

Saudi bloggers, women's issues and NGOs: how women's issues are linked or represented on Web 2.0 platforms

This paper will examine how women's issues in Saudi Arabia have been articulated in several parts of cyberspace and how they have been 'rendered public' (this research will use the term 'public-ise' as defined by Noortje Marres¹) by Saudi women's blogs, news media outlets and regional or international organizations that cover women's issues .

In particular, it will analyze how women's issues in Saudi Arabia are articulated on social media platforms that fall under the Web 2.0 umbrella, and see if and how those same issues are comparably articulated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international government organizations, and media outlets.

This paper does not aim to analyze whether the Internet is a catalyst for policy-making changes or only another tool activated through human interaction. Instead it aims to investigate how certain controversies (issue language, issue formation in cyberspace and network formation around the issue: 'women's issues in Saudi Arabia') are articulated and developed through Web 2.0 platforms, namely blogs and other tools (YouTube, RSS feeds, DiggIt).

Internet in Saudi Arabia

The Internet reached Saudi Arabia in 1994 but was initially only available for academic research. In light of the country's strongly conservative social traditions the government gave great consideration to the potential impact before finally authorizing the Internet for public use in 1999.² It became commercially and publicly available only after the development and installation of filtering systems to safeguard societal and religious norms.

According to Anders and Heickelman (2009) the Saudi government has listed so many keywords as 'enemies of decency and Islam' that instead of talking about a black list of URLs it would be much easier to talk about a white list of URLs. Saudi Arabia has strict codes of behavior when it comes to Internet publishing. Reporters Without Borders, in its latest reports, lists Saudi Arabia as an enemy of the Internet.³ The government has criminalized the publication and/or downloading of a wide range of material deemed offensive, all documented under a Council of Ministers Resolution (2001).⁴

1 Marres N. (2005), *No issue, no public*, UvA (Amsterdam): WTMC and the faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam

2 Boas T. and Kalathil S. (2003), *Open Networks, closed regimes. The impact of the internet on authoritarian rule*, Washington DC: Carnegies Endowment for International peace, pp103-134; Albrecht Hofheinz (2005), *The Internet in the Arab World: Playground for political Liberalization* available at www.fes.de/ipg/IPG3_2005/07HOFHEINZ.PDF; Rasha A. Abdullah, (2007), *The Internet in the Arab World - Egypt and Beyond*- New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.

3 <http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-saudi-arabia,36681.html>

4 <http://www.al-bab.com/media/docs/saudi.htm>

The salient categories of banned material are: anything contravening a fundamental principle or legislation, or infringing the sanctity of Islam and the shariah, or breaching public decency; anything contrary to the state or its system; reports or news damaging to the Saudi Arabian armed forces, without the approval of the competent authorities; publication of official state laws, agreements or statements before they are officially made public, unless approved by the competent authorities; anything which is damaging to the dignity of heads of states or heads of accredited diplomatic missions in the kingdom, or harms relations with those countries; any false information ascribed to state officials or those of private or public domestic institutions and bodies, liable to cause them or their offices harm, or damage their integrity; the propagation of subversive ideas or the disruption of public order or disputes among citizens; anything liable to promote or incite crime, or advocate violence against others in any shape or form; any slanderous or libelous material against individuals.

After 9/11 these norms were reinforced and provisions against terrorist activities over the Internet were introduced, along with tougher measures for any Internet publishing critical of the Saudi governmental system, the royal family or Islam. In particular, imprisonment and fines were laid out for any Internet publishing considered harmful to the kingdom and Islam. Internet cafes are monitored through CCTVs and the names of the customers are recorded. In 2008 the National Human Rights Society decided to unblock the sites of certain human rights associations, out of respect for the UN Human Rights Declaration. One year later, the ministry introduced new restrictions on internet publishing: all Web sites registered and hosted in Saudi Arabia have to get permission from special agencies under the purview of the Ministry of Culture and information. In May of the same year, the religious police (the Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) expressed interest in Internet policing activities.

