogeneous and harmonious entity and this has been the case for many decades, but the reality masks a complex and troubled passage to modernity" (Yamani, 2003, p.144). She also mentions that the strict controls imposed on the national media pushes Saudis to tune in to foreign satellite channels such as Aljazeera and other news outlets on the Internet. Yamani claims that

the Saudi media has lost credibility due to their disregard for local news stories, which Saudis can now watch via foreign satellite channels before they are covered in the national media.

Yamani (2003) concludes that the censorship and control imposed by the Saudi government on national media outlets has become a hot topic among Saudi youth who are annoyed by it and feel that such control is not justified in view of available, reliable alternative news sources. Yamani, Barayan and Al-Kahtani's studies reflect a general trend among Saudi scholars who see press control and censorship as an unsuitable tool in the presence of accessible online and satellite news media.

### **Signs of Change:**

Despite the fact that there are enormous pressures from different groups supporting censorship of the Saudi media, as mentioned earlier, there are some signs of change. Kapiszewski argues that Saudi newspapers can now openly discuss many issues "nobody would have dared" to tackle before (2006, p. 472) and he gives examples of the increasing openness of Saudi newspapers. One example given is Rasheed Abu-Alsamh's column in the *Arab News* about the September 11 attacks in which he mentions that "first, we must stop denying that any of the hijackers were Saudis or even Arab. We must also stop saying that the September 11 attacks were a CIA-Zionist plot to make the Arabs and Islam look bad" (cited in Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 372-3).

Rugh too gives examples of the recent openness of the Saudi press in tackling issues which used to be ignored. For instance, in 2002 the press "covered a fire at a girls' school by reporting negatively on the "mutaween" (religious police), who had always been treated very deferentially in the media" (2004, p. 67). The Saudi press also gave massive coverage to the death of a man in the custody of the religious police in June 2007 (see *Alwatan* and *Okaz*, June, 2007). Another recent example of the openness of the Saudi press in covering incidents which used to be taboo in the past is the coverage of a

prison officer beating prisoners in Riyadh. This led to the suspension of two guards and an open investigation (*Aleqtisadiyah*, April, 2007).

Another sign of the Saudi government's inclination to give the national media more space to discuss issues that it used to ignore was the 2003 dismantling of the Supreme Council for the Media, a previously influential body which directly intervened in the Ministry of Culture and Information's decision-making and was considered a great obstacle to press freedom. Since the day it was established in 1981, the Council had taken a strict line on censorship and imposed harsh punishments on newspapers and journalists (Al-Kahtani, 1999). Rugh argues that:

In Saudi Arabia, there is a Higher Council for the Press, which includes key members of the royal family and is chaired by the Interior Minister. It ultimately decides basic policy for the media, even giving instructions to the Information Minister who is nominally responsible in that area, and the Minister in turn keeps the press informed on government policy with respect to sensitive issues (2004, p. 82).

Dr. Mazen Balila, a member of the Saudi Parliament and former Editor-in-Chief of *Almandine* newspaper, mentioned that since the abolition of the Supreme Council, the Saudi press has entered a new era of press freedom (*Al Bilad*, August 2007). He adds that now the Saudi press discusses subjects which used to be taboo because of the Supreme Council of the Media.

Moreover, Turki Al Sedeiri, Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* daily and President of the Saudi Journalists Association told *Al Madina* daily (January 24, 2007) that the report issued by Reporters Without Borders grieved the Saudi press. He said "its content is groundless and based on personal judgments which do not represent the actual media situation in Saudi Arabia at the present time". He claims that the Saudi press enjoys relatively wide freedom compared to the past. In addition, he said that the margin of press freedom in Saudi Arabia is 90% better than in other Arab and Islamic countries. He points out that "journalists are tortured and jailed in other countries, something that is not witnessed in Saudi Arabia".

He also confirms that the Saudi press enjoys considerable freedom, and it is not composed of government establishments, but rather of private institutions which enjoy wide independence of a nature not found in many Middle Eastern countries. "The concept of freedom we are backing is the kind of freedom that adopts positive criticism and avoids instigating sectarianism or calls for disorder and unrest". He also mentions the unprecedented steps recently taken towards training and developing journalists and the establishment of the Saudi Journalists Association (SJA). In June 2004, hundreds of Saudi journalists took part in elections for the Saudi Journalists Association to elect members of the board for the first time. Turki Al Sedeiri, who was elected as chairman of the SJA, promised that the association will work to protect journalists and help the press to gain more freedom (*Arab News*, January, 2004). He adds that the Ministry of Culture and Information would "not at all interfere" in the association's activities.

A 2006 report by Freedom House indicates that there has been a development in the level of press freedom in Saudi Arabia, and accordingly the country has moved one mark forward (compared to the 2005 report) from (7) to (6) in the classification of personal levels of freedom (see the Annual Reports for 2005 and 2006). The 2006 report confirms that there is a marked improvement in the level of press freedom compared to previous years. However, the Saudi press still cannot be termed a "free press" or even partly free. Freedom House classifies Saudi Arabia in its report for the year 2005 as No. 14 (out of 19) in terms of press freedom in the Middle East, at the same rank as Iran and Tunisia, but ahead of Libya and Syria.

However, in the 2006 report, Saudi Arabia was ranked at number 13, coming before Yemen, Tunisia, Iran, Syria and Libya. In 2008, Saudi press's score improved from 82 to 81 points in the Freedom House scale but remained under the "Not Free" category (Freedom House, 2009). The Freedom House report in 2008 mentions that "Saudi officials have allowed the media to express a moderate level of criticism of the government in recent years, and journalists continued to test the boundaries in 2007 by discussing issues previously considered off-limits" (Freedom House, 2009). Therefore,

interviewing the Saudi journalists in this study helps us to assess how the journalists deal with such changes and whether these changes are affecting their news decisions.

### **III-Saudi Arabia and the Internet:**

The explosive growth in the rate of Internet use in Saudi Arabia has prompted an equally rapid rise in the importance of the World Wide Web as a news and information source for Saudis (CITC, 2009). Al-Qarni found that new media, especially the Internet, pose challenges to Arab politics, people and culture in a more profound way than print and broadcast media (2004). He explains that "new media transcends national borders and reaches its audience without the direct control of these governments" (2004, p.1).

This situation emphasizes the importance of studying the reactions of the Saudi press to such growth, as well as journalists' opinions with regard to censorship which might weaken the ability of the national press to compete with other media outlets. The Saudi national press, public radio and TV channels had been the main source of national and local news available to the Saudis for decades. However, public and private media loyal to the government have lost their domination over national news and information due to the presence of alternative and accessible news media such as satellite channels and the Internet (Al-Qarni, 2004). Moreover, this situation raises the importance of studying the opinion of media decision makers at the Ministry of Culture and Information towards the easing of the Ministry's censorship in order to help the national press survive in an increasingly competitive market. This section focuses on the Internet in Saudi Arabia and how Saudis interact with the Internet. However, before discussing the Internet in Saudi Arabia, it is appropriate to shed light on the Internet and how the growth of Internet websites and users affects other media.

#### **The Internet and its interactivity:**

This section discusses how the great degree of interactivity offered by the Internet makes it a very attractive medium compared to the printed press, radio and TV.

Dimension et al. find that "the Internet has a competitive displacement effect on traditional media in the daily news domain with the largest displacements occurring for television and newspapers" (2004, p.19). Gans points out that due to the presence of the Internet, "the news media have been losing audiences' income from advertisers, and the result is smaller budgets and slimmer news organizations" (2004, p. xxi). Dawidowska argues that Internet users spend more time online than reading newspapers or watching television (2002). Tsao and Sibley argue that "the explosive growth of the Internet has offered a revolutionary platform as an informational channel affecting the use of other media by consumers" (2004, p.126).

The Internet, which is characterized by multi-media and a high degree of interactivity, coupled with new-generation mobile phones such as iPhone and BlackBerry, not only gives the audience the opportunity to choose their preferred content and when and how to use it, but also makes it possible even for people without journalistic experience to participate in news gathering and reporting. Tredinnick argues that the new generation of Internet services, especially Web 2.0, "is presented as a process of ceding control over applications to users, enabling users to extract information and data and reuse that information and data in a flexible way, enabling them in the process perhaps even to change the structure of the information system itself" (2006, p.229). New communication technologies, especially the Internet (specifically Web 2.0, where the rapid growth of websites such as Youtube, Facebook, Wikipedia and Twitter is occurring) and mobile phones might weaken the domination by organizations and governments over the flow of information. Tredinnick states that "Web 2.0 has been used largely metaphorically to suggest a major software upgrade to the World Wide Web" (2006, p. 229). Web 2.0 has the potential to encourage users to generate the content (Barsky, 2006). However, Tredinnick disputes that,

Web 2.0 is not characterized by technological innovation per se, but by a shifting understanding of status of information, knowledge and the role of the user in respect of information application. As information proliferates, control is being gradually ceded to users (2006, p.229).



Davis argues that "individuals' preferences for online news reflect perceptions that these news sources provide benefits unobtainable through traditional news outlets" (2003, p. 474). Moreover, young users tend to rely more on new media for news than on traditional media. The reliance on Internet and mobile phones as news media, especially among "digital natives," i.e. those in the age range 15-24 who have grown up with digital technology, gives these media the potential to dominate the news industry in the future (Wei, 2008). Wei argues that digital natives use the new generation of mobile phones and Internet for news and entertainment more intensively to interact and participate with what they view online. He finds that "results indicate that as the high-tech mobile phone expands function, use of the mobile phone as a source of news and entertainment seems common" (2008, p.43).

The high degree of interactivity provided by the Internet helps audiences to interact with journalists in a way never witnessed before the advent of the Internet. Kinsey asserts that "journalism has come a long way from the days when the audience was perceived, if recognized at all, as a passive receptor of whatever information or story took the whim of an editor, or an editor felt the audience 'should know'" (2009, p. 28). Therefore, the new level of interactivity provided by the Internet and mobile phones has created a new media-audience relationship. Flavian and Gurrea point out that the Internet "is distinguished by the speed with which news items reach the reader, the low cost of distributing information and the opportunity to establish direct contact and interaction with users, who have come to play an important role in the design of the journalistic product" (2006, p. 326). Similarly, Miller argues that "as digital media become the dominant means of communication, they will usher in a new paradigm, transforming how we think, behave, relate, and create" (2005, p.31).

Similarly, Tewksbury found in a study of Americans' news consumption that "American news audiences are in the midst of a cohort replacement process in which successive groups of news readers are gradually shifting aggregate news exposure away from traditional outlets and toward new media" (2003, p.707). "Citizen journalism" has become a major source of news not only for Internet users but also for news channels and newspapers. Glaser offers the following explanation:

The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others (cited in Citizen Journalist website, 2009).

In the same vein, Ludtke points out that "with the arrival of the Internet, the ability of non-journalists to 'publish' their words and link them with those of other like-minded scribes has altered forever the balance of power between those who control the means to publish and those who have something they believe is important to say" (Winter, 2005). Gillmor argues that:

The lines will blur between producers and consumers, changing the role of both in ways we're only beginning to grasp now. The communication network itself will become a medium for everyone's voice, not just the few who can afford to buy multimillion-dollar printing presses, launch satellites or win the government's permission to squat on the public's airwaves (2006, p. xxiv).

This situation forces the BBC, CNN and other news outlets to use Internet websites to reach more viewers. CNN, for example, used Youtube in the debate between candidates for the Democratic Party nomination for the 2008 U.S. presidential elections and Youtube users had the chance to pose questions to the candidates. For the first time in such a debate, Internet users asked questions in video form and heard the answer live from presidential candidates on CNN and Youtube (CNN website, June 2007).

With the popularity of websites such as Youtube, which has more than 30 million members, (Wikipedia, August 2007) the domination of the professional communicators who have controlled media content for centuries is in danger. *USA Today's* survey reports that Youtube, which was created in February 2005, serves up to 100 million video clips every 24 hours, in addition to 65,000 new videos posted daily (*USA Today*, July 16, 2006). In their report, Nielsen-NetRatings (July, 2006), "a global leader in Internet media and market research," mention that Youtube grew 75% weekly in its first six months. Hitwise (an online competitive intelligence service company) which provides a daily report on how many millions of people interact with websites, mentions that Youtube visitors and members in America increased by 70% between January and May 2007 (June, 2007). According to Harris Interactive and the Center for Media Research's survey,

which includes 2,309 adults in America in December 2006, the time American people spent watching broadcast television and reading newspapers has reduced by 0.5% for the first time ever (August, 2007). The survey also found that almost one in three American adults who are frequent Youtube users say that they spend less time watching TV due to the time they spend viewing clips on Youtube.

A Youtube video clip showing American male soldiers in Iraq duct-taping a female soldier in November 2006 was a huge news story which made headlines throughout the world. The execution of Saddam Hussein in December 2006 provides a further example of the Internet and mobile phones as a news medium. The Iraqi government released footage of the execution on Al Iraqiya TV channel but the footage stopped before the actual execution. However, a few hours after the execution, an amateur video shot using a camera phone was posted on the Metacafe website showing the execution, which included witnesses insulting Saddam (Metacafe website, December 30, 2006; Wikipedia, July, 2007). This amateur footage itself became the story, stealing the thunder from the main story of Saddam's execution.

Another story followed by mainstream news outlets after it was published on a website was the killing of eight high school students by their classmate in Finland in November 2007. Three different clips were posted on Youtube under the title "Jokela High School Massacre," showing an 18-year-old gunman firing shots at the ground and getting ready to go to his school and commit his crime (Fox News website, November 23, 2007). CNN, BBC, Fox News and other news outlets followed the story showing the clips posted on Youtube.

Some of the mainstream news media outlets in the world such as NBC, CBS and BBC, which usually set the news agenda, clearly realized the impact of the rapidly growing popularity of websites such as Youtube and Facebook. This has led companies such as NBC, CBS, Vivendi's Universal Music Group, Sony BMG Music Entertainment and Warner Music Group Corp to sign a strategic partnership with Youtube, which includes advertising and the daily publication of video clips featuring new shows, songs and news, on the Youtube website (Youtube website, June, 2006; *USA Today*, September

10, 2006; Montopoli, 2006). The BBC has also launched a news and information channel on Youtube that posts around 30 new clips everyday (BBC website, May 13, 2007). The BBC announced that Youtube users can select which of the latest BBC breaking news stories they want, when they want. They can also comment on clips, rate them and post their own video responses (BBC website, May13, 2007).

### **The Internet in Saudi Arabia:**

During the spread of the Internet over the last decade or so, a number of countries have tried to control and filter the information and news it provides. Countries such as China, Iran and some Arab countries impose very tight controls on the Internet. Different countries control the Internet for different reasons, but the most common are political and cultural. The Internet differs from other mass media (television, radio and press) because it offers multi-way communication which gives users the opportunity to publish materials that can be viewed by millions inside and outside the country. This feature allows the publication of information and news that national media are not able to publish because of censorship imposed on them by national governments.

This situation means that the Internet is a threat to governments that are used to owning and/or controlling the national media. Thus non-democratic countries tend to be keen to find ways to control the Internet. For example, the Chinese government imposes rigorous controls on the Internet, which are considered the tightest in the world. Brown (2006) terms this the "Great Firewall of China". Brown mentions that there are nine Internet providers in China who have been given licences to provide the service nationwide. Chinese people cannot use the Internet services without connecting to one of these local providers, who use the most advanced control devices available to prevent Chinese people from accessing undesirable sites (Claeburn, 2006). The Chinese government not only controls the local content of the Internet but also threatens international companies such as Google and Yahoo that their websites will be blocked if they do not control and filter their contents and ensure that the information and news they publish does not conflict with Chinese government policy.

In 2002 the Chinese government blocked the Google website because it published undesirable material (BBC, September 13, 2002). This situation forced Google to sign a contract with the Chinese government in 2006 to practice self-censorship on its website (BBC, January 25, 2006). The Chinese government goes further than this, pursuing Chinese users who participate in undesirable debates. One of the best-cited examples was the jailing of Chinese journalist Shi Tao for ten years for material published on Yahoo (Claeburn, 2006).

The China case is not unique. Heavy control and filtering of the Internet is practised in other countries all over the world, especially in the Middle East. Brown argues that government control in Iran is similar to that of the Chinese, especially in the number of blocked sites. The number of sites blocked for religious, moral and political reasons may be as high as ten million (Brown, 2007).

In the Arab world, government control and filtering of the Internet is achieved by giving licences to local providers who provide the service to the public. Internet providers filter and block sites that criticize the government or conflict with the religious and cultural principles of the society in question. The extent of the control and filtering differs from one country to another. The number of Internet users also differs from country to country. The number of Internet users in the Arabic world is about 26 million, with an annual increase of up to 18% (Atkins – Kruger, September 2006). The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia lead the Arab world in this regard, followed by Egypt.

In Saudi Arabia, access to Internet services was first granted to the Saudi public at the end of 1999. The government delayed provision of this service in order to put in place the means for monitoring and controlling it (Vogt, 2003). Therefore, when the Internet was introduced in 1997, King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) concluded an agreement with the British company GBB for monitoring and concealing “undesirable” websites (Teitelbaum, 2002). Accordingly, the service was in the beginning provided only to universities, hospitals and some academic and governmental organizations. Eventually, the Internet was made available to the public in 1999 but with heavy control by KACST.

Censorship and control in Saudi Arabia, then, are directed not only towards the national press, TV channels, and radio stations, but also extend to include the Internet. Saleh al-'Adhel, head of KACST, said that "while the Internet has done much in 'relaying and distributing information,' it also 'has a negative side that conflicts with our faith and our Arab Muslim traditions'" (Internews Website, 2004). In a press release al-'Adhel mentions that KACST established a committee on the Internet:

To protect society from material on the Internet that violates Islam or encroaches on our traditions and culture. This committee will determine which sites are immoral, such as pornographic sites and others, and will bar subscribers from entering such sites. There are many bad things on the Internet. That is why we have created a mechanism to prevent such things from reaching our society so that a home subscriber to this service can be reassured. We have programs, software, and hardware that prevent the entry of material that corrupts or that harms our Muslim values, tradition, and culture. We also created a 'fire wall' or barrier to prevent other quarters from breaching our sites. That is why we have not rushed into providing this service. We first want to make sure we eliminate all negative aspects of the Internet (Internews, 2004).

In March 2001 the number of websites blocked by KACST reached 200,000, with 250 websites blocked per day (Teitelbaum, 2002, p. 231). Teitelbaum argues that despite government efforts to block certain websites by using advanced technologies, it is not possible to assure these blockages because many Saudis are wealthy and can afford to purchase the latest programs for bypassing them. However, Teitelbaum contends that Saudi Arabia is unique as the cradle of Islam, home of the two holy cities of Makkah and Al-Madinah, where the country's conservative society supports the monitoring and controlling procedures imposed on the Internet, in order to ensure that the Internet services received by users are free from any materials that contradict Islamic teachings or the traditions and norms of society. KACST announced that it receives 500 requests from Saudis a day to block websites, whilst 100 requests are received to unblock banned sites (cited in Teitelbaum, 2002). Burrows points out that the Saudi Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) who have been responsible for controlling the Internet service (rather than KACST) rely on active Saudis who support such control (November 13, 2008). He adds that every day CITC receives around 1,200 requests from citizens to block sites.

Al-Dosary, in his MA dissertation (2007), points out that the control process begins from the user, through self-censorship. Many Saudis avoid accessing websites that conflict with their religion and traditions. The second step in controlling and monitoring Internet usage is imposed on the service by local providers. If any user accesses a banned site the local provider may be liable to lose its licence. The final, comprehensive censorship is imposed by the main provider KACST, through which all Internet services are licensed before being passed on to local providers. Reporters Without Borders (2002) mentions that since its inception in Saudi Arabia, the Internet has been subject to strict control by KACST blocking Saudis' access to several websites.

KACST was the official government body which granted Internet service to Internet providers before the Saudi Communications and Information Technology Commission took charge in 2007. Most of the blocked sites are either sexual or political websites, but there are also other websites subject to screening such as those concerned with women's rights, fashion and some religious websites (Al Qarni, 2004). Thierer and Crews state that KACST screened all Internet sites that criticize the government, its system or key figures, or which discuss sensitive social, political, economic, religious or cultural issues. However, the censorship does not usually extend to include news media channels, magazines or online newspapers (Al Qarni, 2004).

### **Saudis and the Internet:**

*The Internet as a cheap and accessible medium characterized by a high degree of interactivity helps people make their voice heard in a unique way never witnessed by other print and broadcast media (Al Qarni, 2004). Cottle and Ashton point out that "new communication technologies, digitalisation and technological convergence along with multi-skilling and multi-media production are now contributing to the transformation of broadcast news production" (1999, p. 22). Similarly, Miller describes the experience of information and communication technologies as "quite different from the intellectually passive experience of watching television or the emotionally distant experience of reading (2005, p.32).*

Al Qarni is of the opinion that the massive developments in information and communication technologies are affecting Arab people on different levels (2004). He adds that the information revolution and technology, especially the Internet, impact on and challenge all aspects of Arab politics, people and culture. He explains that ICT helps Arabs to communicate and interact with the outside world without government interference. Information and communication technology is challenging the Saudi government and media. Kraidy (2006), Al Qarni (2004), Al-Shehri (2000) and Yamani (2003) investigated the effects of the Internet in the Arab world. They found that the Internet has profound effects on the governments, news media and people in Arab countries. Moreover, they found that the Internet affects Arabic culture, people and governments in a greater and deeper way than print and broadcast media. Al Qarni (2004) finds that by giving Saudis the opportunity to interact and make their voices heard, the Internet creates a new public sphere. Al Qarni (2004) points out that Saudis are determined to use the Internet to bring about political and social change: after just a few years' online experience, Saudis have made the Internet into a public arena where they can debate and take part in the political process.

For example, Saudis use the Internet to show their resistance to some of the government's decisions. An excellent example of this is a clip posted on Youtube of a Saudi woman driving a car (Youtube, March 10, 2008). It is worth mentioning that Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world which bans women from driving. Therefore, a Saudi woman took advantage of the Internet and filmed herself driving a car in order to place pressure on the Saudi government to give Saudi women the right to drive.

After the Saudi woman posted the video on Youtube, CNN, BBC and Aljazeera followed the story. The BBC mentions that "Wajeha Huwaider talks of the injustice of the ban and calls for its abolition as she drives calmly along a highway" (March 11, 2008). Huwaider told the BBC, "Many women in this society are able to drive cars, and many of our male relatives don't mind." Due to censorship, this type of story cannot be followed by the national media in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, when any group organizes a campaign or protest, it utilizes the Internet or mobile phones to publicize it.



In the same vein, in his doctoral dissertation, Al Salim focuses on the impact of the Internet on Saudi society (Al Salim, 2005). He selects samples from three universities in Saudi Arabia. The study examines the impact of the Internet on the self-image of Saudi women. In this context, the study aims at understanding Saudi women's viewpoint towards the social changes caused by the Internet. Part of the study is also dedicated to the participation of women in Internet chat sites. The researcher selected nine female students from three different universities, who are majoring in English language and who are also members of an Online Writing Collaborative Project (OWCP). The study relies on a qualitative method and adopted two methods of data collection; interview and content analysis of documents posted in the OWCP by the participants or other members. The researcher contacted his sample via e-mail and analysed the outcomes, including the content of the writing project. The study concentrates on six aspects:

- 1 - The experiences of the sample in using the Internet
- 2 - The extent of exchanging ideas and ability to write freely
- 3 - The sample's preferred topics of discussion on the forum
- 4 - The ability of the sample to overcome the social threats of their conservative society
- 5 - Consideration of the change in attitudes towards traditions and norms
- 6 - The social problems the sample face when expressing their thoughts and ideas.

Al Salim finds that the Internet has had a vast impact on Saudi women in various ways. He points out that the Internet increases the availability of information and knowledge to the study's sample, as well as developing their writing skills and ability to analyse and discuss. Furthermore, the study sample confirms that the Internet has become their window to the outside world in the face of social and media restrictions. They additionally mention that they mainly depend on the Internet to obtain thorough and well-analysed knowledge of local and international events, particularly because the Saudi media do not discuss the issues that concern them. The study reveals that Saudi female users have resorted to the Internet as an alternative to the local media.

An analysis by Fandy (1999) also discusses the impact of the Internet in Saudi Arabia. The study focuses on the utilization of the Internet by the Saudi opposition abroad as a reliable medium to reach Saudis. It also discusses the conflicts between globalization and localization. Fandy stresses the importance of the Internet as a new communication medium that has bypassed political boundaries and barriers to reach people and overcome the measures imposed by governments on other forms of media. He argues that the Saudi government used to have full control of information by controlling radio and television and strictly limiting the press, as well as censoring foreign publications. However, the government is no longer able to control the vast flow of information due to the existence of satellite channels and the Internet, which has opened the borders of Saudi Arabia to the world. He adds that the opposition today can reach Saudi people anywhere via the Internet, satellite channels or mobile telephones, without being subject to local control. The existence of a political opposition had been a secret known only by a limited number of people. However, new technologies enable the opposition to reach the houses of Saudis and become known to the public of Saudi Arabia.

Fandy points out that in the past opposition members used personal contacts, mosques or tapes to reach the Saudi public; now the Internet gives access to websites which people can browse despite government attempts at control. Such control has become a hard task because of constant changes to website addresses. Moreover, the blocking of opposition sites on the Internet created a generation of Saudi youth who are able to decode the encryption imposed by KACST. Fandy concludes, "geographic boundaries and notions of state sovereignty, traditionally definers of individual states, seem to dissolve in the cyberspace formed from an overriding globalization of local concepts and localization of global concepts" (1999, p. 147).

In line with this, a study focusing on the impact of the Internet on users in Saudi Arabia has been conducted by Al-Bakhaity (2001). The study tackles the role and the effects of the Internet on the private sector and consumers in Saudi Arabia. The number of Internet users in Saudi Arabia is steadily increasing in the flourishing economic situation; the researcher expects a higher degree of usage during the coming years,

whether as a medium for conveying news and information or for marketing, shopping and exchange of views and knowledge. Al-Bakhaity comes to several conclusions, the most significant being that the Internet has become an important technology in the daily life of many Saudis, particularly women, who are prevented by traditional restrictions from participation in political and social life. Therefore the Internet is the best available medium for Saudi women to interact with others and discuss matters which they cannot talk about in daily life.

In his doctoral dissertation, Al-Shehri focuses on electronic newspapers and the extent to which Arab readers in general and Saudis in particular are satisfied with newspapers published online (2000). He used three methods for gathering his data: questionnaires, direct interviews and content analysis. The questionnaire shows that the majority of readers of Arab newspapers on the Internet are interested in reading news. This group is followed by those interested in learning, and finally by those who browse for entertainment. Some 54.6% of the study sample said that they read newspapers on the Internet on a daily basis. They also admitted that they use the Internet because it is available at any time and cheaper than buying newspapers. 74.2% of the sample expressed their satisfaction with newspapers being issued on the net. However, they did not mention their viewpoint about the contents of newspapers, and concentrated on the price and the availability of newspapers on the net at any one time.

Al-Shehri points out that the strict control and censorship imposed on the national media have forced Arabs to seek reliable news in the foreign media. The study finds that some Internet users complained about the quality of some newspapers' websites compared to non-Arabic sites. Al-Shehri advises national newspapers to develop methods for covering events with due regard to transparency, a lack of which makes the readers turn to other newspapers such as the London-based *Alhyat* newspaper. *Alhyat* is selected by the majority of the study sample as their preferred website because it enjoys considerable freedom and is not subject to the Ministry of Culture and Information's censorship.

Kraidy (2006) also argues that the Arab media has undergone drastic changes in the last ten years, as satellite TV channels and the Internet have become available to the Arab public. The availability of various media outlets has weakened the government's media monopolies. Kraidy mentions that the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information had succeeded for a long time in controlling the national media (radio, TV and newspapers). However, the advent of new media, particularly the Internet with its vast number of websites, the possibility of changing website addresses, and fast, easy access has already weakened the government's ability to control websites.

Kraidy focuses part of his study on Lebanese TV's interactive pop star competition "Superstar," which is considered an Arabic version of the American programme "American Idol". He analyses the content of the programme, including the level of voter participation by Saudis and the religious rulings (Fatwas) issued by Islamic scholars. Some religious leaders have described participation in the programme as "sinful". Kraidy also looks at press commentary on the programme and the new government rules issued for organizing participation in it, and analyses the SMS message and telephone voting by Saudi viewers (Kraidy, 2006).

In addition, Kraidy discusses the impacts of new media such as the Internet and SMS messaging on Saudi viewers, along with the extent of their response and utilization of such technologies in spite of local political, social and religious pressures. He mentions the measures taken by the government to prevent Saudi viewers from participating in the "Superstar" programme, blocking the programme's website and preventing voting by telephone. He finds that despite all actions taken by the government, Saudis found ways to participate, either by calling via foreign telephone networks or through accessing the blocked website by using alternative links.

Kraidy concludes that the Saudi people have found in the new media a non-government controlled means to communicate widely with the outside world. He adds that neither government departments nor local rules can prevent these new media from being utilized. In addition, Kraidy mentions that two thirds of Internet users in Saudi

Arabia are women, who see this new technology as an opportunity to participate in political and social affairs with which they cannot normally be involved.

Through conducting a field study, I examined the degree of responsiveness and interaction of Saudi journalists and media decision makers in the Ministry of Culture and Information with the massive flow of accessible information and news to the Saudi people via the Internet. I also examined the pressure of the Internet on media decision makers in the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information to ease censorship over the national press.

The observations conducted in two Saudi newspapers and the interviews with Saudi journalists from two papers showed the extent of the effects of the Internet on the Saudi press. The interviews determined the extent of the effects of the Internet in news decisions and news making in the Saudi press. This leads to the next chapter, which discusses the gatekeeping model, and the main factors affecting the gatekeepers' news decisions as well as globalization theory.

## Chapter Three

### Theoretical Framework

This chapter reviews two theories; gatekeeping and globalization. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the main factors which influence the western gatekeepers' news decisions. Such discussion helps to develop a deep understanding of the nature of the gatekeeping process in order to compare it to the Saudi gatekeeping which is investigated in the field study. Another aim of this chapter is to review globalization theory and how the Saudi government interacts with the process of globalization. This helps to develop the argument of the effects of globalization on the government decisions related to the national press.

#### **I-The gatekeeping model and factors affecting news decisions**

This chapter discusses the “gatekeeper” model, which attempts to describe and explain the factors that influence news decisions. The focus here is on studies in news making which have influenced the gatekeeping model. Despite the fact that some of the studies are from the last century, they are still of great value for news researchers. A review of previous studies shows that decision-making on news in the Saudi press is a complicated process influenced by a combination of several factors and forces (see Khazen, 1999: Al-Kahtani, 1999: Al Shebeili, 2000 and Rugh, 2004). The complex nature of news decisions in the Saudi press necessitates a review of the gatekeeper model as one of the theories that can help explain this.

Huge numbers of news stories are available, and since it is impossible for individuals to view all of them, they rely on those selected by the news media. Obviously, the enormous number of potential stories that occur daily cannot all be reported.

Nevertheless, the selection of news too often focuses on the trivial (Berkowitz, 1997). It is up to news-workers to decide what kind of stories make it to the public and which are to be rejected. According to Gaye Tuchman (1978), what gets published in newspapers or aired on television depends on what the editor or publisher wants covered, and *how* they want it covered. However, the news is the result of an overall production process and the gatekeeper function applies not only to the traditionally held view of the individual judgment of reporters, but also to the beliefs and preferences of editors and the community (Schudson, 1989). Shoemaker argues that gatekeeping is accomplished through group decisions rather than the selection of individual journalists, which are affected by different factors. Shoemaker states that the news of a single day “represents the effects of many gatekeepers at many gates” and that they are affected by a variety of influences (1991, p. 70).

