

Good Tidings for Saudi Women? Techno-Orientalism, Gender, and Saudi Politics in Global Media Discourse

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Abstract

Gender equality in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is still a contentious and hotly debated issue, both within the country and in global news media as well as social media. Not least has the government app “Absher” drawn attention and criticism, due to features that allow male guardians to track their female dependants, issue or withdraw travel permits, and file for divorce at the click of a button. This study aims to explore the campaigns and debates around the app, and how it has been represented in global media. Focusing mainly on social media campaigning by journalists, activists, as well as the Saudi government, I hope to shed light on the different sides of the debate, and what the representation of Saudi Vision 2030, the reforms and the app, particularly in European and American media discourse, tell us about popular imaginations of Islam, technology, and gender.

Keywords

Saudi Arabia; Absher; gender; Islam; orientalism; technology

Introduction

In January 2019, an 18-year-old Saudi girl, Rahaf Mohammed al-Qanun, fled from her family and barricaded herself in a hotel room in Thailand while appealing for asylum through Twitter. In April of the same year, two Saudi sisters, Wafa and Maha al-Subaie, used their father's phone to grant themselves travel permits, fled to Georgia and soon relocated to an unnamed third country. These stories, and many more, have been widely shared and reported on in English-language media, and attracted a lot of attention on social media. Interestingly, the increased media reports on Saudi women fleeing the country come after several reforms in the area of gender equality, such as women getting the right to vote, and to drive. Saudi Arabia has long been portrayed in media as the epitome of a patriarchal society, oppressive against women and gender minorities, yet when changes are happening, global media outlets often seem uncertain about how to deal with it.

Reports on gender reforms in Saudi Arabia have since 2019 often centred on the smartphone app *Absher*, which was developed by the Ministry of Interior and launched in 2015. This app can be used to renew personal documents, such as passports and driving licenses, but also to file for divorce and to grant and revoke travel permits. The app can also give notification to guardians when a female dependant is using their passport, which has led to it being referred to as a “woman-tracking app” (Leung 2019). However, some argue that this is a misrepresentation and that the app has in fact increased women's mobility by making it easier to obtain travel permits.¹ Previously, the male guardian would have to physically go to a government office, stand in line, and fill out forms in order to get a travel permit for their female dependant, whereas now they are able to do so just through their phone. The guardian system is still in place—although since the summer of 2019 the laws have been relaxed—whether or not one chooses to use the app.

¹ Interestingly, since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Saudi state has introduced a new app, *Tawakkalna*, developed by the Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority (SDAIA), which does track its users and is mandatory for all Saudi residents. This app has not received widespread attention in English-language media to the same extent as Absher.

This presents a row of issues to unpack. First and foremost, what the gendered implications of Absher actually are? Is there any truth in the argument of the Saudi government and some feminist activists, that the app increases women's mobility by making it easier to obtain travel permits, or is it in fact a "woman-tracking app" that maintains the controversial Saudi guardian system more than it helps Saudi women? Furthermore, what are the assumptions about women's rights in Saudi Arabia underlying this debate? More to the point, what does this debate reveal about how the intersection of religion, gender, and technology is treated in global media? Obviously, all these questions cannot be conclusively answered, but they provide an overview of the areas in which this article makes a contribution. I hope to shed light on the media debates surrounding recent developments relating to women's rights in Saudi Arabia, both within the kingdom and in transnational and international, English-language news media and social media, and explore in-depth the discourse, underlying assumptions, and implications of these debates. I do this by employing the mixed media studies method and digital ethnography, following and tracing the debates over time. As such, I aim to make an intervention in several disciplines and research fields, drawing from and engaging with media and communication studies, Middle Eastern studies, gender studies, science and technology studies (STS), as well as feminist technoscience.

Material and method

This article uses media material, both online news media and social media, as well as government statements and press releases. This includes both text-based media and visual media, for example, video clips, recorded statements, still images, and infographics. These have been identified through a close following of related hashtags, the pro-Absher campaign launched by Saudi authorities ("I support Absher"), and key Twitter users, including official Saudi government accounts and national, regional, and international media outlets. As such, the methodological approach taken is grounded in media studies, and mixes different analytical tools, mainly rhetorical criticism, semiotics,

and critical discourse analysis, in order to produce new knowledge about the way international media flows impact and are impacted by debates surrounding the representation of gender and technology in the Islamicate world, with particular emphasis in this study on Saudi Arabia. The tools and methods used have been chosen based on previous experience of how well they work with the material that is used in this study (cf. Abdelmoez 2018; 2017). The mixing of different methods and approaches is done both to better handle the different forms of media—for example, a semiotic approach may be better suited for the analysis of images, while rhetorical criticism works better with written or recorded statements—and to ensure well-roundedness and analytical accuracy. By combining and moving between these different methods, this study aims to show different potential explanations and interpretations of the same events and debates which in itself relates to the argument that the framing of events is tied up with ideology and power.