Although the official attitude towards Internet publishing fluctuates and there is uncertainty about future developments, the Internet is growing in Saudi Arabia. Google's reporting on Internet penetration worldwide shows that Saudi Arabia has grown consistently over the years, from 200,000 users in 2000 to 9.8 million users in 2010, representing 48-fold growth in 10 years, or on average of 133 percent a year. The Internet penetration rate for Saudi Arabia (at 38.1 percent) is lower than rates in more open Gulf neighbors (Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and even Iran) but higher than in any other Arab country outside the Gulf region.

The boom in social media platforms from 2004/2005 has revolutionized the way young Saudis interact with the outside world. In 2005, because of pressure of religious authorities on the government, the social platform Blogger was banned and filtered. The ban was lifted a few days later but bloggers sometimes still have to migrate between platforms to avoid filtering or harassment by the religious police.

Despite the controls the Internet is growing in terms of e-shopping and social media networking. In May 2010 Saudi Arabia, along with Egypt and the UAE, introduced the first non-Latin URL, showing its willingness to introduce Arabic as a competitor of English language. For some researchers, this historical introduction will mean extended censorship. Between 2009 and 2010,

Arabic versions of Wordpress and Blogger have been launched but, again, some media experts say this introduction could lead to further censorship.⁵

Saudi Arabia, Women and Social Media censorship

Naomi Sakr argues that after the Saudi government signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women it took unprecedented steps to attract foreign investment in projects to provide jobs and services for the predominantly young and rapidly growing population. According to the Open Net initiative, despite the poor representation of women in Saudi media outlets, women are increasingly embracing the Internet, specifically the various platforms of Web 2.0.⁶

According to the blogger Americanbedu, the number of women bloggers is increasing in Saudi Arabia. According to my own research, English-language blogs are growing in number even though Arabic is still the language that is broadly used. As my research has shown so far, there is an increasingly related network of platforms that women bloggers use. Most of the bloggers are in fact linked to at least a Facebook page; almost all blogs so far analyzed have a Twitter account that is up to date (at least one message a week) and almost all blogs analyzed have RSS feeds as well as email subscriptions. This richness of platforms has been seen as a way for women to 'get in touch' with the external world.⁷ Is then the Internet a new democratic platform that really allows women to find their voice?

Many studies have looked at the way the Internet can be considered a new democratic platform, a new public sphere where actors that had no voice can finally find one (Mernissi 2004). Albrecht Heifheinz warns against such generalizations and looks at how Internet filtering can thwart any democratic potential the medium may have.

This research does not argue that the Internet is a medium for change or a new democratic sphere but that the Internet can be considered a mediator that allows an issue to be not only discussed but also public-ised⁸ and articulated in new ways.

Methodology

This analysis, which is part of an ongoing research on Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries, was carried out using several Web-based analytical tools that have helped to map and

5 <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/censorship/>

6 Open Net Initiative, Saudi Arabia report, August 2009, available at <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/saudi-arabia>

7 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1583420/Saudi-woman-killed-for-chatting-on-Facebook.html>

8 Marres N. (2005), *No issue, no public*, UvA (Amsterdam): WTMC and the faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam

examine the links between Saudi blogs and the way they articulate the concept of “women’s issues”.

The research began with the identification and content analysis of Saudi blogs written by women in or outside Saudi Arabia, in English and in Arabic, and has tried to analyze the issues they public-ise and the issue-language they use.

The research process was divided into four stages: 1. identifying a list of blogs and issues that are specific to women’s situations in Saudi Arabia; 2. seeing how women’s issues discussed in Saudi blogs are articulated on the Internet and the various networks they build with other actors; 3. identifying if and how the list of blogs is linked somehow to other actors, such as media outlets or international or regional organizations that discuss women’s issues; 4. finally, looking into the issues articulated and discussed in the blogs and in other platforms where “women’s issues” are displaced.