#### **Gatekeeping theory:**

The social psychologist Kurt Lewin was the first scholar to use the term “gatekeeper” in social studies (1947). The term later became one of the prime theories in mass media studies. White contends that a story is “transmitted from one gate keeper after another in the chain of communications” (1950, p. 384). He adds that there is an individual or group at each stage of the communication process that has the right to allow the message to pass to the next gate in its original form, to add to it, to omit it or to ignore it entirely. At the end of the journey, the news item reaches an individual or group “in charge” of deciding whether each item should be allowed “in” or left “out” (Lewin, 1951). However, Gans (1980) locates the construction of news not in the journalist, the publisher, or in the gatekeeping editor, but in the process in which all parts, routines and arrangements of the organization are engaged for the creation of news.

Shoemaker (1991) argues that gatekeeping is the process that allows the millions of messages available all over the world to be reduced and transformed into hundreds of messages given to each person on a daily basis. Moreover, she posits that most gatekeeping theory studies focus on the process of news selection, but that gatekeeping is more than just selection; it also involves the production of news. Gatekeeping as a

process includes “all forms of information control that may arise in decisions about message encoding, such as selection, shaping, display, timing, withholding, or repetition of entire messages or message components” (Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien, 1972, p. 43). Barzilai-Nahon defines gatekeeping as a process of information control which includes “selection, addition, withholding, display, channeling, shaping, manipulation, repetition, timing, localization, integration, disregard and deletion of information” (2005, p.250).

White (1950) in his study of the gatekeeper examines the selection of news as a rational individual process. Shoemaker built upon White's study, adding the effects of social, routine and organizational forces in shaping news decisions made by individual gatekeepers. Recently, Barzilai-Nahon (2005) developed a new model of gatekeeping called Network Gatekeeping Theory (NGT), which takes into account information communication technology and more specifically the Internet as a new factor in the shaping of the news selection process. By challenging the traditional one-way gatekeeping of the relationship between gatekeepers and their audience, the Internet offers multi-way gatekeeping. Therefore, the notion of sender-receiver is no longer as significant as it used to be (Barzilai-Nahon, 2005). She adds, “during any interaction in the net the roles of sender-receiver are repeatedly exchanged, while the gatekeeper and the gated can play both roles” (2005, p. 251).

### **Factors Affecting Gatekeepers' News Decisions:**

There are several factors that affect the decision of the gatekeeper with regard to the selection or rejection of a particular news item. The selection of news is not a simple random process subject to the personal judgments of the gatekeeper. In this regard, Shoemaker (1991) stresses the complexity of the gatekeeping process. The gatekeeper has his/her own likes and dislikes, ideas on the nature of his/her job, ways of tackling



certain problems and preferred strategies for taking decisions. A mix of all these factors plays a role in rejecting, accepting or shaping messages. Shoemaker adds that a gatekeeper is not totally free in selecting news; he or she works within the constraints of communication routines and within the framework of the communication organization. These influences are also coupled with forces beyond the organization. The influence of each factor on the gatekeeper's selection of news differs from society to society, in accordance with the differences in place and time (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). There are six main factors that might influence the process of gatekeeping:

### **1) Personal and Professional Judgments:**

Among the factors intrinsic to the journalist are education, personal attitudes, values, beliefs and professional orientations (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Personal judgments are among the main factors influencing the gatekeeper's decisions. Berkowitz points out that "news represents the outcome of a reporter's expert judgment and personal motivation" (1997, p. 53). The effects of the gatekeeper's age, gender, income, social class, education, religion and self-confidence may influence decisions surrounding selection or rejection of a news story (White, 1950). White's study focuses on how decisions are affected by the gatekeeper's personal and idiosyncratic biases. By studying the news selection of one male wire editor, a key finding of his study was that although some journalistic beliefs were involved, the news selection depended on the gatekeeper's experiences, attitudes and expectations.

There is also professional judgment, which makes the gatekeeper conscientious with regard to news decisions. Shoemaker and Reese contend that "professional roles and ethics have a direct effect on mass media content, whereas the effect of personal attitudes, values, and beliefs on mass media content is indirect" (1996, p. 65). Berkowitz argues that gatekeeping focuses on the news decision makers' ability to exercise "professional news judgment" (1997, p.53). By investigating the experiences of thirty-five editors, McGinty (1999) found that most journalists are keen to build a sound reputation as

professional journalists and are very aware of this. Establishing a good reputation is seen as essential, and journalists therefore avoid publishing news that might harm their image as respectable and competent professionals. Thus, professional gatekeepers prefer stories regularly covered by the media, such as wars, disasters and celebrity news (Gans, 1980). The professional journalist exhibits “distinctive patterns of cognitive judgment and differing specific attitudes” (McLeod and Hawley, 1964, p. 538).

Furthermore, news judgment incorporates with news values which focus on how news is selected based on its value to the readers. Galtung and Ruge (1973) emphasize proximity, frequency, meaningfulness, unexpectedness, prominence and negativity as the most important criteria in news selection. Fedler's (1997) replica of Galtung and Ruge's study reveals proximity, importance, identification and newness as the major news values in western news selection. However, Brooks et al. argue that the audience is the first criterion of newsworthiness and “the backdrop against which reporters and editors consider questions of news value” (1988, p. 5). They argue that people are interested in the private life of celebrities more than anything else.

Arab news media share many of the same news values as the Western news media, with the exception of identification. Mellor argues that Arab readers cannot easily identify with the news in the Arab media due to the dominant focus on hard news. She posits that such stories do not interest Arab readers (2005, p.96) and adds, “Arab news media still prioritize political news at the expense of soft news, which is increasing in the Western media to attract more viewers” (2005, p.96).

Objectivity, fairness, balance and viewing both sides of a story may lead the gatekeeper to select or reject a story. Moreover, the press code of ethics plays an important role in news decisions. For example, the gatekeeper who believes in the media's role as a watchdog representing the public, is far removed from the gatekeeper who believes that the press is the voice of the government. However, it is not easy to identify and generalize even the core values in the journalistic profession (De Bruin, 2000). De Bruin argues that “it is not only that the professional roles are judged quite

differently around the globe, but there are very different values given to such questions as which dimensions of the job are considered to be most important and whether some ethically questionable reporting practices might be justified in the case of an important story.”

In the Arab media, according to Mellor, some journalistic professional values do not exist. She argues that “the Western notion of objectivity as presenting two sides or opinions rather than one is not particularly hailed in the Arab news media, as they might be accused of conspiracy with the enemy, particularly if interviewing Israeli officials” (2005, p. 87). In the Saudi media, Barayan argues, a lack of understanding of journalism as a profession among news employees, coupled with unskilled and untrained journalists are among the most important factors behind the poor quality of news on Saudi television, which explains the dissatisfaction of Saudis with the Saudi television news service (2002).

## **2) Organization and Routine:**

The gatekeeper encounters several pressures from the organization for which he/she is working, which vastly affect his/her decisions regarding selection of news items. At the organizational level, news is the result of a combination of decisions by journalists within news organizations and other outside factors (Kim, 2002, p. 431). The primary pressure on the employees of an organization is the inside policy and agenda of that organization. Tuchman’s implication is that the media have their own agenda and objectives that influence which issues are covered and how they are covered. According to Shoemaker and Reese (1996), the longer people work for an organization, the more institutionalized they become and the more attached to the policies of that organization, both stated and unstated. Therefore, most of the published and aired news is likely to be based more on organizational policies than on the merits of a story (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Consequently, the gatekeeper as part of the organization is compelled to adhere to the organization's policy and agenda when taking decisions, and if, for

example, a newspaper has a certain tendency to back the government's decisions, it is hard for the gatekeeper to challenge that general trend.

Beside the effects of the organization, routine plays a major role in news decisions. "At the routine level, gatekeeping decisions are based on a pre-established and generalized set of practices in judging newsworthiness, including accuracy, the appropriate length, good visuals, human interest, novelty, negativity, conflict and violence, loss of lives, and the story's timeliness" (Kim, 2002, p. 431). Shoemaker and Reese define media routines as "patterned, routinized, and repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs" (1996, p. 105). Therefore, the gatekeeper carries out his/her duties in a routine system where his/her role and decisions must be consistent with all news making processes applied in the organization. This factor makes news decisions a routine process, carried out by editors as a normal practice.

Bennett (2004) makes the point that "the news decision basis in the organizational model of gatekeeping is the bureaucratic routine in which an editorial hierarchy establishes everyday news priorities, production processes, assignments, and status distinctions among journalists and their activities" (2004, p. 298). Shoemaker and Reese argue that "media routines, although helping fit the flow of information into manageable physical limits, impose their own special logic on the product that results" (1996, p. 119). Gans (1980) asserts that editors favour news that has already been certified by its acceptance elsewhere. Therefore, events such as press conferences and official statements and speeches, which fit into the media routine, are more likely to be covered.

### **3) Social and Cultural Factors:**

Social and cultural factors are considered a key factor affecting the gatekeeper's news decisions. News items are examined "in relation to society and culture, portraying news as both the result of social cultures and the maintainer of those cultures" (Berkowitz, 1997, p. xiv). Shoemaker points out that "none of these factors - the

individual, the routine, the organization, or the social institution- can escape the fact that it is tied to and draws its sustenance from the social system” (p. 1990, p.75). News stories are socially created products and not a reflection of reality, in spite of a story’s basis in a real event or problem (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). According to Tuchman, the ways in which news is constructed forms a basis for defining the social construction of reality.

Mellor (2005) argues that in Arab media, “researchers stress that the moral and social responsibility of news people dictates that they should not agitate public opinion, but rather should keep the status quo” (p. 82). Social and cultural factors also include the religious and cultural principles and norms honoured by the community. Thus, some taboo subjects, such as sex, are strenuously avoided. Mellor mentions that Arab researchers and journalists tend to see the role of the news media as serving the country’s moral and cultural heritage and preserving national unity. In line with this, Mellor argues that Saudi journalists see the main role of the press as promoting Islamic values.

Therefore, it is unusual for a Saudi newspaper to cover news stories which include religiously or socially sensitive issues such as homosexuality and gambling (Al Shebeili, 2000). For example, the columnist Hussain Shobokshi was threatened with death for writing an article about allowing women in Saudi Arabia to drive cars (Arab Press Freedom Watch, July 29, 2003). Similarly, Jamal Khashoggi, *Alwatan’s* Editor-in-Chief, was fired in 2003 because of pressure on the government from religious leaders (Arab Press Freedom Watch, May 28, 2003). Consequently, it is clear that social and cultural factors are crucial in news decisions in the Saudi press.

#### **4) Economic Factors:**

Eliaspaph (1988) emphasizes the news as an economic and political product rather than a social one. Most media outlets in the world are commercial (profit-based) organizations owned either by individuals or companies. Economic factors in the news include production, circulation, market size, competition, revenue, advertisers and audience. Bagdikian's main argument in his book *The Media Monopoly*, (2000) is that the

media exists solely for the purpose of selling goods, and therefore advertising revenues, rather than the dissemination of news, are the primary motive. He points out that newspapers and magazines “do not want merely readers; they want affluent readers” who can buy the advertised goods (2000, p .113).

By investigating the effects of the organization’s economic goals (profits) on news content and corporate policy, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) describe organizations’ owners and shareholders as among the most influential factors in the industry. They argue that due to the production process, “most stories cannot be weighed on the basis of their economic payoff,” and that many stories are evaluated for audience appeal, in order to bring in greater advertising revenue (1996, p. 146). They contend that “for the most part, the commercial mass media make their money by delivering audiences to advertisers” (1996, p. 149). Bennett (2004) argues that the personal and routine factors affecting news decisions are diminishing against growing economic factors, which have drastically affected the form of news over the past few years. Thus, the media organization is considered a commercial project aimed at generating profit, and the gatekeeper must take this factor into account in his selection of news, publishing items that contribute to this goal.

While economic factors may be considered the paramount drive affecting the content of the Western media, it is less salient in the Saudi press. Although some Saudi newspapers are owned by the private sector and aim to make a profit, none of the studies of Saudi newspapers reviewed in this study indicate the predominance of economic factors in news decisions (see Al Kheraigi, 1990: Al-Kahtani, 1999: Al Shebeili, 2000). The relative unimportance of this factor in Saudi Arabia can be attributed to the subsidies granted by the government to newspapers, which rarely face any risk of bankruptcy. For instance, when *Al Nadwa* newspaper was on the verge of insolvency in 2007, the Saudi government granted it financial support, despite the fact that it is owned by a private establishment. Al-Rashed (2007) mentions that King Abdullah donated 10 million riyals (1.5 million pounds) to *Al Nadwa* to help with the financial problems it was facing. This leads us on to the next factor influencing news decisions, the government-press relationship.

## **5) The Government-Press Relationship:**

There are many different groups - the government, media owners, advertisers, social groups, interest groups and the public – which compete to gain control over media content or at least to make their voice heard. Although most newspapers in the world are privately owned, governments in several countries endeavour to dominate news media content, whether through direct censorship and control or by establishing close relations with the media and influencing news selection. Cook (1998) argues that the government's relationship with the press is a major factor affecting news decisions.

The government-press relationship could be described as a game of give and take. On the one hand, the government needs the media as a medium to reach the public. On the other hand, the media try to maintain a good relationship with the government because the government provides information and news to the news media. In fact, governments are the biggest news providers for most mainstream media outlets (Cook, 1998). It could be added that the government is not only the biggest news provider, but also one of the most organized and accessible sources. In this context, Gans argues that sources are judged legitimate if they have been used previously, and if they are “productive,” “reliable,” “trustworthy,” “authoritative” and “articulate” (1980, p. 128-132). As a result, the news media rely heavily on official sources of news, especially from high-status, authoritative officials. However, poor relations with the government, as Cook reports, lead to the newspaper or channel in question being cut off from these government sources. Ted Turner, the founder of CNN, states that in 1981, CBS, NBC, and ABC teamed up with officials to keep CNN from covering the White House (2005).

The media in the Arab world in general, and in Saudi Arabia in particular operate under conditions of government control. The Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information imposes censorship on national newspapers. In this environment, the Saudi gatekeeper must consider relations with the government when making editorial decisions. The appointment of an Editor-in-Chief depends on the approval of the Ministry of Information and Culture, which might put pressure on the gatekeeper to select or ignore a certain story.

## **6) New Communication Technologies:**

Technological developments in communication, especially the Internet and mobile phones, have further complicated the functions of the gatekeeper in selecting news items from among the vast number of sources of stories. They have reduced the number of gates that the news has to pass through during its journey to publication, as compared to the chain of gates present during the 1950s, when White conducted his study. The Internet and mobile phones enable any person, without any journalistic experience, to report news, as long as he/she has a mobile phone with a camera or has access to the Internet. Barzilai-Nahon posits that the Internet has changed the “identity of gatekeepers and their role, whilst gatekeeping as a process has been altered as well” (2005, p. 251). She has developed a new model of gatekeeping called Network Gatekeeping Theory (NGT). Barzilai-Nahon argues that “NGT offers new definitions of gatekeeping and gatekeepers adapting traditional concepts to a networked society” (2005, p.1). She points out that “NGT is based on examination of power relations in the Internet, a space of information, and conceptualizes the distribution of information and processes of information control” (2005, p.1). She argues that the balance between gatekeepers and gated (entity that is subject to a gatekeeping process) is more complex.

Bennett argues that due to the presence of the Internet, the gatekeeping model has lost most of its traditional elements (2004, p. 288). He adds that “the most interesting dimension of technological gatekeeping is the press–government relationship, which can be thrown into real-time event management as reporters and officials all watch the same spontaneous transmissions of events and construct real-time interpretations of problems and solutions” (Bennett, 2004, p. 301).

### **Gatekeeping Summary:**

As discussed above, the gatekeeper’s decisions are affected by multiple factors. Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim & Wrigley point out that “when a potential news event approaches a gate or gatekeeper, there are a number of forces that determine whether the



event will become news or remain just one of millions of daily occurrences unnoticed by the general public” (2001). They add that “potential news items fight to get past each news gate, and the forces attached to the gates determine the news items' success”. Bennett argues that there are four main factors play an influential role in news decisions (1) the reporter's personal and professional news judgment values, (2) bureaucratic or organizational news gathering routines that establish the working relations between reporters and sources, (3) economic constraints on news production such as considerations of cost, efficiency, advertiser potential, and audience demographics, and (4) information and communication technologies that define the limits of time and space and enable the design of news formats that appeal to audiences (2004, p. 284). Shoemaker (1991) adds social institutions and the social system as factors that also affect the decision of the gatekeeper. Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim & Wrigley argue that the gatekeeping process is becoming more sophisticated, extending beyond thinking of gatekeeping as a series of discrete decisions made by individuals to recognizing that news gates are surrounded on both sides by forces that compete with one another to move stories forward or stop them (2001). Bennett argues that these gatekeeping factors have been thrown into change all at once, creating complex interactions and correspondingly puzzling changes in news content (2004, p. 284).

Although there are several overlapping factors affecting the western gatekeeper's news decisions, personal judgment and the routine are considered the most influential factors. Salwen & Stacks argue that “although journalistic routines may mediate personal influences, personal influences would still play a role in shaping media content” (1996, p. 88). White concluded his study mentioning that the decisions of "Mr. Gates" influenced by his personal beliefs and by his knowledge of news (1950). Berkowitz (1997) argues that “news represents the outcome of a reporter's expert judgment and personal motivation” (p.53). He adds most gatekeeping studies find that the job of gatekeeper as “implementation of journalistic judgment in the face of routine and organizational constraints” (1997, p.53). In similar vein, Bissell points out that “most studies have provided conclusive evidence that each journalist's decision-making is shaped by influences at the individual level” (2000, p. 81).

Although the analysis of several studies provided evidence of the effects of personal judgment as the most influential factor on news decisions of the western gatekeepers, there are studies that emphasize the effects of routine forces on news decisions. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argue that “routines form the immediate context, both within and through which these individuals do their job” (p.105). Several studies suggested that routine-level influences rather than individual-level influences play more influential role in news decisions (see Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim & Wrigley, 2001; Berkowitz, 1991; McCombs and Becker, 1979; Abbott and Brassfield, 1989). At the routines level, news decisions are based on a pre-established and generalized set of practices in judging newsworthiness, including accuracy, the right length, good visuals, human interest, novelty, negativity, conflict and violence, loss of lives, and the story's timeliness (Berkowitz, 1997, p. 55).

Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim & Wrigley argues that “routines are crucial in determining which items move through the news channel and which are rejected, and the distinction between individual forces and routine forces on news gatekeeping must be made if we are to evaluate the extent of each separately” (2001). They concluded that “the data support the idea that routine forces are more successful in winning the competition to determine what becomes news than are individual forces”. Dailey, Demo & Spillman (2003) mention that researchers such as Gieber “continued to extend White’s work to professional norms and organizational constraints: they found the individual newspaper gatekeeper to be much more passive than White did, and more reliant on such journalistic routines as deadlines, space constraints, the inverted pyramid, and beat systems” (p. 19).

Such understanding of the main factors which affect news decisions in the western model of gatekeeping helps in understanding the main factors affecting the Saudi gatekeeper. Like the western model, news decision-making in the Saudi press is influenced by a combination of the factors. This research aims to ascertain the most influential factors in the news decision process. In addition, the factors which influence news decisions in the Saudi press are examined through personal interviews with Editors-in-Chief and their deputies at *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah* daily newspapers and through

eight-week observations of these papers. Shoemaker argues that “the advantage of observation in studying gatekeeping is that the researcher sees real decisions being made in a real newsroom under realistic conditions and can observe some of the influences affecting the decisions, thus increasing external validity” (1996, p. 85). The interviews and observation exercises focus on the most influential factors affecting news decisions. Special emphasis is placed on the effects of government-press relations, especially in the light of competition from online news sources, which are not subject to the same control as the national press. In this context, this study discusses the effect of online published news on government-press relations in terms of whether it constitutes a real threat to such relations as Bennett (2004) and Lasica (1996) claim, or whether the relationship is solid enough to withstand any pressure.

## **II-Globalization and Saudi Arabia**

The aim of this section is to review globalization and the main aspects of globalization with greater emphasis on information and communication technologies in general, and the Internet specifically. Another aim of this section is to discuss globalization and its relationship to, and with, the Saudi government. Censorship is one of the techniques that the government uses in order to control what the Saudis watch, listen and read. However, the ability of the Saudi government to control information and news that the Saudis can view is challenged in the era of globalization; characterized by the presence of information communication technologies (ICTs), especially the Internet and mobile phones. Therefore, this section is divided into three parts; the first focuses on the definition of globalization theory and its main aspects; a second discusses the reforms and changes that the Saudi government has made as a reaction to globalization pressure; and finally the third concludes the discussion of globalization by focusing on censorship in the presence of the internet and how the internet is able to overcome such censorship.

## What is Globalization?

Globalization is one of the most frequently examined topics in the field of the social sciences. Although there is no clear definition of globalization, there is some agreement that it entails a view of the world as a single unit, especially in the economic, political and cultural spheres. Globalization refers to what is *international* and *common* rather than *local* and *private*.

Pieterse mentions that since 1990, globalization has become a dominant theme in the social sciences (2004). Similarly, Guillen (2001) notes that globalization is the most discussed subject especially in terms of its economic, social, technological and cultural aspects. Brysk points out that “globalization is a package of transnational flows of people, production, investment, information, ideas, and authority; not new, but stronger and faster” (2002, p. 1).

According to Thomas Friedman, globalization is “the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states, and technology to a degree never witnessed before, in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever” (1999, p.9). Giddens (2001) points out four overlapping trends of globalization:

- 1 - The communications revolution
- 2 - Free trade and market liberalization
- 3- Neo-liberal democracy, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union
- 4- Changes in the everyday life of people worldwide culturally and socially.

Scholars such as Greider (1997) and Korten (1995) define globalization as a predominantly economic process or even a new form of capitalism. Others such as Ruggie (1998) however, define globalization based on the growth of the role of international organizations such as Amnesty International and Reporters without Borders.

Some scholars such as Kearney (1995) and Sassen (1998, 2000) “emphasize the impact of transnational demographic, environmental, and cultural flows” while others such as Kaldor (1999), Lipschutz (2001) and Wapner (1996) plot the emergence of cross-border networks that may constitute a “global civil society” (Brysk, 2002, p.6).

Economic globalization is the most obvious and salient aspect of globalization. “Economic globalization constitutes integration of national economies into the international market through trade, direct foreign investment (by corporations and multinationals), short-term capital flows, international flows of workers and humanity generally, and flows of technology” (Bhagwati, 2004, p. 3). The world today is increasingly inclined to accept the idea of a single economic system, especially after the collapse of Soviet Union. Richard argues that communist countries such as Russia and Romania are “moving towards a market economy and evolving in the direction of the Western capitalist model” (1995, p.320). The form of capitalism adopted by Western countries has become the dominant economic system in the globalization.

Guerrero’s (2004) point that the notion that globalization is the new face of capitalism may not be a highly controversial one. Globalization is a process driven by the dominance of neo-liberal political economy (Giddens, 1998). Economic globalization and free trade, with the support of Western powers, particularly the United States, has encouraged many countries around the world to alter their local regulations in order to cope with global economic changes and to avoid isolation from the rest of the world. The growing role of global economic organizations and institutions such as World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the European Union is one of the economic dimensions of globalization. “The policies and practices of international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund can only be understood in the context of the notion of globalization” (Friedrichs & Friedrichs, 2002).

Globalization is not, however, simply an economic project. Friedrichs and Friedrichs argue that globalization has important political dimensions (2002). Politically, the Western model of government built on democracy and the right to elections, has

become the dominant system in most countries all over the world. Supported by America, the new global system will adopt a political model closer to that of liberal democracy. According to Gray (1998), globalization is a US-inspired political project designed to ensure the dominance of neo-liberal and free trade policies worldwide. Mittelman (2002) points out that there are two factors that tend to sublimate the politics of globalization: "First, there is the rush to implement a series of neo-liberal policies - namely, liberalization, deregulation, and privatization - that promote market integration. Second, there is a preoccupation with market growth rather than balanced development or equity" (Mittelman, 2002, p.3).

Kobrin (1999) argues that globalization is not only cultivated by foreign trade, but also by technological development and the massive flow of information. Globalization is a process by which factors of time and place make the world smaller (Mittelman, 1996). Castells (1996) proposes that rapid development in communication technology has made the world look like one unit, one that takes into consideration differences in time and place.

The idea of treating the world as a global village due to communication developments regardless of political and geographical barriers is not a new one. The relationship between the development of communication technologies and the dissolution of geographical barriers, creating a global village, is also much discussed. The idea of the "global village" was first proposed by Marshal McLuhan. He suggested that the world would be transformed into a single unit by electronic media allowing people all around the world to communicate with each other across political and geographical barriers (McLuhan, 1962). New technologies such as the Internet, mobile phones and digital TV have made the world smaller and more connected. Levinson mentions that:

The Internet helps complete McLuhan's metaphor, to the point of making it a reality. The online villager, who can live anywhere in the world with a personal computer, a telephone line, and a Web browser, can engage in dialogue, seek out rather than merely receive news stories, and in general exchange information across the globe much like the inhabitants of any village or stadium (1999, p. 7).

The Internet is playing a major role in globalization as one of the communication revolution trends. Sacks argues that “The great leaps in civilization occur when there is a fundamental change in the way we record and transmit information. There have been four such changes. Printing was the third. Our current era of instantaneous global communication via computer, email, and Internet is the fourth” (2003, p. 214)

Day and Schuler argue that “Today, in the network society, the dominant perspective, the dominant voice and the dominant agenda, is what Castells calls the “space of flows” - the techno-economic agenda - and what many academics, industrialists, and policy-makers insist citizens of the world have no alternative but to accommodate, accept, and change for” (2004, p. 5). With the massive development in digital technologies, which have become an essential part of contemporary societies, individuals spend more time communicating with each other through this medium, creating a *digital society*. Baer, Hassell and Vollaard explain that “a digital society implies growing reliance on networked information and communications technologies (ICTs), with more and more people using the Internet and such other ICTs as cell phones, digital video recorders, digital music players and, of course, personal computers (PCs)” (2002, p. 1). Lai (October 2003) summarizes the main drivers for digital society in the following:

- Innovations in ICT products and services, which make them better, cheaper, and easier to use.
- Investments in ICT and related infrastructure.
- Industry and market structures for ICT products, services, and applications.
- Extent of regulation or other government controls.
- Public trust and confidence in ICT networks, services, and applications.

Baer, Hassell and Vollaard point out that “such a society suggests changes in the structure and operation of the economy that emphasize higher productivity, quicker obsolescence of capital goods and human skills, the use of customized processes to make better products at lower cost, and the growth of ICT-intensive businesses such as electronic commerce (e-commerce)” (2002, p. 1).

The high speed and multi-media services of the Internet, coupled with mobile phone cameras make the Internet a news medium capable of completing the missing part of globalization – overcoming geographical boundaries (Wei, 2008). Also, the easy and low cost of making and publishing media materials allows individuals to publish materials online which can be viewed by millions of viewers all over the world. In the past, producing a short video used to cost thousands of pounds, but now it is both easier and cheaper. The interactive nature of the Internet enables individuals to participate and make their voice heard. It may also weaken the ability of individuals, organizations or governments to control news and information. Novak argues,

In the days when governments were the only source of information for the ordinary citizens, the government could, through propaganda and censorship, get citizens to believe that conditions in their countries were not much worse than those obtaining in other places. . . . With the improvement in the global communication system, large proportions of the populations have come to know much more than their governments would have wished them to know (2003, p. 258).

Another aspect of globalization is a cultural one. One of the greatest barriers against total globalization is the cultural differences between different nations of the world. Lieber and Weisberg (2002) argue that cultural integration is far more difficult to accomplish than economic or political integration. Hebron and Stack say that when the cultural aspect of globalization is discussed, it most often refers to American popular or mass culture (cited in Lieber and Weisberg 2002). American culture allows Disney's products, Hollywood and Hip-Hop culture to spread as the new global culture. The domination of a few wealthy and powerful American corporations which produce high quality TV shows, movies, music, magazines and books makes American products the favoured choice of the international audience.

The disequilibrium in the flow of information between the East and the West has made globalization seem more like a cultural invasion to many scholars. Developments in communication technology have increased the gap in the information flow between the East and the West. McChesney argues that the relationship between the dominant media firms and imperialism is complex. He adds that the "emerging global media system also has significant cultural and political implications, specifically with regard to political



democracy, imperialism, and the nature of socialist resistance in the coming years" (2001, p. 1).

Hebron and Stack describe American cultural hegemony as a "foreign invasion and assimilation of cosmopolitan consumerism with its materialistic orientation, indulgent values, moral bankruptcy and fraternizing of nationalities [which] is a prescription of cultural genocide because of the process' potential to vulgarize and/or destroy the rich diversity of human civilizations" (cited in Lieber and Weisberg, p 281). The domination of the Western global media gives the new global culture a distinctly Western, or rather American, character.

Cultural imperialism focuses on the domination of the West over the broadcasting and print media as well as on movies and music which affect non-Western cultures. "Cultural Imperialism Theory states that Western nations dominate the media around the world which in return has a powerful effect on Third World Cultures by imposing on them Western views and therefore destroying their native cultures" (Theory Workbook of University of Kentucky, 2000). Boyd-Barrett defines imperialism as a "process of dominance and dependency between nations" and, citing Golding, says that cultural imperialism mediates the notions of imperialism and media imperialism (cited in Ogan, 1988, p. 93).

Pieterse (2004) mentions that he spent many years studying imperialism, however, when he began to focus on globalization, he started to differentiate between the two. He points out that "globalization refers to the long-term historical trend of greater worldwide interconnectedness; imperial episodes are part of this trend, so empire is part of globalization" (2004, p. v). Pieterse distinguishes between imperialism and globalization saying "Both imperialism and contemporary globalization are intentional and involve multiple actors. Yet contemporary globalization is marked by a greater diffusion of power, including international institutions and NGOs (2004, p.38). Furthermore, he argues that globalization creates anger and anxiety in the eastern countries as they consider it another form of the Western imperialism, supported by

power and wealth. Non-Western cultures, however, are not as passive as the Cultural Imperialism Theory states. Non-Western cultures have their own techniques to limit and cope with the huge influx of Western ideas.

Featherstone points out that "one of the problems in attempting to formulate a theory of globalization, that the theories often adopt a totalizing logic and assume some master process of global integration which it is assumed is making the world more unified and homogeneous" (1996, p.46). Befu (2003), who studies globalization in Japan, argues that while revising much Western research about globalization, he found that researchers look at the world as consistent. He adds that many Western studies assume that globalization is eating McDonalds and drinking Coca-Cola, but that this is a superficial look at the phenomenon. He argues that this consistency to the neglect of locally unique cultures in academic studies. Even when "the East" is included in globalization theory, it is mostly examined as a superficially passive or intractable object which does not reflect the true face of globalization in such societies. Featherstone says:

There is also the sense that such monological accounts which equate the success of the globalization process with the extension of modernity, that "globalization is basically modernity writ large," miss the cultural variability of non-Western nation-states and civilizations. It is insufficient to assume that their cultures will simply give way to modernity or to regard their formulations of national particularity as merely reactions to Western modernity (1996, p. 47).

Brysk argues that one of the cultural aspects of globalization is the promotion of Western ideas such as press freedom and human rights (2002). The outstanding communication and Information revolution crossed geographical borders and disseminated many Western concepts to other countries in the world. Brysk explains, "The very process of globalization blurs distinctions among categories of rights" (2002, p. 4). Sussman (2000) points out that advanced communication and Information technology, particularly the Internet, helps organizations supporting press freedom such as Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House and Arab Press Freedom Watch (APFW) to play a major role in protecting journalists and placing pressure on countries that have limited or no press freedom. This influence also turned local matters concerning the suspension of newspapers and journalists into global issues. A good example of that was

the request made to US President George W. Bush by the Freedom House Organization to discuss the issue of press freedom in Russia after the jailing of two Russian journalists during his meeting with Russian president Vladimir Putin on 21st September 2003, (Freedom House report 25 Sept. 2003).

