

# Virtual Space and the Rise of the Public Sphere: Social Media in the Sultanate of Oman

**Conference Paper**

**Author(s):**

Windecker, Gidon

**Publication date:**

2019-03

**Permanent link:**

<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000339875>

**Rights / license:**

[Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International](#)

# Virtual Space and the Rise of the Public Sphere: Social Media in the Sultanate of Oman

Gidon Windecker

## Abstract

Social media and its impact especially on the young generation has challenged political and social norms in the conservative Gulf monarchies. In the past, shaping news and initiating social innovation and civic participation were, to a great extent, controlled and determined by centralised governments and their affiliated media systems within a framework of rules and regulations. Social media, on the other hand, has crafted a new virtual space, where young people can create platforms to exchange ideas beyond the boundaries of the traditional patterns of physical space and conventional social interaction.

In the Sultanate of Oman, where ca. 70% of the 2.2 million citizens are under the age of 30, this new space led – at least temporarily – to an accelerated transformation of society, especially in the aftermath of the protest wave of 2011. Young Omanis used it to test the limits that the strict laws imposed on public space. In response, authorities tried to counter this development from within, both by expanding the legal framework to the online world, and by using the virtual space to spread their own normative discourse. Moreover, virtual interaction led to a transformation of social norms within the traditional space as well. Not only did the awareness of political developments and the call for more participation rights gain momentum, but also the citizens developed a new civic awareness, which transcended the traditional norms and values of their tribal society.

Based on Habermas' model of the "public sphere", this chapter examines how Omani citizens have used virtual and non-virtual public space to make their voices heard. It assesses to what extent social media has turned into a new platform of dialogue and debate by opening new channels of participation and creating new challenges to conventional social patterns. The analysis focuses on opportunities and limitations of how virtual space impacts life beyond the virtual sphere in a conservative society, and how it affects social patterns and the political awareness of the young generation.

## From public space to public sphere – reflections on societal development in a conservative state

Social media and the surrounding technological and legal regulations have emerged in an environment where a “public sphere” has been an essential pillar in the rise and development of democratic, liberal societies. According to Habermas’ concept of “Öffentlichkeit” (“the public”), this sphere describes the process of shaping a modern mass society, through politics, economics, and the mass media. This process, which Habermas traces back to the German, French and British bourgeoisie of the early modern era, is hence deeply embedded in the formation of society and democracy in Western Europe. In this regard, the notion of Citizenship (“bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit”) is an essential element, for the essence of democracy requires a solid public sphere, and this sphere can only evolve if public space is granted and public opinion can develop. Public opinion on the other hand “can only come into existence when a reasoning public is presupposed,” or in other words, if society is formed by responsible, conscious citizens.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the distinction between “public sphere” and “public space” is essential, for the former can only emerge within the latter, however it can never be taken for granted. For “the ultimate goal of the public sphere is public accord and decision making, although these goals may not necessarily routinely be achieved.”<sup>2</sup>

Based on this premise, the rise of the internet and subsequently of social media in Western societies can be seen as a continuation, as a shift – or extension – of the public sphere. New public space, “virtual” space, was created and added an additional dimension to the existing discourse. The potential of the internet to enhance democratic tendencies has hence been widely disputed. Whereas the utopian view sees online civic participation as a useful contribution to societal development, the dystopian view on the other hand largely dismisses this potential. It has been argued that especially in the context of post-industrial and postmodern societies, a diminishing interest in politics and public affairs contributes to a decline of the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, research suggests that the internet and social media are much more dominated by a “personal sphere” and a “professional sphere,” rather than by the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> And an even larger share goes to the mass culture of commercialism. Hence, the evolvement of an authentic public sphere 2.0 in the Habermasian sense might remain wishful thinking.

However, this development takes a different turn in the case of a conservative, tribal society in an absolute monarchy. Here, the concept of public space and decision-making is traditionally characterized by consultative meetings between the ruler and the tribal

<sup>1</sup> Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, (Berlin, Luchterland: 1971), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere 2.0: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Beyond,” in *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, ed. Andrew Chadwick and Philip Howard, (Abingdon-New York: Routledge, 2009), 233.

<sup>3</sup> Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere 2.0”, 240.