Research

The research started with drawing up a list of blogs analyzed and monitored since 2006. Attentive content analysis of the existing literature helped extract the main ‘issues’ which bring together women bloggers in Saudi Arabia. These ‘issues’ have become keywords, bases for a more extended Web-based research on the articulation of women’s issues in and about Saudi Arabia.

From the content analysis of this initial list of blogs other useful information has emerged. This has helped to either corroborate or deconstruct the issue list the research was building. Without assuming that all members of online groups or bloggers are activists, this research has nevertheless tried to see whether the initial list of blogs and Facebook pages could help answer the question: “What matters to Saudi women bloggers?”

This initial process of analysis and reading led to the extrapolation of an initial list of “issues” that concern women in Saudi Arabia and the initial list of blogs and issues became the starting point for empirical research based on multiple Web-based tools.

These tools helped determine if the blogs on the initial list were related and, if so, how. One of them helps the discovery of hyperlinks. In fact, from an initial list of URLs, this tool (Issue Crawler)⁹ searches the Net and expands the research. The results of this search are displayed on Map 1, which shows a complex network of specific URLs linked to each other.

9 The IssueCrawler is web network location and visualization software. It consists of crawlers, analysis engines and visualization modules. It is server-side software that crawls specified sites and captures the outlinks from the specified sites. Sites may be crawled and analyzed in three ways: co-link, snowball and inter-actor. On http://www.govcom.org/Issuecrawler_instructions.htm

The chart shows an intense cloud of blogs and websites, all linked to each other either bidirectionally or multidirectionally. Through a set of hyperlinks, Issue Crawler enriched the initial list of blogs and helped to show whether there was a network of actors that interact on the web.

The run can be divided into three main areas, which are called clusters. These clusters are organized around three main nodes: wordpress.com; brhom.net and saudijeans.org. It is also possible to see that many of the actors inserted initially are organized on the left-hand side of the map and are linked to each other and are further linked to the remaining clusters through entropymax.wordpress.com,¹⁰ which is a blog where the main social issues in Saudi Arabia are discussed, including general queries on work issues in Saudi Arabia, poverty and human rights. This blog – along with watar.wordpress.com - is the link between the three clusters.

The second cluster is organized around a few nodes. The main ones are nalfajr.com, asmaworld.com and brhom.net. In this second cluster it is possible to see a majority of Arabic blogs, some of them concerned with human rights and education but others in the form of personal diaries as in the case of [asmaworld](http://asmaworld.com). In this second cluster some peripheral actors appear, namely Hathoo.ws and noooooor.net, the first a spam and the second one a general blog. It is interesting to notice that from the analysis and from interviews with some bloggers, spam is common and quite difficult to avoid.

A third cluster is what could be defined as the “platform cluster”, built around wordpress.com and containing the various Web 2.0 platforms such as Twitter, Wordpress.TV, En.wordpress and software for English translation. I tried to put these URLs in the list of addresses to avoid but this resulted in the loss of almost all the blogs.

This run was made on 16 July, 2010, and a previous one showed a different map (Map 2, again visible on the pdf version of this article through the link at the bottom of the page). In fact, one reference was made to the MTV program *Saudi Arabia Without Make-up*, a reality program discussed in blogs and websites. But, as it is possible to see, that link no longer appears there. That shows that the links and the blogs have to be analyzed on a regular basis because many changes can happen in a very short period of time.

The second step focused on understanding if and how the initial list of blogs had any links with international organizations such as the United Nations (with its numerous agencies and programs) or Amnesty International and so on. From initial runs on Issue Crawler, it was more than clear that Saudi blogs and IGOs have few connections, apart from some single links to the UN.