Although concepts such as press freedom and human rights become universal due to information and communication technology, most non-democratic countries have difficulties accepting and implementing such concepts. Burrowes argues that “highlighted the importance of cross-national testing of propositions to avoid premature generalizing on the basis of conditions that are unique to certain periods and societies” (1997, p. 341). In non-democratic countries where the government controls and censors the national media, press freedom in its Western guise is hard to practice (Al Kheraigi, 1990). Sakr points out that, in Arab world, global NGOs involved in media freedom are facing serious challenges including Arab laws on NGOs and “a wide range of administrative interventions by the state and security services” (2006, p. 4)

Press freedom is perceived as a Western concept which has developed and evolved in the context of Western history and culture. However, in non-Western cultures the concept is relatively new and does not have any cultural or historical context that supports the acceptance of such concepts as discussed in the previous Chapter. Although global organizations, which support press freedom, become a pressure factor to governments which oppose such freedom, they have accomplished modest breakthroughs in spreading the concept of press freedom. In my M.A. (2006), I interviewed Saudi columnists asking them about the need for press freedom in the Saudi national press. 80% of the interviewed sample was not enthusiastic about press freedom. They argue that press freedom in its western perspective has no limits which might create chaos. A male columnist said, “If the Saudi press becomes free, the national newspapers would become a theatre for religious and tribal conflicts in a tribal and religious based society”. Instead, the Saudi columnists proposed what they call *responsible freedom* which arguably another form of self-censorship.

## **Globalization and Saudi Arabia:**

Most studies of globalization have taken a western perspective and/or focused on the effects of globalization on the east, whilst ignoring the capability of eastern cultures to participate and interact with those processes without losing their distinctive characters. Moreover, the East or more specifically conservative and religious cultures such as the Saudi, the main focus of this study, have their own techniques of dealing with globalization, enabling them to incorporate or reject what comes from the West on their own terms.

Most studies focus on two contradictory arguments of globalization. The first argument sees the world as a one consistent and harmonious unit. The second argument, on the other hand, looks at globalization as a new form of imperialism or colonialism. Categorizing globalization as exaggeratedly positive or negative impedes the creation of new approaches that might better explain the phenomenon. Discussing globalization as good or bad does not adequately reflect the degree of interactivity between the West and the East as active player in globalization which can add something to a global culture. On the other hand, this flip coin argument (good and bad) ignores another level of interactivity between local and global.

Globalization theories should take the East into account, as they are part of the overall process. They must also examine not only how good or evil are the effects of the phenomenon, but also the interactivity and responsiveness of societies towards it, especially conservative and religious ones. Goldman mentions that “globalization is so concentrated in the West and virtually excludes the rest of the world” (2001).

There is a need to include the missing part of the puzzle, which is the non-western perspective. Despite the technological, economic and political domination of the West, the rest of the world is not as passive as it may seem. Although the internet and powerful Western media organizations appear to inform western domination over information and intensify the one-way nature of the information flow, cheap and accessible internet services coupled with a high degree of interactivity may help conservative cultures to participate in the global age. Al-Jazeera news channel and its website are excellent

examples of the resistance of conservative cultures to western domination and of the degree of level activity in such cultures.

The popularity of Al Jazeera may be credited to its remarkable coverage of the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, or to the appearances of Osama Bin Laden and other members of Al Qaeda. However, Al Jazeera has been popular since the first day of broadcasting in 1996, because Arabs look at Al Jazeera as a non-governmental news medium enjoying an enormous margin of freedom. The Arab audience sees Al Jazeera as an excellent replacement for two types of media previously available: local governmental media, which lost its credibility and reliability a long time ago because of the domination of government in editorial issues, and global channels such as CNN, NBC and Fox which were seen as having an anti-Arab bias. This situation not only challenges Western domination of information, but also it challenges the governmental and loyal media over news and information in Saudi Arabia.

Rejecting some aspects of globalization does not mean that a particular society is stubborn and anti-globalization. Most societies are culturally selective and protective; they choose what fits with their culture and does not threaten their identity. Therefore, they have their own way to cope and deal with globalization; they try to manage the huge flow of information and decide what is "in" and what is "out". Furthermore, different societies have different reactions to globalization which might be hard to understand from outside such societies. Therefore, the western interpretation of such reactions to globalization mostly labels societies based on accepting or rejecting globalization, ignoring the degree of activity within those societies and the interactivity between globalization and localization.

Lieber and Weisberg claim that cultural backlash is evoked by globalization and the presumption of American primacy not by a clash between civilizations. The modern history professor, Michael Howard, argues that the Islamic world is an "intractable confrontation between a theistic, land-based and traditional culture, in places little different from the Europe of the middle ages, and the secular material values of the Enlightenment" (Howard, 2002). Similarly, Thomas Freidman (1999) warns people and countries who try to get in the way of globalization that they will be left behind or

crushed. These kinds of arguments prove that it is hard for outsiders to examine a very profound phenomenon such as globalization because they look at it from an American perspective, misunderstanding and underestimating how active and creative other cultures are. Ironically in the “global” era, one side of the globe is often ignored.

Religious and conservative societies have their distinctiveness and privacy which are not shared by other cultures. Hersh & Schmidt argue that “religion has been a political arena of contention between various internal and external forces in Muslim societies” (2000, p.205). Therefore, there is a need to discuss globalization from a new approach which takes into account the differences between cultures and societies. An in-depth analysis examines globalization from the inside of conservative cultures which should go beyond the stereotypical idea of globalization which involves drinking Coca-Cola, eating McDonalds and watching Spiderman.

Al Dabassi (2004) in his book *Globalization and Education* argues that Saudi Arabia is qualified to be one of the countries that benefits most from globalization, particularly in economic and information technology, which are considered the prominent arenas of globalization. He explains that Saudi Arabia as a big economic power, in addition to its religious influence as a cradle of Islam, qualifies it to be placed among the most influential States in the international arena. Al Dabassi discusses the importance of openness towards the world in order to grasp the opportunities of playing effective roles on the global scene. He insists that policies of reticence and fighting globalization would not serve Saudi Arabia’s interests. He adds that Saudi Arabia has to interact with globalization and adopt a policy of openness with special focus on economic and information technologies.

Saudi Arabia has been remarkably affected by the political, economical and technological changes brought about by globalization, which has played a major role in the Saudi government adopting a number of political and economic reforms to avoid it being isolated from the rest of world. A significant step in this direction was the effort exerted to ensure inclusion in the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Saudi Minister of Trade indicated that Saudi Arabia had to convince the United States and the European

Union that the Saudi controlled economy had become more open to foreign investment and was therefore eligible to join WTO. However, the WTO required that certain reforms and legislation be adopted regarding the liberalization of the economy and opening it up to the international market.

In 2005, following 12 years of intense and difficult negotiations, Saudi Arabia formally joined the World Trade Organization, becoming the trade body's 149<sup>th</sup> member. This set the stage for the Kingdom to play a significant role in global commerce after satisfying all the prerequisites of WTO, which plays the role of arbitrator in all international trade disputes (BBC, September 11, 2005). On this occasion WTO Director General, Pascal Lamy hailed the membership of Saudi Arabia, which is the world's major source of oil production in the world as well as an economic giant, and described the event as important step for Saudi Arabia as well as for the WTO (BBC, September 11, 2005).

Saudi Minister of Trade at that time, Hashim Yamani explained that the accession of Saudi Arabia to the WTO would boost business, strengthen transparency and would take the Saudi economy into a new stage of competitiveness with the big international economies. He pointed that joining the WTO would attract more investment and create new jobs as well as stabilizing Saudi Arabia's role as the biggest oil producer in working to achieve economic stabilization in the world.

As a direct consequence of joining the WTO, the Saudi Ministry of Trade issued a license to the international bank HSBC, which was the first of its type allowing a foreign bank to operate investment activities into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (*Al Sharq Al Awsat*, December 2, 2005). The license granted HSBC the right to perform all activities connected with stock market trading including brokerage, assets management and financial consultations. *Al Sharq Al Awsat* mentions that this kind of license is considered an unprecedented development in the Saudi financial sector as no company had previously being given permission to practicing brokering activities in the Kingdom (December 2, 2005).

Saudi Arabia does not focus only on economic reforms, but also moves forward with political reforms. This included the appointment of a woman for the first time in the political history of the Kingdom to the position of Deputy Minister in 2009. The Saudi government also established the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue in order to widen participation of individuals in decision-making relating to national issues. Among all the political reforms, the advent of municipality elections was the most prominent reform to affect all parts of the Kingdom. The Saudi government announced in October 2003 that it was studying the feasibility of launching municipality elections as a first step on the road to other measures for broadening national participation. Prince Mansour bin Miteb, Chairman of the General Committee for Municipal Elections said that the government had decided to widen the participation base of its nationals in running their local affairs by having municipal elections. (*Alriyadh*, December 25, 2004).

Prince Mansour mentioned that the Kingdom has assistance from the German Foundation for Technical Cooperation in preparing election processes and had invited international experts to the Kingdom as well as sending many Saudi teams to several democratic states to study and make use of their experiences. He explained that the Kingdom had also invited a team of election experts from the United Nations. Prince Mansour confirmed that election would be conducted under UN supervision to ensure transparency, accuracy of results and to avoid any misconduct in vote counting. UN representative Dr. Al Mustafa bin Al Melaiah stressed that the UN role in the municipal elections was by invitation from the Saudi government. The government wrote in June 2004 to the UN Secretary General asking him to provide the Kingdom with consultative services regarding arrangements for the elections and technical support if deemed necessary (*Alriyadh*, December 25, 2004).

Mohammed Al Zahrani, one of the candidates in the municipality elections, commented on the event saying "this election regardless of its results is considered a good beginning to increase Saudi public awareness of elections which need a lot of refining" (*Alwatan*, February 11, 2005). He added "although it is the first time to run



elections but it has passed safely and I am proud to take part in the first elections in the Kingdom as a first step in democracy" (*Alwatan*, February 11, 2005).

*Asharq Al-Awsat* reported that the Saudi municipality elections gained comprehensive international press coverage and described the move as a big step towards granting Saudis the opportunity to control their own affairs locally. In this regard, the *Washington Post* reported the news under the headline "An experiment in Democracy in Saudi Arabia" and the *Washington Times* selected the headline "Saudis go to poll centers" while *Los Angeles Times* described votecasters as "placing their fingerprints on the Saudi politics" (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, February 12, 2005).

The Saudi government also took some steps to preserve Saudi citizens' human rights. The pressure applied to the Saudi government by international organizations, particularly those concerned with human rights and women's rights played a remarkable role in the attention paid to human rights in the Kingdom. Accordingly, the Saudi government allowed the establishment of the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) in March 2004 as a non-profit organization with no links or ties with any government body. The organization is dedicated to defending human rights in the Kingdom in accordance with the teaching of Islam and consistent with international treaties and agreements (see [nshr.org.sa](http://nshr.org.sa) for the objectives and responsibilities of the organization).

Since its inception, NSHR has played a big role in defending human rights in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi writer Saad Al Dossari mentioned in his column that the NSHR is undertaking tremendous efforts in preserving and defending the rights of people and making them aware of rights which had been expropriated by government organs (May 24, 2009). "Now we are aware of our rights and shall take legal action against aggressors," he added (May 24, 2009).

*Okaz* newspaper described in a report about NSHR the efforts exerted on teaching the concept of human rights in schools (May 22, 2009). This was described as one of the most prominent activities of the organization, enlightening school students with the

fundamental principles of human rights and making them aware of their own rights and to respect the rights of others (May 22, 2009). The most challenging step taken by NSHR was the publication of its annual report in 2008, which was considered a big leap in the reform process. The report contained direct criticism of many government bodies including Shoura Council, the religious police, the Ministry of Interior and other government organs which were not used to being criticized in such harsh manner (Alarabiya, March 23, 2009).

The report stressed the need to expose who was in control of the religious police in view of dissatisfaction and complaints about their conduct from citizens. The report called for aggression and bad treatment by the religious police to cease. The report also criticized the poor performance of the Shoura Council in dealing with vital issues facing Saudis such as rising living costs due to high inflation rates. It stressed the need to make the Members of the Council elected rather than appointed.

The report described the performance of the judicial system as slow in issuing verdicts and expressed dissatisfaction over the difficulties facing women in getting their rights in litigation. The report also criticized the non-commitment of some judges to equity in litigation and the practice of segregation between litigants in court sittings by means of depriving, for instance, one litigant from the right of defending himself or herself.

The report further criticized the Ministry of Interior over detention without referral to court. It pointed out that there were cases of detention of expatriates and citizens for periods reaching up to four years without going to trial. The human rights report mentioned the lack of press freedom in Saudi Arabia. It mentioned the case of *Alhyat* newspaper being suspended for three days after criticizing the Minister of Trade. The report also expressed its objection to the random curtailing of websites concerned with legal affairs and other international websites such as Reporters Without Borders.

### **Two Sides of the Conflict:**

There are many levels to the conflict between globalization and localization in most societies. In Saudi Arabia, there is a conflict between two clearly defined parties – those in who oppose it and those who favor it. The former consists of conservative and religious groups, along with the government, which opposes opening up to outside cultural influences. The other side calls for a greater degree of openness towards the outside world, not just economically but also in terms of culture. This group tends to consist of literate, educated Saudis and international organizations which call for more reforms and changes. This view is also supported by massive technological developments which are not only considered an important factor pushing such countries towards more openness towards the outside world, but which are also hard to censor and control.

The anti-globalization bloc derives its power from social, religious and cultural opposition to the idea of openness to other cultures which may threaten the identity of conservative Saudi society in the face of the western cultural invasion. This is very much the position taken by the government, which also feels that openness to the foreign media would not only affect religious, cultural and social principles but may also embody a political threat to the government. Al-Dosari (2007) cites a high rate of support for internet censorship in the country. Furthermore, in the Internet Services Unit's survey (ISU) on site blocking in Saudi Arabia, 45% said that blocking was too extensive, 41% thought it was reasonable, but 14% felt that it was not enough (Teitelbaum, 2002). The high rate of opposition towards internet provision without control is also evidenced in the number of requests received daily by KACST to block sites which were previously accessible from within the Kingdom.

On the other side of the conflict, there are some intellectuals and writers in Saudi Arabia calling for more reforms, especially in terms of easing the official censorship. They demand more freedom for local media outlets and the loosening of the controls under which they operate at present. Also there is pressure from some international organizations which demand more freedom not only at the level of the local media, but

also on the political and cultural levels. As Brysk argues, “international norms and institutions for the protection of human rights are more developed than at any previous point in history, while global civil society fosters growing avenues of appeal for citizens repressed by their own states” (2002, p. 1). Organizations such as Reporters Without Borders, Amnesty International and Freedom House, among others, put continuous pressure on the Saudi government to broaden freedom of expression in all fields.

#### Conclusion:

Defining globalization as a new form of imperialism, invasion, homogenization or/and colonization misunderstands and underestimates the degree of cultural creativity and interactivity. Studying the effects of globalization as a one-way analysis of that phenomenon neglects to look at the East as an actor in the process rather than as a mere consumer. Mellor says that the effects of globalization in Arab countries “can neither be exaggerated nor interpreted in western-based theories” (2005 p.144). On the other hand, talking about globalization as a reality the rest of the world has to accept for fear of being left behind, as Thomas Friedman claims, means that the West fails to understand the real picture of globalization in conservative and religious societies. John Page (World Bank economist) also claims that “the global economy is developing so rapidly that nations or regions that fail to make the required structural adjustment to compete for market share and capital investment are now liable to remain irrevocably poor” (cited in Gher and Amin, 2002, p 59).

These kinds of analyses fail to credit conservative societies with a choice regarding whether or not to accept western cultural imports. However, conservative and religious societies are not as passive, nor as stubborn as the West believes. They have their own techniques to limit and cope with the huge influx of ideas. They are very selective and protective societies, which make them reluctant to accept every western product and selective in accepting what they believe it is appropriate for their people and culture. Even though globalization has created conflicts within conservative societies, such conflicts can be seen as a way to preserve and assert their identity and distinctiveness, especially given the imbalanced flow of information. Thus, globalization

is a challenge to those societies rather than a threat, which may enable them to participate in global culture and play their full part in forming the new global culture.

The examination of the editors and subeditors of two daily newspapers, who may be seen as lines of control, give a clear picture of the extent of their understanding or misunderstanding of the effects of globalization on the role of press. Also, interviews with them will determine the extent of the effects of internet websites in news selection which might force editors to follow stories they used to ignore. Furthermore, I examine the effects of the presence of news websites on press-government relation, asking whether the presence of such websites challenges this relation or whether the press is indeed still loyal to the government.

## Chapter Four

### Study Design, Process and Methodology

This study examines how Saudi journalists and decision makers at the Ministry of Culture and Information evaluate censorship in the presence of the Internet, and how the Saudi press reacts to and interacts with stories published on the Internet which are not subject to censorship. It also examines the influence of news published on the Internet on the one hand, and the impact of the Ministry of Culture and Information's censorship on the other hand, on news decisions in the Saudi press. It further ascertains the opinions of media decision makers at the Ministry of Culture and Information on the effects of the Internet, which is not subject to the Ministry's censorship, on the competitiveness of the national press.

#### **Primary Research Questions:**

**1- How do media decision makers at the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information evaluate the Ministry's censorship over the national press in the presence of the internet which is not under the Ministry's censorship?**

- a- What are the main reasons behind the Ministry's censorship over the national press in the presence of news media which are not subject to the Ministry's censorship?
- b- To what extent does the presence of the Internet place pressure on decision makers at the Ministry to ease the censorship imposed on the national press?
- c- What are the main factors which place pressure on the Ministry to ease its censorship?

- d- To what extent did the dissolution of the Supreme Council of the Media in 2003 give the Ministry autonomy and independence to take decisions related to the national press and as a result help to ease official censorship?

**2- How do Saudi journalists evaluate censorship in the presence of the internet?**

- a- To what extent does censorship by the Ministry of Culture and Information influence the performance of the Saudi press?
- b- What role does the Internet play in news decisions?
- c- To what extent does the presence of the Internet place pressure on the Saudi national newspapers to follow news stories which used to be ignored, due to censorship?

**3- What are the main factors affecting the Saudi gatekeepers' news decisions in the Saudi national press?**

**Study Methodology:**

This is a social study that depends on a descriptive and qualitative approach. Tuchman argues that observation coupled with interview methods are the most effective tools of data collection in journalism studies (1991, p. 79). Therefore, this study relies on observation and interview methods to collect the required data.

Since the objective of the study is to ascertain how journalists and media decision makers in the Ministry of Culture of Information evaluate censorship over the national press in Saudi Arabia, it is logical that Saudi journalists, the Saudi press and the media decision makers in the Ministry of Information and Culture provide the core of data.

Through face-to-face interviews and direct observation, this study presents the opinions of media decision makers in the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information on censorship and their evaluation of different factors which pressure the Ministry to practise such censorship. In addition, this study presents the opinions of Saudi journalists on the extent of the effects of censorship in the presence of Internet. It also examines Saudi gatekeepers and the main factors which affect their journalistic decisions.

To answer the study questions, three methods are employed:

### **1-Non Participant Observation:**

The first method employed to research the above questions was non-participant observation. This took the form of observation used by Gaye Tuchman (1978), being present but not participant. The researcher also followed the guide to qualitative observation and analysis by Lofland and Lofland (1995). Two newspapers (*Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah*) were monitored for 4 weeks each.

According to Mason, "observation refers to the methods of generating data which involve the researcher immersing herself or himself in a research setting, and systematically observing dimensions of that setting, interactions, relationships, actions, events" (1996, p. 60). Harrison contends that the observation method is one of the best methods for studying and analysing the "formally invisible world of journalistic activity and media production" (1995, p.180). She adds that observation "is vital to understand the kinds of formal and informal decisions which are made in the newsroom on a day-to-day basis" (1995, p.180).

Observation is considered one of the most effective methods in the field of journalism studies, as it allows scholars to interact directly with the research environment and actors within it (Tuchman, 1978; Sanger, 1996; Iorio, 2004; Jensen, 2002). Ted Conover mentions that "observation is the way I prefer to pursue journalism" (cited in Sims, 1995, p. 13). He says:



The idea to me that journalism and anthropology go together ... was a great enabling idea for my life—the idea that I could learn about different people and different aspects of the world by placing myself in situations, and thereby see more than you ever could just by doing an interview (cited in Sims, 1995, p. 13).

However, one of the disadvantages of the observation method, especially non-participant observation, is that the observer needs time in order to be fully accepted by the participants (Harrison, 1995, p.182). With this in mind, early on in the investigation I met the Editors-in-Chief, editors and sub-editors of both newspapers to be examined, in order to create a friendly atmosphere and facilitate my acceptance at the start of the observation. However, creating a friendly atmosphere with the participants does not mean that the observer is manipulated by the participants, and I have ensured that the data collected reflects the nature of the two newspapers. Moreover, non-participant observation is designed to minimize the effects of the observer's presence and allow the observed sufficient space to do their jobs as normal.

During the course of this study, unstructured interviews were also conducted with editors, journalists and reporters on both papers as part of the observation method. The observation aims to investigate how editors, journalists and reporters deal with pressure from the government, and the effects of that pressure on their news decisions. It also examines the effects of news published on the Internet on news decisions made by the two newspapers, and aims to investigate the effects of the Internet and the government on censorship. Due to the fact that the Internet and the government are the main factors that influence censorship over the Saudi press, the observation chapter is divided into two main parts: a) the Internet and b) the government. Censorship, however, is discussed in both parts. The effects of the Internet on censorship are discussed as part of the Internet section. The effect of the government on censorship is discussed as part of the government section.

In addition, the observation concentrated on investigating the most effective factors which affect news decisions in the national press. One of the main goals of the observation was to understand and present the state of the Saudi press, helping the researcher to formulate effective questions for the face-to-face interviews which are later

conducted with editors, journalists and reporters from the two newspapers. The observation helped to provide an understanding of how Saudi journalists react and interact with what the Internet publishes in the presence of the Ministry's censorship. Such an understanding was also of great help in the process of formulating questions for the semi-structured interviews conducted with media decision makers in the Ministry of Culture and Information.

No audio or video devices were used during the observation, as they might have disturbed the interviewees. Notes were taken describing the actions and reaction of the journalists with the Internet and censorship. The duration of the observation was four weeks in each newspaper.

*Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiyah* daily newspapers were selected as topics of the study for two reasons:

-The two newspapers represent two different schools of journalism. *Alriyadh* is a conservative, semi-governmental paper, whereas *Aleqtisadiyah* is a new paper characterized by boldness in discussing national issues. Moreover, whereas *Alriyadh* is one of the most popular and widely distributed newspapers in Saudi Arabia (Rugh, 2004), *Aleqtisadiyah* is a new paper trying to find its way to the Saudis.

-The two papers are located in Riyadh city, the capital of the Kingdom and the most heavily populated of its cities. The Ministry of Culture and Information and the Saudi government are located in Riyadh, which means that most decisions affecting media policy in the Kingdom are taken there.

The observation method was an effective approach for exploring the questions tackled in this study. The reactions of journalists towards censorship and their interaction with the Internet needed an appropriate method in order to detect and trace the extent of such interactions on the decisions taken by journalists. The observation method also provided a flexible way for the researcher to monitor the interactions of journalists with the Internet in their actual working environment, where they are subject to daily

editorial restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Editor-in-Chief.

Every day of the observation at the two newspapers provided new opportunities for insights into how Saudi journalists deal with pressures placed on them by the government on the one hand and the Internet on the other. For this reason, the observation chapter is full of published or unpublished examples and stories showing the effect of these two factors (the government and the Internet) on publishing decisions. The observation method provided not only adequate information and data, which helped in answering the research questions, but also gave this study a depth and richness that could not have been attained without this method.

The observation methodology contributed to answering the research questions for the following reasons:

- Observation granted the researcher the opportunity to examine the effect of the government and the Internet on the Saudi press through close daily interaction with journalists at their workplace while they performed their duties. Observation is an efficient method for studying a sensitive issue such as the press-government relationship. Therefore, this method was adopted in order to describe the prevailing work environment and the nature of journalists' interactions while performing their duties. Other research methods would not have provided the same flexibility and deep understanding that was provided by observation, which also led to results that are not easy to obtain without the interaction with and presence of journalists. For instance, while I was sitting in the national news section of *Alriyadh*, there was a reporter following news of an incident of theft at the Sierra Leonean Ambassador's house in Riyadh. The reporter told me that coverage of such news stories was prohibited three years previously by clear instructions from the Ministry of Culture and Information, which banned publication of any news about diplomatic missions except that released by the Saudi Press Agency (SPA). However, according to him, no paper now waits for instructions from the SPA, especially regarding national news. I would have not

known this information if I had not been at the workplace of the newspaper when the incident occurred.

- Observing helped me to develop friendly relations with journalists. These close relations with journalists during the eight weeks of the research contributed effectively to this study and its results. Journalists began to take the initiative of supplying me with useful information even before I asked for it. They became more aware of the nature of the study and more responsive. All of this kind of cooperation helped me to gain information about the interaction of journalists with the Internet and with government. During the period of observation, I acquired information and data which would be hard to obtain without applying such a method. For example, a reply by HRH Prince Salman Ibn Abdulaziz to an article published by a columnist in *Alriyadh* was photocopied and sent to me along with the original article. Although the journalist who provided me with the above-mentioned information is working in the national news section which I did not visit that day, he was very keen to let me have the information. The journalists, after understanding the nature of the study, began of their own accord to provide me with data and information to keep me abreast of the subject matter, and this greatly enriched the study.
- The flexibility of observation, which allowed the application of other methods within it, is another reason that made observation an excellent method for this study. The unstructured interviews with journalists during the observation contributed to interpreting and explaining a number of news decisions taken by them. This helped me to get acquainted with the reasons for publishing or curtailing certain news stories. The answers I obtained during the interviews, coupled with my understanding of the nature of work, enabled me to conduct analysis and reach a clear understanding of the effect of the Internet and censorship on the Saudi press.
- The observation opened up other unforeseen issues neither known to me nor considered in the study's objectives, but which proved to be important for understanding the effects of the Internet and government on the Saudi press. Observing journalists while they were doing their work raised issues which

would have been hard to notice if I had used another method which did not have the same degree of interactivity with the sample in their working environment. For instance I would have had no idea about the role of the websites of cities such as Arrar, Huraymila and others. During the observation period I learned that the city websites are an important source of local news, especially in cities where there are no branches or correspondents for the newspaper. The observation method developed my understanding of the crucial role of these websites. The popularity of these websites is partly due to the fact that there are only eight daily newspapers in Saudi Arabia, which obviously cannot cover all Saudi local and domestic news, especially events that happen in small cities. Therefore city websites emerged as news sources for the natives and residents of such cities to report and discuss the main events and incidents that take place in their city.

## **2- Face-to-face interviews with editors, journalists and reporters:**

I used a semi-structured interview technique in order to collect the required data. DeMarrais and Lapan, call the interview method "a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study" (2004, p. 54). They add, "these questions usually ask participants for their thoughts, opinions, perspectives, or descriptions of specific experiences" (DeMarrais and Lapan, 2004, p. 54). Wilkinson and Birmingham argue that "while other instruments focus on the surface elements of what is happening, interviews give the researcher more of an insight into the meaning and significance of what is happening" (2003, p. 44). Moreover, DeMarrais and Lapan point out that "qualitative interviews are used when researchers want to gain in-depth knowledge from participants about particular phenomena, experiences, or sets of experiences" (2004, p. 52).

I interviewed twenty-one male editors, journalists and reporters aged between 22 and 55 at *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah* newspapers, to investigate their opinions on the effects of censorship in the presence of the Internet. Fifteen journalists refused to take part in the interviews after reading the questions of the study, a problem familiar to other

researchers in this field, as mentioned in Chapter One. Al Khuraigi (1990) and Al Kahtani (1999) attributed the meagre number of study samples to the small numbers of journalists prepared to participate in their studies upon knowing that the studies are examining censorship and controls on the press.

In my case I was supported by the observation period I spent with journalists and the close relationships and trust I gained during that period, in addition to the condition of anonymity guaranteed to the potential samples. All the above-mentioned reasons helped me to maintain an increased number of participants in my study. According to the conditions of anonymity, I have used general descriptions for the positions mentioned in the study to avoid pinpointing any journalist by name or job title. I use terms such as "reporter" to refer to any journalist covering events outside the newspaper. I use the term "journalist" for any journalist who works inside the premises of the newspaper collecting and writing news by himself and who is not responsible for editing other journalists' work. The term "editor" refers to a journalist who undertakes editing of his own work as well as the work of other reporters and journalists. Editors may also take publishing decisions, to a certain extent. The term "senior editor" is used to refer to the key editing positions including Editor-in-Chief, Deputy Editor-in-Chief and heads of departments.

Each face-to-face interview, which lasted for up to an hour, gave the interviewees enough time to answer questions and also to give explanations and examples. I adopted the style of conducting interviews in a dialogue form rather than a question and answer in order to go deep into each topic and gather evidence and examples to justify answers. Thus the interviews generated data, information and examples that could not be obtained by other methods such as a questionnaire, which give no opportunity to elaborate on answers. I was keen to conduct face-to-face interviews instead of holding the interviews via telephone or e-mail because the samples were cautious about the recording of their answers or documentation of their e-mail messages on the grounds that the study topic is sensitive. The first three journalists who agreed to be interviewed did soon condition that their interviews would not be recorded, which prompted me to assure the other journalists that no recording would be done during the interviews.

I was very keen to conduct interviews with female journalists to add another dimension to the censorship related to women's issues such as women's rights. But unfortunately, I could not accomplish this target because the premises of female journalists are not in the same place as the men's offices of the two newspapers. As I mentioned at the beginning of this study, there is complete segregation between men and women at the workplace - men have a separate building, where no woman is allowed to enter, and women have their building where no man can have access. Therefore, conducting face-to-face interview was not an option. Unfortunately I could not find any suitable female researcher with enough knowledge of the subject matter to undertake a face-to-face interview with female journalists on the two papers. Male researchers in the media field in Saudi Arabia normally encounter similar problems gaining access to women interviewees, especially for research based on face-to-face interviews.

**Face-to-face interviews were an appropriate method for data collection for this study for the following reasons:**

- Face-to-face interviews gave journalists the opportunity to express their views in a detailed manner and proved to be very suitable for data collection connected with the subject matter of this study. The interviews not only provided the chance for journalists to express their opinion but also gave them the opportunity to explain assumptions, facts and examples on which their opinions were based, giving the study more insight and richness. Face-to-face interviews, which extended in some cases to one hour, permitted discussion and explanation in detail of the effects of the Internet and censorship on the journalists' work and their performance.
- Furthermore, the interviews enabled me to interact with journalists and conduct fruitful dialogues with them. Such interactivity enabled me to ask for clarification and examples supporting the answers given, which helped in explaining some unclear answers. These clarifications could not have been obtained in the case of applying the questionnaire method, which relies on question and answer, and does not give the researcher the opportunity to ask for clarifications.

For instance, one journalist replied that censorship is a frustrating/disappointing factor for journalists. When asked by the researcher, “Why?” he gave an example that a journalist may trace a certain event which he believes is very important and exert effort in editing it, but after all his effort, the report may be rejected by the Editor-in-Chief. He added that “No doubt such a journalist will be disappointed and such experiences will push him to practise self-censorship in order to avoid rejection of his future reports.”

- My presence with journalists at face-to-face interviews enabled me to engage with the subject matter and steer the interview within the framework of the information required for the study. This result could not have been achieved by other research methods where samples may give unnecessary or off-topic information or inadequate answers. In face-to-face interviews the researcher can control the discussion by interrupting the journalist in case of unnecessary details or by asking for supporting examples or more details for any brief answers.

### **3-Face-to-face interviews with media decision makers in the Ministry of Culture and Information:**

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with media decisions makers in the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information. The focus of the interviews was on the effects of the Internet on decisions related to the national press. The questions also examined the reasons behind censoring the national press while news media such as news websites are not subjected to the Ministry’s censorship. The interviews also examined decisions makers’ potential to ease censorship of the national press in the face of uncensored news media. In addition, the interviews presented the opinions of decision makers on the effect on official censorship of the abolition of the Supreme Council of the Media in 2003.