<sup>4</sup> Frenette and Vermette, “Young adults involvement in the public sphere: A comparative international study,” in *Public Sphere Reconsidered*, ed. João C. Correia and Rousiley C. Maia, (Covilhã: LabCom Books: 2011), 71.

leaders (“Shura”), who reflect public opinion. In modern Oman, this tradition is reflected in the Shura Council, or Consultative Assembly, which is the lower house of the Council of Oman. Its 84 members are directly elected by the Omani people. Moreover, the elected Municipal Council represents citizens and their needs on the local level. This tradition of an advisory council is based on the specific ‘Ibadi school of thought, which is prevalent in Oman.<sup>5</sup> A civil society-based public sphere, however, found its genesis only with the protest movement in 2011, when citizens started to voice their concerns beyond the existing traditional structures. Up to then, political participation and self-expression were rather limited. In this context, Habermas’ description of the public sphere as a mediator between state and society becomes all the more relevant. The public sphere, Habermas argues, becomes a “bearer of public opinion”, based on the notion of “public information which once had to be fought for against the arcane politics of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities”.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Habermas refers to the historical dimension of this transformation, the Gulf monarchies seem to offer contemporary ground to analyse this process. Western post-modern societies may contribute to a decline of the public sphere, however, in the case of Oman it can be argued that the society is on the rise, or at least it has been to an extent in the wake of the social protests. Whereas public sphere in this context was certainly not established solely on the grounds of social media, the virtual world played an integral role in shaping the emerging social sphere, simultaneously to the moment when Oman’s first modern political movement claimed public space for its transformative agenda. Whereas in Western societies, the public sphere was well-established before the rise of the internet, which in turn took place before the emergence of social media, all three steps occurred almost simultaneously in the Sultanate.

Papacharissi suggests that the three major indicators to measure the impact of the internet on political and social development are access to information, reciprocity of communication, and commercialisation of online space. It could be argued that these indicators also have their relevance when it comes to the more specific question of social media. Access to information thereby is not only limited to technical access, but it also refers to the question of quality and relevance. Is the phenomenon of social media a mere reflection of conventional public interaction and sources of information, or does virtual interaction offer a qualitative added value? Moreover, access can refer to an increased access and connection to political elites and an impact on decision-making. However, Papacharissi also raises the concern that social media can create a “sense of activity” which promotes the illusion of civic involvement, rather than actual societal engagement, since “access to information does not guarantee that information will be accessed.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, although freedom of information is an essential element of democratic development, mere access

<sup>5</sup> Al-Salmi, *Oman’s Basic Statute and Human Rights: Protections and Restrictions*, (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag: 2013), 47-49.

<sup>6</sup> Saleh, “The Emergence of the Omani Public Sphere,” unpublished paper submitted to Sussex University.

<sup>7</sup> Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, 351.

<sup>8</sup> Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere 2.0,” 233.

to information cannot be taken as an indicator.<sup>9</sup> Hence, reciprocity is the second factor to determine the impact of the internet on the public sphere. Online discussions can “reproduce and magnify cultural disparities” and can be fragmented and too specific. There is no doubt that Facebook and Twitter have filled a huge gap in making the internet more interactive – and thus reciprocal – by opening platforms of multidimensional interaction, which go far beyond the traditional online discussions limited to specific groups of individuals who usually knew each other offline. Lastly, it is the phenomenon of mass commercialisation which dominates the internet. Grown with capitalist roots, virtual space provides a new dimension of entertainment and commercialism, which has not spared the sphere of social media. This tendency, some scholars argue, has hindered civic engagement even more than it is the case in the offline world.<sup>10</sup>

In the Omani case, an additional, or rather overlapping, factor limiting the emergence of a public sphere has to be considered: access to information, reciprocity, and interaction in public space is controlled by the state. Public opinion is hence subdued not only to a strict legislation that limits freedom of speech, but also to a degree of self-censorship based on the consideration of political regulations and social acceptance of specific statements. In this context, an essential point to be addressed is the question of whether virtual space is a mere reflection of non-virtual space, and thus whether online interaction and its legal and social limitations are parallel to the boundaries of the non-virtual realm. Can social media in a conservative state be seen as an instrument of progressive development, in a way that it opens a new form of public space that would otherwise not be available, or is it rather a space that can all the more be controlled by the state, enabling surveillance methods and fostering “national security”?<sup>11</sup> Hence the question – does social media in Oman act as a normative agent, or is the space it creates an authentic tool for the emergence of a public sphere that would otherwise not be possible?