The research moved on to analyze the main governmental and non-governmental organizations that are concerned with women’s issues. The initial intention was to find all those organizations that had Saudi Arabia as a subcategory or country of concern, but it has not been that easy. In order to collect a list of organizations exclusively concerned with women’s issues (this particular

10 Even if this blog is not active, it still receives links from other blogs.

research has excluded AIDS, HIV and prostitution as relevant key words) the starting point has been the UN website and related pages. This stage of the research has shown that only a few international organizations have Saudi Arabia listed as a country where women's issues have to be flagged. Nevertheless, an initial list of organizations has been put together and a content analysis of articles and petitions related to Saudi Arabia has been undertaken. It has been found out that most of the articles/petitions related to the year 2007/2008. Given such thin coverage of 'women's issues in Saudi Arabia' the research was restricted to the few organizations that had at least four or five articles related to either Saudi women or Saudi women's rights.

After this search and skimming through international actors, the research entered a new stage, trying to identify if and how the concept of 'women's issues in Saudi Arabia' is discussed in similar ways in Saudi blogs and in international platforms. Since the dominant language of the international organizations is English, the research has been limited to English-written blogs and the English list of issues put together through literature and blog content analysis. The results are shown in the chart below (Chart 1):

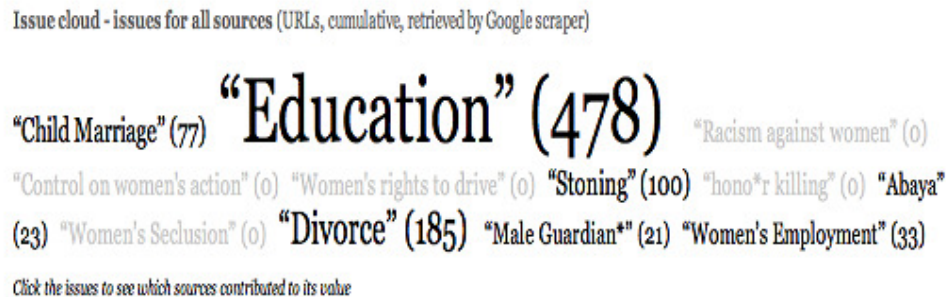


Chart 1 - issue chart based on material on the platforms of international organizations

As it is possible to see, the main issues for international organizations seem to be education, divorce, stoning and child marriage. Little attention is given to issues such as male guardian, the abaya (the obligatory head covering for women) or women's employment.

I have then undertaken the same analysis for the list of Saudi blogs in English, excluding those bloggers based outside the country (although some of those have made a significant contribution to the discussion of women's issues in Saudi Arabia.

Issue cloud - issues for all sources (URLs, cumulative, retrieved by Google scraper)

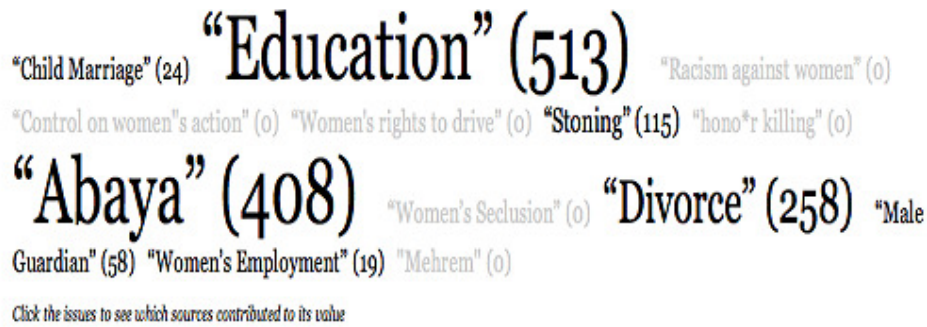


Chart 2 - issue chart based on material in Saudi blogs

As it is possible to see, education is confirmed as the main issue of discussion but some others are much more prominent than in the previous chart. "Male Guardian" (together with "Male Guardianship") is mentioned 58 times in six of the 10 blogs considered. Similarly, stoning appears to be more relevant than in the IGO list of issues. The biggest contrast is in the "abaya" issue, which is mentioned 408 times in seven of the 10 blogs, against 23 times in the International Organisations issue chart.