In the course of this study, I interviewed 11 out of the 15 males aged between 45-58 who are considered senior officials at the Ministry of Culture and Information, and who are responsible for decision-making and drawing up policies for guiding media work



in Saudi Arabia, including censorship. Al Shaikh (1989) describes the Ministry of Culture and Information as a centralized structure in which each decision has to be passed to the senior decision makers. Deputy Minister Dr. Salah Al Namallah identified fifteen key decision makers in the Ministry, including the Minister, deputy ministers and assistant deputy ministers. I used the same method of anonymity used with the journalists. I used general descriptions to avoid pinpointing any decision maker by name or job title. I could not interview all of the decision makers because they were either too busy or not present at the time of the study. I also tried to interview the Minister and made three different appointments but sadly the meeting was not possible. I was unable to interview any senior female officials at the Ministry because there are no women among the key decision makers.

Face-to-face interviews were suitable for answering the study questions concerning decision makers and gave the study a significant depth. The interviews, which lasted for one hour with key officials, tackled issues in detail. They gave decision makers the opportunity to explain the interconnecting factors necessitating the application of censorship on the Saudi Press. Such interconnecting factors mentioned by the key officials of the Ministry to justify control and censorship would not be clearly understood if a method such as a questionnaire was used. The decision makers elaborated on both the internal factors at the Ministry and external factors outside the Ministry that sometimes dictated taking certain decisions. The main subject matter of "feasibility of censorship applied to a sector of the national press in the presence of other accessible media outlets which are not subject to censorship," as discussed with decision makers, provided a good opportunity for the decision makers in the Ministry to explain their viewpoints.

In this regard I repeated enquiries for clarification and elaboration on certain issues in order to understand thoroughly these viewpoints. For example, the issues connected with the Supreme Council of the Media prior to its abolition would not have been clearly understood without the interview method. The key officials explained that the Council had been an external body interfering in the affairs of the Ministry. The interviews conducted with senior officials at the Ministry helped me to understand in depth the issues connected with censorship and factors leading to the imposition of

censorship, as well as the effects of the abolition of the Supreme Council of the Media and its consequences for the Ministry's decisions and consequently on censorship.

## Chapter Five

### The Observation Method

#### Introduction:

Observation was carried out to understand how Saudi journalists use the Internet in their work and how this use affects their news decisions in the presence of government pressure. Observation is considered one of the most effective techniques in news studies, especially when it is coupled with the interview technique, because it allows scholars to interact directly with journalists while they are working on news stories (Tuchman, 1978; Sanger, 1996; Iorio, 2004; Jensen, 2002). Therefore, unstructured interviews were conducted alongside the observation.

I observed journalists at work and wrote my notes and observations as well as asking questions about their use of the Internet in their work and the effects of the Internet on their decisions. Additionally, this chapter introduces notes and observations about the type of stories that the Saudi press avoids publishing due to official censorship. Another aim of the observation was to investigate the reasons behind publishing or ignoring stories in the Saudi national press. It also aimed to examine news decisions and whether such decisions reflect the loyalty of the Saudi press to the government.

The observation was conducted in two national Saudi newspapers, *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah*. I spent four weeks at the offices of each newspaper, the first four at *Alriyadh* and the latter four at *Aleqtisadiah*. During this period, I observed journalists, editors and reporters at work and also talked to them, asking them about their decisions.

By observing and interviewing journalists, I investigated how journalists on both papers use the Internet and whether news publication online affected their decisions as to whether to publish or ignore stories. Websites such as Arabiya.net, Elaph.com, Sabq.org and Alweeam.com have received major acclaim among Saudis due to the different issues covered on them. In 2009, Sabq.org became the most popular news source among Saudis (Alexa, 2009). However, this does not mean that other websites have been neglected; on the contrary, the present research encompassed many online news websites focusing on Saudi issues. However, before investigating the role of these websites, some general background for *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah* needs to be discussed.

### ***Alriyadh* newspaper:**

I spent four weeks at *Alriyadh*, from December 25, 2007 to January 23, 2008. *Alriyadh* is one of the biggest Saudi newspapers in terms of the number of journalists and of its circulation. It has a circulation of 170,000 from Saturday through Wednesday, and 90,000 at the weekend (Thursday and Friday) (Rugh, 2004). The official working week in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia starts on Saturday and ends on Wednesday, while the weekend includes Thursday and Friday. The number of journalists, including reporters and editors, working in the head office in Riyadh city (not including branches) is 105. It is also one of the biggest newspapers in terms of the number of pages. It reaches 84 pages on some days, not including supplements. Each department of the paper takes care of its own stories from receipt to publication. There are eight departments at *Alriyadh* (international affairs, national affairs, sports, finance, culture (which includes show business and music), features, readers' opinions and new media, which includes the Internet and mobile phones). Each department consists of a number of journalists; the larger the department is, the greater the number of journalists it has. Each department is headed by a chief editor who has an independent office called "the desk" that is open to all the editors of the department.

Each journalist writes his own material, and presents it to the "desk". All materials are then reviewed by the head of the department and sent to be revised and laid out. Afterwards, materials are sent to the editing department and then the production

department. The production department is responsible for the selection of photographs and deciding the size of each story. At this stage, the material is ready to be printed. The first version of the newspaper is called the "test". The test is distributed to all departments in the paper to be reviewed. Each department carries out revisions, and checks for mistakes either in print, photographs or in anything else in the materials over which they have control before the final copy is sent to be printed.

*Alriyadh* publishes three editions a day. The first edition is published outside Saudi Arabia and in remote areas of the Kingdom such as Makkah and Al-Sharqia. This edition must be ready at 6 pm; most news in this edition happened in the morning or on the day before and was not covered by the second and third editions of yesterday's paper. The first edition also focuses on stories that happened outside Riyadh city. Even advertisements are of goods, services and companies in the area to which the first edition is distributed. This edition does not cover events and stories that occur in the evening, because it must be ready at 6pm due to the constraints of distribution to distant districts. *Alriyadh*, as is the case with other Saudi daily newspapers, relies on one distribution company called the National Distribution Company. This company has its deadline for all newspapers in Riyadh city. Therefore this edition which is also called the "regions' print" has to be ready at 6:30 pm to be transferred outside Riyadh city. This edition cannot be delayed for any reason whatsoever. Therefore, anything which may happen after 6 pm cannot be published in the first edition.

The second edition, also called the "fast edition," is sent to cities and areas close to Riyadh city such as Alkharj (80 km) and Almajmaaha (150 km). This edition must be ready at 9 pm. It covers what has been published in the first edition and any new events that have happened in the following hours. It also concentrates on the news of these regions as well as the adverts for these regions. Normally, this edition does not cover what happens after 9 pm due to the distribution company's arrangements unless an important story needs to be covered. In this case the Editor-in-Chief can postpone the second edition for one hour.

The third edition, which is exclusively produced for distribution in Riyadh, is arguably the biggest and most important edition because the paper gets most of its revenue from Riyadh city advertisers and circulation. However, all editions share the main sections of the paper such as articles, features, cartoons, contests, and questionnaires. They differ only in late news and advertisements.

At the *Alriyadh* newspaper offices, there are two working shifts: the first is from 10 am to 2 pm, while the second starts at 4:30 pm and ends at midnight. I conducted my observation at the offices every day in the morning. I used pen and paper to record significant events and compiled a full report at the end of each day. In the beginning, I explained the nature of my study and that any information would be used for academic purposes. I emphasized that participants in the study would remain anonymous.

After a few hours, the journalists started to get used to my presence. This was helped by the fact that most of them already know me as a journalist and columnist at the paper. I sat in a corner, slightly removed from them, in order not to disturb them. On the first day, I did not write any notes, but I made a tour of the different departments, accompanied by Mr. Fiadh Alshamry, a journalist at the paper. He took the responsibility of introducing me to the staff of each department. I talked to both the chief journalist and other journalists in each department, introducing my research and myself. During these early stages, I was eager to understand the ways in which journalists work and how they take their decisions. I also focused on their knowledge of computers and how familiar they are with such technologies because this is the first step to understanding the influence of the Internet on their decisions.

I noticed that older (40+) journalists on *Alriyadh* do not use their computers quite often to type; instead they write by hand. When I asked one of them about the reason for handwriting, he answered that his typing speed is too slow. He claimed that handwriting helps him write his reports in a proper way. I kept walking through the departments, observing that the collection of news relies on the editors who receive news from outside either through phones or faxes, e-mails, or even the paper's reporters. As the journalists receive news, they start to paraphrase it in a way that suits the readers of the paper. When

each story is rewritten, it is sent to the "desk" of the department. As mentioned earlier, every department has its own desk, which is located in the head of the department's office. Therefore, when a journalist finishes rewriting a story he puts it on the desk. Afterwards, the head of the department reads the material and writes comments on it; then returns it to the journalist who first wrote it. If the journalist thinks the story is important he does not wait for the story to be returned to him, but instead he goes to the head of the department to find out what the head thinks about it.

Materials are then sent to be revised in the editing department, wherein all materials are taken to be accurately copy-edited. Next, the copy is transferred to the typesetting department to be set out on the page. Finally, a journalist from each department attends the production department to supervise the revision of the material related to the department. Each journalist works with a designer to design the department's material. The process of gathering material begins in the morning; there is generally little material at that time. The major focus during this period is usually on the main sections of the paper such as articles, cartoons and features.

At the end of each morning shift, which finished at 2 pm, I wrote my notes in a detailed fashion before preparing for the second shift. During the evening shift, which started at 4:30 pm, the offices of the paper became more crowded than in the morning because most Saudi journalists do not work full time as journalists. In the morning they tend to work for the government or in private jobs that have nothing to do with the press. Shortly after the beginning of the evening shift, they begin to work rapidly to put the final touches to the first print that will be sent to be revised and laid out.

Next, a journalist from each department goes to the editing department to check the arrangement and size of the material; he also reviews the photos and headlines. Each department is in charge of its own material and must review every story carefully. In addition, the position, the size and the page of the news are also checked, for there is certain news such as sport or crime stories that do not usually make it to the front page. On the other hand, political news such as items about the King is always promoted to the front page, on the left hand side.

In the Saudi press, it is important that no other news be more prominent than news about the King, thus the size of photographs is also a major consideration. The King's photo should not be smaller than any other photo in the story. After a final revision, the final copy is sent to print at 6 pm, after which time nothing can be added to the first edition. At 5:30 pm, a primary version (test) is printed and distributed to all departments. The Editor-in-Chief and his deputy receive copies of this edition. After reading the whole issue, they either pass the issue or raise whatever points need to be taken into account.

Starting from 6 pm, departments begin to prepare the second edition, which goes to print at 9 pm. Journalists submit material to be added to the second print to the "desk". The same process that was described for the first edition occurs in the second. Not all material submitted to the desk is published immediately. Some items are deferred, while others are not used at all due to the emergence of news that the head of the department thinks is more important. The head of the department decides which news deserves to be published, deferred or completely ignored. Each department has a limited number of pages that is determined by many considerations; the most important of them is how big the department is.

The national news department is the largest, with 25 editors, journalists and reporters, and produces 15 pages. Its main interests are national news stories that take place inside Saudi Arabia, such as crime, the cost of living, and other items that attract the attention of the Saudi reader. Second to this department come the finance department and the sports department, which are second in size after the national news division. The sports division consists of 13 journalists and has 8 pages daily while the finance department has 20 journalists and 10 pages daily. Advertisements may limit the number of articles printed on these pages. A one-page or half-page advert may be published in the place of an article. Whenever a large advert is printed, the chief journalist chooses the material to be replaced by the advert. Unpublished material is usually postponed until a later date, and sometimes never gets published. The highest circulation is usually on a Wednesday, possibly because Wednesday is the last day of the working week. For this reason, Wednesday's edition also carries a greater number of adverts. Thursday's and Friday's editions of the paper usually sell fewer copies than those of other days.



### ***Aleqtisadiah* newspaper:**

I spent a four-week period of observation at *Aleqtisadiah* from January 24, 2008 to February 22, 2008. *Aleqtisadiah* is a smaller publication than *Alriyadh* both in terms of the number of journalists and of pages. There are around 50 journalists based at the head office in Riyadh. There are four main departments in the paper (international affairs, national affairs, finance and sports). All journalists work on the same floor in open offices. There are no doors between offices, only small aisles between each department. *Aleqtisadiah* is more developed than *Alriyadh* in term of technology. For example, every journalist uses a computer to write his material. Material is sent by e-mail from one department to another. When an editor receives a piece of news by phone or fax, he immediately writes it down using his computer. Paper-based material is rarely used at this newspaper.

It is worth mentioning that most of *Aleqtsadiah's* journalists are young compared to the employees of *Alriyadh*, particularly given the age of the latter's senior correspondents. The open-plan design of the offices makes the journalists more sociable with each other. They talk to each other during work, something which does not occur at the offices of *Alriyadh*. Baldry (1997) (Senior Lecturer in Industrial Relations, Department of Human Resource Management, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow) argues that the advantages of an open-plan office are enormous. He points out that "there are the organizational advantages of easier line-of-sight supervision and hierarchical communication and the development of flow-line work organization" (1997, p. 371).

In terms of content, *Aleqtsadiah's* journalists are independent regarding the items they select for publication. It is rare for the Editor-in-Chief or his deputy to intervene and overrule a journalist in the process of selecting or paraphrasing a news report. Only the editor and the head of the department are in charge of this process. Each department consists of a chief journalist and between seven and ten journalists. The bigger the

department is, the greater the number of journalists. The largest departments of the paper are the local news department and the finance department, with ten journalists each.

Unlike at *Alriyadh*, there is no "desk". At *Aleqtisadiyah*, every journalist is in charge of his material from receiving the story until it gets published. Each chief journalist supervises his own pages; he instructs his staff to focus on certain stories which he believes are important and asks them to paraphrase them. During my observations of the process of news making, I noticed that each item passes through many steps. First the news is received by telephone, fax or e-mail. Then, the journalist paraphrases the news and follows it until it is published.

In order fully to understand this process, I followed a single story from the moment it was received, through to publication. The story in question concerned the annual financial report of Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC), the biggest company on the Saudi stock exchange, for which the journalist responsible was eagerly waiting. He received the report directly from the company. It contained statistics about revenues for the year 2007. The journalist wrote down the news on his computer, noting that the company recorded an annual revenue of 27 billion SR (7 billion US\$) during the fiscal year of 2007. He then sent the news from his computer to those subscribing to mobile news from the paper.

All the journalists at the newspaper can send SMS messages to subscribers to this service. SMS news is short (150 words maximum) and focuses on the main parts of the story. In the SABIC news item for example, the focus of SMS was on the 27 billion SR revenue without mentioning any extra details. The SABIC item was considered a significant news item, therefore it was sent to SMS subscribers a few seconds after it was received. After sending the news to mobile subscribers, the journalist rewrote the story in full for the newspaper. He added a comparison between the revenues of 2006 and 2007. He also checked the news on the company through its website and the Saudi stock exchange website, which records news about and announcements by Saudi companies. This gives the editor enough material to compare present results with past ones. The

journalist wrote the full story and sent it to be revised and laid out. When he had finished, he started on another similar task.

My presence at *Aleqtisadiah* coincided with the announcement of financial results by Saudi companies, so the newspaper published the results of a number of other companies. However, not all company announcements are treated in the same way as those of SABIC. For example, the announcements of four smaller companies could be combined in one SMS. After the journalist wrote the full story, the story was sent to be revised and laid out. Then the journalist waited until 5 pm, when all materials are sent to the editing department. At that time, all journalists go to the editing department, and then all materials are sent to the production department.

At 5:30 pm, the designing process begins. At *Aleqtisadiah*, this is called "drowning". Each journalist comes to supervise the material he sent in, a process which takes from 30 minutes to one hour depending on how many stories each journalist presents. The designer and the journalist work in cooperation to decide the size of each item as well as its location. Most of the time the head of the department supervises the designing process and gives directions. The journalist chooses the headlines and photographs that accompany the news. Normally there are many potential pictures, from which the editor selects one or two. Once the designing process is finished, the material goes to press. Then the journalist returns to his office in order to work on other news items. He continues to gather news items that are normally deferred until the next day, unless there is piece of news that the journalist thinks is important and cannot be left until the next day. If there is, it is then immediately paraphrased and sent to be revised and laid out. If important news comes in late, it may replace less important items. The head of the department has to make the decision. Less important news, based on the head of the department decision, is left for the next day or it is left unpublished. If there are many important stories in one day, the head of the department may ask the Editor-in-Chief for more pages.

The Editor-in-Chief often grants a department more pages if the department has late stories which the head of department believes are too important to delay. After

getting agreement, the journalist in charge of the story goes back to the production department to design it. Next, it is sent to press. A primary version of each section in the paper is printed and sent to each department, but the Editor-in-Chief and his deputy receive a full version of the paper, in which they revise all material and approve the copy as it is or ask for corrections. Each journalist checks his material and photographs since, as one of the journalists said, mistakes in photos, such as printing the wrong one, are the commonest kind of error. After revising the copy, it is sent to the press to insert corrections.

Unlike *Alriyadh*, *Aleqtisadiah* is a single edition newspaper. This reflects the fact that *Aleqtisadiah* is printed simultaneously at locations in Jeddah, Riyadh and Dammam. The deadline for an issue of *Aleqtisadiah* is normally 12 am, although this may be delayed to 1 am if necessary. *Aleqtisadiah* does not make use of the National Distribution Company; it owns a private distribution company that is a part of Saudi Research and Marketing Company. This gives *Aleqtisadiah* more flexibility when the issue is delayed. The working hours for this paper are one shift, starting at 1pm and finishing at 12 am.

The working hours may be extended if necessary, although I did not observe any extension of working hours during my four-week observation. I was at *Aleqtisadiah* at 1 pm every day. Most journalists leave at 9 pm, but one or two journalists from each department stay until midnight.

I employed the same technique at *Aleqtisadiah* that was implemented at *Alriyadh* - that is to say, I wrote down short notes, then compiled a full report at the end of the day. I had little chats with them (talking about issues such as sport) and I explained the nature of my research and the kind of news that I would be examining in the course of my study. I felt that the journalists became familiar with me very quickly, within hours of my arrival. I did not write any notes on my first day, and did not even take my notebook with me, as I was interested in finding out the nature of work at the paper. Walking between different departments and asking the journalists briefly about the nature of their jobs were the most important tasks of my first day. On my second day, I took my notebook and started to write notes; the journalists seemed to feel familiar with my presence.

### **Observation Method:**

As mentioned in Chapter Four, the aim of the observation was to investigate the pressure of Internet websites and the government on the journalists. Therefore, the observation at the two newspapers focused on two primary dimensions - the Internet and the government, and the effect of both factors on censorship- and also how both papers react to these pressures. Censorship is discussed within both of these two parts (the Internet and the government).

### **I- The Internet and the press**

This part of the observation examines the effects of online published stories on Saudi journalists' news decisions and how journalists react and interact with national news published in news websites such as Sabq and Alweeam. Based on my observations and interviews with journalists at *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah*, there are differences in how journalists interact with news websites which focuses on national news. Although journalists on both newspapers use the Internet in their work, some older journalists, particularly at *Alriyadh*, tend not to use the Internet on a large scale; their use of the Internet is limited to sending and receiving e-mails. They believe that news websites are unreliable as a source of news, and rarely use them as a news medium. When they receive a story via the Internet, they print it out and rewrite it manually. Their inability to use the Internet or to speak English has limited their use of the Internet. This makes the process of searching for information difficult. However, the younger generation of journalists on *Alriyadh* tend to be more familiar with using computers and the Internet.

All journalists, editors and reporters at *Aleqtisadiah* use computers and the Internet. News making on the paper is a computer-based process at all stages, and a

computer-illiterate reporter could not work on this paper. One journalist told me that he used to write his material manually because he did not know how to type on the computer. When this was noticed by the Editor-in-Chief, he was given a one-month ultimatum to learn to type or he would be dismissed. He said his only way out was to learn computer skills.

After spending four weeks at the offices of each newspaper, I found that there are three facets of the Internet-press relationship: the Internet as a competitor to the press, the Internet as a source of information and the Internet as a source of pressure on newspapers.

#### **A –Internet websites as a Competitor to the Press:**

Through my observations and interviews conducted with the journalists at both newspapers, I found that news websites have become a strong competitor in covering news in Saudi Arabia. Their ability to publish news as it takes place has exceeded the capabilities of newspapers, in which news must pass through a relatively time-consuming processes in order to be published. Although this situation came about to some extent before the existence of the Internet, due to the existence of radio and TV channels, the Internet has other effects. The Internet has multi-media capabilities which include audio and video as well as text. The latter obviously challenges the press because it has the same features as the press but it is not limited by the number of pages or a deadline, as newspapers are. Moreover, news websites do not suffer from the same official censorship as the national press, TV channels and radio stations in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, Saudis see online news websites as a supplement to the national press, which cannot cover certain stories due to censorship. This gives the Internet as a news medium a huge advantage over the press in Saudi Arabia, and that is what makes websites such as Alarabiya.net, Sabq and Alweeam so popular among Saudis.

The journalists pointed out that, with the emergence of news websites, it has become difficult for a newspaper to obtain exclusive news. These websites have zero printing time; therefore the news is published as soon as it is received. In contrast,

newspapers have deadlines and printing times that have to be met. At *Alriyadh*, the distant regions' edition must be ready at 6 pm at the latest, due to printing and transportation constraints. The Riyadh city edition goes to print at 11 pm, but can be delayed until 12 pm if necessary. At *Aleqtisadiah*, the paper is under print by midnight. News that reaches the paper after midnight cannot be published in either newspaper. On the Internet however, news can be published at any time.

A journalist participating in this study stated that the presence of news websites forced him to change his way of reporting news. In the past, news items used to be published as they came from the source; there was extensive reliance in the Saudi press on news agencies (Al-Kahtani, 1999; Al Shebeili, 2000). Now, however, the journalist said that he does not publish the news as it is received, he rewrites the news and adds other information. The way in which this is done is what distinguishes one newspaper from another, he told me. A journalist in the international news section said that in the past he used to publish news exactly as he received it from the news agencies, but now it is more complicated. He said, "What comes from news agencies is a part of the story but not the whole story." A good journalist is one who rewrites the story and extends it to suit the reader, he added.

Another journalist indicated that, as a result of the proliferation of news websites focusing on Saudi news, journalists have realized that most stories published in the newspaper happened the day before it is published and are mostly covered by other news media such as news channels and websites. News channels and websites are now the first to publish news. Gans argues that as a result of competition with the Internet, the coverage of news in traditional news media is characterized by "extra detail, and explanation for events the audience presumably already knows about" (2004, p. xv). Therefore, publishing news in the paper on the next day will be a repetition of what people already knew the day before. As a result, journalists at *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah* take this fact into consideration; they change the way they write news in order to compete with the Internet. They extend the news and analyse the story in depth, linking it to the reader. This point is explained with examples below.

The Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* paper pointed out that the paper has gradually started to turn from news reporting to news analysis; this has happened due to the advent of many competitors such as the Internet and news channels which publish news stories immediately after receiving them. The Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* mentioned that the news that is published in the paper today was received yesterday. This means that 24 hours may have passed since the event took place. Therefore, he stated, "A successful newspaper is one that provides something new to the reader." Only a short-sighted journalist publishes news that was issued before; he does not take into account the inability of printed papers to confront online and live news channels. News acquires its value from being fresh and recent. The presence of the Internet and TV news channels has made newspaper news look old; this does not mean that papers have lost their purpose, but that their role has moved towards concentrating on deeper analysis of the issues. The Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* newspaper added that his newspaper has gained more sales because he knows how to deal with the new situation. The paper has turned from focusing on news itself to emphasizing news analysis.

An editor of the international news department at *Alriyadh* said that deep analysis of the news had rarely been presented in the paper in the past. As a result of the intense rivalry of the Internet and live news channels, however, deep analysis has become essential. Also worthy of mention is that the number of news items in *Alriyadh* paper has been reduced by fifty per cent in order to allow space for more in-depth analysis of a smaller number of issues, as the Editor-in-Chief pointed out. "We used to publish a large number of short news items, but now most published items are long and detailed," he said. Whenever an issue is raised, the paper assigns a place for analysis and examination of the material. News has now become deeper than it has ever been, and it is now rare for news to be published unaccompanied by analysis. News reporting has become more difficult, as noted by many journalists. Instead of focusing on the event itself, the newspapers' attention has been pulled towards the reasons for and consequences of the event.

An international stock exchange reporter mentioned that as he receives international news items, he thinks of the best way to expand the story by linking it to the



Saudi reader and investor. For example, when he received a story about Citigroup (the American financial services company), which suffered heavy losses at the end of 2007, the story was brief. "US banking giant Citigroup has reported a \$9.83bn net loss for the last three months of 2007. Chief executive Vikram Pandit said the loss had been caused by a \$18.1bn exposure to bad mortgage debt and was 'clearly unacceptable'" (AP, 24 January, 2008). Therefore, the reporter rewrote the news and expanded it by contacting many banks to investigate the damage caused by this loss to local banks, particularly the Saudi American Bank (SAMBA). He also contacted the office of Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal to find out his opinion about what happened to Citigroup, as the Prince owns about 5% of Citigroup's shares and 95% of the Kingdom Company (one of the biggest companies on the Saudi stock exchange). The journalist also telephoned Citibank's branch in Dubai to find out their reaction to the news. Finally, he called a financial analyst in Beirut, who predicted the division of the Group into four separate companies.

As mentioned earlier, two stories were extended and enriched in order to face the heavy competition from national news websites. The first example is the annual financial reports of SABIC which I followed in the first day at *Aleqtisadiah*. The second example of the use of such a technique is the story about Citigroup's heavy losses at the end of 2007. Another example of the expansion and enrichment of news stories was the assassination in Pakistan of presidential candidate Benazir Bhutto. It was one of the major events which took place during my observation at the *Alriyadh* offices, and I followed the coverage of the story with one of the editors who was in charge of this news item to see how he would respond to such important news that attracted the attention of the global media. When the editor received the story from the news agency, it was brief. "Former Prime Minister of Pakistan, leader of People's Party Benazir Bhutto died today after suffering fatal wounds from an assassination attempt at a campaign rally just two weeks before parliamentary elections" (AP, December 27, 2007). The editor first rewrote the news, and then he telephoned political analysts from Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Pakistan and asked them about the future of Pakistan. Next, he contacted the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs to find out if they had issued a statement. He also browsed

the web to find more information about Bhutto and her political history, and searched for more details on the failed attack on her two months before.

On the next day, I read the story in *Alriyadh*; I found that the editor had divided the news into two different stories. The first story underlined the Saudi statement and the Saudi condemnation of such violent acts; it also presented the King's condolences to the Bhutto family. This story was issued almost exactly as it came from the Saudi Press Agency (SPA). The second story was longer and more detailed. It gave details of the assassination and offered the views of many political analysts on the effects of this event on the future of Pakistan and the up-coming Pakistani elections. The news also included many reports on Bhutto's life and her political career. The editor concluded this part with a question about the participation of her political party in forthcoming elections. This contradicts what Al-Kahtani (1999), Barayan (2002) and Kheraigi (1990) argue in their studies. They argued that the Saudi media and the press in particular rely heavily on foreign media and international news agencies, and this made the content of Saudi newspapers very similar. Kheraigi (1990) and Al-Kahtani (1999) attribute a cut and paste strategy to the lack of well trained and qualified journalists.

The Internet and mobile news are characterized by their focus on short news items, dealing with the most important aspects of each story. Due to the lack of journalistic skills and their low budget, websites such as Sabq and Alweeam focus on short news. Unlike websites news, newspaper articles are long and investigative, in order to add new information and analysis, providing the reader with something that the Internet and mobile news cannot. Newspapers use their contacts and their ability to hire analysts and experts to enrich and deeply analyse the news. The assassination of the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto, and the big losses of Citigroup are among the stories that the papers covered in-depth using their contacts and financial ability, something which news websites such as Sabq and Alweeam do not have and cannot afford. The two newspapers attempted to re-introduce the news story by paraphrasing it and adding new information which the readership could not get from the Internet, mobile phones, or satellite channels.

The availability of multiple news sources for national readership and the high competition these sources pose to newspapers have definitely contributed to increase the quality of the wording of news stories in Saudi newspapers. As a matter of fact, the two papers have entirely abandoned the descriptive method of news editing, as noted by the Editors-in-Chief of both newspapers. As discussed in Chapter One, Saudi newspapers were established by novelists and poets who had a strong relationship with the government, which meant that the coverage of news in the national press was full of description.

In the past, Saudi newspapers were characterized by exaggeration and overemphasis in the way they composed national news stories, especially those in which the government was a party. Al-Kahtani (1999) in a three-week content analysis finds that the Saudi press coverage of the 1990-1991 Iraq war was full of exaggeration and description. The newspapers exaggerated extremely in portraying the government officials and employees as supermen in terms of bravery, boldness, and creativity, notably in the coverage of terrorism-related issues (Al-Kahtani, 1999). However, this is no longer the case. The Editor-in-Chief of *Aleqtisadiah* indicated that newspapers have restricted their role nowadays to concentrating on the factual event itself, without exaggerating, overestimating, or filling the news story with unnecessary details designed to portray a positive image of the government.

Another face of Internet websites as a tough competitor to the press is the official websites of different organizations. Official websites have become a popular source of news. One of the stories that highlighted the Internet as a strong rival to journalism was the transfer of the Saudi footballer Yasser Al-Qahtani, who had been nominated the best player in Asia in 2008, to Manchester City football club. Al-Qahtani was approached by the Manchester club, and I was at the paper while a journalist in the sports section was following this deal, which was being conducted secretly between the club and the player. Before City manager at that time Sven-Göran Eriksson made his decision, the player went to Manchester for playing trials. After he left Saudi Arabia, news about the player was suppressed, for reasons of confidentiality, by the Saudi Al Hilal, Manchester City, and Al-Qahtani himself. The journalist asked me to help him with that story because he

does not speak English. We started looking for news about the deal on the Internet. We checked the Manchester City official website, which mentioned that the player had trained with the team, but gave no more details. We logged on to other websites, and found that the *Manchester Evening News* had published a story mentioning Al-Qahtani, but nothing about the deal. We also reviewed the responses of the club's fans to this particular story. Surprisingly, many Manchester City fans were familiar with the player; they knew him through the video website Youtube, where they had seen some of his goals.

Although we found websites covering the story, none of them gave any details of the deal. However, the journalist liked the comments of Manchester City fans on the Saudi player which were published on the club website. He believed that publishing some of the fans' comments under the title "Manchester fans' views on Yasser Al-Qahtani" would be a good idea. It was not what he hoped for, but it was soft news that might interest the readers. However, although he wrote the story, it did not get published. That was because the Al-Hilal official website announced that the player was coming back from London at midnight. The website promised to keep the fans updated about any developments in the story. The news did not mention any details of the deal, but it was enough to make the journalist's prepared story irrelevant. The return of the player after a short trial meant that he would not sign a contract with the English club, and so the story was not considered worth publishing.

The journalist who followed the story said that the existence of the clubs' websites had reduced the chance of getting exclusive stories to newspapers. He remarked that the Al-Hilal website's announcement of the return of Al-Qahtani was evidence of the Internet as a competitor. Before the Internet came into being, news came voluntarily from clubs to reporters. A major problem, the journalist added, is that clubs have started to limit information to that published on their websites. He pointed out that when journalists contact the spokesperson of any club, they are almost invariably referred to the club's website.

Another sports reporter mentioned that mobile news services have made matters increasingly difficult for journalists. He added that most sports clubs now have this service, for which the club's fans and supporters pay a fee in order to stay up to date with the club's news. Thus, when the club has any new announcements on the appointment of a new coach or player, it sends a mobile message to the subscribers of the service. A journalist, who is the newspaper's reporter at the Al-Nasser club, one of the clubs in Riyadh city, said that his task is to report news from Al-Nasser, but that since the launch of the mobile news service, the club has started to limit its news to this service. Instead of passing the news on to newspapers, the club sends it direct to its fans and makes money from it. This forces reporters to subscribe to this service too, and reduces the chance of uncovering exclusive news.