Rhetorical criticism

Apart from forming some of the theoretical positions for this study—such as the focus of the ideological–political purposes of the rhetor, that is, whether the Saudi government’s claimed concern for women’s rights can be considered genuine, and to what extent the intent matters—rhetorical criticism is, more importantly, a method. In this study, the method is drawn from the models of rhetorical analysis as delineated by Mral (2008), Foss (2004), and Pierce (2003), synthesized in order to form a methodology specifically suited for the material at hand, and best suited to answer the research questions. Foss (2004) distinguishes rhetorical criticism from classical rhetorical analysis in that it places systematic analysis as the act of criticism and understanding rhetorical processes as the purpose of that criticism. This research method is multi-layered and focuses on uncovering the purpose of the rhetoric, identifying the intended recipients, and exploring the context of the message. “Rhetoric” is understood broadly, enabling it to be applied beyond the scope of traditional rhetorical analysis, not only covering overtly political texts but also texts seemingly free from ideology, such

as social media posts, infographics, and press releases—of course, “seemingly” is a key word, as one could argue that no text is entirely free from ideology, especially from the perspective of rhetorical criticism.

Semiotics

Semiotic method can mean many things and could sometimes be considered a point of view more than a particular method (Gaines 2010). Therefore, in order to have a workable and applicable method for analysis, Chandler (2014) has developed a structured DIY that is used in this article. This involves an initial analysis of the surroundings, to identify the text (medium, genre, context, etc.) and one’s own purposes in analyzing this text (reflexivity), before looking at the signifiers and what they signify. This is then followed by questions such as “What reality claims are made by the text?” and “To whom might it appear realistic?” aimed at understanding the modality and constructions of reality. Next, Chandler (2014) recommends looking at the semiotic codes; the means by which a sign can be understood in a specific way, that is, the conventions of communication. This involves finding what codes are common and which are unique, an important aspect to distinguish the medium from other media. This part of the analysis also includes asking which codes are absent, since meaning is not only what is being expressed, but also what is not. As such, it is also important to look at other texts, or intertextuality, as well as the possible textual alternations. An important aspect in this regard is the paradigmatic analysis. “Paradigms” refer to the connotations that underlie the explicit content of texts (Chandler 2014). In other words, a paradigm is a set of signs that can be chosen, thus changing the meaning of the text. For example, different words can convey similar meaning, but which word is chosen in a certain context may alter how the message is perceived. Related is what in semiotic terms is called the syntagm, which is the structure of the texts, such as how signifiers relate to each other and form hierarchies of meanings. Similarly, intertextuality refers to the text’s relation to other texts. This is important since the texts do not

exist in a vacuum and do not only connect the writer with the reader, but also the text itself with other texts.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

Discourse can be defined in a number of different ways, but the perhaps most common definition comes from Foucault (1980), who views discourse as regulated institutions of knowledge. Foucault views language as formative—it forms and constitutes the way we think about things—which means that there is an aspect of power, as control can be affected through language, not least in the establishment of “knowledge.” Therefore, discourse is the institution through which such “knowledge” is established. Language usage constructs the reality that we are speaking of, and the way that we agree to speak of a certain thing—although not necessarily consciously—can be called “discourse.” Discourse contains everything that is said about a certain topic, and sets the limits of what *can* be said, although this changes over time. This is emphasized by Habermas, who defines discourse as sociopolitical validity claims, that is, statements and explanations that are considered *valid* in a certain context. What is considered valid, according to Habermas, are those statements which the audience can believe has good reason to be factual, even if they are not entirely convinced of it (cf. Habermas 1998).

Fairclough (1992) delineates a model of conducting discourse analysis which includes three levels: text, discursive practice, and social practice. The textual analysis means studying at the micro level, looking at the speech act itself, its structure, word choices, metaphors, et cetera. The social practice entails the context in which the text occurs, that is, the macro level, as well as the norms, ideals, and power structures the text relates to, and the way the text is positioned towards other texts and authors. While Fairclough argues that all levels need to be considered, he emphasizes the discursive level. This means studying the production, consumption, and distribution of the text, in order to uncover the processes and ideological forces that shape the text and the impact it

enacts on society. This often includes reception studies and ethnography, exploring audiences' consumption of texts through interviews and participant observations, but may also focus on the engagement of the text through other texts, what others are writing and sharing about the text in question, such as through social media posts (which is the main form of engagement explored in this study). More importantly, however, the analysis should try to uncover the factors that are influencing the production of the text, such as the political or ideological underpinnings, and the sociopolitical implications of the text; what effects are enacted or reproduced by the text, what are the ideologies that it engages with, challenges, or resists? These questions are what make the analysis "critical" and are also emphasized by Teun A. van Dijk who writes:

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality. (van Dijk 2001, 352)

Discourse analysis is often accused of being biased or politically motivated, which stems from the fact that discourse analysts emphasize their positionality and challenge the view of knowledge production as a neutral or objective practice. Knowledge is seen as situated, and thus deeply tied with social structures and power relations.