What does that say?

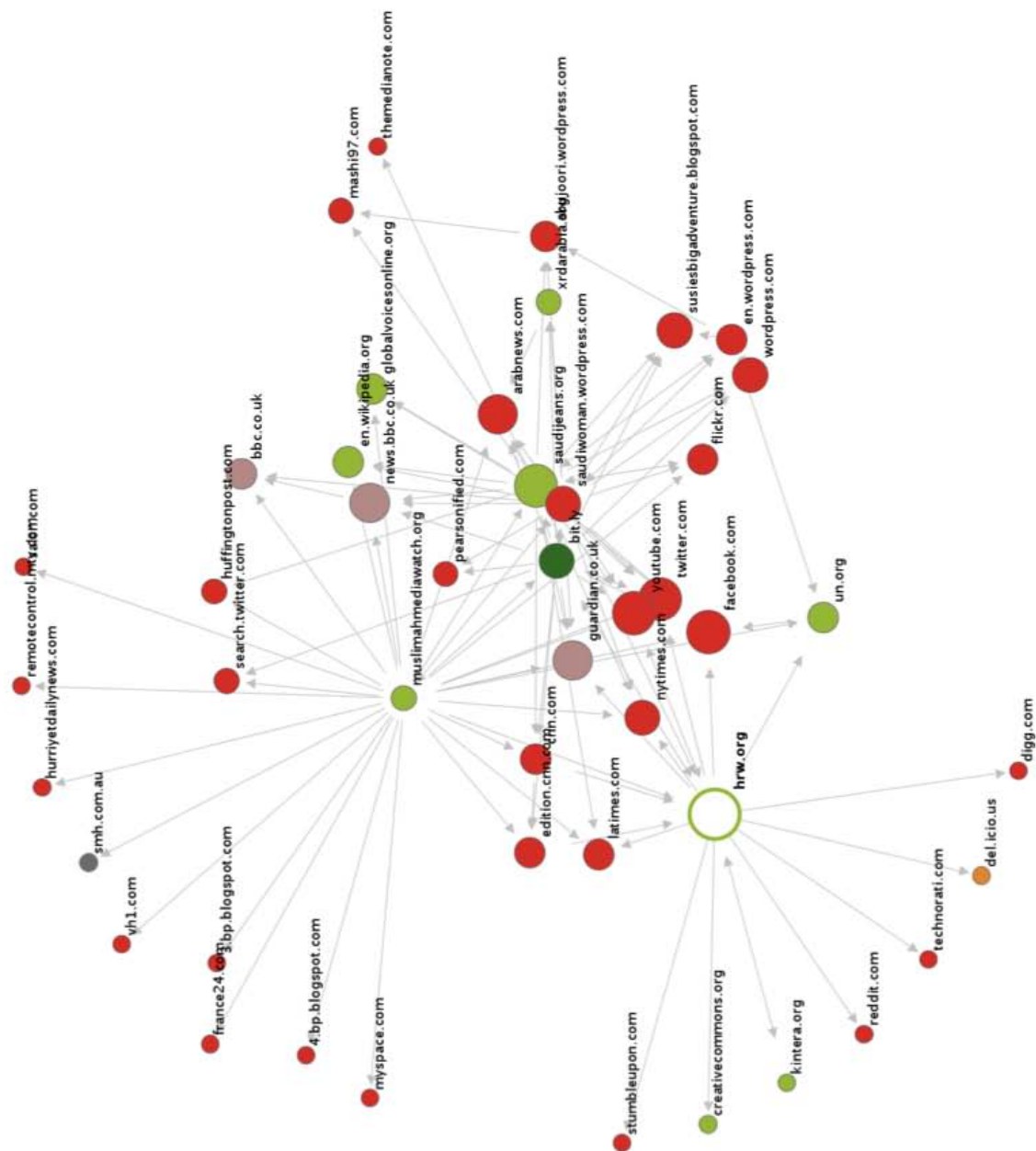
Clearly the issues discussed on the Web by Saudi women living in Saudi Arabia are articulated differently and are not mirrored in international organizations.