*Alriyadh's* deputy Editor-in-Chief said that the presence of Internet websites have surpassed newspapers in obtaining exclusive news, and consequently a new media department has been created at the newspaper. As he noted, the paper has developed ways to limit the effects of the Internet as a competitor. A department has been set up with specialized reporters who rewrite breaking news which arrives at the paper after the print deadline. Breaking news is sent to the readers of the paper through the breaking news service in an SMS form. This service was established in 2007, and now has more than 40,000 subscribers. Furthermore, new technology has recently been used to send videos and photos to subscribers. Asked about the reason for not publishing this news on the paper's website, the deputy Editor-in-Chief mentioned that the website is free and its revenues are limited, thus the paper prefers to make money from breaking news. He mentioned that the website is important for the brand of the paper but that it is still hard to make money out of it.

*Aleqtisadiah* has the same mobile news service, but in a rather more developed way. Instead of writing the news then sending it to a new media department, *Aleqtisadiah* uses a technique that enables the journalists to send the news directly from their computer to SMS subscribers, and all journalists at *Aleqtisadiah* are now able to directly send breaking news from their computers to customers' mobile phones. When a journalist receives a story, and before paraphrasing it for the paper, he sends it to subscribers to the

SMS update service. The decisions as to the type of stories that are sent via this mobile news service are taken after a short phone or personal conversation between the journalist who received the story and the head of the department. The deputy Editor-in-Chief mentioned that stories that concern the Saudi reader, such as the quarterly or annual reports of the revenue of Saudi companies and the announcement of a 5% wage increase for public sector workers, take priority in the mobile news service. *Aleqtisadiah*'s Editor-in-Chief mentioned new technology that enables the journalist to send his SMS from home, so as to cope with the arrival of news after the end of the working shift.

An editor in the new media department of *Alriyadh* stated that he obtained exclusive stories and they were sent to the subscribers of the newspaper in SMS form. He told me that a story that employees of the Saudi governmental apparatus had been given a two-day holiday during the hosting of the Arab Summit, which was considered important news, was exclusive to *Alriyadh*. With the increase in the number of subscribers to mobile news services, news is sent at the moment it is received, not after the deadline of the print edition of the newspaper.

Journalists do not often spend time rewriting this news; they send it to subscribers as it comes in from the news source. This is because every second counts due to heavy competition from other mobile news services. A scoop may be lost due to being delayed by seconds. An editor gave the example of losing a news exclusive relating to the football player Osama Husawi's transfer from Wiheda to Al-Hilal. This happened due to a 20-second technical problem. Before sending the news, reporters received it on their mobile telephones from Al-Hilal club's mobile news service. He pointed out that he sent the news on to the subscribers knowing that some of them knew about it already. He added, "A mobile news service is about beating other providers - that's how *Alriyadh* mobile service gets its popularity."

Although the two newspapers tried to reduce online overtaking of scoops through relying on SMS services, many websites took exclusives. For example, *Aleqtisadiah* was waiting for the announcement of the flotation of Petro Rabigh shares on the Saudi stock market. This was highly significant news, as more than 4 million Saudis had shares in the

company. As the news came into the paper, I logged on to Sabq, which specializes in national and local Saudi news and I found the story already published there. During the rewriting of the news for the SMS service, the reporter said that the flotation would be on the Sunday, but I told him that, as announced on Sabq, it was on the Saturday.

News websites also achieved a scoop in weather forecasts, particularly on the rainfall in different regions of the Kingdom. News of rain is considered important for Saudis, due to its rarity. During my time at *Aleqtisadiyah*, news came in of snow falling in the northern city of Arar. This was considered significant, as it is unusual to see snow in the Saudi desert, but the absence of photographs of the snow made the reporter unwilling to publish it. However, an online website (ararcol.com) published photos of the snow in Arar, and the reporter was forced to rely on these pictures, referring to their source.

#### **B- Internet websites as a Source of Information:**

Although Internet websites have become a major rival to newspapers as a news source, it can also help them to extend and enrich news items. Many journalists at the two papers in this study use Internet websites which focus on national news to find information related to their materials. Internet websites become an indispensable part of their daily work as professional journalists. As one of the journalists pointed out, the Internet is seen as a kind of mobile library that journalists can use when they need particular information. A sports journalist mentioned that he uses the Internet as a source of information to support stories received from other news sources such as officials and news agencies. A sports reporter mentioned that he used information obtained online to support news he got as a sports correspondent at the Saudi Football Federation (SFF). As a correspondent, his task is limited to reporting news and official decisions issued by the SFF. He mentioned that he covered a story of a Spanish official refereeing the final match of the Saudi King's Cup last year. Once he had found out the name of the referee and that he would be officiating at the match, he logged on the Internet to look for information about him. By this means, he found that the referee had a reputation for strictness, issuing more bookings than any other referee in the Spanish league that season. The reporter

wrote the story using this information; the news headline was "Red Card Lover to arbitrate in the King's Cup."

In the finance departments of both papers, journalists said that they rely heavily on Internet websites. Budget and revenue details of companies are announced on their official websites. Therefore, when news comes in, the journalists naturally log on to company websites and check the news; they may also add any important information to support and enrich the story. I followed an editor's coverage of Petro Rabigh's debut on Saudi Arabia's stock market (Tadawul). The news as it arrived at the office was brief and only limited to the event itself, but the editor went online and looked for more information about the company. Through his online exploration, the editor added much information, such as the number of shares and the capital of the company, as well as details of its founders and its core business.

A local news journalist spoke of the magnitude of Internet use in his work. He mentioned that he once read a story on Alsaha.com, about a man who was dismissed from his job along with a number of his co-workers without sensible reasons. The journalist called the company who fired the man and asked about the reasons, and developed the story by calling the dismissed workers and also the Ministry of Labour, who is in charge of such cases. The journalist added that the Internet is a fertile source of news and that qualified and experienced journalists can make extensive use of it.

The rapid growth of the Internet has given readers too the opportunity to participate and comment on the content of their favourite newspapers, which has in turn led to a new era in the reader-newspaper relationship. Van der Weijden points out that "opinion, discussion and comments are no longer exclusive to forums and newsgroups; they are now ubiquitous on the Web and even coveted by mainstream online newspapers" (August, 2007, p. 4). Jay Rosen argues that "the people formerly called the audience are now participants" (cited in Van der Weijden, 2007, p. 21). Moreover, as journalists pointed out, readers' comments put pressure on newspapers to adopt and focus on the stories that interest them. Journalists on both papers mentioned that their newspapers' websites have deepened their understanding of the paper's readership.



The deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* stated that the editorial board knows the kind of stories that attract the reader. For example, high food prices have been found to attract the attention of *Alriyadh* readers, so the newspaper has responded by increasing its coverage of that issue. In the same way, a journalist in the local news section of *Alriyadh* claimed that while he had never expected coverage of rising prices for dairy products to attract the newspaper's readers, when he published news on the increase in dairy prices, many readers responded to the story. The topic was extremely popular and was the subject of around 5000 comments on the website. This prompted the journalist to interview the manager of one of the biggest Saudi dairy companies, asking him about the reasons for raising prices, and this also attracted readers.

At the foot of the home page of the *Alriyadh* website there are two menus which are updated continually. The first is dedicated to the stories most visited by readers, while the second is devoted to the topics prompting the most comments. Via these two menus, editors, reporters and journalists have access to the readers' likes and dislikes which can help the papers to gain a better understanding of the readers' opinions and attitudes.

### **C- Internet websites as a Source of Pressure:**

The third role of Internet websites which I observed is the role of news websites as a source of pressure on the national press to follow stories which used to be ignored. During my eight-week observation I found that news websites placed pressure on the two papers to cover stories they used to ignore. For example, papers used to avoid publishing negative stories about government institutions or the government's international policy. Rugh argues that the Saudi press is characterized by total loyalty to the government, which makes it support *all* decisions taken by the government (2004, p. 43). However, avoiding negative stories about the government has become difficult in the present time due to the existence of websites that focus on Saudi national affairs, as *Alriyadh's* deputy Editor-in-Chief told me. Yet this does not mean that all stories published online have been covered by the two papers. Stories relating to the government's international policies, the arrest of journalists and writers and protests are among the stories that usually ignored by the Saudi press, regardless of their online coverage.

One type of story that used to be prohibited in the press was anything relating to the national or religious police, particularly scandals involving physical abuse. As discussed in Chapter One, the religious factor is considered one of the most influential reasons for the censorship practised over the national press. Rugh argues that "the religious police has always been treated very deferentially in the Saudi media" (2004, p.59). However, now this kind of news is publishable in the national newspapers, according to the Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh*. "We cannot ignore these kind of stories any more because they are published on the Internet," he said, adding that "although we still receive orders from the Ministry of Culture and Information not to cover religious police stories, we have started to cover these stories because we do not want to give websites the opportunity to have the lead and attract readers." He added that ignoring stories which interest Saudi readers, such as those about the religious police, embarrasses the paper to its readers, who expect the paper to cover this kind of story. Therefore, this type of story has become publishable in the national press.

The Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* explained that though the Ministry of Culture and Information still issues instructions to the newspapers to focus on or avoid publishing news about certain events, these instructions are not applied strictly. In this regard, he mentioned that he had received several instructions not to publish certain news but had published it anyway. He added this includes pictures of Saudi women or activities related to the religious police, but he published photographs and news about the religious police.

There is a committee for printing violations at the Ministry of Culture and Information concerned with monitoring publication matters. This committee is in charge of printing materials internationally and nationally. However, its activities have almost vanished, according to *Aleqtsadiah's* Editor-in-Chief, who said that he did not remember receiving a single circular or instruction from this committee. The committee mostly warns newspapers or imposes a nominal penalty, not exceeding SR 5000. He added that when he assumed the office of Editor-in-Chief there had been a number of unpaid penalties but he did not receive any demand for payment from the Ministry.

The rate of penalties and punishments which used to be imposed in the past on national newspapers and journalists has declined sharply in the last three years, as Editors-in-Chief and their deputies in both papers pointed out. In addition, the firing of journalists and Editors-in-Chief, which had been experienced in the past, is now rarely seen, particularly after King Abdullah assumed the leadership of Saudi Arabia in 2005, according to *Aleqtsadiah's* editor-in-chief. He added that since that date, no journalist has been fired from his paper and he has not heard of any journalist being sacked from any other paper. He also mentioned that Jamal Khashoggi, who was fired from the post of Editor-in-Chief of *Alwatan* in 2003, returned in mid-2007 to assume the same post, a matter that indicates that the government is not backing the principle of suspension or dismissal. Columnists such as Mansour Al Nakidan and Ginan Al Ghamdi who were suspended from writing for national newspapers are now back to write for the *Alriyadh* and *Alwatan* papers, he said.

As a result, the press now tends to cover stories which used to be taboo. One of the stories that received huge attention from the Internet was the attack on a high school student by the religious police. Sabq, Alweeam, Alsaha and Alarabiya all followed the story. According to these websites, the incident took place on Sunday, January 13, 2008, when the boy (Ahammed Almokais) left his parents' home to go to a grocery store in a quiet neighbourhood of Najran city (in Southern Saudi Arabia), he was stopped and subsequently beaten by four men from the religious police and one man from the National Guard. Sabq described the attack as a brutal and inhuman assault on an innocent boy.

As part of my observation at *Alriyadh*, I observed a journalist who followed the story on the same day. The journalist supplied details of the attack on the boy, which had resulted in his hospitalisation. The title of his piece was "A 16-year old boy brutally beaten up by four religious officers in front of his home." The newspaper's correspondent in Najran city, where the incident took place, interviewed the boy to find out the reasons for this aggression. What drew my attention to this story was the large photos showing the effects of the attack on the boy. The news was published in the local news section, together with photos (see Figures 1 and 2). From my experience as both a journalist and

reader living in Saudi Arabia, I have never before read a story about violence by the religious police that included photos of the victim. Part of the story was a statement from the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) that described the incident as brutal and inhumane; it considered what the religious police did to citizens and residents as unjustified. The news mentioned that the paper contacted the religious police spokesman and asked him about the incident, but he declined to comment for lack of information.

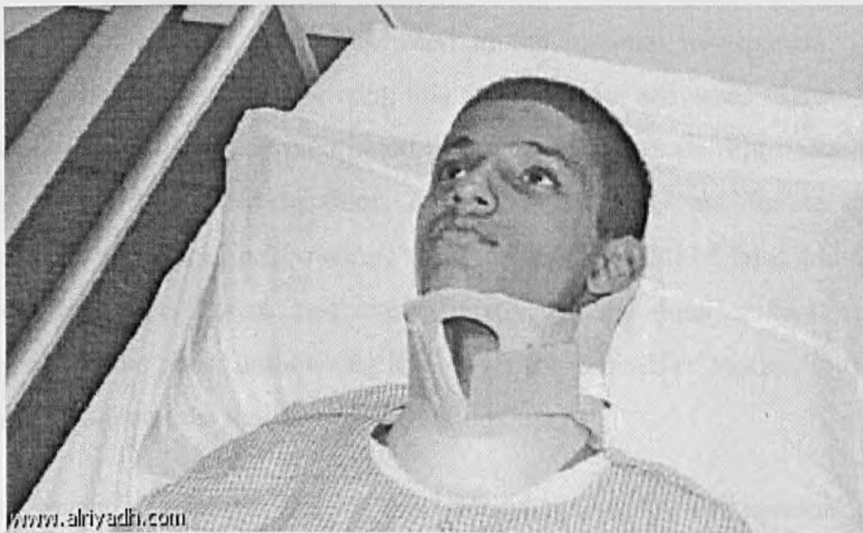


FIG. 1 & 2



One of the stories which was covered by the Internet and then followed by *Alriyadh* newspaper was a break-in at the official residency of the Ambassador of Sierra Leone in Riyadh City. The house is located in the diplomatic quarter of Riyadh City. I read the news on Sabq before going to the paper's offices. As I arrived at the offices, I found a local news journalist working on that story. He contacted both the police and the embassy to learn more about the incident. From my experience as a journalist, I was aware of the fact that any news on foreign diplomats in Saudi Arabia, either as victims or perpetrators, is not allowed to be published in the national newspapers. I asked the journalist about his reasons for following this news, and he answered that restrictions on such news have been lifted. He mentioned that recently, news on diplomats has become publishable. The lifting of restrictions, as he pointed out, was due to the massive coverage of such stories online, coverage which tends to be full of false and exaggerated information. Thus the Police and the Ministry of the Interior had sent official announcements to the paper authorizing it to cover these kinds of stories, in order to preempt the spread of rumours and false information.

The spread of news stories on the Internet is used by the national press as an excuse to follow stories the national press used to avoid. An excellent example of such a story used as an excuse was given by *Alriyadh's* deputy Editor-in-Chief. This was the case of a girl from Al-Qatif (an oasis town in northeastern Saudi Arabia) who was kidnapped and raped by seven men. He added that despite the Ministry of Culture and Information's prohibition of the publication of such stories, the paper followed it because it had become known to Saudi people already via the Internet. Although the 18- year old girl was raped by seven men, the court sentenced the victim to six months in prison and 90 lashes. The story was given enormous attention in the international media as well as by international organizations.

The *Daily Mail* published a transcript of an interview with the victim, which was released by Human Rights Watch (30 November, 2007). The girl said "I had a relationship with someone on the phone... He threatened to tell my family about the

relationship. Because of the threats and fear, I agreed to give him a photo of myself." She continued that "I asked him for the photo back but he refused. He said: 'I'll give you the photo on the condition that you come out with me in my car'." She recalled: "He started to drive me home, and when we were about to turn the corner to my house, another car stopped right in front of our car." "One of the men brought a knife to my throat. They told me not to speak. They pushed both of us to the back of the car and started driving." She recalled that "They took us to an area with lots of palm trees. No one was there. If you killed someone there, no one would know about it." She continued that "The first man with the knife raped me. I was destroyed. I tried to force them off but I couldn't. Another man came in and did the same thing to me. I didn't even feel anything after that." (The *Daily Mail*, November 30, 2007).

After ignoring the story for several weeks, *Alriyadh* gave it extensive coverage, placing it on the front page for three consecutive days, as the deputy Editor-in-Chief told me. He explained that the paper could not ignore it any longer, especially after it became a hot story.

Another type of news which used to be ignored in the past is negative stories of Saudis abroad, including their arrest. As the deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* noted, although such news was not allowed to be published in the past, this is no longer the case. He added that this kind of news was previously not published because it might have affected Saudi relations with the country in which the Saudi citizen was arrested. He acknowledged that the paper finds itself obliged to cover these kinds of stories because ignoring them in the past meant that readers would not know about them. Now, however, if the paper does not publish it other news sources will do so, and this might affect the paper's readership, especially as such stories get much attention from the public. Such news may become a sensitive issue if there is injustice done to a Saudi citizen.

A famous example of this is that of a Saudi PhD candidate who was jailed in the United States in 2004. Homaidan Al-Turki (36) and his wife were first arrested in November 2004 for violating immigration law in the State of Colorado (Arab News Website, September 2006). In June 2005, Al-Turki was arrested again for bad treatment

of his housemaid and in addition for sexually abusing her. The Saudi press described the allegations of sexual abuse and the bad treatment of the housemaid as false and discriminatory (*Militant Islam Monitor*, June 2006). A Youtube (January 20, 2008) clip called "Homaidan Alturki is alone" created anger among Saudis.

The *Alriyadh* deputy editor mentioned that this story was the first that the paper had covered which included criticism of a friendly country like the United States. He added that the paper started following the story after it had been published on the Internet for weeks. He said "We were cautious about publishing the story but after the story was published in *Alwatan* newspaper, we felt obliged to publish it." He added, "Not only does the publication of news stories online place pressure on the paper to follow stories which used to be ignored, but also the publication of news on other national newspapers plays a similar role." The Saudi daily *Alwatan*, which allows "genuine political debates to take place in its opinion pages," plays a key role in media *infatih* (openness) in the Saudi national press (Lacroix, 2004, p.358). Jamal Khashoggi, *Al-Watan's* editor-in-chief, said, "Issues previously raised by *Alwatan* newspaper that had provoked criticism are now openly and audaciously discussed by all Saudi newspapers" (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, April 25, 2007).

As a result, as a journalist in the local news department pointed out, not only did *Alriyadh* publish Al-Turki's story, it also demanded help for the Saudi student, accusing the U.S. judiciary of being unfair. Similar news had never been allowed to be published in the past, he added. The publication of that story by *Alriyadh* not only shows the effects of Internet pressure but also shows the pressure of other news media, whether a national newspaper, a TV channel or an Internet website.

During my observation at *Aleqtisadiah*, the paper covered a car crash involving a young Saudi woman in Egypt. Sarah Fahd al-Khottafi, a Saudi student in Egypt, was accused of driving her car under the influence of alcohol and causing a crash which killed two men (an Egyptian and Azerbaijani) in Cairo on January 14, 2008. Although the Egyptian police announced that the Saudi student was not under the influence of alcohol at the time of the accident, the Egyptian press disputed this.

*Aleqtisadiah* followed the story, reporting that the Saudi woman had been involved in a collision between two cars on one of Cairo's main streets, which led to the death of two men (*Aleqtisadiah* website, January 25, 2008). The story focused on the allegations of the Egyptian papers, which accused the woman of driving under the influence of alcohol. *Aleqtisadiah* accused the Egyptian press of lying to the Egyptian public. The paper defended the Saudi girl and accused the Egyptian press of exaggeration, in order to persuade the girl's family to pay more compensation to the victims' families.

As the editor-in-chief of *Aleqtisadiah* pointed out, this kind of story used to be prohibited in the past. "This type of news used to be considered very sensitive because it could cause tensions between the Saudi and Egyptian governments," he said. However, such news can now be published, especially if there is no official statement from the Egyptian side. If statements are issued by government officials, they are usually published without any question about their credibility, in order not to create tensions between the two states. He mentioned that conservative papers such as *Alriyadh* and *Al-Jazirah* avoid publishing stories of this type because these two papers are considered semi-governmental. *Aleqtisadiah*, however, does not suffer from the heavy censorship practised over semi-governmental newspapers such as *Alriyadh* and *Al-Jazirah*. He added that coverage of certain news in *Alriyadh* or *Al-Jazirah* is considered by observers as the government's opinion, especially where international affairs are concerned. This situation places an enormous pressure on these papers (*Alriyadh* and *Al-Jazirah*) to ignore stories that other papers cover. This certainly applies in other Arab countries too. For example, in Egypt, articles or reports in *Alahram* newspaper are mostly considered to promote the Egyptian government's view. Therefore, semi-governmental papers are cautious when covering stories that involve any other Arab state. In an interview with *Aleqtisadiah*, Ibrahim Nafaa (*Alahram's* Editor-in-Chief), criticized the Egyptian press coverage of the Saudi student's accident, accusing some of the Egyptian papers of violating journalistic ethics. He went on to apologize for the unfair coverage in the Egyptian press.

Although there are some news stories which have been allowed to be published, other news is still prohibited in the national press in Saudi Arabia. One of the stories I



witnessed when I was at *Alriyadh* related to the French President Nicolas Sarkozy's visit to Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government refused to allow the French President to be accompanied by his fiancée on the visit. Many websites published the story, including Elaph, Kabar and Alarabiya. Similarly, ABC covered the story mentioning that "A senior Saudi official urged French President Nicolas Sarkozy on Monday to respect Saudi Arabia's conservative Islamic culture by visiting the country without his fiancée, former supermodel Carla Bruni" (January 7, 2008). The Saudi government's policy related to the laws of the country, which ban any woman from travelling or staying with a man if he is not her husband or first-degree relative. When I asked about the reasons for not covering such news, the editor-in-chief of *Alriyadh* answered that the paper does not normally publish stories related to the government's international decisions unless an official statement by the Saudi Press Agency is issued. He added, "As long as we have no official statement related to Sarkozy's fiancée, the story will remain unpublished."

An editor at *Aleqtisadiah* mentioned that personal news about foreign diplomats and politicians is often not published in local newspapers. These newspapers are very cautious when dealing with political news, especially negative stories related to friendly countries which might cause tensions between the two countries. He added that this kind of news on foreign affairs is often avoided unless there is an official declaration by the Saudi Press Agency (SPA).

The journalists on both papers confirm that news on relations with other countries, especially Arab countries, is cautiously dealt with because they may create tensions between the two countries. The deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Aleqtisadiah* confirmed that press outlets in the Arab world are regarded as the representatives of government viewpoints, so any criticism of an Arab country will be interpreted as the view of the government. He added that there is much sensitivity surrounding the criticism of other countries in the national newspapers. On the other hand, criticizing the Saudi government's performance has become common in the Saudi press, as *Alriyadh's* Editor-in-Chief pointed out. He added that it is nothing out of the ordinary to criticize a Minister or an official in the government. However, the national press is still not able to criticize any politician or official from another country.

The arrest of an online writer, Fouad Al-Farhan, by the Ministry of the Interior is another story which was completely ignored by the two newspapers. Although this story received a great deal of attention from both local Internet websites and international media, the story did not get published in the papers. The story of the Saudi blogger started when he was detained by the Interior Ministry on December 11, 2007. Alarabiya.net mentioned that the Interior Ministry spokesman Mansour Al-Turki confirmed the arrest (January, 2008). The website added that this is the first known arrest of an online critic in the country. Not only the Arabic websites covered the story, but international news media such as CNN, BBC and others also followed it.

The *Washington Post* followed the story, mentioning that the blogger was arrested "because of his criticism of the government" (*Washington Post* website, April, 2008). He had apparently accused the government of lying when it accused five men of supporting terrorism (CNN, April 26, 2008). CNN added that the Interior Ministry spokesman mentioned that the blogger was detained "for violating rules not related to state security." The statement of the spokesman was short and ambiguous and did not give the actual reasons behind the arrest. Al-Farhan told the *Washington Post* in early December 2007 that "an Interior Ministry official had warned him that he would be detained because of his online support for a group of men arrested in February and held without charge or trial" (*The Washington Post*, December 31, 2007). Elaph mentioned that the Ministry banned Al-Farhan from writing online several times before arresting him (December 25, 2007). Alweeam covered the story, mentioning that the blogger was banned from writing after publishing articles on the need for political reforms in the Kingdom (December 18, 2007). An Interior Ministry spokesman announced that Al-Farhan would be released and allowed to write again soon. When I asked the reporter how he found out about the story, he said that it was broadcast on news channels and online news websites; he also said that CNN reported it. When I asked, "Will you publish it?" He answered "No way." He added that this kind of news is hard to publish in any Saudi paper – the arrest or suspension of a journalist cannot be mentioned in the Saudi press.

In a clip posted on Youtube Al-Farhan's 10-year old daughter Raghad sends a message to her father asking him to come back home (YouTube website, March, 2008).

The emotional and touching clip was rapidly distributed via SMS and websites. Fouad Al-Farhan's friends also launched a website (<http://en.freefouad.com>) calling for the immediate release of the blogger. In an interview with CNN, Al-Omran said, "It showed the community of bloggers in Saudi Arabia can come together and support this cause -- support his freedom of speech -- even those who didn't agree with some of the things he wrote" (CNN, April 26, 2008).

The *Washington Post* reported that "Al-Farhan's supporters continued his blog and set up the Free Fouad Web site, but Saudi authorities blocked both sites earlier this month" (April 26, 2008). Although this is not the first time a journalist, writer or activist has been arrested, this case in particular has attracted an enormous amount of attention due to the use of the Internet to distribute information about it.

On 25 April 2008, Fouad Al-Farhan was released without charge. Kabar (news) website mentioned that Al-Farhan, 32, who is called the "father of bloggers" was released after serving four months in prison (Kabar, April 25, 2008). The *Washington Post's* website mentioned that the most popular Saudi blogger was released on Saturday, April 25 after being detained for four months without charge (April 26, 2008). In a telephone interview with the *Washington Post*, Fouad said that he was happy to be free and described his time behind bars as "a unique experience" (*Washington Post* website, April 26, 2008). He added "I will be blogging soon."

A Saudi boycott of dairy products is another story which was ignored by the two newspapers during my observation. As a reaction to the rising price of milk products, a group of Saudi activists called for a boycott of such products. The activists used the Internet and SMS to publicise their campaign (Alosaimi, January 11, 2008). When I started my observation there was a massive campaign across the country to boycott dairy products. People decided to stop buying them after the dairy companies announced a 30% rise in prices. I personally received a number of mobile messages encouraging me not to buy dairy products. The slogan of the campaign was "Let it rot". In an interview with *Arab News*, Jafer Alkaisy, an economics web writer and one of the campaign organizers, said, "It's an absolutely natural reaction from people who feel powerless to make any

change, especially when there is a perception that authorities aren't moving enough to supervise the situation and prevent possible commercial fraud." (Alosaimi, January 11, 2008).

Despite the widespread presence of the campaign online, the two newspapers never referred to it. The reason, a local news reporter explained, is that news on demonstrations, boycotts and protests is not allowed to be published in the Saudi press. Although the pressure of the Internet can be seen in stories such as the religious police crimes, this pressure is not as influential when it comes to stories about public anger. Therefore, the two papers discussed the issue of raising prices and there was a tough critique of the dairy companies, but no reference to the boycott. Rugh argues that "by 2003, the Saudi press had become more willing to criticize the government, but still only within limits (2004, p. 81). In addition, stories that show public anger such as boycotts and protests remain taboo.

Another type of story I witnessed during my observation which was ignored by the national press was the anger generated by the 5% rise in Saudi public sector wages. On January 28, 2008 the Saudi Council of Ministers, which has the authority to issue ministerial decisions, announced that public sector wages and pensions would rise by 5%. This was to offset the impact of rising inflation, which reached its highest rate in December 2007, as reported by the Saudi Press Agency (SPA, 28 January 2008). SPA added that the rise would last for three years. The decision to raise public sector wages by 5% was a huge disappointment to workers who had expected a rise of between 50-70%, as happened in other Gulf States such as the UAE and Qatar.

The workers' anger at such a paltry increase was justified, given the increase in food prices, which have risen by 50%. The Saudi public was outraged by this decision, as it demonstrates that decision makers do not sympathize with the suffering of the people (see [www.raninalkoon.com](http://www.raninalkoon.com), [www.swalif.net](http://www.swalif.net), [www.bdr130.net](http://www.bdr130.net), [www.mqataa.com](http://www.mqataa.com) and others). Dozens of jokes about this decision (text, videos and cartoons) were published on the Internet and circulated via SMS. Most focused on the disappearance or theft of the

zero from the expected 50% pay rise (see Figures 3 and 4). Youtube played a major role in circulating such clips. "The police hope that all citizens will assist in the search for the zero so it can be added to the five," said one (Swalif, 29 January, 2008).

Two days after the decision to raise wages by 5%, the cabinet decided to review the policy, in response to public anger. As the SPA reported, "Ibrahim Al Assaf [the Minister of Finance and National Economy] announced on Wednesday 30 January [2008] that the rise would be altered to become a cumulative one whereby wages would go up by 5% a year over three successive years, meaning a rise of 15% rather than the 5% originally announced" (SPA, January 30, 2008).



FIG. 3. A cartoon mocking the Saudi government's decision to raise public sector wages by only 5%. The picture uses Hindi numerals, widely used in the Gulf countries; the one on the left is a 5 and the face on the right is based on the diamond-shaped zero. The caption reads: "There is no zero! After 3 years we will see!"

ردة فعل الشعب من الزيادة

!!! % 5



FIG. 4. Another cartoon mocking the public sector wage increase. The caption reads “The public’s reaction to a 5% raise!”

Not only was the public anger over the 5% rise ignored by the national press, it also ignored any stories which showed the dissatisfaction of the public with the government. This also applies to news published on the Internet, which mentioned that a number of men and women had protested in the Umm Alhamam neighbourhood of Riyadh city. One of the journalists mentioned the story as one that the national press dared not follow. I read that story first on the Alsaha website. An eyewitness report of the story mentioned that after Friday prayers, three young men started screaming inside the Umm Alhamam grand mosque in Riyadh city, saying, "We are unfairly treated by the government" (Alsaha website, December, 2007). After a few minutes more young men joined the protest, then they went outside the mosque where the police waited for them. Then, in a video posted on Youtube, five men and a woman repeatedly shouted 'Allahu Akbar' (God is great) and demanded political and economic reforms in Saudi Arabia (Youtube website, December, 2007). The Sabq website followed the stories for two weeks and kept asking eyewitnesses about the protest (Sabq website, December, 2007). The website mentioned that the police tried to arrest the protesters when they went out of

the mosque to protest, but the crowd deliberately blocked the way and helped the protesters to march for half an hour before they got arrested. Despite the fact that the story was published on many websites, the two papers completely ignored it.

### **The Internet and Saudis:**

The Internet is one factor of globalization that overcomes the government control and censorship over news and information. The Internet helps individuals and groups who were not able to express their sufferings or ideas to a wide audience to publish and disseminate text and images on the World Wide Web, overcoming government controls. The Internet also allows individuals and groups to interact with other users nationally and internationally. Such a situation allows Saudis to communicate and convey their complaints to national and international organizations. Brysk (2002) argues that the Internet has helped the dissemination of international concepts such as human rights and women's rights, while helping minorities and aggrieved people to convey their issues of concern to the world by overcoming the controls imposed to curtail their voices.

The widespread use of the Internet by individuals in Saudi Arabia completes the discussion raised in Chapter Three of this study about digital society. By using the Internet, Saudi individuals become able to press for obtaining their rights without the need to go out from their houses. Individuals need no more than a computer provided with Internet service to communicate with the world and claim their rights.

As discussed throughout this study, the national media have represented the government's voice while the voices of the people were ignored. Additionally, as discussed in Chapter One, there are no political parties, unions or local organizations that represent people and can make their voices heard. Therefore, the presence of the Internet as a means that is difficult for the government to control has become a suitable medium for individuals and groups to communicate with each other and with the outside world.

The Internet gives people in Saudi Arabia, especially minorities and the unrepresented such as the Shia and women, the chance to make their voices heard by the government, national and international individuals and organizations. This argument completes that which was raised in the literature review about the role of the Internet as a public sphere for people to express their opinions, especially in non-democratic countries where the governments controls the national media. Al Rasheed (2003) argues that the Internet has opened a new door for people to communicate with international organizations and to express their dissatisfaction with the government. She adds that the Internet, which is hard for the government to control, gives Saudis the opportunity to discuss political, social and economic issues that they were never previously able to discuss in public. Similarly, Al Qurani (2004) points out that the Internet has created a public sphere through which people can discuss the matters that interest them without interference from the government, as usually happens in the national media (press, radio and television). He adds that the Internet permits individuals and groups to express their views in a manner that was never witnessed by the conservative society before the existence of the Internet.

