Impact of Internet Usage in Saudi Arabia: A Social Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Internet in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was introduced in the late 1990s. Being relatively new, its effects and impact on Saudi society are still in their infancy. A survey-based study was conducted to measure these effects, monitor their influence, project possible long-term developments, and define early measures that would best harness this new technology. Covering a span of two years, this study also identifies and documents any noticeable shifts in perspectives. This work presents the findings and observations drawn from this study and is based on the direct interpretation and cross-analysis of survey responses.

Keywords: computers and society; internet usage; Saudi Arabia; social issues of IT; social perspective

INTRODUCTION

Society and social systems can be defined as non-physical entities designed and constructed around man’s inherent need to live and thrive within a non-isolated environment. We call it ‘non-physical’ in the sense that a society cannot be seen, heard or touched but it exists as a complex mechanism that presides over human behavior and inter-communication. Social systems are also characterized by their internal dynamics, which drive a definite though unsteady pace of change. There are numerous factors that comprise these dynamics; some of them being impact-oriented injecting sudden change in society, while others have a slow and steady influence, literally bringing about a social evolution over time.

Among these factors, modern technology developments and progress play a very significant role primarily by widening the arena of interaction, bringing different distinct societies and cultures into direct or indirect contact,
each influencing the other. In essence, social systems are based on human interaction and communication; consequently, the technologies that alter these very basic elements also have the greatest potential to influence social evolution. As such, the Internet as an unprecedented communication technology has opened wide channels of interaction and information flow and hence, is very much a social phenomena. This article views the Internet from the perspective of cultural anthropology, wherein its influence on interaction within defined communities and between social groups is examined. The focus is regional where the influence of the Internet as an unmediated medium of expression, information, and leisure, and its impact on a strongly conservative Saudi society is documented. The purpose is not to pass judgment on the overall consequence of the Internet as to its positive or negative influence, but to describe its effects in ways that add to our understanding of society and our ability to predict and influence change.

The Internet can change individual behavioral and societal perspectives, often through provision of alternate means of social interaction. Given the immediacy of the medium, and the existence of virtually every conceivable interest group on the net, online addiction or overuse is of significant concern to an individual’s mental and social health. Further, unmediated exposure to objectionable content, can have a corrupting influence on morality and spirituality. These changes, both positive and negative, when considered from a macro-perspective taking into consideration the outward-ripple effect, easily move beyond the individual into the more wider and variant domain of society.

The following section presents the reviewed literature and documents similar studies carried out elsewhere. Their approach and results give insight into possible outcomes and trends, and whether these are specific to the regional context or can be considered generic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Internet has a profound effect on individuals and entire societies with its vast influence unrivaled by any technological achievement of the past century. Unfortunately, this impressive feature holds true for both its positive and negative effects wherein instead of a strong social bond, the Internet can catalyze undesired shifts in cultural norms, leading away from responsible and healthy social dynamism. As to an outright conviction about the Internet being a boon or bane to society at large, the topic remains highly controversial.

There have been numerous independent studies that have tracked the growth of Internet access world-wide since its inception in the late sixties. These provide a valuable insight into Internet diffusion patterns across highly varying economical, sociocultural and political contexts. In 1997, a paper by Larry Press documented numerous bodies and institutions that were responsible for tracking and reporting on Internet access from the perspectives of infrastructure, social influence, and traffic density (Press, 1997). The same year, another extensive study on Internet growth patterns specifically in developing countries suggested towards common diffusion patterns (Bazar & Boalch, 1997). According to the authors, the premier users of Internet technologies are usually researchers and academics, from where it permeates among the population at large. However, the growth of Internet use has been fastest where there is a profit-driven initiative, such as the emergence of commercial ISP’s. The paper investigated the components required for Internet roll-out and use, and proposed a model illustrating the process of diffusion and the main factors influencing it.

A seminal study by the prominent MOSAIC group proposed a framework to effectively assess the extent and quality of Internet use and its underlying communication infrastructure within a country (Goodman et al., 1998). The framework characterized six dimensions to Internet diffusion - pervasiveness, geographic dispersion, sectoral absorption, connectivity infrastructure, organizational infrastructure, and sophistication of use. Four ordinal values were defined along each dimension, ranging from the value ‘zero’ (non-existent) to value

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