Is it therefore possible to talk about a different articulation of women's issues in global vs local contexts? The research itself tries to avoid any opposition along the lines of Local vs Global and Essentialism vs Universalism but the charts clearly show that women's issues are articulated quite differently in the two places analyzed (International Organizations and Saudi blogs): more 'generalized' in the case of international organizations and with more specificity in the case of Saudi blogs.

From a content analysis of the issues the research has also shown that even though certain issues such as education are discussed both on International Organizations' sites and in Saudi blogs, the same issue is articulated differently. In particular, education on International Organizations' sites is never related to Saudi-specific issues such as segregation in schools, video-lessons and access to university. This surely requires more investigation but it is interesting to see how it is not only the concept of "women's issues" that is differently articulated in two different cyber places; issues such as education can also be articulated in completely different ways in different places. This supports the idea of a 'displacement' of issues on the Web.

These results led to the third step of the research, which has looked more specifically at the possible relationships between Saudi blogs and women's organizations (IGOs and NGOs that cover women's issues) that are focused on the Middle East (Map 2).

The initial list of blogs in English and Arabic has therefore been enriched by a short list of NGOs that discuss women's issues in the Arabic world and, more specifically, in Saudi Arabia. At this stage of my research I have not only included general URLs (e.g. www.hrw.org for Human Rights Watch) but also specific pages, mainly trying to focus as much as possible on Saudi women's issues, in order to understand if and how Saudi women's blogs are interlinked to international or regional organizations. It is important to note that the language issue is not relevant in Issue Crawler. Issue Crawler can recognize 16 languages, including Arabic, so it is of little relevance if the starting point is in Arabic or in English.



Map 2 KSA Blogs-International Organizations.

Analysis of the relationship between blogs in and about Saudi Arabia and International Organizations

This run has shown quite surprising results. Firstly, it is possible to see that the chart can be divided into three main clusters, each with one main node. The first cluster can be identified around the NGO “Human Rights Watch”. The site www.hrw.org receives 2,358 links, making it the main point of reference for blogs, news outlets and other organizations. A second cluster is aggregated around the Saudi blog www.saudijeans.org, which looks not only at women’s issues in the kingdom but also at life in Saudi Arabia in general, discussing the hot topics difficult to discuss in real life. This second actor (which is technically defined as a node) receives 3,395 links, mainly from Saudi actors, whether blogs or news media outlets. A third node can be identified around the Muslim women’s blog www.muslimahmediawatch, which largely discusses women’s representation in media, media issues in Muslim countries and women’s rights related to new media of communication. This third node receives 1,513 links from Saudi blogs and news outlets; it also links to several non-Saudi media outlets but does not receive any link back, suggesting that non-Saudi actors do not recognize it in the role of actor.

Secondly, it is possible to see that there are certain peripheral actors, mainly brought to the scene by Muslimahmediawatch and hrw.org. These peripheral actors are Hürriyet Daily News (Turkey), Remote Control MTV (USA, a particular link to women’s rights in Saudi Arabia), many social media platforms (such as Twitter, Facebook, Stumbleupon, myspace, the main sort of archives where women’s issues can be found) and, surprisingly, the United Nations Web site, www.un.org.

Thirdly, it is important to remember that this Issue Crawler run aimed to look into any potential relationship between Saudi women’s blogs and NGOs/IGOs but resulted in an interesting map of the relationship between Saudi women’s blogs (in Arabic and English) and Saudi and non-Saudi news media outlets online.