As previously mentioned, the method utilized in this study is inspired mainly by the three-levelled model of Fairclough (1992), but further inspiration is also taken from Fairclough and Wodak (1997), as well as van Dijk (2001), who focus on explaining discursive structures and its relation to social issues rather than describing them. As such, van Dijk argues that critical discourse analysts need to consider the patterns of access to public discourse; not just what is being said and whose voices are heard, but who is excluded from participation.

The Absher application

Absher, which means “good tidings,” is an application launched in 2015 by the Saudi Ministry of Interior, available through the Apple App Store and Google Play Store. As of March 2022, Absher has more than 23 million users, which is about 66 percent of the population. The main function of Absher is to make government services digitally accessible, making it possible to request and download government documents, renew personal documents such as passports and driver’s licenses, and apply for permits—such as the permit needed to perform Hajj. However, it was not until January 2019 that the app was given widespread attention outside of Saudi Arabia. The attention focused on certain features and services, mainly the possibility to add the names and passport numbers of dependants in order to grant and revoke travel permits, decide how many journeys they may take, and for how long they are allowed to travel. Another feature that has gained attention is the possibility to file for divorce, which will send a text message to the wife informing her of her new civil status (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Screenshot of a now deleted tweet by the Saudi Ministry of Justice (@MojKsa_EN).

Many people, including Oregon senator Ron Wyden, called for Apple and Google to remove Absher from their app stores. In a letter addressed to Apple CEO Tim Cook and Google CEO Sundar Pichai, Wyden wrote:

It is hardly news that the Saudi monarchy seeks to restrict and repress Saudi women, but American companies should not enable or facilitate the Saudi government's patriarchy. By permitting the app in your respective stores, your companies are making it easier for Saudi men to control their family members from the convenience of their smartphones and restrict their movement. This flies in the face of the type of society you both claim to support and defend. (Wyden 2019)

Fourteen members of the United States Congress, all from the Democratic Party, also signed a letter with the same demand, and Republican senator of Florida, Marco Rubio, criticized Google for keeping the app in the store, calling it "grotesque" (Rubio 2019). International NGOs such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch have also called on American companies to investigate the issue and potentially take down the app. Google pledged to look into it but later announced that they did not find the app to be in violation of their terms and conditions, and therefore would not remove it (Bostock 2019a).

After the backlash against Absher, Saudi Arabia launched a social media campaign to gather support for the app, which included taking down several of the tweets and infographics that had been criticized (such as the one about divorce notifications via text message), and starting a campaign under the hashtags "#i_support_ABSHER" and the Arabic equivalent. They also started posting new infographics, emphasizing the aspect that they wished Absher to be associated with, such as how it may help the elderly, disabled people, or those who otherwise have difficulty physically going to a government office (see Figure 2). Another image that became widely shared shows a large crowd waiting outside a government office, comparing the experience with using your phone for the same errands.



Figure 2: Infographic shared on the official Absher Twitter account (@Absher 2019).

Nonetheless, many people have continued to criticize the Saudi government and the application, as well as criticizing Apple and Google for keeping the app in their respective stores. One of the most ardent critics has been Bill Bostock, a news reporter for Business Insider, and he was also one of the first to break the story about Absher (Bostock 2019b). He has accused the supporters of faking positive reviews and stated that many of the Twitter accounts that shared the pro-Absher hashtag were in fact Twitter bots, that is, software programmed to perform tasks such as tweet and re-tweet supportive messages about Absher.

One tweet that went viral, from an account under the handle @farooi, was a linked YouTube video of a man defending Absher, pointing to the 160 different services it provides, and also accusing Senator Ron Wyden of being a man who hates Saudi Arabia.² This tweet and video were also quickly picked up by Bostock, who wrote a critical report about it in Business Insider, in which he criticizes the person in the video for not mentioning the features that are most controversial, mainly the ability to track and restrict dependants' travels (Bostock 2019c). In the article,

² See (including the video): @farooi, *Twitter* post, February 18, 2019, 1:57 p.m., <https://twitter.com/farooi/status/1097480161715458053>.

Bostock also brings up another viral video in support of Absher, showing a large crowd of Saudis rushing to a passport office (*jawazat*) as it opens, from before the launch of Absher.