### Public Space in Oman – State, Society and the Media

The official and generally accepted narrative of modern Oman dates back to the 1970s, when Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'eed Al-Busaidi took over power from his father, and started a revolutionary reform process, which catapulted Oman into modernity. He continued in the tradition of an absolute monarchy, and has been careful to balance the traditional tribal structure on which Omani society is based. In doing so, Sultan Qaboos has centralised power to his person: He formally unites key government positions such Prime Minister, Foreign and Defence Minister, and has the unlimited power to create or dissolve any government institution.<sup>12</sup> The underlying rationale of this unipolar state model and its

<sup>9</sup> Kyriakopoulou, “Authoritarian states and internet social media: Instruments of democratisation or instruments of control?”, *Human Affairs* 21, vol. 1 (2011): 20.

<sup>10</sup> Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere 2.0,” 235.

<sup>11</sup> Kyriakopoulou, “Authoritarian states and internet social media,” 19.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Salmi, *Oman's Basic Statute and Human Rights*, 103-105; Kenneth Katzman, *Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy* (Congressional Research Service, 2016), 2.

continuation to this day has been explained based on the strong need for security, since the formation of the Sultanate was overshadowed by the Dhofar War (1965-75), in which southern separatists fought against the central government. The fear of impeding security threats and a potential toppling of the ruling elite has created a “psycho-political complex that is embedded in the Omani collective subconscious.”<sup>13</sup>

As a consequence, besides being governed by the tribal and religious structures, Omani society is first and foremost characterised as a paternalist society of subjects who consider the Sultan their “father,” and who place their gratitude and fate in his wisdom and benevolence. The consensual narrative suggests that Oman’s future, its economy and society lie in the hands of their leader who has transformed the country into a modern state. Moreover, rooted in the oil-based economy and the consequent welfare state, the contract social suggests that the lack of political and societal participation is justified by the no-taxation policy, as well as free education and health services. However, according to Al-Azri, the reverence for the Sultan used to be coupled with a deep-rooted sense of fear. Fear not only of the state, the patriarchy and the omnipresent security system, but also fear of violating social and religious norms.<sup>14</sup> This fear was for many years nurtured by the risk of crossing acceptable boundaries, and this environment created a normative society where space for individualism or public initiatives was limited to the space provided and administered by the authorities. Saleh describes this atmosphere as a “culture of obedience and personal loyalty,” which prevented citizens from political participation and self-expression and “paralysed the national growth” of Omani society.<sup>15</sup>

As a consequence, the Omani media are rather a pillar of the state than of society. National media outlets started developing after Sultan Qaboos announced a “Strategy for National Development” in December 1970. This modernisation strategy included the formation of newspapers and radio stations, and later a state TV channel, which mainly served to spread news about the policies and initiatives of the new government. At the same time, the ruler laid the groundwork for a normative media environment, when he pronounced himself against a commercially oriented press, as well as against media which could “morally harm the nation.”<sup>16</sup>

It is hence not surprising that the media scene which emerged in the following decades did not go beyond normative reporting, focusing on state matters and serving as a mouthpiece of the authorities. Bahlani describes them as “government media,” as opposed to “state media.”<sup>17</sup> They have been subject to a media law issued in 1984, which Omani journalists

<sup>13</sup> Saleh, “Tahrik al-sakin wa jahl al-mutaghaiyyur,” in Al-Rabi’ al-‘umani, ed. S. Al Hashmi, (Beirut: Dar Al Farabi, 2012), 37.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Azri, *Social and Gender Inequality in Oman: The Power of Religious and Political Tradition*, (London: Routledge, 2013), xv.

<sup>15</sup> Saleh, “Tahrik al-sakin wa jahl al-mutaghaiyyur,” 4.

