

Social and Digital Transformation of the Saudi Education System: A Cyberconflict Analysis

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Abstract

The Saudi government considers the modernisation of the education system as a critical component of the national development plan, Saudi Vision 2030; however, this sudden reform creates tension amongst Saudis. This study examines first, the reflection of the social and digital education reform on stakeholders and the general Saudi public, and second, the influence of ICTs on the ethnoreligious conflict in Saudi Arabia. This study employs Cyberconflict theory to examine conflicts in the real world and cyberspace. The findings are based on a qualitative case study methodology that uses netnography, an analysis of 3,750 Twitter posts and semi-structural interviews with 30 individuals, including key actors in the Saudi education sector and Twitter activists during 2019\2020. The methods utilised are guided by thematic analysis to map an understanding of factors that influence societal conflicts in Saudi Arabia, which in this case include religious, national, and gender identity. Elements of Cyberconflict theory are used to better understand how conflicting groups build their identities in connection to their ethnic/religious/cultural differences and competing national identities. The findings correspond to the ethnoreligious components of the Cyberconflict theory. Twitter became a battleground for liberals, conservatives, the Saudi public and elites, and it is used in a novel way to influence public opinion and to challenge the media monopoly. Opposing groups relied heavily on a discourse of exclusion and inclusion, and show ethnic and religious affiliations, national identity, and chauvinism. The findings add to existing knowledge in the cyberconflict field of study, and they also reveal outcomes that are critical to the Saudi Arabian national context.

Keywords: Education; Identity; Cyberconflict; Ethnoreligious conflict; Twitter.