In the same vein, Al-Salim (2003) finds that the Internet has given women in Saudi Arabia the chance to express their problems and issues, especially women's rights, which they were not able to discuss previously due to male domination in Saudi society. As discussed at the beginning of this study, Saudi society is characterized by the domination of men over women. Such a situation makes the participation of women in political, social and economic arenas very limited. However, the Internet has helped Saudi women publicly to discuss issues that interest them, especially those related to women. As a result, the Internet gives Saudi women the chance to claim a wider role in political and public life. For example, through the Internet they demand the right to drive cars. They also demand the right to participate in the government and Shoura Council.

The Internet has also given other minorities besides women the ability to claim a wider public role. The Shia minority in Saudi Arabia uses the Internet to criticize the discrimination that is being practised against them. Saudi Arabia is composed of a Sunni



majority that controls the government and the national media. However, after the appearance of the Internet, some Shia leaders have become able to establish websites that discuss discrimination against the Shia. For example, Shia leader Hassan Al Saffar publishes on his site articles criticizing the Saudi government for being unfair to the Shia. He describes the Saudi government's stand on discrimination based on sect as "slow and lagging". He adds that this generates feelings of disappointment and frustration among Shia in the country ([www.saffar.org](http://www.saffar.org)).

The Internet not only gives Saudis the opportunity to demand their political, social and religious rights, but also allows people to go further, expressing their dissatisfaction with the government's performance in economic affairs. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, people have expressed their anger regarding the increase of government employees' salaries by only 5%. People were angry because they were expecting a larger increase that would help them deal with the high inflation that impacted on major food products such as milk and rice.

Thus public anger at the modest increase in the salaries of government employees of only 5% compelled the government to try to absorb people's anger by increasing the percentage to 15%, as stated above. The public's angry reaction was not covered in the two newspapers, and therefore people used the Internet to express their anger against the government. Similarly, the demands of Saudi women to participate in political life pressured the government to take the decision, for the first time, to appoint a woman as Deputy Minister of Education in early 2009. The Shia claims for more rights, especially of participation in the political and religious spheres in Saudi Arabia, also made the government respond, and it appointed Shia members to the Shoura council in 2005.

The Internet is certainly not the only factor in the religious, political, economic and social changes that have taken place recently in Saudi Arabia. However, the Internet was the main medium the public used to express its anger, dissatisfaction and opinions to the government.

### **Saudi press in the age of globalization:**

Various websites grew very active in searching out news stories, and became fiercely competitive, gaining major 'scoops' and successfully taking the initiative on a number of important stories. News websites such as Sabq and Alweeam have become very popular sources of news, and their popularity makes these websites a major competitor to the national press. However, this situation does not mean that national newspapers have lost their readership to news websites. Despite the fact that the presence of news sites such as Sabq and Alweeam has affected the readership of the national newspapers, *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah* are taking advantage of the existence of these websites. *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah* are not financially affected by competition from the Internet. As a matter of fact, al-Yamama Press Foundation, which owns *Alriyadh*, experienced a substantial rise in its revenues for the year 2008, amounting to 423 million Saudi Riyals (65 million pounds), an increase of 40 million S.R compared to 2007 (*Alriyadh*, March 28, 2009). The fact that al-Yamama Press Foundation has grown by about 10% over the past year is evidence of the success of *Alriyadh* in reducing the effect of the Internet as a competitor, especially given that al-Yamama Press Foundation mainly depends for its income on *Alriyadh* newspaper.

Similarly, *Aleqtisadiah* is witnessing growth in its distribution and advertisements, as the Editor-in-Chief of the paper mentioned. In addition, its income has been increasing since the paper established its mobile news service. However, it is difficult to know the actual revenue of *Aleqtisadiah* alone, as the Saudi Research and Marketing Group, which owns *Aleqtisadiah*, also owns 20 other newspapers and magazines. Therefore, when the company releases its results, it does not publish the profits of each paper or magazine separately - instead it publishes the profits of the company as a whole.

One of the reasons that these two newspapers are not affected by the presence of news websites which focus on Saudi national news is the awareness of the Editors-in-Chief of the dangers of these websites as competitor to the national press. This awareness

makes the papers look for solutions to reduce the effects of such competition. The two papers have made four changes in order to maintain their readership in an era of globalization:

1 - The two papers have concentrated on deepening their news coverage and making it richer in analysis. The national newspapers used to focus on short stories provided by news agencies (Al Kahtani, 1999). Al Kahtani argues that the Saudi national newspapers use a cut-and-paste technique which means that they publish the news stories as they receive them from news agencies. However, the situation of the two papers has changed since the emergence of the Internet as a competitor. Therefore, the two papers, which used to publish a large number of short news stories, have now adopted a new strategy in news-making which relies on a smaller number of stories, permeated with analysis and of greater depth. By extending news stories and adding to them the opinions of analysts and experts, the papers use the publication of news on the Internet as a catalyst to attract readers. These changes in news treatment are helping the two papers to survive heavy competition with news websites because the reader finds depth and analysis that news websites cannot provide. As mentioned earlier, news websites such as Alweeam and Sabq focus on short news, which is characterized by its lack of depth and analysis, because they do not have enough money to hire analysts or experts.

2 - The two papers have shifted their main focus from news reporting to concentrate on columns, cartoons and reports that distinguish them from the internet. News websites have the ability to compete in scooping the news because they are able to publish news stories at the moment they receive them from the source. However, in feature articles and columns, such websites cannot compete with newspapers. The weak financial abilities of such websites mean that they are unable to attract these well-known writers and cartoonists, while the financial abilities of the newspapers to attract distinguished writers and cartoonists helps them to maintain their readership despite the presence of news websites.

*Alriyadh* paper publishes about 20-25 columns and three caricatures daily. It has started to attract distinguished Arab and Saudi writers. One of the recent examples that

show how keen *Alriyadh* is to attract distinguished writers is the clash that happened between *Alriyadh* and *Al Jazirah* over the famous writer Abdulla Ben Bakheet (Sabq, February 2009). Sabq mentions that *Alriyadh* offered a large amount of money to Ben Bakheet, more than what he is paid at the *Al Jazirah* paper, to attract him to write for *Alriyadh*. Sabq adds that Ben Bakheet refused to renew his contract with *Al Jazirah* and transferred to *Alriyadh*.

Similarly, *Aleqtisadiah* has between 12-16 columns every day. *Aleqtisadiah* hires Saudi and foreign columnists in order to distinguish itself from news websites and other daily papers. However, the biggest step taken by *Aleqtisadiah* at the end of 2007 was to enter into cooperation with the *Financial Times*. Their agreement allows *Aleqtisadiah* to re-publish any material published by the *Financial Times*, and also allows *Aleqtisadiah* to publish one to three pages daily, translated into Arabic from the *Financial Times*. Such pages include news, reports, articles and caricatures.

3 - The two papers have launched a mobile news service to provide subscribers with the latest news. This service gives the papers the chance to compete with websites as they send news stories to subscribers as soon as they receive them. *Aleqtisadiah* is eager to improve and develop this service to compete with Internet sites and the other news outlets that have established this service. Sports clubs, TV channels, websites and newspapers too are keen to develop this service, which has become a very competitive arena in which various parties are fighting for a share of the market. The mobile news service not only helps newspapers to compete with websites over journalistic scoops, but has also become one of the papers' main sources of income.

4 - The two papers have consistently improved and developed their websites in order to reduce the effects of the competition from other news websites. Throughout 2008, the two papers entirely redesigned and developed their websites to ensure easy browsing. Moreover, during 2009 the two papers developed their sites so that they can be updated every hour in order to be able to publish the latest news. This procedure allows the reader to find new news items every time he/she visits the newspaper's site, as the website is constantly updated and follows up the latest news. The two papers also give readers the

chance to interact with news and columns through publication of their comments. This not only gives readers the chance to comment on the published material but also allows them to participate in writing about issues that interest them. In addition, the two papers have initiated an electronic journalism service, which gives the readers the chance to report news.

### **The Internet and Censorship:**

Throughout my eight-week observation I observed that published news online played an influential role in affecting censorship over the national newspapers. The effective role of the publication of national news stories online with regard to censorship can be summarized as follows:

1 - The presence of news websites which focus on Saudi national affairs as a source for news that is not subject to the Ministry's censorship places pressure on the national press to follow stories which used to be taboo. The publication of news on the Internet places pressure on the national press to follow up news stories in order not to lose their readership. The intense competition between the national press and news websites such as Sabq and Alweeam which are able to cover news as they receive them, forces national newspapers to follow news stories without waiting for the Ministry's decisions or for the Saudi Press Agency to release news, especially national stories. Furthermore, such heavy competition forces the national press to follow issues which might irritate the Ministry. The publication of national news stories on the Internet such as those about the crimes of the religious police allows and compels the national press take the risk and publish such stories, despite the fact that the Ministry circulated guidelines banning the publication of stories on that particular issue.

2 - The massive online coverage of national news reduces the pressure on national newspapers when they cover the same issues. Before the emergence of news websites which focus on Saudi national affairs, national newspapers were the main source of national and local news. Such a situation put the national press under great pressure from

the government and the religious leaders, who tried to ban the publication of stories that irritate them. However, the publication of news stories on the Internet has allowed knowledge of them to become widespread among Saudis. This coverage reduces the sensitivity of issues such as women's rights and crimes committed by the religious police, and therefore this situation allows the Saudi national press to follow stories that the national newspapers did not dare to follow due to their sensitivity. National newspapers are still afraid of taking the initiative to publish stories that may irritate the government or the religious leaders. This forces national newspapers to wait for news that is sensitive politically, religiously or socially on the Internet, to be widely known in order to follow them after they become known to the public.

3 - Publication of news stories on websites such as Sabq and Alweeam which used to be prohibited, forces the Ministry of Culture and Information to ease its censorship and allow national newspapers to follow the same stories. The cases of police offences against citizens are a clear example of the Ministry's overlooking the publication of such stories by the national newspapers. Although the Ministry had issued a decision not to publish news about such cases, the newspapers started to follow up and publish these stories widely - sometimes on the front page. The fact that the Ministry issues directives banning national newspapers from publishing certain national and local stories does not mean that the Saudi public will not know about them. As a matter of fact, prohibiting national newspapers from following stories gives news websites the opportunity to become the main source of national news. Therefore, the Ministry has become more aware of the importance of allowing national newspapers to cover previously prohibited stories in order to help them maintain their readership.

4 - The presence of news websites such as Alweeam and Sabq as a competitor to national newspapers, especially in news scoops, makes newspapers speed up news making decisions in order to compete with the Internet. Such competition makes newspaper editors keen to publish the news when it comes in, without going through the filtering machinery that news stories used to have to go through before their publication. The two papers have launched rapid news services on mobile telephones and also publish the

latest news on their websites in order to reduce the effect of the Internet. For example, in *Aleqtisadiyah*, news stories are sent to mobile news service subscribers as soon as they arrive at the newspaper offices. The expediting of the news publishing process reduces the number of journalists who take news decisions to one single journalist. Such a situation helps journalists to take news decisions based on their personal judgment without direct pressure from the Editor-in-Chief, who is considered one of the main tools of the Ministry's censorship. This point is discussed in more detail in the next chapter (The Saudi Gatekeepers).

5 - Mobile phones with cameras have put great pressure on newspapers to follow stories that they used not to discuss before the presence of such services. The spread of video clips through mobile telephones and the Internet compels newspapers to defy Ministry directives against publication and to follow up such cases. The spread of the video of two national guards beating up prisoners in Alhair prison made newspapers follow up the story, despite the involvement of the Ministry of Interior in such a case. The existence of clips like this as material evidence that cannot be denied makes the national newspapers follow stories which could not be followed without such evidence.

Although news websites which focus on national news can be seen as a major competitor to the national press, it is also helping the national newspapers cover stories that used to be ignored. The presence of news websites which focus on Saudi national affairs places pressure on the Ministry of Culture and Information to allow the national press to follow stories that were previously taboo. Moreover, even if the Ministry does not respond to that pressure by allowing the newspapers to cover the stories, the publication of online stories gives the Editors-in-Chief the courage to follow the stories regardless of the Ministry's decision. Indeed, the online publication of national news related to the government forces the government to publicly confirm or deny such news. Therefore, it could be concluded from this section of the observation that the news websites are playing a major role in easing the censorship that the national press has enjoyed since the emergence of news websites as a main national news provider.

## II- The Government and the Press:

The observation at the two newspapers revealed a great deal about relations between the government and the press in Saudi Arabia. Front-page news is always on the activities of the King and important government figures. Receptions given for official guests by the King and his Crown Princes are given extensive coverage in both papers. It is not hard to notice the similarities between coverage of stories about the King in the two papers. Both rely on the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), and stories about the government which come from the SPA are published as received, without any rewriting or editing, as the head of the local news department at *Alriyadh* pointed out. The voice of the government is easy to recognize in the coverage of news items, especially in international news and conflicts. "In regard to international affairs and policy, the Saudi press tries not to challenge the government's decisions and agenda," said the deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh*. Rugh argues that editors in the loyalist press admit that their newspapers support the official announcements and the government's decisions on "all essential matters" (2004, p.65). He adds that the most obvious characteristic of the loyalist press "is that the newspapers are consistently loyal to and supportive of the regime in power despite the fact that they are privately owned" (Rugh, 2004, p. 59)

During the observation, President Bush's visit to Riyadh city was an extremely prominent story, and took up a large part of *Alriyadh's* front page. Bush's meetings with the King and other senior government figures were the most highlighted part of the visit in *Alriyadh's* coverage. The visit of the French President Sarkozy to Riyadh city was also covered in depth by the paper. This news focused on fields of cooperation between Saudi Arabia, France, and America. As the head of the international department of *Alriyadh* commented, coverage of foreign politicians' visits to Saudi Arabia usually focuses on positive aspects of the visit.

Another facet of Saudi government-press relations is the positive coverage of different religious, political and economic events organized by the Saudi government. When I started the observation at *Alriyadh*, the Hajj season was under way (between 17 and 22 December 2007). Hajj is the largest annual pilgrimage in the world, which every



Muslim should attempt to do once in his or her lifetime. In order to perform Hajj, pilgrims have to go to the city of Makkah from the 8th to the 13th of Dhu Al-Hijja (the last month of the Islamic calendar). Although the Hajj season lasts six days, preparations for it take months. Hajj is an extremely important event to the Saudi government, and therefore the government moves from the official capital Riyadh to the holy capital Makkah for the month leading up to 8th of Dhu Al-Hijja, in order to supervise Hajj preparations

The importance of Hajj to the Saudi government means that coverage of it has to be handled carefully, as the deputy editor-in-chief of *Alriyadh* mentioned. He added that news relating to the Hajj focuses on the success of the Hajj season as well as the contribution of the Saudi government to that success. Thus, positive coverage of Hajj activities exemplifies the close government-press relations.

The strong relationship between the government and the press is especially evident not only when the press positively reports government activities, but also when the press ignores stories that might displease the government. Government pressure on the press can be easily seen in the avoidance of the publication of certain news items on relations with friendly states or other Arab governments. This is evident through the avoidance of any mention of Sarkozy being unaccompanied by his fiancée on his visit. Although the visit was excessively covered in both newspapers, the non-attendance of his fiancée was not mentioned. This also clarifies the idea that the government does not allow the publication of news that might affect relations with other countries. The head of the international department at *Alriyadh* said, "We know the kind of stories that might create a political conflict between the Saudi government and other countries, therefore we avoid publishing them." He added that the best strategy is to wait for an official declaration by the government.

Similarly, a senior editor in the international news department of *Alriyadh* stated that some stories do not get published because they might create a political conflict between the government and another Arab state. He added that the paper does not publish stories on police abuse and human rights violations in other countries, especially Arab

states. He gave an example of the torture of Egyptian prisoners by the Egyptian police. "Although that story was widely covered by many news media, the paper did not cover it," he said. He added that when similar incidents happen in Saudi Arabia, the paper publishes them.

The arrest of the Saudi blogger Fouad Al-Farhan was one of the stories which enjoyed extensive coverage on the Internet, not only on Arabic websites but also foreign websites and news channels, including CNN and the BBC, as discussed earlier. Despite the massive coverage of the story on the Internet and TV news channels, the two newspapers completely ignored it.

*Aleqtisadiah's* Editor-in-Chief pointed out that this kind of story irritates the government by harming its image abroad. He continued by saying that human rights organizations are looking for stories like this to attack the Saudi government, and hence newspapers tend to avoid such stories. "Sometimes we ignore stories if the coverage is likely to harm the image of the country and might be used against it," he said.

Even when an official statement was issued by the Ministry of Interior on the arrest and suspension of the blogger and his imminent release, neither *Alriyadh* nor *Aleqtisadiah* mentioned the news. An editor at the local news department of *Alriyadh* asserted that this kind of news is still very sensitive and for this reason, the paper tends to avoid it.

### **A New Stage in the Government-Press Relationship:**

The close relationship between the Saudi press and the government does not mean that the former does not challenge the latter by publishing stories that irritate it. Although the Saudi press can be characterized as loyal, this notion has been challenged on several occasions, especially in the coverage of national issues. Rugh argues that Saudi newspapers "tend to be loyal to the regime in presenting news and commentary on important issues" (2004, p. 26). Moreover, according to a review of the literature, the

Saudi loyal press is of a passive type which avoids discussing issues that might irritate the government (see Al-Kahtani, 1999; Rugh, 2004; Kheraigi, 1990). However, I have found that the Saudi press is not as loyal as the literature review would suggest. As part of my observation I witnessed the publication of several stories which could irritate the government.

For example, the two newspapers in this study criticized the passive role of the Saudi Shoura Council on national issues. Most of the criticism was concentrated on the Council's deference to the government on many issues, as most of its members had previously worked for the government and were appointed by the King. The heavy criticism of the Council infuriated some of the Shoura council's members. In an interview with Alarabiya news channel, Dr. Abdullah Al-Tuwairqi, a member of the Shoura Council [the Saudi Parliament], said, "The Shoura Council, as one of the highest institutions of government, must maintain its distance from the games of the media." He added, "The press has insulted the Shoura Council and treated it in a way inappropriate for an institution of its stature. The Minister of Culture and Information should take a strong position on media attacks of this kind" (Alarabiya, November 26, 2007)

Another story that focused on the poor performance of the government was with regard to the outbreak of bird flu among millions of birds in Saudi Arabia. One of the stories I witnessed as part of my observation was the spread of the H5N1 bird flu in captive birds in the country. After the Agriculture Ministry announced the first bird flu outbreak in Saudi Arabia on March 2007, this issue was followed by the national press, as the head of the national department told me. More cases of the disease were found in different regions in the Kingdom. However, this issue did not become a hot story until the Ministry announced the discovery of a new site of an epidemic in the Riyadh region on November 21, 2007 which forced the Ministry to kill 3.5 million birds (Alarabiya, November 2007). The story led to a heavy critique of the Agriculture Ministry. Al Anzi, an editor for *Alriyadh*, wrote "The Ministry of Agriculture has remained a spectator – most of the time – waiting for an announcement of an outbreak so it can carry the coffin in the aftermath" (December, 2007). He wrote, "The Ministry and its vets have not been prepared for this kind of crisis... This not only applies to this Ministry, but to most of our

Ministries, which take no action until the casualties of their negligence reach a sufficient number and the Minister finally deigns to intervene."

Since the birth of the Saudi press, stories on women's rights had been prohibited from publication because they irritate the government, an editor at *Aleqtisadiah* revealed. An editor in the local news department of *Alriyadh* pointed out that in the past no story dealing with human rights or women's rights in Saudi Arabia was allowed to be published in the national press. Women's rights have now, however, become one of the topics commonly discussed in the two papers.

I read many articles, news and features on women's rights in both papers. From my experience as a columnist and a journalist, I know that women's rights issues, especially those concerned with women driving cars, used to be taboo and no journalist dared to cover them. However, throughout my observation, I followed and witnessed stories, columns and a reportage focusing on this topic in both *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah*. Furthermore, *Alriyadh* posted a survey on its website asking readers whether they support or oppose women driving.

In addition, the newspaper's website carried a discussion of the absence of women in the Shoura Council to which readers could respond. That then allowed one of the editors in the local news department to turn it into a report published in the paper. A journalist in the local news department of *Alriyadh* paper commented, "In the last two years, women's rights and human rights have become publishable stories even if they include criticism of human rights in Saudi Arabia."

The rise in commodity prices was another hot topic covered extensively in both papers. There was a strong campaign against the Minister of Trade and his silence on raising prices, described by an editor as robbing people of their money. This happened after the announcement of a 30% increase in the price of dairy products. *Alriyadh* published various cartoons showed the suffering of Saudi citizens caused by the price rises while the Minister of Trade looks on (see Figures 5, 6, and 7, cartoons are read from right to left). Al-Kuwailit, who writes *Alriyadh*'s daily editorial, criticized the Ministry of

Trade, writing "We don't want it to be the Ministry for Traders. That is how people mock the Ministry of Trade." He added, "What the Ministry has perhaps not realized is that playing with people's needs is a dangerous business that cannot be solved by monopolized decision-making... It seems that its only role now is to be silent or to issue responses to what is published in the press, not to answer any questions or solve any problems" (Al-Kuwailit, January 28, 2008).

This kind of critique and attack on senior government figures was not possible in the past, as a local news reporter at *Aleqtisadiah* confirmed. The Minister of Trade received heavy criticism from the Saudi press, which demanded his resignation. This eventually happened a week after my observation was completed. The Elaph website covered the Minister's resignation, saying that he resigned after widespread criticism from the press (March 13, 2008). Elaph points out that the Saudi press has continued its campaign against the Minister of Trade, criticizing his department's failure to deal with the crisis of rising commodity prices, particularly the price of rice. "The Saudi press has used critical language towards the Minister, Hashim Yamani, which observers describe as a shift in media discourse towards Ministers in the Saudi government. Columnists used words such as 'impotence' and 'the weak Minister'. *Alwatan* newspaper called on the Minister to be a 'responsible citizen'" (Elaph, March 13, 2008).



[rabea@alriyadh.com](mailto:rabea@alriyadh.com)  
[www.alriyadh.com](http://www.alriyadh.com)

FIG. 5. A cartoon mocking the Saudi Minister of Trade. A man labelled 'Trader' is hitting another labelled 'Consumer' over the head with a stick labelled 'Prices', while the man on the right, labelled 'Consumer protection' does nothing.



[rabea@alriyadh.com](mailto:rabea@alriyadh.com)  
[www.alriyadh.com](http://www.alriyadh.com)

FIG. 6. Another cartoon mocking the Saudi Ministry of Trade. The cartoon on the right is labelled 'Price war' and shows two traders fighting: the Ministry intervenes. On the left, the two traders strangle a consumer, while the Ministry does nothing.



FIG. 7. A third cartoon from *Alriyadh*, mocking the Ministry of Trade. The consumer on the right complains of rising prices, a crisis in grain supplies and traders' dishonesty, while the Ministry, on the left, ignores him.

### The spokesman phenomenon:

Heavy criticism of government Ministers, the Shoura Council, the national police, the religious police, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia (the senior religious leader in the country) and other governmental bodies has forced the authorities to think of a way to respond. They have accordingly employed spokesmen to respond to such criticism. The spokesman can be seen as part of the public relations responsibility of each organization, but as the head of national news in *Alriyadh* pointed out, such a position did not exist in the Saudi government organization until the government started facing criticism from the

press. Through my observation at both newspapers, I witnessed many official statements from spokesmen for different governmental bodies. "Almost all government institutions have hired spokesmen as a response to the press criticism," deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* said. He stressed that in the past, the Saudi press used to stand up for the government and defend its position, but today, papers criticize the government's performance directly; each time an authority is attacked or criticized, it issues a denial and accuses the press of exaggeration and lying.

An editor at *Aleqtisadiah* said that in the past, nobody contacted governmental authorities to ask for comments on stories. Instead, reporters had to wait for a call from the government department, or an official declaration. Now, however, newspapers take the initiative and contact the officials when looking for answers. The editor added that news is published even if the spokesman refuses to respond, a decision unthinkable in the past. He pointed out that the refusal of government departments to respond is understood as an inability to comment because the news is true. The spokesman for the Ministry of Health, Dr Khaled Marghalani criticized a report published by *Alriyadh* about the number of HIV positive cases in Saudi Arabia saying, "It is unfair and fraught with exaggeration". He adds that "the figures on HIV cases in 2007 aren't available yet, I am not sure where the paper got the exaggerated figures from" (*Alriyadh*, February 10, 2008).

During my observation at *Alriyadh*, when the news arrived of an attack by four religious policemen on a 16 year-old boy in Najran as mentioned earlier, the religious police's spokesman refused to comment. However, the paper published the story with photos of the victim, questioning why the spokesman did not want to comment. A week later, the religious police spokesman responded to the coverage of the story by several Saudi newspapers, accusing them of lying and exaggerating. The title of his official announcement was "Reply to a mess of words," and in it he criticized the newspapers which had published the report, describing them as "malicious" and praising the papers that did not cover the incident (*Alriyadh*, January 20, 2008).



As has already been said, Saudi newspapers have started to criticize government performance and to publish stories that may irritate the government. The inability of governmental bodies such as the religious police and the Ministry of Justice to prevent critical coverage of their activities and policies has compelled them to look for new methods of placing pressure on national newspapers, and so official spokesmen have been employed as a means through which the government can express its anger over the coverage of local issues and try to affect the publication of negative stories. These spokesmen regularly accuse the papers of exaggeration and bias against the bodies they represent. On the other hand, there is praise for newspapers that do not cover such news or those which defend the government.

Saudi government bodies, through their official spokesmen, are trying to place pressure on national newspapers from two aspects. Firstly, they use the spokesman to press newspapers to *stop covering* issues when a newspaper follows a story. Through accusing newspapers of exaggeration and bias, official spokesmen are trying to make the newspapers that have published the stories stop following them. This also, of course, sends another message to the newspapers that did not publish the issue that they have taken the right decision. This applies to the official spokesman of the religious police, who accused the newspapers that published details of the case of the abuse of the 16-year-old boy of being against Islam. On the other hand, he praised the newspapers that did not publish details of the case, describing them as being nationalist and supporters of Islam.

Secondly, through criticizing the coverage by the national press of certain issues, spokesmen try to influence the *tone* and the *framing* of the coverage. As discussed above, government bodies try to stop the coverage of negative stories as a first step. However, if they cannot do so, they try to make the coverage less negative. The statements from official spokesmen, as journalists pointed out, did not concentrate on the issues themselves but on the tone of the coverage. The task of the official spokesman of any party is to concentrate on the issue and to convey the opinion of that party on the information published. But the official spokesmen often leave the main issue to one side

in order to dedicate themselves to criticizing the newspapers' coverage, in an attempt to affect their handling of the issue.

#### **Senior Government Officials' Criticism of National Press Performance:**

During the time I spent at the two newspapers, I noticed that senior government officials responded to the publication of stories and articles in both papers, expressing their dissatisfaction with the performance of the national press. The deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* mentioned that the paper receives complaints from senior officials; for example, in various interviews with the papers HRH Naif bin AbdelAziz (the Minister of the Interior), the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia and the Minister of Justice have all expressed their dissatisfaction with the coverage of a number of issues by the Saudi press. He added that the role of newspapers has changed from being largely supportive of the government to being partly critical of it, especially regarding national issues. He argued that this explains the angry responses of some senior government officials to the coverage of issues which were never witnessed before. In an interview with *Asharq Al-Awsat*, Jamal Khashoggi, the Editor-in-Chief of *Alwatan*, said "Prince Naif, the Saudi Interior Minister, when asked about freedom of the press, replied that there is freedom and that there are complaints about this freedom" (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, April 25, 2007). Prince Naif said: "When something bad happens, even something normal or insignificant, the national press cover it and it is splashed across the front pages, but when the security services do something positive or useful, it is hidden in the middle pages or not written about at all." (SPA, June 22, 2008).

During my observation at *Alriyadh* newspaper, an important comment was made by HRH Prince Salman bin Abdelaziz, the governor of the Riyadh region. He was responding to an editorial by Mohammed Al Kwaiz, a weekly columnist at *Alriyadh* newspaper, who described security in Riyadh as "terrible". "Burglaries in daylight. Mobile phones stolen from their owners' hands. Cars stolen from their garages. Armed robberies. Not, as you might expect, scenarios from Chicago, Brixton or South Africa, but daily events in Saudi cities," Al Kwaiz wrote (December 13, 2007). The columnist wrote that crime had become part of people's daily life in Riyadh. He added, "The strange

thing is that the response to this has been tepid indifference from the authorities charged with protecting citizens.” He concluded, “The failure of the security services to fulfill their role will force people to rely on self-defence of their lives and belongings, leading to a wave of violence.”

Prince Salman bin Abdelaziz responded to the column personally, admitting that crime is increasing in Riyadh city but criticizing the writer for his pessimism and rejecting the idea of people carrying guns in a civilized state like Saudi Arabia (Bin Abdelaziz, December 29, 2007). “Your article was full of generalizations and exaggerations, an odd thing for a doctor who relies on precision and accurate instruments when diagnosing a patient,” he wrote. He added, “In response, I do not deny the presence of crime in Riyadh. This is well known – no society is completely free of crime. However, your odd suggestion that people should resort to self-defence for their security is certainly not a solution in a stable country such as Saudi Arabia.” He concluded his response saying, “Much as I respect you and your family, and knowing full well your love for this country, I wish your suggestion had not been reactionary or generalizing, which usually leads to negative results.” (Bin Abdelaziz, *Alriyadh*, December 29, 2007).

Another famous example of responses by senior officials is that of the Minister of Justice, who criticized all Saudi newspapers for their biased coverage of the young woman from Al-Qatif who was raped by seven men (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, November, 25, 2007). He condemned the criticism of the justice system as inhumane when the court sentenced the raped girl to be whipped and jailed. A local news reporter at *Aleqtisadiah* stressed that the Ministry of Justice had been immune from criticism for a long time, but now it has become one of the Ministries most often criticized, particularly for issuing harsh sentences. This heavy criticism of the Ministry of Justice and its rulings provoked the Minister of Justice to demand, in an interview with Al-Ekhbariya news channel, that the Minister of Culture and Information should punish any national paper which unfairly criticizes the Ministry of Justice. The Minister of Justice commented on the Saudi media's coverage of the rape victim in Al-Qatif: “It saddens me what some of the media outlets have reported about the role of the woman in this case and their reporting of

distorted facts. They have taken an unjustified position in defending this woman and presented the case in an inaccurate way." (*Alriyadh*, November 25, 2007).

A further story which illustrates the conflict between the press and the government and is considered the first of its kind is the case of a Saudi columnist who was sued by Prince Faisal Bin Abdullah Bin Abdelaziz, the son of King Abdullah, over an article published in *Alwatan* paper under the title "Rescuing what can be rescued" (Elaph, June 22, 2008). In his article, Salah Al-Shihi criticized the Saudi Red Crescent, of which Prince Faisal is the Chairman (Al-Shihi, December 24, 2007). He wrote: "When I read the budget for the Saudi Red Crescent, the first question in my mind was this: what does the Saudi Red Crescent actually do? It has a huge budget, with no justification – how, where and when that massive budget will be spent, nobody knows" (Al-Shihi, December, 24, 2007). Elaph mentioned that Salah Mohammed Al Shihi, the famous Saudi columnist at *Alwatan* newspaper, would appear in court the next day (June 22, 2008). He was being sued by Prince Faisal Bin Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, the son of King Abdullah, over an article criticizing the work and the "vast" budget of the Saudi Red Crescent.

Elaph mentioned that this case is the first of its kind in Saudi Arabia, where the press is enjoying greater freedom than ever before (June 22, 2008). It added, "Many believe that this case, in which one of the King's sons is a major player, demonstrates the transparency of the Saudi press, as the only power that can settle the case is the judiciary itself, even though the plaintiff is a prominent person directly linked to the King himself." Al-Shihi wrote another article, under the title "The King's son". "When the court started, I could not help but ask myself, what would happen to a journalist in another Arab country if he openly criticized an organization run by the son of the President, or even the eighth neighbour of the President! What would happen to the writer and to his paper?" he wrote (Al-Shihi June 22, 2008).