<sup>16</sup> Kutschera, “Oman: The Death of the Last Feudal Arab State,” *Washington Post*, December 27, 1970. See also Abdulmonam Al-Hasani, “Teaching Journalism in the Arab World: Recent Obstacles and Future Plans in Oman,” paper presented at the IAMCR Conference in Cairo, July 23-28, 2006, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Bahlani, “Al-‘lam al-iliktruniyya wa dawruhu fi thawrat Fibrā’ir,” in Al-Rabi’ al-‘umani, ed. Said Al-Hashimi (Beirut: Dar Al Farabi, 2012) 117.

describe as including “more prohibitions than actual rights.”<sup>18</sup> The Basic Statute of 1996 guarantees freedom of expression, however the media law continues to prohibit direct and indirect criticism of the Sultan, his family, or the ruling elites. Moreover, no story may be published that could “compromise behaviour, general ethics or religion” or which might jeopardise “national security.”<sup>19</sup> The Ministry of Information has the duty to censor any material that could be considered politically or socially offensive. Even the Oman Journalist Association (founded in 2004) is often criticised for its proximity to the government and for fostering the mainstream narrative. Hence, journalism in Oman developed as a tool to promote a normative discourse, rather than an opening of public space that could translate into a public sphere.<sup>20</sup>

### Virtual Space and the Rise of the Public Sphere

Shaped by these political and social conditions, Oman entered the 21st century as a country with a system based on a patriarchal approach to power, institutions, and participation. However, in order to comprehend the transformations that occurred in the wake of 2011, it is essential not to neglect the years that preceded the demonstrations and sit-ins. One of the characteristics of the early 2000s was that by then, the majority of the population had been born after 1970 and no longer had a strong personal connection to the foundation of the modern state. Rather, their awareness stemmed from their parents’ tales and the national discourse prevalent in the education system.<sup>21</sup>

### From virtual space to social protests

It was the arrival of the internet which for the first time offered Omanis a public space that was beyond the realm of normative social structures. Already back in 1997, Sa’id Al-Rashdi established the online forum *Sablat Al-‘Arab*, which was used especially by young people to exchange social news, but increasingly also economic and political questions. In this way, the forum developed to become an alternative news source. *Sablat Al-‘Arab* was the first among a number of forums, where young Omanis perceived the notion of public space, where they could act and express their opinions as individuals. One of the key elements in this development was the fact that they were able to speak out anonymously, and were thus protected from social control mechanisms. Moreover, in the early years of the internet, government control was not yet deep-rooted, and anonymous posts could in fact hardly be traced back to their sender. However, in 2006, the owners of *Sablat Al-‘Arab*

<sup>18</sup> Personal interviews by the author, October 2014.

<sup>19</sup> “Royal Sultani Decree No. 49/1984 on Press and Publications”, articles 20-28, accessed on June 5, 2016, [www.omainfo.om/module.php?module=pages-showpage&CatID=162&ID=522](http://www.omainfo.om/module.php?module=pages-showpage&CatID=162&ID=522).

<sup>20</sup> Al-Bahlani, “Al-‘I‘lam al-iliiktruniyya wa dawruhu fi thawrat Fibrat’ir,” 117f. For perceptions of traditional media see Obaid Al-Shaqsi, “Readership and Readers’ Perception of Omani Newspapers,” *Global Media Journal – American Edition* 1222 (2013): 1-38. See also Gidon Windecker, “Oman: Medien und Modernisierung im Land des Weihrauchs,” in *Arabische Medien*, ed. Carola Richter and Asiem Difraoui, (München: UVK, 2015), 320ff.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Shaqsi, *Masirat al-islamiat fi Sultanat Oman* (Doha, Qatar: Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2013).

crossed a red line when they published an anonymous article on a corruption scandal involving a government agency, and as a consequence, the forum was shut down.<sup>22</sup> The legal ground was the so-called Telecommunications Act of 2002, according to which any electronic message that could “jeopardize public order” is considered a crime.<sup>23</sup> Alternative networks were created, such as Sablat Oman, to continue the by now popular use of its predecessor. At the same time, the government started using these networks to promote its own discourse.<sup>24</sup> Omani intellectuals consider Sablat Al-‘Arab a door opener, which offered a public space to young Omanis with internet access. This virtual “Omani Hyde Park” was such a revolutionary novelty that other Omanis followed its lead and started to create personal blogs where they expressed the need for change in creative ways, and eventually prepared citizens for the advent of Facebook and Twitter.<sup>25</sup>