Gender, discourse, and technology

Technofeminist scholars, such as Judy Wajcman, argue that the internet can function as a powerful tool for political mobilization and increased democratic participation for women, as well as an escape from the reduction and relegation of women to the corporeal and the private sphere. On this note, Wajcman (2004) writes:

This is highly subversive of the conventional definition of women as biologically determined and confined to the private sphere. The twin visions of bodily transcendence in cyberspace and easy engagement in the public realm of international politics are certainly seductive. (Wajcman 2004, 8)

However, an important aspect of Wajcman's analysis is that she refuses to treat technological advances as either utopic or dystopic, neither liberatory nor oppressive to women, but that it contains many possibilities, and it is the feminist politics in relation to the technologies that matter. This is what she calls *technofeminism*, which brings together the cyborg feminism of Haraway (1991) with a constructivist theory of technology, which "grounds it firmly in a thoroughgoing materialist approach to the social studies of technology" (Wajcman 2004, 74). This means paying attention to both the material and the social aspects of technology, as it is never purely one or the other. Technology and society are coproduced, and neither is ever a finished product but always changing and evolving. This also means that technology is situated historically and that it is shaped by social relations. With gender being such a pervasive aspect of social life, and with this perspective on techno-social development, Wajcman concludes that "technofeminism conceives of a mutually shaping relationship between gender and technology" (2004, 74). This is important to keep in mind when

considering the gendered impact of new technologies, such as the app Absher, particularly in relation to the perceived democratic impact of increased accessibility, government transparency, and the view that the internet is an egalitarian space.

Daubs (2017) argues that the internet is sometimes viewed as an egalitarian and equally available space, outside of the control of any particular group. If this was true, it would be a tool equally available for women to use for their political purposes and social needs. However, this view may be contested as the same power structures and hierarchies found in society at large are also designed into new information and communication technologies (ICTs). It is nevertheless true that technologies can be used in a multitude of ways; sometimes even ways that are antithetical to their purpose. While there may be aspects of a technology's design that inform how it is "meant" to be used—affordances in semiotic terms—there are few ways for a developer to entirely control the actual usage, particularly when it comes to ICTs and software, which are vulnerable to hacking. Shaw and Sender (2016) elaborate on this and offer a way for activists to turn technologies against themselves, by asking "how can hacking and resistance of heteronormative technologies offer alternative forms of engagement and experience?" (Shaw and Sender 2016, 2). When assessing the impact of Absher on gender politics and subjectivity, it is important to also consider the possibility of "subverting" the technology and using it against itself. Exploring the intersection of queer theory and technology is therefore useful in this regard.

Techno-Orientalism and Islam

European and American imaginations of Islam and the Middle East—particularly of the Arabian Peninsula and of the so-called *Wahhabi* form of Islam—are often marked by notions of social conservatism, tradition, and a general "backwardness." Such depictions, according to Said (1978), act to discursively construct "the Middle East," or "the Orient." In other words, they are not based on any material reality, but

are part of a political project to position the region in relation to Europe, or “the West.” In this dichotomized representation, Europe stands for knowledge, fine arts, technology, development, and the Middle East is its “Other.” It is depicted as a mysterious and exotic place, undeveloped, medieval, volatile, perhaps dangerous, and full of people who are not as progressed and enlightened as the Europeans. Perhaps most notable is the depiction of Middle Eastern life as deeply marked by Islam, and in turn, there is a connection made between religion and the perceived backwardness of society as a whole, that is, that Islam plays a key role in keeping the region from progressing.

The preconceived notion of religion being inherently incompatible with technological development and “modernness” is also noted by Lara Deeb in her ethnographic work on Shia Islam and modernity in Lebanon: “My guides always linked religion and modernization, almost as though responding to unstated accusations that the two were incompatible” (Deeb 2006, 170).

This popular imagination of Middle Eastern life creates an apparent paradox when combined with media reports of new and advanced technologies, particularly as used within a religious framework—such as the development of an app used for maintaining, aiding, and enforcing Islamic divorce laws (as applied in the Saudi context)—leading to what I call a “techno-Orientalist crisis” which highlights European and American anxieties over shifting cultural and economic powers. The term *Techno-Orientalism* was first defined by Morley and Robins (1995) but is perhaps mainly associated with the eponymously titled book by Roh, Niu, and Huang (2015), which begins by exploring the fictional character Dr. Fu Manchu, created by British author Sax Rohmer in the beginning of the 20th century:

A figure of unnatural, unknowable peril who must be kept from acquiring knowledge lest it be used against the Western subject, Dr. Fu Manchu is at once brilliant and technologically challenged. In one part of the serial, Dr. Fu Manchu plots to strengthen China

by kidnapping European engineers, suggesting the Orient's lack of technological prowess and desire for Western technology. Yet, in another, he is described as possessing "all the cruel cunning of the entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science, past and present." Both of the past and the future, his monstrous form captured Western ambivalences toward what it regarded as the mysterious power of the East, manifesting in strange contradictions. (Roh, Niu, and Huang 2015, 1)

In the above quote, the authors detail how the fictional character reveals the anxieties and fears that European powers at the time had about "the mysterious power of the East," which is strikingly similar to contemporary depictions of Saudi Arabia in English-language media. While Morley and Robins (1995), and Roh, Niu, and Huang (2015) focus mainly on East Asia, and define techno-Orientalism as the hypo- or hyper-technological depiction of Asia and Asians, there are similarities to be found in the depiction of West Asia and the Middle East, and the term is useful for the study at hand.