Another important point to make relates to the platforms that have been used. Looking into the results, it is clear that most of the platforms used by bloggers (including Saudijeans and Muslimahmediawatch, which is a women's association conceived by women for women) are Wordpress and Blogger; moreover, many of the links inside the blogs have shown that all these interactions take place on platforms such as DIGGit, Stumbleupon, blogging platforms and RSS feeds – along with newsletters.

Given these results, the research then focused only on those regional NGOs dedicated to Muslim women’s issues and tried to see if and how they are linked to the blogs.

The hyperlink analysis has shown that there is a deep relation between Saudi blogs and Saudi NGOs. In this map (Map) it is possible to see that there is a homogeneous disposition of blogs and NGOs.

The map shows a triangular shape where two of the corners are Saudijeans and Human Rights Watch.

They are the two actors that receive most links. The third corner is the blogger Saudiwoman, which receives links mainly from blogs but also from hrfsaudi Arabia, the Web site of the NGO Human Rights First Society.

This map shows that there is a relationship between local NGOs (those that could be defined as grass-roots or small) and Saudi blogs. Even content analysis has shown that 'women's issues in Saudi Arabia' are discussed in very similar tones and in the same language, showing a high affinity in issue articulation.

The last step of the research focused on the issues and on an overall understanding of what bloggers and NGOs dedicated to Arab women discuss on the Web. The initial list of blogs and the initial list of issues, put together through literature, blogs analysis and interviews, has been enriched through Web search and the Web-based tools that have allowed the discovery of new blogs, regional and Saudi-focused NGOs (in English and Arabic). The new enriched list of blogs and issues has been put together, compared and analyzed to see if 'women's issues in Saudi Arabia' are articulated in a similar way. Results are shown below



Chart 3 - based on material posted by regional NGOs interested in women's issues

This chart shows that regional NGOs dedicated to Muslim women have far more in common with the bloggers than with international organizations. As it is possible to see, education, divorce and segregation are the main issues discussed in both blogs and NGOs, in Arabic and in English. This shows a certain affinity that corroborates the reliability of the English blogs.

Conclusion

Through this research it is possible to say that there is a vibrant but subdued community of bloggers in Saudi Arabia. Almost all of them write on social platforms such as Blogspot and Wordpress. Many of their hosts are registered outside the kingdom and use servers located

outside the country too. These are all elements that need further explanation and research but they have so far shown that there are people discussing the kingdom and its rhetoric on the Web.

For almost three years it has been possible to observe the growth of a blogging community in Saudi Arabia that openly discusses women's issues, including issues which challenge religious norms. This is not to say that the Internet is a democratic place where Saudi women can express their thoughts and find their voices but it cannot be denied that bloggers (women activists hardly exist in Saudi Arabia but there is a young generation of opinionated women and men, all of them highly educated) are voicing 'women's issues' in Saudi Arabia and contributing to the set of information available on the Internet. There is a rich set of links between news media outlets and blogs, not only in Saudi Arabia, where censorship of content is strict, but also outside the country. This means that the concept of 'women's issues' is being rearticulated in new platforms in a way that does not necessarily mean new democratic action or significant shifts in policy making.

Another observation that can be made relates to the relationship between 'women's issues' as seen by international organizations on the one hand and as seen by bloggers and regional NGOs on the other. It seems that international organizations articulate 'women's issues' more broadly and generally, in order to be representative of many conditions and situations. After close analysis of the international organizations that have 'women's empowerment' and 'women's issues' as a subcategory, I noticed that there is little or no mention of Saudi Arabia as a country (only in two of the 10 International Organizations taken into consideration does Saudi Arabia appear in the list of countries covered). Certain practices such as child marriage (which is present in the IOs' list of issues) does not seem to have Saudi Arabia as a target country when, as showed, Arabic and English bloggers and Middle Eastern NGOs do consider it an issue for the country, along with segregation of the sexes and the right to drive. This divergence could be further investigated.