Whereas virtual space became the frontrunner in creating a public discourse, the non-virtual world was also gaining ground, even before the nation-wide protest movement of 2011 took shape. On the virtual side, Sablat Al-‘Arab had initiated a culture of blogging, yet most bloggers in those years remained anonymous and thus their contribution to the public discourse was only limited. At the same time, the traditional media scene was used for the first time in more unconventional manners. In 2005, a radio programme called Hadha Al-Sabah was launched, which discussed political topics and gave citizens space to comment live on air on social matters.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in 2007, Ibrahim Al-Ma’amri founded the daily newspaper Al-Zaman, which provided an alternative narrative on political developments. Although the truthfulness of its reporting was highly disputed, it was the first time that a public news outlet diverted from the official discourse. When the paper accused the Minister of Justice of corruption in 2011, it was temporarily closed down on the base of “defamation and spreading false information,” and Al-Ma’amri was sentenced to a prison term, which was waived after his public apology.<sup>27</sup>

In early 2011, activism made its first step from the newly discovered virtual public space into the “real” world. On Sablat Oman, discussions on unemployment, low wages and corruption gained ground in 2010, and attracted more and more followers, who welcomed the space to express their frustration. The government reacted by closing down discussion threads and in early January 2011, bloggers began complaining about the continuous shutdown.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup>“Oman Media Sustainability Index,” IREX, accessed May 8, 2016, <http://www.irex.org/resource/oman-media-sustainability-index-msi>; Sablat ‘Oman, accessed May 12, 2016, [www.s-oman.net/avb/showthread.php?t=57197](http://www.s-oman.net/avb/showthread.php?t=57197) Al-Bahlani, “Al-‘I‘lam al-iliktruniyya wa dawruhu fi thawrat Fibrā‘ir,” 118f.

<sup>23</sup>Telecommunications Regulatory Act (Royal Decree 30/2002, Art. 56, 3), accessed on June 15, 2016, [www.ituarabic.org/coe/2005/Interconnection-05/Documents/Additional-2b.pdf](http://www.ituarabic.org/coe/2005/Interconnection-05/Documents/Additional-2b.pdf).

<sup>24</sup>Sablat ‘Oman, accessed May 12, 2016, [www.s-oman.net/avb/showthread.php?t=57197](http://www.s-oman.net/avb/showthread.php?t=57197). Another forum called Al-Harah al-‘umaniya was closed down after it refused to hand the member IPs to the government. See Al-Bahlani, “Al-‘I‘lam al-iliktruniyya wa dawruhu fi thawrat Fibrā‘ir,” 126.

<sup>25</sup> Personal interviews by the author, May 2016. For a detailed description of the blogs see Al-Bahlani, “Al-‘I‘lam al-iliktruniyya wa dawruhu fi thawrat Fibrā‘ir,” 120.

<sup>26</sup>Al-Zuaydi (“Al-Daris”), “Al-Qissa al-kamila li i‘tiqali wa mahakamati wa ‘audati ilaykum jadeed,” Al-Saha al-‘umaniya (2011), accessed May 8, 2016. <https://om77.net/forums/thread/518955/>.

<sup>27</sup>Al-Shaibany, “Omani journalists face jail for corruption article,” (Reuters), September 22, 2011.

<sup>28</sup>Sablat ‘Oman, accessed May 12, 2016, <http://avb.s-oman.net/showthread.php?t=1020986>.



Finally, they decided to take their pleas to the streets on January 17, and they formed a movement that became known as Masirat al-Khadra' ("Green March"). They called on the online community to assemble in front of the Ministry of Housing to present a protest letter to the government. Moreover, out of concern that their online call would be blocked or deleted, they provided a Facebook link with the same call, demonstrating the gradual shift from public forums towards social media.<sup>29</sup> In an additional thread, a user pleaded to the Royal Police not to interfere in the planned peaceful protests, and to respect the citizens' rights.<sup>30</sup>

The strategy worked. On January 17th 2011, a group of about 200 Omanis staged a peaceful assembly in Muscat, which was tolerated by the government, apparently to allow the population to express their anger in a controlled environment. The activists of the Green March protested in front of the Ministry of Housing and demanded an increase of salaries, jobs and more powers for the Shura Council. Whereas up to that point, many of them had been hiding behind pseudonyms in the forums, they now stepped out into the daylight to openly demand their rights. Just as they had been pioneers in Omani online activism, they now became the forerunners of a larger protest movement that would sweep over the country. The Green March experienced a second and a third wave on February 18th and 20th, with around 300-500 young demonstrators who called for a rise of minimum wages, ending corruption and the removal of a number of ministers.<sup>31</sup> By that point, the movement was taken seriously by the government, and an official statement by the Diwan of the Royal Court read: "The message submitted during the Green March was conveyed to His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'eed, who always cares for everything that benefits the public interest for everyone."<sup>32</sup>