Of course, the popular depictions of Saudi Arabia differ in important ways from those of China, yet they still rely on similar Orientalist tropes of an illiberal, backwards state, which constitutes a threat to the Western world should they acquire technological advancements or cultural hegemony. News reports and opinion pieces about new technologies and implementations of new systems, such as China's "social credit system" (Dirnhuber 2019), or Saudi technologies used to regulate women's mobility (Bennet 2019), often portray them in an overtly Orwellian light; as belonging to a dystopic future, mixing technology with "outdated" social norms, much in similarity to the depiction of Dr. Fu Manchu. Techno-Orientalism, I would argue, is likely a driving force behind the way media reports and debates play out; it gives potency to anti-Muslim rhetoric by playing to commonly held beliefs about Islam's place in relation to technological development, and social and cultural values ascribed to Islam contra what is ascribed to Europe. In other words, reactions to Saudi reforms in English-language media may

be indicative of a view of Islam as essentially anti-technological.

On the intersection of Islam and cybertechnology, Varisco (2010, 100) notes that a “distinction can be made between ‘online religion’ which can radically alter traditional modes of being Muslim, and ‘religion online,’ which may be little more than archiving materials.” Here we may follow a similar line of argument as the technofeminists who write about the coproduction of technology and society, and see that Islam too is both shaped by, and itself shapes, technologies that Muslims use, not only for religious purposes but for all kinds of daily tasks. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are used to share videos and recordings of popular preachers, disseminate fatwas, and religious decrees, but also to connect with a global community—virtual spaces are created for Ramadan meetups, and social networking sites specifically catering to Muslim users gain in popularity. Some scholars have argued that these trends require a rethinking of the concept of *ummah* (cf. Mandaville 2013; Varisco 2010; Anderson 2003). Absher may stand as a proof for this intersection and the socio-technological coproduction of religion, as it is a prime example of how technology is both developed to fit with religious doctrine while at the same time itself transforming how certain religious practices, such as *ṭalāq*, are practiced.

Findings

After the announcement of some of the new services from Absher, available from January 2019, social media users and international media outlets alike picked up the story and a campaign to get Apple and Google to pull the app from their respective stores quickly grew. This was then met by campaigns in support of the app, mainly under the hashtags “#i_support_ABSHER” and its Arabic equivalent. However, some of these services, such as the possibility to file for divorce had been announced in the newspaper Saudi Gazette several months before the backlash came, on July 23, 2018 (Saudi Gazette 2018). This raises the question of why reports and criticism were not widespread until early 2019; BBC and Al-Jazeera picked up the story on January 6, and CNN and The Guardian on

January 7, and there were no Tweets on the issue, other than the original announcement from the Saudi Gazette, prior to January, 2019. The Saudi Gazette wrote about the decision again on January 2 (Al-Shabrawi 2019) but still it took several days before international media picked up the story. A likely explanation is that the Ministry of Justice tweeted a since-deleted infographic image (see Figure 1), informing about the feature, on January 6, which is what triggered a widespread response via Twitter and brought attention to the issue for international media outlets. However, the response has also coincided with increased media attention on the issue of women attempting to flee Saudi Arabia, which shows that there may have been a rhetorical opening that international media outlets took advantage of—or in Vatz’s (1973) view, media outlets created a rhetorical situation by relating the story to an existing narrative. In other words, as there was already an established discourse on women demanding mobility freedom, media outlets knew that reports that conform to this narrative would be of interest to their audiences and would likely get widely shared. This explanation is further evidenced by the fact that some of the services that have also been a target of critique, such as the possibility to grant and revoke travel permits, have been available for several years, and, in fact, occur in older news stories and opinion articles as an example of how women’s rights are improving in Saudi Arabia. For example, Rym Ghazal wrote in 2016:

If a Saudi woman wants to travel, it is quite easily arranged via Absher, an e-service from the interior ministry listed under “travel permits for dependents”. A few of my Saudi relatives and friends said that their male guardians even gave them the login and password so they could set it up themselves. One permit can last for more than 10 years. (Ghazal 2016, n.p.)

Another report about this Absher service was published in Arab News in August 2016, again presented as an improvement for women (Arab News 2016). As we can see, although the feature that allows Absher users to issue and revoke travel permits has been around for a long time, it was not until early 2019 that it became a topic of debate in English-

language media, and has previously been used as an example within an antithetical narrative to the one that proliferated in 2019—that is these stories have previously been examples of the improvement of women’s rights rather than symptoms of a gender-oppressive system.