Al-Shihi told Elaph in an interview:

I don't deny my happiness at the number of new freedoms granted to the press in the past few years. If I win the case, it will make me even happier, but if I

lose it I won't be disappointed. In the end I look at it from another angle: we in the Saudi press have started to experience a far greater degree of freedom, and that alone is an achievement. This is the first time in our country's history that a son of the King has sued a journalist in his own name and resorted to the courts in a very civilized manner. I am optimistic that what is happening in our country clearly confirms the presence of a decent margin of press freedom, and it responds to all those who deny that (June 22, 2008).

Senior officials use their responses and their interviews to criticize newspaper coverage of certain issues. Through this method, they are attempting to press the newspapers to stop publishing news stories that irritate the government. The ability of Saudi newspapers to cover news and issues that they did not discuss in the past has caused senior officials to try and place pressure on newspapers through other means besides prohibiting the publication of certain issues. They now express their anger regarding newspaper coverage through publicly criticizing the publications. This method is new in Saudi Arabia and to my knowledge has not been discussed in any previous study on censorship of the Saudi national press.

The shifting of the government-press relationship is forcing the government to look for new ways to influence and put pressure on the coverage of the national press instead of traditional measures such as banning publication and the suspension of newspapers and journalists. As discussed in the literature review, the national press has since its very beginning been characterized by its loyalty to the government. This compliance kept government officials generally satisfied with national press performance. However, this situation has changed, especially at the national and local news level. Although the national press is still loyal to the government in international policy and affairs, it has started to criticize the government and its performance in national and local issues, as has been shown in this chapter.

The replies made by high-ranking state officials indicate dissatisfaction with the newspapers' performance. They also indicate that local newspapers have overcome numerous censorship restrictions and hindrances. For instance, the reply made by the Governor of the Riyadh region, Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz, to a columnist who

criticized the widespread crime in Riyadh city highlights Prince Salman's belief that the Saudi public has the right to know the truth. The governor acknowledged that there is a security problem and that the newspapers have the right to discuss such a problem.

As Jamal Khashoggi, the Editor-in-Chief of *Al-Watan*, pointed out when he was asked about what has changed between the first time he was dismissed as Editor-in-Chief of *Alwatan* in 2003 and his return to the post in 2007:

“The atmosphere and the circumstances differ greatly from the previous period. What is happening nowadays is healthy, with a degree of discipline, which was confirmed by more than one official who said, ‘Write what you want as long as you have verified your information.’” (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, April 25, 2007).

In the past, publishing an article that irritated the Governor of Riyadh would have meant that the writer of the article would be suspended and/or the Editor-in-Chief would be fired. However, Prince Salman's reply to the writer on the same page shows that he believes in dialogue aimed at clarifying facts and giving the public the right to know the truth. It also means that he accepts the new role of the press as an independent institution. This might mean that suspending writers and journalists or firing Editors-in-Chief is no longer the main method adopted by the government for responding to criticism published in newspapers. This leads to a discussion of the methods that the government uses to influence the performance of the national press in the age of globalization.

### **Government Methods to Influence the National Press:**

Despite the fact that Saudi national newspapers are now able to discuss issues which were considered taboo in the past, the margin of freedom in this regard is still narrow. Saudi newspapers are still not able to discuss issues connected with the government's foreign policies. Although the government still interferes in press activities, the methods of imposing pressure on the press are changing in the era of globalization. The traditional means of imposing penalties on press and journalists are applied only in limited cases compared with the past. Alleviations in applying suspension of press and journalists came to avert criticism by international organizations such as Amnesty,

Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House regarding such practices. In the era of globalization, local issues have become global issues which enables international organizations to place pressure on governments to stop such practices. International organizations such as those mentioned above are playing a major role in protecting journalists and newspapers globally. The case of the Saudi writer Fouad Al Farhan was a local issue but swiftly became an international issue discussed by international TV channels, newspapers and Internet websites. The international coverage of this case helped organizations such as Reporters Without Borders publicise their demand for the immediate release of Al Farhan. These international organizations are considered an integral part of globalization and can turn local cases such as suspension of press and jailing of journalists and writers into international issues. They have forced the Saudi government to seek new means of pressure on newspapers – ones that do not attract the attention of such international organizations.

Relations between the government and newspapers, as mentioned in Chapter One, go back to the birth of Saudi newspapers. However, with time, this relationship has changed. With the changes in the government-press relationship, the government has changed some of its methods in order to influence national press performance. The latest stage that the national press is going through forces the government to use new methods to affect the way the press performs. The methods the government uses to place pressure on the national newspapers can be summarized as follows:

#### **A - The Ministry of Culture and Information Censorship**

The Ministry of Culture and Information still practises censorship of national newspapers, and continually provides newspapers with guidelines and decisions regarding prohibited issues. When it bans coverage of a certain issue, the Ministry directly notifies the Editor-in-Chief of the decision. The Ministry also uses punishments against the newspapers and journalists as another means of censorship. Although the Ministry is not using this method as much as it did in 2003, for example, the power of the Ministry to use this method still exerts a great pressure on national newspapers. The

suspension of a newspaper for several days is considered one of the harshest punishments, causing financial losses for the newspaper. Jihad Khazin, the former Editor-in-Chief of *Al Hayat* newspaper, points out that he is not willing to publish on issues that might irritate the Ministry of Culture and Information, as the suspension of the paper means the loss of thousands of dollars daily.

Additionally, the Ministry can still threaten to dismiss Editors-in-Chief of national newspapers. This punishment was used during 2003, as mentioned in Chapter Two. Thus, Editors-in-Chief are keen to have a close relationship with the Ministry in order to keep their positions.

### **B - The Saudi Press Agency**

The task of news agencies is to provide the news media with the latest news. However, in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) is used as a means of censorship over the national press. The SPA provides the national press with the latest news, decisions and announcements from the government, and in this way it also provides the national press with the government's point of view and the way items of government news should be treated and framed.

The news agency influences the performance of the national press in two ways.

- 1- The agency provides national newspapers with the national and international news with which the Saudi government is concerned. The SPA is not only a news provider but also provides the national newspapers with the tone and the framing of such news. Saudi national newspapers do not have the right to change or rewrite the news that comes from the agency. Thus the agency writes and frames the news in a way that suits the government and expresses its point of view. Moreover, it concentrates on certain aspects of the news and ignores others, depending on the government's preference. This makes the national newspapers' coverage of such news similar to the agency's coverage. Coverage of the visit of



George W. Bush to Saudi Arabia is an example of the role of the SPA as a mean of censorship. The Agency did not mention the demands made by the U.S. President for Saudi Arabia to increase its production of oil, which was the main reason for the visit, especially in the light of an increase in oil prices. Instead, the national press concentrated on the visit itself and the senior Saudi officials that the American President met during his visit.

- 2- The SPA not only affects the salience, the highlighting and framing of news stories, but also by completely ignoring certain stories it sends a clear signal to the national press that the government does not want certain stories to be covered. When the agency ignores a news story, especially one related to government foreign policy, this means that the government does not want the national press to publish such news. The refusal of the Saudi government to allow the French President to be accompanied by his fiancée during his visit to Saudi Arabia provides an excellent example of the role that the agency plays in censorship. The agency ignored the news completely and consequently this forced the two papers to ignore it as well.

### **C - The close relationship between the King and the editors-in-chief**

The close relationship between the Editors-in-Chief of the national newspapers and senior figures, especially the King, is considered an important means of pressure on newspapers. Since King Abdullah assumed power in the Kingdom in 2005, he has been keen to strengthen his relationship with Editors-in-Chief of the national newspapers. Editors-in-Chief started to accompany the King and the Crown Prince on their national and international trips. The benefits which editors gain from having close personal relationships with senior officials makes them eager to avoid criticizing any of the King's or the Crown Prince's national and international decisions and jeopardizing their relationship. Such close relationships make them support the King and his Crown Prince's national and international policies and give them special treatment by publishing their activities on the front page. Such a situation makes these relationships another method of censorship that the government uses over the national press, since Editors-in-

Chief will practise censorship over their newspapers in order to maintain a strong relationship with senior officials. This point is discussed in detail in the next chapter on Saudi Gatekeepers.

#### **D - Direct criticism of the national press by senior officials and spokesmen**

Senior government officials and official spokesmen in Saudi Arabia have recently engaged in heavy criticism of the national press in order to pressure editors to minimize their criticism of the government. This new method has never before been practised in the history of the Saudi press because Saudi newspapers were loyal to the government and never dared to criticize it. However, as mentioned above, national newspapers have started to criticize the performance of some government bodies such as the Ministries of Trade, Justice, Education and the religious police. Such criticism irritates these parties, who have felt the need to respond in defence of their interests and to place pressure on the newspapers who publish such criticism. Through harsh criticism, senior officials and official spokesman try to influence the performance of national newspapers and pressure them into toning down their criticism of the government.

#### **Conclusion:**

Observation methodology showed that the Internet overcomes the control and censorship imposed by government on the flow of news and information. Individuals and organizations are able, via the Internet, to communicate with the outside world and have their voices heard. Individuals and groups in Saudi Arabia use the Internet to claim their rights.

Saudi Arabia is a non-democratic country lacking channels for the public to defend their rights, such as political parties, unions and a free press. Therefore individuals and organizations have found in the Internet an excellent means of conveying their demands to the world.

The wide use of Internet by individuals in Saudi Arabia completes the discussion raised in Chapter Three of this study about "digital society". A "digital society" is a society that largely relies on digital communication technology such as the Internet and mobile phones to communicate within itself and with the outside world. Individuals in Saudi Arabia depend on the Internet as a direct means not only to convey their voices to the outside world but also to communicate with others within the territory of Saudi Arabia. Street demonstrations used to be the major means adopted by people for expressing their anger and for protesting against and applying pressuring on the government. Now in the era of globalization, the Internet has become another means used by Saudi individuals to impose pressure on the government. The Internet helped individuals in Saudi Arabia organize campaigns such as that for boycotting dairy products. It also helped in organizing the protest against a meagre increase in public wages of just five percent.

The responsiveness of the two newspapers to news websites and government pressure was obvious in the news decisions they made. News websites can cover issues that cannot be covered by national newspapers because of censorship imposed upon them by the Ministry of Culture and Information. As a result, Saudis see online news websites as an excellent supplement to the national press, which suffers from censorship. However, the newspapers have responded to these pressures and have started to cover issues which "nobody would have dared" to discuss before (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 472). Furthermore, publication of national stories on the Internet has provided the Editors-in-Chief with an excuse to challenge directives by the Ministry of Culture and Information and to publish stories regardless. This situation has extended the type of stories which are publishable in the national press.

It is clear that relations between the press and the government in Saudi Arabia are entering a new stage which does not please the latter. Part of the government's dissatisfaction with the press is due to the coverage of stories previously ignored by the press. The publication of news stories and viewpoints implying criticism of the government has created a state of tension and stress between these parties and the

newspapers. It has also created a state of dissatisfaction with the newspapers among some government parties.

Although Saudi newspapers are now able to discuss issues which used to be ignored, the margin of freedom is still narrow. No doubt, the Saudi press is classified as “not free,” and such a classification is evidenced by the lack of coverage of events such as the arrest of the Fouad Al Farhan and the public anger over the 5% public wage increase. Continuing government interference in press affairs is the main reason for limited press freedom in the country. The observation method showed that the government is still looking for new means of pressure on the press after the traditional means - such as suspension of the press and pressmen – began to incur the anger of international organizations such as Amnesty International and Reporters Without Borders. The government now tends to use new methods including criticism of press performance by official spokesmen and senior officials to impose pressure on newspapers. The environment surrounding the Saudi press does little to nurture a free or even partially free press. The effect of the government, along with the effects of other factors on the Saudi national press, are discussed in the next chapter, which focuses on the factors that influence Saudi gatekeepers’ news decisions.

## Chapter Six

### Saudi Gatekeepers

#### **Introduction:**

Observation coupled with unstructured interviews were conducted at *Aleqtisadiah* and *Alriyadh* in order to describe and explain the factors that affect Saudi gatekeepers' editorial decisions. To examine the factors that affect their decisions regarding what should be allowed "in" or left "out" and why and as part of the observation method, I interviewed the Editors-in-Chief and their deputies, asking them about the effects of each factor. I wanted to find out the main factors that influence Saudi gatekeepers' news decisions. However, before discussing the factors that influence the gatekeeping process, it is important to discuss the role of editors-in-chief in Saudi press.

#### **Saudi Editors-in-Chief:**

To date, the role of Saudi Editors-in-Chief has received relatively little attention from studies of the Saudi press. Although studies such as Al Kheraigi (1990), Al-Kahtani, (1999) and Al Shebeili, (2000) touch upon the role of Saudi Editors-in-Chief, they do not give it much attention. Therefore, before discussing the factors affecting Saudi gatekeepers' news decisions, it is justifiable to elaborate on the responsibilities and authorities of Saudi Editors-in-Chief. The observation process I adopted revealed that the Editors-in-Chief of Saudi newspapers enjoy wide powers, and this ranks them as the most powerful authorities not only in their newspapers but also at the level of the journalistic organizations that own the newspapers. The authority of the Editors-in-Chief outranks the

power of the CEO of the journalistic organization. This is attributed to the fact that the position of Editor-in-Chief is not only a post confined to journalism, but goes beyond the newspaper itself as discussed below.

It is important to note that the Editor-in-Chief of a Saudi newspaper is directly accountable to the Ministry of Culture and Information with regard to every article published in the paper, as has been explained in the printing law section in Chapter One. Jamal Khashoggi, Editor-in-Chief of *Alwatan*, points out that in the Saudi press "the Editor always bears responsibility for all that is written in the newspaper" (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, April 25, 2007). If the paper publishes any unacceptable material, the Ministry directly contacts the Editor-in-Chief (not the owners of the journalistic organization or the CEO). In reply to my question about the extent of the responsibility of the Editor-in-Chief regarding materials published in the newspaper, *Aleqtisadiah's* Editor-in-Chief pointed out that the Editor-in-Chief is the only person held accountable for all stories, reports and articles published in the paper. He is also considered the link between the newspaper and the Ministry of Culture and Information. Therefore, all Ministry decisions and penalties imposed on the paper, journalists, columnists or writers are addressed directly to the Editor-in-Chief, to take action accordingly.

The Editor-in-Chief is also the only person notified by the Ministry about suspension of publishing items concerning certain events or focusing on and highlighting specific occasions. *Aleqtisadiah's* Editor-in-Chief indicated that such decisions and instructions are no longer made in writing but communicated orally and directly to the Editor-in-Chief via telephone, to make sure that they are conveyed personally to him. He explained that the process of addressing official letters to the Editor-in-Chief was stopped following a letter by the Ministry calling for an end to coverage of the activities of foreign embassies, which was leaked and published on *Alsaha Alarabiya* website in 2006. Following this incident, all instructions are given to the Editors-in-Chief by telephone.

The Editor-in-Chief is the key authority who draws up the policies, editing plans and agenda of the newspaper. He allocates work and undertakes the daily decisions

affecting the operation of the newspaper, in addition to evaluating the performance of the paper and the staff. One of the prime responsibilities of the Editor-in-Chief is monitoring and supervising all material to be published in the newspaper and making sure that such materials comply with decisions, instructions and circulars issued by the Ministry. To achieve this objective, the Editor-in-Chief has to read all the materials before the final printing and no article can be published until it has been checked by him or by his deputy or the person authorized by him to approve that day's issue. As journalists in both papers pointed out, in most cases the decision taken by the Editor-in-Chief is considered final and non-negotiable.

The Editor-in-Chief is also responsible for ensuring that the newspaper and its staff adhere to journalistic ethics and regulations, especially regarding issues connected with slander and defamation. The Editors-in-Chief are also entitled to receive financial incentives, such as a certain percentage of the advertising and subscription income. These are considered another privilege accorded to them and this considerably raises their salaries. Additionally, the functions and responsibilities of the Editor-in-Chief include hiring and dismissing journalists and other employees on the paper as well as attracting columnists, writers and analysts to contribute to the newspaper and determining their remuneration. Also, he is responsible for approving all kinds of leave and vacations for journalists and other employees, nominating reporters and correspondents for outside offices and distributing work, including assignment of journalists to cover certain events as a representative of the paper.

As a matter of fact, there have been some complaints from journalists that Editors-in-Chief do not always use their authority in a prudent manner. In this context, an employee who served as an editor for 16 years and held a position as department chief said that he was dismissed for a minor difference with the Editor-in-Chief and was rehired after several mediation sessions as the editor of another section and on a lower monthly wage.

The Editor-in-Chief has the right to allow or prohibit the participation of journalists working for the newspaper in press conferences and TV interviews. Journalists cannot conduct TV interviews or any other type of statement to any media means without prior permission from the Editor-in-Chief. When I was at the *Aleqtisadiah* newspaper a decree was issued prohibiting any journalist working on the newspaper from appearing in any media except as a representative of the paper and after approval from the Editor-in-Chief. This decision upset journalists who used to appear on TV channels without any preconditions or restrictions.

The Editors-in-Chief also regularly meet with national and foreign officials and diplomats. When I was at *Alriyadh*, I could not see the Editor-in-Chief regularly because he had meetings with foreign diplomats, including the Australian ambassador and the Kuwaiti Minister of Information.

In addition, Editors-in-Chief of the national Saudi press accompany Saudi political leaders on their official trips abroad. Mostly, they go as part of the press delegation accompanying the King and the Crown Prince on their official visits to other countries. As *Aleqtisadiah's* Editor-in-Chief pointed out, and as mentioned earlier, since King Abdullah succeeded to the throne in 2005, he has taken Editors-in-Chief from the national Saudi press with him on every official visit. This preferential treatment adds importance to the position of Editor-in-Chief and gives it an additional political dimension.

This close relationship between the Editors-in-Chief and senior officials adds a further new dimension to press-government relations. The editors have access to the decision makers in the country, which makes them familiar with the government's international/national policy and agenda. This familiarity means that they are aware of the kind of news stories that might irritate the King or the Crown Prince. The close relationship between the Editors-in-Chief and senior officials makes the role of the editors seem closer to that of a state employee rather than a professional gatekeeper whose decisions are driven by his/her journalistic judgment. This explains the lack of



coverage of stories such as the arrest of the Saudi blogger Fouad Al-Farhan and public anger over the decision to raise wages by only 5%, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The other side of close relations between the Editors-in-Chief and the King and the Crown Prince is that the editors are more powerful than they were before King Abdullah assumed the throne in 2005. The close relationship protects them from the Ministry of Culture and Information's punishments and helps to maintain their position. This explains why they have ignored several decisions by the Ministry of Culture and Information to prohibit the publication of certain stories such as assaults by the religious police, which were discussed in the previous chapter. Such close relations with senior officials gives them the courage to ignore Ministry decisions. Jamal Khashoggi, Editor-in-Chief of *Alwatan* said, "We are now seeing Saudi newspapers that follow the regulations of Saudi publications and those that do not" (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, April 25, 2007).

#### **Factors Affecting the Saudi Gatekeeper in Selecting News Stories:**

There are various factors affecting the decisions of Saudi gatekeepers as to whether or not to publish a certain news story, and the focus of this chapter is to examine the main ones that affect these news decisions of the gatekeepers in the national Saudi press. Six different factors play major roles in the rejection, publication, framing and highlighting of a whole or part-story by gatekeepers. Shoemaker (1991) argues that news decisions are not totally dependent on the gatekeeper's likes and dislikes. She adds that the gatekeeper works within the constraints of news-making routines and within the framework of the organization as well as factors beyond the journalistic organization itself. Therefore, the effect of each factor on the gatekeeper's news decisions differs from one society to another (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996).

Throughout my observation and interviews with the Editors-in-Chief and their deputies at the two papers, I learnt that there are several interacting and overlapping factors impacting on Saudi gatekeeper's decisions. Bearing in mind the complexity of

news decisions which might be affected by one factor or a mix of factors in a single story, I wanted to investigate the influence of each factor independently. In view of the eight-week period I spent at the two newspapers, the application of the methodology of observation and the interviews with the Editor-in-Chief and his deputy on both papers, I reached a conceptual framework for evaluating the influence of each factor and its role in the approval or rejection of publication.

Observing gatekeepers' news decisions on both papers and reviewing a substantial number of studies in Chapter Two which focus on the main factors affecting the performance of the Saudi media and the press in particular assisted me in understanding news decisions in the Saudi press. The justifications given by gatekeepers themselves for publishing or rejecting different kinds of stories and their evaluation of each factor deepened my understanding of each factor's impact. Accordingly, hereunder are the major factors that affect the Saudi gatekeeper's news decisions as witnessed during my observation of the two papers.

#### **A) Social and Religious Factors:**

As discussed at the beginning of this study, religious and social pressures influence the selection of topics in the Saudi national press. As explained earlier, Saudi society is very conservative and religious, and fears the loss of its cultural identity. This situation makes social/religious pressure one of the most influential factors in news-making in the Saudi national press. Rugh points out that:

The most common reason is that the editor's perceptions of events, which are determined by his own experience and his cultural, historic, economic, and social environment, cause him to make certain choices in the presentation of news. This cultural bias is the major reason for a given medium's particular slant on the news (2004, p. 16).

He adds that the content of Saudi media (print and broadcast) is severely controlled in order to conform to social and religious norms. Based on my close examination of news decisions by gatekeepers on both *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah* I found

that social/religious factors are among the most pressing influences on news decisions. As discussed at the beginning of this study, Islamic principles and values play a significant role in shaping the daily life of Saudi people. As a result, religious and social factors are overlapping and it is hard to separate them from each other. The deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Aleqtisadiah* pointed out that social and religious factors are considered as a single factor due to the overlap between them. He added, "The religious leaders, for example, are considered social leaders and what they say or do affects and moves the Saudi people."

The Editor-in-Chief of *Aleqtisadiah* termed news a "social product" and described the selection of news stories in the Saudi press as a continuation of the dominance of the powerful social effects which play a role in all aspects of the life of Saudis. Saudi Arabia, as the cradle of Islam, is structured on religious concepts and has certain social and religious fundamentals that cannot be violated by any Saudi newspaper, as *Alriyadh's* Editor-in-Chief pointed out. The paper's deputy Editor-in-Chief considers the social/religious factor as the most significant one influencing his decisions and the major guide in making news decisions. Any material that contradicts Islamic principles, such as criticism of the prophets, or the encouragement of gambling or drinking alcohol is not allowed to appear in the Saudi press. He added that the Saudi press avoids also publishing any materials about other religions.

During my time at *Alriyadh*, the paper's correspondent in Germany followed a story about a German novel translated into Arabic, called *Ein Zimmer im Haus Krieges*, (A room in the house of war) by Christoph Peters. The story is about a German man who converted to Islam and was captured on his way to Afghanistan to wage "Jihad". The book discusses the concept of Jihad in connection to paradise and hell. The deputy decided against publishing the story on the grounds that it contains parts that expressed doubts about the existence of Allah. "A story cannot be published - even mere fiction - if it contradicts any Islamic principles."

There are particular issues that irritate religious and social groups in Saudi society, especially issues related to women, as *Aleqtsadiyah's* deputy editor mentioned. In this context, *Alriyadh's* Editor-in-Chief raised the example of the controversial issue of women's veils as a matter that many papers avoid discussing due to the different concepts connected with veiling in different Islamic countries. In some Islamic states women use only a head-covering while in Saudi Arabia the face is also covered. He mentioned that he had rejected articles discussing the veil issue to avoid the controversy such an issue would cause among some of the religious groups.

Similarly, *Aleqtsadiyah's* deputy editor admitted that social factors play a considerable role in his news decisions. "Saudi Arabia consists of a tribal society where newspapers must be cautious in publishing any article that harms the reputation of any tribe," he said. For example, he indicated that the newspaper is cautious when writing the name of a criminal, if the name might reveal that he came from a certain tribe. He pointed out that the paper prefers to use the initials of the criminal's first and family name. He added that in a very collective society a name can represent a whole tribe, not only the individual who commits the crime.

For the same reason, *Alriyadh's* deputy editor explained, discussion of the historical fighting between the tribes in the Arabian Peninsula is restricted, to avert any possibility of creating a sectarian conflict among Saudi tribes. "Before the existence of Saudi Arabia, different tribes used to rule different regions and cities in the country, which created wars among those tribes," he said. Defamatory stories, poems and jokes were part of the war between the tribes. Therefore, publishing news stories about the activity of a certain tribe or any of its members should be treated with caution in order not to revive the old conflicts. When I was at *Alriyadh*, the Otaiba tribe (one of the biggest tribes in Saudi Arabia) in the west of the country held a camel beauty pageant. Reuters wrote:

The legs are long, the eyes are big, the bodies curvaceous. Contestants in this Saudi-style beauty pageant have all the features you might expect anywhere else in the world, but with one crucial difference - the competitors are camels (December. 2007).

Despite the coverage of the story by the paper's reporter, the deputy editor told me that *Alriyadh* did not publish it, so as not to create any possible rivalries between the tribes.

On both papers, the Editor-in-Chief and his deputy affirmed that stories with sexual content are not allowed in the Saudi newspapers due to their sensitivity in terms of social and religious aspects. The deputy editor of *Aleqtisadiyah* pointed out that although the paper had started to publish photos of women (which was prohibited in the past), photos of women wearing immodest dress are still prohibited, including stories about drawings or sculpture of the naked body. Moreover, any article about sexual orientation—homosexual or lesbian - is strictly forbidden.

Another story which was completely ignored by *Aleqtisadiyah* for social reasons, even though the paper's female reporter covered the story, was a girls' football game. *Alarabiya*, *Elaph* and *Alwatan* followed the story, writing analysis of the game between Alyamamh University and Prince Mohammed Bin Fahad University. The game took place in Alkuber city in the eastern region of the country, in a closed play field with a Canadian female referee, and lauded the encouragement by the Saudi universities of women's sports (*Alarabiya*, January 24, 2008). The Alyamah team won the game 4-3 on penalty kicks after extra time ended 2-2. Despite the massive coverage of the story online, due to the fact that this game was the first official women's game in Saudi Arabia, neither paper published the story.

When I asked why such an apparently newsworthy event was not published in the paper, the Editor-in-Chief of *Aleqtisadiyah* explained that publishing the story would definitely have annoyed some segments of Saudi society. He added that publishing the story might also cause endless "headaches" (calls, visits and letters to the paper) as the religious leaders would not accept such a large scale female sporting event and its publication would no doubt rally many segments of society against the paper. He pointed out that this story is the first of its kind; therefore publishing it would be "a complete risk

which the paper is not willing to take.” He mentioned that publishing the story might be considered by Islamic activists as *kofr* - heresy.

Despite the enormous influence of social/religious factors on news decisions, the Editors-in-Chief and their deputies on both papers mentioned that such influence is diminishing. *Aleqtsadiyah's* Editor-in-Chief pointed out that stories which used to be taboo in the past because of social pressure had become more acceptable not only to be published in the paper but also among Saudis. He argued that the presence of different online and satellite media helps society gradually to accept the publication of topics which used to be very sensitive to the Saudis. "Some of the socially sensitive issues, such as women driving cars, are becoming acceptable to Saudi society due to the massive discussion of these issues online and on satellite channels," he said. The deputy editor of *Alriyadh* pointed out that issues such as the religious police, photos of women and domestic crimes which used to be prohibited due to social/religious pressure have now started to appear regularly in the newspapers.

#### **B) Political factors:**

The second factor which influences Saudi gatekeepers' news decisions is political bias. Government influence on the press is considered a significant factor in news decisions. *Alriyadh's* deputy editor categorized the political factor as the second most important factor influencing his decisions. This factor is demonstrated on the front pages of the Saudi press, which normally focus on the official local news with special stress on high-ranking official receptions, visits abroad and the activities of the royal family in both the domestic and external arenas. The front-page coverage of the visit by the President of France by both papers is an excellent example of the influence of the government over the press. As discussed in Chapter Five, the coverage of the visit focused on Saudi-French relations and ignored the refusal of the Saudi government to allow the French President to be accompanied by his fiancée.

While I was with the Editors-in-Chief and their deputies at the two newspapers, I found that in stories and decisions relating to the government, the papers relied mainly on the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), which normally publishes and furnishes the national press with statements and official instructions issued by the government. As mentioned in the previous chapter, and as the Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* and his deputy pointed out, the SPA transmits news in a certain wording to all local newspapers and the newspapers in turn issue the news in the exact same wording, particularly in stories and decisions relating to the King or the Crown Prince which are routinely published on the front page.

*Aleqtsadiah's* deputy editor stated that the paper can only decide over the font and location of placing the story, as well as a suitable photograph to accompany the story, but cannot change the wording or the content of official decisions received from the SPA. He added that "The news transmitted by SPA represents the approved wording and viewpoint of the government, therefore newspapers avoid inserting any changes in its wording or content."

*Aleqtsadiah's* Editor-in-Chief stressed the importance of the role of the Saudi press in preserving national unity and backing government decisions, particularly during times of crisis. He added that the Hajj season – for example – represents a big challenge each year for the Saudi government, when more than two million Muslims gather in Makkah for a specific period of time. It is incumbent on the press to back government decisions and reflect a good image about the Hajj process. Al-Kahtani (1999) describes the Saudi press and its role in reflecting a positive image of the government as a reflection of the authoritarian press system which has operated in the country since the introduction of the press into the Kingdom. Therefore, the Saudi press covers religious events such as Hajj and Umrah positively, regardless of any negative incident that might happen during such events. There are no doubt many incidents that occur in Hajj season every year as a result of having such a huge gathering of people in one place at a particular time. However, newspapers focus on the positive aspects concerning organization, donations offered by the government for pilgrims and other stories which

reflect the hospitality and great concern of the Saudi government for the safety and welfare of pilgrims.

The government effect is not confined to the publication of government news in a conspicuous manner, but extends to the prohibition on certain news and subjects as discussed in previous chapters. During my presence at *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiah*, news stories were rejected on the pretext of not complying with government directives (see Chapter Five).

During my presence at *Alriyadh*, the deputy Editor-in-Chief turned down a story covered by the paper's reporter at the Shoura Council. The story was about a request by ten Shoura members to separate Saudi newspapers - officially and financially - from the Ministry of Culture and Information. Although Saudi newspapers are privately owned, they are supervised and licensed by the Ministry of Culture and Information, not the Ministry of Trade as with all private companies in Saudi Arabia. The ten Shoura members argued that Saudi newspapers are commercial entities and therefore should be engaged with the Ministry of Trade, as is typical with other commercial companies, to attract businessmen to invest in the press field, which is monopolized by eight establishments. *Alhyat* newspaper published this story, mentioning that "The Shoura Council is discussing a proposal by ten members to separate the Saudi press from the Ministry of Culture and Information, on the grounds that newspapers are commercial institutions intended to make a profit and should therefore operate under the authority of the Ministry of Trade" (January 15, 2008). *Alhyat* added that the move is seen as a step towards greater press freedom in Saudi Arabia, where the Ministry of Culture and Information is the only authority to issue licences for media outlets to operate in the country.

In connection with this, I asked the deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* why he turned down the report, which is important for the newspaper and might attract the readers as well. He replied:



The story is an excellent story and should be on the front page, but the Ministry of Culture and Information will not be pleased to see it published. As long as the Saudi newspapers are still under the Ministry of Culture and Information's authority this story or any similar stories which include the Ministry of Culture and Information will remain unpublishable.

Additionally, he mentioned that in the same vein, the paper did not publish anything about a meeting held between the Minister of Culture and Information and Editors-in-Chief of Saudi newspapers, where the Minister promised to ease official censorship, despite coverage of the story by *Alhyat* and *Elaph*. Newspaper editors in Saudi Arabia have made a strong demand for press censorship in the country to be relaxed (Elaph, November 2007). Elaph mentioned that during a meeting with the Minister of Culture and Information, the Editors-in-Chief complained about the lack of press freedom in Saudi Arabia.