When CNN reported on the service allowing women to receive text message notifications about changes in their marital status, they did initially present it as a solution to the issue that women could otherwise be left without knowing that they had been divorced (Altaher and Clarke 2019). However, the presenter also followed up the same story by saying that Saudi women have historically “faced a number of social barriers” and goes on to list a few topics of gender inequality in the country, such as gender segregation in certain public spaces and the modesty laws (requiring women to wear abayas). As such, by relating this story to other women’s rights issues, they avoid framing the service as an improvement of women’s rights. The takeaway from the report is that there are still many issues that are faced by Saudi women. Similarly, Al-Jazeera also began their report by briefly mentioning the stated intention of improving women’s lives through the service of text message notifications, but then went on to detail the critique against the Saudi government and the country’s guardianship system:

Campaigners said the main sticking point remained Saudi Arabia’s guardianship policy, whereby women must have permission from a male relative to work, travel, marry, and even get some medical treatment. “The male guardianship system is a core issue and it must be dismantled. It controls women in each and every step of their lives. This system strangles Saudi women,” said Abu-Dayyeh. (Al-Jazeera 2019)

This could be compared to the original announcement of the feature, published in the Saudi Gazette, in which they quote the Minister of Justice, Waleed Al-Samaani:

“To protect the rights of women and to ensure that their divorce deeds reach them without delay, we have launched the SMS service that

will notify the women of their marital status the moment the divorce is approved.” (Saudi Gazette 2018)

They go on to quote outrage on Twitter as a reasoning behind introducing this service:

Many people took to Twitter to vent their anger over numerous cases where women had no idea that they were divorced, a matter which had immensely affected their lives. One of the accounts stated that a woman found out that she was divorced more than 15 years later after the death of her husband. She had been living with him as husband and wife when he died. It was only when she went to the court to claim her inheritance she found out that her husband had divorced her more than a decade ago and that she had no right to inherit him. (Saudi Gazette 2018)

When the Saudi Gazette later published an article about the new service, penned by Adnan Al-Shabrawi, they again presented it as an improvement of women’s lives and women’s legal rights, beginning with a lede stating: “Women lawyers welcome new legal system taking effect next week” (Al-Shabrawi 2019). The same article ends by stating:

Other lawyers said several reforms introduced by the Ministry of Justice lately contributed greatly to ensure justice to women and protect their rights. The ministry and the Supreme Judicial Council worked together to resolve many issues facing women and to protect their rights through the judicial system. (Al-Shabrawi 2019)

Just as with the digitalization of travel permits, we are presented here with a rhetorical problem, relating to whether these services can be seen as practical improvements for Saudi women or not. To the Saudi government and state-aligned media, the story fits well with the reform-narrative of Vision 2030. However, in international media, it is mainly represented as symptomatic of the Saudi guardian system. The question is which of these “solutions” to the rhetorical problem wins

legitimacy, and by what means? One way of winning legitimacy is simply by dominating the media channels and, by doing so, controlling the narrative. As previously mentioned, the Saudi government narrative seemed to be relatively unchallenged up until January 2019, which meant that there was no need for any massive media campaigns. However, when international media picked up on the story and it became widely circulated on Twitter after the release of an infographic from the ministry of justice, the Saudi government was quick to launch their support campaign.

Sharing their thoughts mainly in English, likely due to the attention in English-language media, many Saudi-based Twitter users—whether real or bots—defended the app, stating it is being misrepresented, that it makes Saudi women’s lives easier, and that it helps those who have physical impairments or otherwise have difficulties accessing government services. Many of the same statements and arguments are repeated, and the same videos and infographics are shared by many people. This includes images such as the ones previously presented, but also videos depicting a large crowd of people storming the passport office (*Jawazat*) as it is opening its gate. Another widely shared video is an explanation of the app and its features, in English with Arabic subtitles, and accompanying animation. In this video, the narrator directly addresses the critique relating to women’s rights.³

Just as with many of the written tweets, the fact that this video is narrated in English, with an American accent and what I would call an “infomercial tone of voice,” shows that the intended audience for the video is not mainly Saudis. One may question why the Saudi government would bother convincing non-citizens about the nature of an app that they would never use anyway, although there are a few possibilities. For one thing, they want to keep the app available to their citizens and residents, meaning they need the US-based companies Apple and Google

³ The video can be seen here: Brdese, Hani (@Brdese). 2019. *Twitter* post, February 19. 7:51 p.m. <https://twitter.com/Brdese/status/1097931817137651714>.

to keep the app in their stores. If pressured enough by politicians, activists, and customers, they might be inclined to remove it. Secondly, they want to retain an image of Mohammad bin Salman as a reformer, which is an image that has been seriously tarnished—not least since the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi. This explanation falls in line with what Seib (2012) calls the “real-time diplomacy” of Twitter, that is, that the government has a direct channel to communicate with both politicians and ordinary citizens of other countries and engage in public diplomacy. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, is the country’s dependency on foreign investors to succeed in diversifying their economy and achieve the goal of decreasing dependency on oil. Important to note is that it is not necessary that the Saudi government succeeds in entirely dominating the media narrative—their “solution” to the rhetorical problem may be challenged and may not even be widely considered legitimate and true. All they need is for their narrative to be a possibility, to which the investors can point in case their business with the government is called into question. In other words, ambiguity and remaining in a state of liminality—always changing and reforming but never entirely reformed—may be beneficial to them.