Although the political factor is efficiently influential, the four gatekeepers whom I interviewed and asked about the extent of this factor's influence confirmed that the Ministry of Culture and Information as the voice of the government is not interfering in the newspapers affairs as much as it used to. The dominance of the Ministry is fading, according to the deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh*, who said:

The paper now publishes and discusses issues such as corruption in the government sectors and other subjects which were not tackled in the past. Although the Ministry of Culture and Information still pressures the Saudi newspapers, now the Ministry advises the papers not to publish certain news and discusses the reasons with the paper. In the past the Ministry did not advise or justify its decisions - it used to order the papers not to follow stories, without listening to what the papers think.

The Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* explained that although the Ministry of Culture and Information still issues instructions to the newspapers to focus on or avoid publishing information about certain events, the instructions are not applied strictly. In this regard he mentioned that he receives several instructions not to publish certain news items but he publishes them anyway.

### **C) Personal and Professional Judgments:**

As discussed earlier, Editors-in-Chief from the Saudi national press accompany the King and the Crown Prince on their international visits. These close relationships with senior officials and the government's orientation towards openness give the Editors-in-Chief the power to ignore some of the Ministry of Culture and Information's instructions, especially those regarding national stories which do not relate to the King or Crown Prince or to international policy. Kapiszewski argues that the government allows Saudi dissidents to speak more openly in public and is broadening newspaper freedom to publish materials criticizing the government (2006). The government's orientation towards openness, as the editors and their deputies pointed out, gives Editors-in-Chief in the national press more space to choose to publish stories which used to be unpublishable due to Ministry pressures.

*Alriyadh's* Editor-in-Chief said, "I know better than the Ministry what to publish and what not to publish." He said that on a personal level, his experience as an Editor-in-Chief and journalist for decades and his knowledge and understanding of the readership are considered the most influential reasons behind his decisions to publish or reject news items.

The personal factor has noticeable effects on the selection and production of news stories. It reflects the wide authority enjoyed by the Editor-in-Chief, supported by the fact that there is no clear institutionalism guiding work in the press institutions in general, as the *Aleqtisadiyah* Editor-in-Chief pointed out. *Aleqtisadiyah's* Editor-in-Chief mentioned that in the absence of clear and precise institutional policies in the Saudi press, Editors-in-

Chief had assumed the responsibility for drawing up the policies and trends of the newspaper according to their own inclinations and viewpoints.

The deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* said that apart from avoiding criticism of the King, Crown Prince and Islamic principles, the Editor comfortably chooses what to publish and ignore based on his personal judgment. He added that this is what makes Saudi newspapers differ from each other in the stories they follow. Rugh argues that "In Saudi Arabia the daily newspapers differ in content from each other primarily in the amount of space they give to secondary stories and nonpolitical items (2004, p.66). He adds, "The amount of freedom editors have, however, to some extent depends on their perception of their role and how much they want to criticize" (Rugh, 2004, p. 67).

When I asked the deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* about the effect of the Editor's individual likes, dislikes, attitudes and ideas on his news decisions, he responded that these factors definitely influence his decisions. He declared that he cannot publish any story that may tarnish Saudi Arabia's image or may be utilized by foreign parties to harm the Kingdom, even when no instructions are given for abandoning publication of such stories. He said:

I love the country, I am Muslim; therefore, publishing what might harm the image of the country or challenge some Islamic principles is not something I would support, regardless of the Ministry's decisions.

*Aleqtisadiyah's* editor pointed out that he tried to isolate his personal likes and dislikes and focuses on the news value. He mentioned that he knows the paper's readers and try to focus on the news that interests them. He said:

I try to be objective in news decisions, isolating my personal feelings in order to practise journalism as a professional Editor-in-Chief. With the heavy competition we are witnessing from other newspapers and other news media, the effects of the editor's personal attitudes and values decreases, and the influence of the readership increases.

The deputy editor of *Aleqtisadiyah* declared that, "My belief in fair journalism is the most important criterion in news decisions." He added, "I will never allow any story

to be published if it does not give a fair coverage of different sides of the story.” I was sitting with the deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Aleqtisadiah* when he received an article about violence in a Saudi family where a husband used to hit his wife. A female journalist wrote the story and the deputy Editor-in-Chief turned it down. When I asked him the reason behind rejecting the story he mentioned that it was a one-sided story. He claimed that when a female journalist covers domestic violence, she stands up against the man, accusing him of being the only reason behind every domestic violence case. As a result, he turned down similar stories which he described as "one-sided, full of emotions and accusations.” Such story also shows the effect of personal judgment on the Saudi gatekeeper and how the gender of the gatekeeper affects his news selection.

The deputy editor of *Alriyadh* mentioned that his Editor-in-Chief, for example, is considered one of the most prominent advocates of giving more rights to women and therefore the subject of the possibility of granting women the right to drive cars in Saudi Arabia has enjoyed a considerable presence and discussion in the paper. Several interviews with prominent women and a questionnaire were put on the newspaper's website for this purpose and the results were published in the paper.

#### **D) New Communication Technologies:**

After I started my observations I noticed that journalists are giving significant attention to new communication technologies. The two newspapers have direct access to Internet services, and each section has a large TV on which to follow events broadcast by the major Arab and international channels. For example, the sports section focuses on the Saudi Sports channel, Aljazeera sports and ART sports, while the economics department relies on the CNBC Arabic and Aleqtsadia channels. The political news section normally follows up news bulletins on the Aljazeera and Alarabiya channels.

Where usage of mobile phones for the purpose of journalistic activities is concerned, each journalist is provided with a free subscription to the main sources for his respective activity. For instance, sports journalists have subscriptions to sports clubs'

news services, while journalists in the economics section are provided with the latest market news on their mobile phones from certain specialized sources in this field. Similarly, journalists in the local news section have free subscriptions to the local press and some specialized Internet sites like Sabq and Alweeam as well as other newspapers' mobile services.

The Editors-in-Chief and their deputies stressed on the effects of the Internet on news decisions. The deputy editor of *Alriyadh* said, "The Internet is playing a major role in news making in the paper". Similarly, the deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Aleqtisadiah* pointed out that the effects of the Internet grow rapidly compared to three years ago. "The Internet affects news gathering and news selection which as a result affect the gatekeeper's day-to-day work", he said. The great interest in exploiting technology in Saudi national newspapers makes such technologies an integral part of the journalists' daily work. In turn this vast developing technology is a new and pressing factor which affects gatekeepers' decisions regarding news stories, as was demonstrated in the previous chapter.

Based on my observation and interviews with four editors, the influence of the Internet on Saudi gatekeepers' news decisions can be summarized with reference to news sources, news production and news selection.

### **1-News sources:**

As pointed out in the literature review, the Saudi press relies on news agencies and the international media in news reporting. However, the Internet have recently opened new windows for Saudi journalists to diversify their news sources in a way never seen before. There are four different new sources of news that Saudi gatekeepers have access to via the Internet, extending the number of stories available for each gatekeeper to choose from, especially at the national news level. The first of these is the proliferation of news websites focusing on Saudi national affairs. Websites such as Sabq, Alweeam and Kabar have become a rich source of news that Saudi journalists can rely on,

especially regarding national news. As mentioned in the chapter on observation, journalists pick up stories from websites and develop them for publication in their newspapers. The story of the firing of Saudi workers by a private company was one of the stories published on *Alsaha Alarabiya* before a journalist in the national news department developed it into a story published in the paper. Although news websites can be seen as competitors to newspapers, these websites also turn the attention of the national press towards stories that Saudi newspapers would never have known about in the absence of such websites.

The second source of news which helps Saudi gatekeepers in news-making is official websites. Like the rest of the world, private and governmental organizations as well as individuals in Saudi Arabia have their own official websites which become a rich source of news on which journalists can rely as news sources. Journalists regularly browse official websites which might help them in covering news stories, especially when certain news, such as the announcement of the annual financial results of Saudi companies, is expected. Therefore, official websites not only provide the press with the latest news about their organizations' activities, but also help to confirm stories that the paper receives from other sources.

The third source of news which has recently become available to Saudi gatekeepers is city websites. Due to the large size of the country and the difficulties of having reporters in each Saudi city, the presence of city websites plays a major role in news reporting, especially in national news. Local people from different Saudi cities launch their city websites in order to report the latest news and events which take place in their cities. These websites give Saudi journalists access to news stories, especially events that take place in small cities without reporters or stringers to cover them. In order to publish the story about snow falling in Arar City, the *Aleqtisadiyah* reporter relied on the Arar City website ([ararcol.com](http://ararcol.com)) to confirm the story that he had received from an unreliable source.

The fourth source of news, which plays a vital role in news reporting, is the participation of citizens in news reporting. As discussed in literature review, the Internet and mobile phones allow people who have no journalistic experience to report news to the news media. News media in various countries are taking advantage of the latest communication technologies that people have in news reporting. CNN, for example, has launched the “i-report” feature, in which users of the CNN website can report stories. These stories can be viewed on the CNN website and some of them are also podcast on the channel. Similarly, the Saudi press is taking advantage of citizen journalism by giving readers the opportunity to participate via newspaper websites. *Electronic journalist* is a new service offered by *Alriyadh* through which users can report stories or write articles. The service is easy to use and the user can send a story directly to any department of the paper.

The role of Saudi gatekeepers in the national press is therefore influenced by the massive amount of news and information that the Internet has to offer. The huge quantity of news and information makes the role of the Saudi gatekeeper harder than it used to be before the emergence of the Internet. On one hand, gatekeepers have access to much more news and information which help in news production, as discussed below. On the other, the massive amount of news available to the Saudi gatekeepers makes news selection a complex process which involves many different factors, as discussed in the section on news selection below.

## **2-News production:**

The Internet is playing a very influential role not only in news reporting but also in news production. The effects of this role can be summarized under three headings. First, Internet websites help journalists to deepen and expand news stories that the paper receives from news agencies and other news sources. News agencies focus on the incident itself without giving many details or predictions. The availability of Internet websites as a source of information has changed news-making in the Saudi press. Instead

of the “copy and paste” technique that the Saudi press was famous for (as Kheraigi, 1990 and Al-Kahtani, 1999 point out), the press started to lengthen and extend news stories by adding related information as well as providing in-depth analysis of news stories. Internet websites are also a rich source of photos, videos and audio on which journalists can rely in order to confirm and deepen news stories. As mentioned in the previous section, when *Aleqtisadiyah's* reporter received a story about the fall of snow in Arar City, he relied on the City's website for photos of the snow.

The second element of the Internet's influence over news production is that the usage of the Internet in news making helps to reduce the number of gates each news story travels through in its journey from reception to publication. This element is clearer at *Aleqtisadiyah* more than *Alriyadh*. For example, due to the usage of the Internet in news production at *Aleqtisadiyah*, only one journalist is in charge of a story from reception to publication. When a journalist receives a story he/she follows the story until publication, including sending the story via the SMS news service, and this limits the number of gatekeepers in the story to one, besides the Editor-in-Chief. In contrast, *Alriyadh*, where the Internet is not playing the same role in news production and handling as at *Aleqtisadiyah*, the number of gatekeepers through which the news passes on its journey is comparatively large. When a journalist at *Alriyadh* receives a story, he/she writes it up and places it on the “desk”. After the story is reviewed by the head of the department it is sent to be revised and laid out before being sent to the production department (see previous chapter). It is worth mentioning that that SMS news service of *Alriyadh* is handled by the department of new media, which adds another gate to the journey of the news, by rewriting the story in SMS format.

The third aspect of the Internet's influence on Saudi gatekeepers in terms of news production is the presence of websites such as Sabq and Alweeam which can publish news stories immediately after receiving them. Flavian and Gurrea point out that the Internet, which is characterized by its speed and low cost, is playing an influential role in news production (2006). Unlike the national press, the news-making process on news websites such as Sabq, Alweeam and Kabar is characterized by its speed, which enables



these websites to steal scoops from the national press. The speed of the Internet allows websites to cover stories that can be hard to cover in the press due to deadlines and printing times which create an inflexible publication cycle. However, the national press has made two changes (see chapter Five) in its news production methods in order to reduce the effect of these websites and limit their ability to steal scoops from the press.

### **3-News selection:**

Internet websites now play an important role in Saudi gatekeepers' news selection. This can be seen in two main areas. First is the participation of the readers on the paper's website. As seen in Chapter Two, the Internet is characterized by a high degree of interactivity, which helps the audience participate in news reporting. Such participation turns the paper's readers into a factor that Saudi gatekeepers must bear in mind when selecting news. As discussed in Chapter Five, Saudi journalists regularly read readers' comments on the papers' websites in order to know their reaction toward what the papers publishes. Such access to the readers' likes and dislikes places pressure on the gatekeepers in their news selection. The deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* pointed out that due to the ability of the paper to monitor hits on every area of its website, the paper now knows the type of stories that attract the paper's readers. Therefore, in order to maintain their readership, newspapers try to satisfy their readers by giving them the kind of stories that interest them.

Secondly, the publication of news stories on national and international websites places pressure on Saudi gatekeepers to follow the same stories, regardless of the sensitivity of these stories in Saudi Arabia's conservative society and government. The journalists mentioned that the publication of stories which used to be taboo on national websites such as Sabq and Alweeam gives the national press the opportunity to cover the same stories because they are already known to the Saudi public. Online publication gives Saudi gatekeepers the courage to select stories which had been "off limits" since the birth of the Saudi press. For example, the coverage of religious police crimes was not possible in the past (see Chapter One). However, after the extensive publication of these

crimes online, both papers followed them. When a newsworthy story is published online, the Saudi gatekeepers find it hard to ignore the story.

The deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* said, "I personally feel 'ashamed' when stories are extensively covered on websites and ignored by the Saudi press." Moreover, the publication of stories online can be used as an excuse to follow other stories which are prohibited by the Ministry of Culture and Information, under the pretext that these are already known to the Saudi public. For example, as the deputy Editor-in-Chief pointed out, online publication of the Al-Qatif girl's story and the assault by the religious police on a 16-year-old boy are among the stories which have been used by the national press as an excuse to follow a story of a type that used to be taboo.

#### **E) Economic Factors:**

Al-Kahtani (1999), Al Shebeili (2000) and Barayan (2002) point out that economic factors have a weak influence on the content of the Saudi media in general and the press in particular. This, they argue, is due to the fact that the government subsidises the national newspapers. Rugh points out that "the government is a major source of revenue to the newspapers, in the form of official government advertisements, subscriptions for government employees, and in some cases direct subsidies" (2004, p.75).

However, the deputy editor of *Alriyadh* argued that this situation is changing slightly, due to the high revenues that the Saudi newspapers make. He commented, "Saudi newspapers are commercial establishments, in which their profits reflect their success or failure." Jamal Khashoggi describes the Saudi press as "a private sector in every sense of the word and it generates very high profits for its owners." *Aleqtisadiyah's* Editor-in-Chief said, "Newspapers are commercial organizations targeting profits and the success or failure of the Editor-in-Chief is valued in this context."

When I asked the Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* about government subsidies to the national newspapers, he said that the paper makes around 120 million riyals annual net

profit, which makes the paper financially independent. "We have not received any donations from any party (governmental, organizational or personal) in the last ten years," he added. The Saudi Minister of Culture and Information has said that the Ministry has not offered any type of support to the national press for more than three years (*Alriyadh*, May 2008). "We used to offer many different types of material support to the national press but we have stopped providing anything of this kind as these newspapers have become successful projects in their own right, and no longer need our support," he said. He added, "The advertising market in the Saudi press has reached 3 billion riyals in 2007, with high distribution figures." "The Saudi press certainly no longer needs any kind of financial support [from the Ministry]," he said (*Alriyadh*, May 2008).

*Alriyadh's* Editor-in-Chief pointed out that Saudi newspapers rely on their high income from circulation and advertising to make them financially independent and this negates the need for any help from the government. He added, "The paper donated more than 12 million riyals last year to different organizations, including public schools and universities." One of the *Al Jazirah* newspaper's managers revealed that the paper donates 20 million riyals every year to public education (Elaph, July 28, 2008). When I asked *Alriyadh's* editor about King Abdullah's donation of 10 million riyals (1.5 million pounds) to *Al Nadwa* newspaper when the paper faced bankruptcy in 2007 (Al-Rashed, 2007), he responded that the money was a private donation from King Abdullah, at the paper's request, and not a subsidy from the government. He added, "*Al Nadwa's* bankruptcy represents the transitional phase that the Saudi newspapers are witnessing as independent private companies." He added that if the government kept subsidizing Saudi newspapers, none of the papers would face any financial problems.

As the major share of the papers' income comes from advertisements, the influence of the advertisers has gradually grown. The vast competition among the national newspapers to get a bigger share of the advertisement stake makes them endeavour to satisfy and attract advertisers, as the Editor-in-Chief of *Aleqtisadiah* told me.

He classified advertisers into two categories, "active and passive." The latter deals with the paper as a means to reach customers, without trying to impose any pressure on the paper to publish or ignore certain stories. The active advertiser, on the other hand, tries to utilize his advertising in the paper to influence the selection of news related to his company. He informed me that one of the banks (he preferred not to mention its name), classified as a major advertiser in the newspaper, was granted special treatment in publishing news about it, especially when it launches new services. The deputy Editor-in-Chief of the paper admitted that the influence of advertisers is increasing, and they normally request publication of their news and activities in conspicuous fonts and on major pages.

During the course of my observation, which coincided with the publication of the annual financial statements of companies for the year 2007, I noticed that some particular companies (major advertisers in the paper) such as banks, dairy companies and telecom companies were granted special privileges, and their statements and news were given particular prominence. For example, when the paper published the annual financial report by Saudi Telecom (STC), one of the biggest advertisers in the paper, the story was located at the top of the first page of the national finance section, with a photo of Saud Al-Daweesh (the president of the company) and the company logo (*Aleqtisadiah*, January 25, 2008). The story included a comparison of the last three annual reports of the company and the expectations of the growth of the company in the future, mentioning that the firm may enter new international markets such as Kuwait. The story concluded by mentioning some of the company's new services which are to be launched soon, such as the new Internet-mobile phone service "Mobilenet".

On the other hand, the annual financial reports of companies who had no advertisements in the paper were in small fonts and might be combined in one news story with reports of other, similar companies. For example, the reports of the Saudi International Petrochemical Company (SIPCHEM), the Advanced Polypropylene Company (APPC) and the Saudi Arabian Fertilizer Company (SAFCO) were combined

into one short news story focusing on their current reports with neither analysis nor comparison with the previous year's annual reports. The deputy editor of *Aleqtisadiah* justified the special treatment of big advertisers as a way of maintaining the main revenue of the paper.

A good example of the influence of advertisers, given by the deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh*, was represented plainly in the year 2006 when a real estate developer signed an advertising contract with the newspaper for two months to promote his project. The deal included two full colour pages of advertisements every day, as well as news stories about the project as a form of public relations. Unfortunately, after one month of this advertising campaign the project was suspended by the Ministry of Trade and the Ministry of Finance due to a dispute over the ownership of the land concerned. Despite the fact that the paper received the story, it was not published. The deputy editor of *Alriyadh* explained that "the paper ignored the story because we value the choice of the company who chooses the paper to reach its customers."

The Editor-in-Chief of *Aleqtisadiah* recalled that he had phoned a prominent advertiser and asked him whether he was satisfied with the newspaper and told him to send in details of the latest activities and news of his company to be published free of charge. The Editor-in-Chief also requested that the public relations section of the company should call an appointed reporter from the paper to cover the regular activities of the company.

Economic factors are now a growing influence over news decisions. The Saudi economy is booming due to record high oil prices, which reached \$145 per barrel in July 2008. As a result, the Saudi press is making substantial revenues from the boom in the advertising market. The Minister of Culture and Information mentioned that this reached 3 billion riyals in 2007.

The large profits made by Saudi newspapers have helped them to become financially independent from the government on the one hand, but increased the impact

of the advertisers on the other. Revenues from advertising have become an important source of income for Saudi newspapers, who are in turn keen to keep on good terms with advertisers. Competition among newspapers to attract advertisers necessitates satisfying the latter's requests to publish their news and activities in a conspicuous manner and to ignore stories that may defame or harm relations with the main advertisers.

#### **F) The Organization/Routine Factor:**

The Editors-in-Chief and their deputies at both newspapers categorized the effect of the organization as the least influential factor affecting editorial decisions. They mentioned that the weakness of this factor can be attributed to the strength of the other factors. The Saudi press has, since its inception, been loyal to the government. In addition, the influence of social/religious factors place an enormous pressure on the national press. Besides this, the growing power that the Editors-in-Chief of the national press are gaining due to their close relations with the King and the Crown Prince also limits the influence of the organization.

However, the deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* mentioned that the news stories that reach his desk everyday are a product of a bureaucratically structured process within the organization. "Reporters and journalists gather, report and select the stories, before the Editor-in-Chief or I choose what to publish or reject from what has been hierarchically selected... Their selections affect the types of news we select from," he said.

*Aleqtisadiah's* deputy Editor-in-Chief mentioned that after working with the Editor-in-Chief for five years, the other gatekeepers in the paper know the types of stories that the editor usually rejects and most of the time they take their decisions based on their expectations of the Editor-in-Chief's decisions. He added that exceptions happen when non-routine news appears: reporters cover it and wait for the Editor-in-Chief's decision.

I recorded some observations where the organization has a clear influence on the news decisions of Saudi gatekeepers. For example, the incident of the Saudi girl's car accident in Cairo, in which two men were killed, was not published in *Alriyadh* immediately after it was received from the paper's reporter in Cairo. Despite the importance of the story, which was covered by other Saudi national papers such as *Alwatan*, *Okaz* and *Aleqtisadiah*, *Alriyadh* preferred to wait for three days before publishing it, which shows that the organization is very keen to keep its image as a reliable press establishment.

The Editor-in-Chief of *Alriyadh* said, "We have to wait for an official statement, either from the Saudi embassy in Cairo or the Egyptian police, to publish the story." He added, "*Alriyadh* is a reliable and respectable newspaper which has a name to protect; publishing a story without a reliable source might harm the name and the image of the paper." Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, *Alriyadh* is considered a semi-government newspaper, which means that it represents the government's point of view, especially in international affairs. Therefore, news which might have political implications must be treated with caution and published only when based on reliable information from reliable sources.

The organizational factor can also be seen in the wording of news stories, as *Aleqtisadiah's* Editor-in-Chief told me. "*Aleqtisadiah* adopts a very distinctive style in story writing and headlines." He added that most Saudi papers lauded the government and its performance, while *Aleqtisadiah* focuses directly on the core of the event, without offering undue praise. This style differs from the one he previously followed when he worked for *Al-Jazirah* five years ago, he said, adding that *Aleqtisadiah* is part of the Saudi Research and Marketing Company, which owns some of the leading pan-Arabic daily and weekly newspapers and magazines such as *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Almajalla*. Therefore, the high level of journalistic writing and reporting must be reflected in *Aleqtisadiah* as well as in the other newspapers and magazines of the company.

On the other hand, the effect of routine is very clear in both papers, especially in the reliance on routine news sources such as the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) and on Saudi officials. For example, on Tuesdays, the front page carries coverage of the Council of Ministers held on Mondays, routinely relying on what the SPA reports. *Aleqtisadiah's* editor mentioned that the paper is keen to publish government decisions not because of the paper's loyalty to the government but because they interest Saudi readers and are considered newsworthy. He added that Tuesday's issue has a higher circulation than the issues for the rest of the week, due to the publication of the government decisions which are taken at the weekly meeting of the Council of Saudi Ministers every Monday.

International visits by the King or the Crown Prince are also routinely covered by the Saudi press, and the visits of foreign officials to Saudi Arabia are given considerable coverage. For example, the visit of U.S. President George Bush to Saudi Arabia was widely covered by the two papers from his arrival until his departure, as was the French President's visit. The news published during the two visits focused on bilateral relations and cooperation between the Kingdom and the USA and France respectively. The coverage of such visits routinely concentrates on positive outcomes.

Although routine plays a major role in the gatekeepers' decisions, the Internet reduces the influence of this factor. It does this in two main ways. First, the Internet diversifies news sources, as mentioned earlier. Instead of relying routinely on news agencies, press conferences and official press releases, the gatekeepers have many new sources online which can provide them with news. Second, the reduction of the number of gatekeepers who are involved in each news story reduces the effects of the hierarchy and bureaucracy of the paper. As discussed in Chapter Three, the decisions of gatekeepers are affected by the bureaucratic routine of the editorial hierarchy. However, due to the presence of news websites which might steal scoops, Saudi papers are trying to speed up the gatekeeping process in order to survive stiff competition, as demonstrated earlier. As also discussed earlier, *Aleqtisadiah* has reduced the number of journalists involved in each story, so that only one gatekeeper is in charge of each story from reception to production, including sending the story as a SMS message. This situation



slightly reduces the influence of the head of the department and other journalists on each story because the paper uses advanced technologies which enable each journalist to follow a story until it gets published without any interference from other gatekeepers.

## **Conclusion:**

There is a difference between the gatekeeping process in *Alriyadh* and *Aleqtisadiyah*. In *Aleqtisadiyah* the number of gates is reduced in many cases to only one journalist. In *Alriyadh*, however, each news story has to go through multiple gates in its journey. This is due to two main reasons. Firstly, the reliance on advance technologies in news making at *Aleqtisadiyah* compared to the reliance on bureaucratic hierarchy at *Alriyadh* which increases the number of gates. Secondly, the pressure of the government on *Alriyadh* as a semi-governmental paper which represents the government's view, especially in international affairs - greater than the pressure on *Aleqtisadiyah*. Such pressure adds another responsibility to *Alriyadh*'s gatekeepers. Instead of only focusing on selecting news stories that interest the readers, *Alriyadh*'s gatekeepers have to ensure that news stories also do not conflict with government's view.

There is a clear difference between Saudi gatekeepers and the gatekeeping model that was reviewed in Chapter Three. In this chapter I examined the factors that affect Saudi gatekeepers' decisions. I found that the effect of each factor on Saudi gatekeepers differs from the effect on Western gatekeepers on which the studies of the gatekeeping theory were applied. As discussed in Chapter Three, personal judgment is considered the most influential factor in Western gatekeeper's news decisions (see White, 1952; Berkowitz, 1997; Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). After personal judgment, the factors of organization and routine are the next most influential in Western gatekeeper's decisions.

However, where the Saudi gatekeeper is concerned, his or her news decisions are affected by two main sets of factors: the socio-religious and the political. The existence of the gatekeeper in a society where the religious leadership has great influence in public

life makes the influence of this group more powerful than the influence of the personal convictions of the Saudi gatekeeper. In fact, as discussed at the beginning of this study, religious leaders in Saudi Arabia are influential enough to place pressure on national newspapers in order to affect their news decisions. This influence forces Saudi gatekeepers to avoid news and issues that might irritate religious leaders. This is different from the case of Western gatekeepers, for whom the religious factor does not constitute such a great pressure. The influence of religious factors in the West is considered weak and so they do not exert pressure on Western gatekeepers.

In addition, in Saudi Arabia the government is an influential factor which affects Saudi gatekeepers' news decisions. The government's intervention in Saudi national newspapers and its censorship of them make this an influential factor in news decisions, and the Saudi gatekeeper will keep political factors in mind when taking news decisions. As discussed in the previous chapter, the government uses several methods to put pressure on national newspapers. The principal method is Ministry censorship. The Ministry issues instructions and guidelines to national newspapers regarding news stories that can be published and those which are prohibited. Such instructions and guidelines, which are known to the senior editors, affect their news decisions. As a result, Saudi gatekeepers follow the Ministry's guidelines in order to avoid any punishment for the newspaper or gatekeeper who challenges the Ministry.

As mentioned in the literature review of this study, there are six obstacles blocking the existence of a free press in Saudi Arabia. By examining Saudi gatekeepers, an additional hindrance can be added to the elements blocking press freedom in Saudi Arabia. This seventh element is the relationships of Editors-in-Chief with political leaders. These relations force editors to endeavour to satisfy political leaders and not to harm such relations through reports published in their respective newspapers. The Saudi Editor-in-Chief practices censorship on his paper to make sure that no news or information irritates the political leaders shall be published. Thus, the Editor-in-Chief who is assumed to be an enthusiastic advocate of press freedom becomes a tool for censorship on his newspaper.

The Western gatekeeper, on the other hand, does not suffer from government influence in the same way as the Saudi gatekeeper. Unlike the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information, Western governments do not provide the national press with guidelines that the gatekeeper should follow. Governmental interference in the press is seen as unacceptable and a conflict with press freedom as a principle of democracy. This situation reduces the effect of the government on the gatekeeper's news decisions in the West. The weak influence of political and religious factors on Western gatekeepers allows personal judgments to become the most influential factor in the Western gatekeeper's news decisions, whereas the strong influence of political and religious factors on the decisions of the Saudi gatekeeper weakens the effect of his personal judgment.

Although the organizational effect is clear in the Western gatekeeping model, it is still relatively weak in the Saudi press, as Editors-in-Chief and their deputies pointed out. The strength of other factors such as Saudi society and religious leaders, the government and the wide powers of the Editors-in-Chief makes the influence of organizational factors a relatively minor consideration in editorial decisions.

The growing influence of the Internet as a source of news and information in news-making, as discussed in this chapter, completes Barzilai-Nahon's model that was discussed in Chapter Three (2005). She argues that the Internet places pressure on the gatekeeper to speed up his/her news decisions. As shown earlier in this chapter, the Internet plays a role not only in speeding up the process of news decisions, but also in reducing the number of gatekeepers that the news item passes through on its journey to the audience. In *Aleqtisadiah*, only one journalist follows every news item from its arrival at the office through to its publication in the paper. Using the Internet in news-making, the journalist receives a news story via e-mail then rephrases it and sends it by e-mail to the design department. At the same time, he/she sends the news story to mobile news subscribers, as any delay in sending the news may cause the newspaper to lose the scoop.

However, the examination of the gatekeeping model in this study finds that the role of the gatekeeper becomes complex and essential, something, which contradicts Bennett's (2004) argument. As discussed in Chapter Three, Bennett argues that the work of the gatekeeper will lose its value because of the Internet and its interactivity. Bennett (2004) argues that the gatekeeper should look for a new job, as the Internet reduces the importance of the gatekeeper. The examination of the gatekeeping model in this study finds that the Internet, although it constitutes a great challenge to the gatekeeper, gives his or her work greater importance. The huge number of news items that reach the gatekeeper daily (the number has increased greatly due to the existence of the Internet) makes the process of news selection more complex than before the Internet, when the number of news items was smaller. Instead of choosing hundreds of stories out of thousands, due to the presence of the Internet the gatekeeper now has to choose hundreds out of millions of stories every day. This situation increases the importance of professional gatekeepers, who are able to choose newsworthy stories that attract readers. The reader does not want to do the gatekeeper's job, therefore, they rely on the gatekeeper's selection of news, which every day reduces and transforms millions of stories into hundreds that the reader wants to read. This conforms to the model developed by Shoemaker (1991) and Shoemaker and Reese (1996), who argue that the importance of the gatekeeper increases whenever the number of news items increases.

News websites such as Sabq and Alweeam have had a significant impact on Saudi gatekeepers' decisions. The presence of news websites as a competitor to newspapers has compelled the Saudi gatekeeper to speed up news decisions, which in turn reduced the number of gatekeepers as explained previously in this chapter. The ability of news websites to publish news and information that the Saudi gatekeeper cannot publish due to censorship is challenging the Saudi gatekeeper. The gatekeeper has to take a decision whether to publish news and information in spite of censorship, or to that ignore news and information, giving other media the lead in covering news and information which interest the Saudi reader. Though, the role of the gatekeeper as a news selector becomes vital, his/her role as a tool of censorship declines because of the pressure of time and competition.

This situation also applies on a broader level. The Saudi government, by practicing censorship on inflowing information and news, faces the same challenge. The government plays a gatekeeping role on news and information coming from abroad to Saudi Arabia and on outgoing news and information from Saudi Arabia to world. However, the high interactivity of the Internet coupled with mobile phones has overcome the control and censorship applied by non-democratic countries on the flow of news and information. The continuing development of new generations of the Internet and mobile phones makes it difficult for the government to play the gatekeeper role it used to play before the presence of the Internet.