It is important to consider the medium, in this case, a short informational video shared via Twitter. The video is likely produced, or at least commissioned, by the Saudi government, but it is not a statement or press release, which may tell us about the reach that they want. As they are aware that a lot of the backlash against Absher came from Twitter users, it is understandable that they would choose this platform for their response, and the video format likely reaches a different audience than those who would read press releases. Video is also a good medium because it is easy to fit in a lot of information in a short clip, while still retaining the interest of the “reader,” particularly when the video is accompanied by animations and animated infographics. It is also easily shared and attached to Tweets under the “I support Absher” hashtag.

Among the critics of the app is Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, Kenneth Roth, who has also called for Apple and Google to

pull the app from its stores. In a tweet from February 17, 2019, he described Absher as an app that allows men to control women. The tweet also includes a link to a longer article in Business Insider by Bill Bostock (2019d), which in turn is a response to a press release by the Saudi Press Agency (2019), stating that the “Ministry [of Interior] strongly condemns the systematic campaign aimed at questioning the purpose of (Abshar) services.” This press release was also shared by the Saudi Gazette, which further emphasized and endorsed the statement by adding that the “ministry reiterated its keenness to protect the interest of beneficiaries of its services from all the damage caused by such misinformation campaign” (Saudi Gazette 2019). Interesting in Roth’s critique of the app is that he says it “allows” men to control women, thereby placing impetus on the app itself rather than the guardianship laws. This logic follows the argument of Wajcman (2004) and others, that technology, society, and religious practice are coproduced, meaning that the app, rather than being just symptomatic of the guardianship system is actually part and parcel of its maintenance. One might argue that if the system remained as inefficient or impractical for Saudi citizens as many claims were the case before Absher, they would be more inclined to advocate for changing the system. By making it easier to obtain travel permits and conduct the government errands that are required by the guardianship laws, they are also making those laws more likely to remain in place. This means that the app and the system and regulations that it adheres to cannot be entirely separated, but must be understood as one and the same and that by supplying the app, Apple and Google are indeed complicit in maintaining the guardianship system. As such, opposing the app and advocating for it to be taken down could also be understood as opposing these laws, and it is possible that without the app the system would receive greater pushback.

While it is clear that the Saudi government has an interest in maintaining an image of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman as a reformer, it is also necessary to further consider the motivations, purpose, and ideological underpinnings of global media responses. If we take a rhetorical criticism approach, we ought to ask: what do international

media outlets try to convince their readers of? As previously mentioned, the reports surrounding Absher fit well with stories about women fleeing Saudi Arabia, and even when it is stated that services are meant to improve women's lives (such as in the reporting of CNN and Al-Jazeera on divorce notifications via text message) it is emphasized that Saudi Arabia is a heavily gender segregated and unequal country. This story can be pushed because the audience will be familiar with it and the media outlets know that it is likely to gain traction. However, ideologically and discursively there may be more to be found: through a Saidian, Orientalism-inspired analysis, this narrative of Saudi Arabia as the poster child of gender inequality is likely connected to a Euro-American project of constructing "the West." In this imagination, "the West" is seen as the pinnacle of liberty, liberalism, democracy, and so on, while Islam stands as its "other." Massad (2015) argues that far from being outside of the history of liberalism and European history, Islam is in fact "central to liberalism as ideology and as identity" (Massad 2015, 11), precisely by being placed as "other" against which it can be constituted. As Saudi Arabia is closely associated (connotatively) with Islam, these portrayals act to maintain an idea of Islam as something foreign and anti-Western; as contradictory to "Western" values, or as belonging outside of the sphere of Europe and America, which, paradoxically, makes it an important part of constituting it.

We may also consider Abu-Lughod's (2013) critique of Western liberal feminism, and the attempts by European and American organizations at "saving" Muslim women, thereby universalizing the Euro-American ideal of what feminism and women's rights mean. As such, when the reports on Absher, its services and features, and reforms associated with Saudi Vision 2030, exclude the voices of Saudi Muslim women, they are also perpetuating an idea of these issues as being dictated by European and American values and ideals, which in turn reproduce these values precisely as "Western."

One aspect of the digitalization of government services that is rarely mentioned, either in news articles or in social media posts, is the

potential of alternative usage. Although the app has been designed for a certain kind of usage, and many of its services are meant for a certain kind of user, there is always the possibility of hacking the app or using it in ways that are antithetical to its purpose, and it is virtually impossible for the developers of the app to be in total control of the way it is used. In an article answering questions about Absher, Human Rights Watch writes:

Some Saudi women contend that *Absher* is preferable to the old card-based system, because women can more easily and surreptitiously change travel permissions and halt text message alerts on their male guardian's phone than forge travel permission cards under the old system. (Human Rights Watch 2019)

This is also the reason why Human Rights Watch is not advocating for the removal of the app by Apple and Google, and in the same article they write:

Women's rights activists told Human Rights Watch that Absher's removal would directly harm Saudi women who have benefitted from the relative ease with which they or sympathetic family members can surreptitiously change their travel permissions without their male guardian's knowledge. (Human Rights Watch 2019)

This is perhaps the clearest acknowledgement of how the app can be used in beneficial ways by Saudi women. An example of this is the highly publicized case usually just referred to as "the Saudi sisters," in which Wafa and Maha al-Subaie used their father's phone to grant themselves travel permits so that they could flee to Georgia and later relocate to a third country. Interestingly, the Saudi sisters themselves are vocal in calling for Apple and Google to take down the app (Harman and Patin 2019). At the same time, they have opted not to disclose how they managed to use the app for their own benefit, as it could lead to male guardians protecting themselves against this, and that they need to help other women. As such, even though they advocate for the removal of the

app, they too acknowledge it may be used in ways that are beneficial to women who want to flee the country.

Conclusion

In this article, I have traced several different arguments and perspectives relating to gender politics and women's rights in Saudi Arabia, with particular emphasis on debates surrounding the application Absher and its impact on women's lives in the kingdom. These arguments have been analysed in relation to theories on the intersection of gender, technology, and religion, as well as critical theories of representation and subjectification. One of the main fault-lines between the different sides of the Absher-debate appears to be whether blame should be placed entirely on the app, entirely on the guardianship system, or some combination of both. However, most commentators in English-language media go the path of placing blame on both, either by directly stating that removing the app without changing the guardianship system will only have a negative effect on Saudi women or by using the app as a stand-in for the system. Theoretical debates from critical science and technology studies and debates about religion and technology may back these positions, in that if we view technologies such as Absher as being produced concurrently with (and inseparable from) social values, systems, and relations of power, we must also consider those technologies as part in the construction and maintenance of the same values, systems, and power relations. As such, focusing our critique on Absher may still be an effective strategy in changing the system itself, although pragmatically, removing the app itself is likely to have a negative impact in the short-term. Beyond the fact that Absher may have improved women's mobility by making it easier for guardians to provide travel permits, it has also made it easier for Saudi women to subvert or circumvent the system, such as by hacking or otherwise gaining access to their guardian's phone and granting themselves travel permits. This may work as another form of critique, wherein the system is used against itself, thus making it work for the women who wish to flee the country, rather than against them.

Regardless of the attitude towards Absher or the mode of critique employed, it is also evident that a lot of the articles, posts, and comments about the application suffer from a techno-Orientalist bias, based on a view of modern technology as not only incompatible with Islam, but indeed a dangerous combination. These writers employ dystopic, Orwellian imagery, and emphasize surveillance, tracking, control, and regulation, as the main functions of the technology, while simultaneously connecting these functions to religious (Islamic) doctrine, the effect of which is (inadvertently or not) giving credence to ideas of Islam as belonging outside of the Euro-American sphere, and as antithetical to liberal values that are ascribed to Europe. Reports and posts about Absher are tied into wider questions of gender politics and women's rights in Islam, the effect of which is a narrative that gives potency to anti-Muslim rhetoric by playing to and reaffirming commonly held beliefs about Islam's place in relation to technological development. As such, it is important that while it is valid to criticize Absher, and other technologies that uphold the Saudi guardianship system, we must remain aware of the politics of representation—what assumptions are we building our critique on, what norms or tropes are we reproducing in our critique, and what is the impact of this critique on the larger scale?

I have argued in this article that the global media representation of Saudi gender politics, as well as social media debates around these issues, is embedded in commonly held beliefs about Islam as essentially anti-technology, as well as stereotypes and presumptions about the place of gender politics in Islamic societies. This further extends to how Islam is viewed in relation to “Western” society, which is often constructed as both the pinnacle of liberal social norms and values, particularly regarding women's rights, as well as the height of technological development, which means that (1) Islam is presented as incompatible with Euro-American values, and (2) technological development may be dangerous without these values, or in combination with other values.

I conclude that it is of utmost importance to keep in mind the underlying ideological structures we are treading on when either critiquing or

promoting technologies such as Absher, and to remain aware of the implications of our work and the kind of politics we are emboldening or undermining in doing so. What may at first seem like a tool of oppression may very well be used as a means of liberation, just as what may seem like a critique of a misogynist, patriarchal system may become a tool for another kind of politics. It is still entirely possible to oppose and challenge such systems, without playing to Orientalist fears, as long as we remain aware of the pragmatics and the realities of the political, journalistic, and academic work that is conducted.

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