### The 2011 movement and the rise of the public sphere

Omani observers described the Green March protests as "expressing thanks and professing loyalty, but respectfully asking for more job creation," and bloggers on Sablat Oman, characterised them as "respectful and with love for country, people and leader."<sup>33</sup> Whereas until then, the government had opened small spaces for young people to vent their frustration, events became more turbulent only six days after the third Green March wave. On February 26th, 2011, job seekers in Sohar were turned down by the Ministry of Manpower, and in their frustration, they spontaneously started a sit-in on one of the city's main squares. Whereas the ensuing protests were without question inspired by the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, they started in a very different manner than the Green March

<sup>29</sup> Sablat 'Oman, accessed May 12, 2016, <http://avb.s-oman.net/archive/index.php/t-1020890.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Sablat 'Oman, accessed May 12, 2016, <http://avb.s-oman.net/archive/index.php/t-1072366.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Sablat 'Oman, <http://avb.s-oman.net/showthread.php?t=1074205>, accessed May 12, 2016; Sablat 'Oman, <http://www.s-oman.net/avb/showthread.php?t=1035249>, accessed May 12, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Vaidya, "Message of Green March Protesters Delivered to Sultan Qabood," (Gulf News), February 23, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Zidjaly, "From Oman with Love," (New York Times), March 7, 2011.

movement. They were neither organised, nor planned, nor initially announced on social networks. They started off as a spontaneous expression of social frustration, especially with the lack of jobs and growing corruption. Nevertheless, some Omani observers identify an indirect link between the Green March and the subsequent social protests. Whereas before 2011, street protests had been unheard of in Oman, by the time of the sit-ins, three waves of protest had been launched successfully as part of the Green March, and the government had responded favourably. Soon, the protests spread from Sohar to Muscat, Ibri, Sur and Salalah, with more and more young people joining the sit-ins. Oman saw itself confronted with an open, public discussion and demands for political reforms.<sup>34</sup>

Some major differences between Oman and other countries that experienced protests in 2011 have to be emphasised in order to shed light on the Omani particularities. For one, the protesters never questioned the legitimacy of the ruler, nor of the royal family. Already during the Green March movement, protesters had carried signs in support of the Sultan, asking the security forces to pass on their demands. Yet the essential feature was the fact that they crossed the cultural line by creating for the first time a discourse that focused on society as an entity separate from the state. In this way, they were able to establish a non-virtual public space that went beyond the traditional structures of consultation. On the other hand, the lack of strong civil society organisations and a public sphere prevented a more sustainable growth of the movement. Further, many intellectuals were reluctant to join the protests given the potential consequences. Sit-ins were unknown territory and contrary to Omani culture up to that point. In addition, the focus of international media was on the far more dramatic events in Tunisia and Egypt, and Oman remained marginalised in the discussion on the region-wide uprisings.<sup>35</sup>

Saleh argues that the masses found themselves for the first time confronted with an authentic public space, where they could release their feelings of anger and injustice, and their hope for social change. He compares the first days of the sit-ins with a “tug of war,” since so many different interests and opinions were voiced for the first time, beyond the traditional boundaries between genders and between religious and secular activists.<sup>36</sup> Whereas initially, there was no sense of public opinion or of political activism, and the emotional charge triggered tensions and quarrels among the protesters, a majority vote was eventually decided upon to overcome the differences. Committees were formed to organise the “newly born political entity,” to organise activities, speeches and logistics. A system of guidelines, which called upon citizens to refrain from slandering and name calling, introduced a culture of more objectivity, and helped develop a discourse that focused on actual demands for political and economic reforms.<sup>37</sup> By managing to overcome these

<sup>34</sup> Lynch, *The Arab Uprising – The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), 113f. For a detailed depiction of the protest movement see Al-Shaqsi, *Masirat al-islamiat fi Sultanat Oman*; Al-Hashmi 2012, James Worrall, “Oman: The ‘Forgotten’ Corner of the Arab Spring,” *Middle East Policy Council* 19, vol. 3 (2012).

<sup>35</sup> Al-Hashmi, “The Omani Spring: Towards the Break of a New Dawn,” *Arab Reform Initiative Brief* 52 (2011); Worrall, “Oman: The ‘Forgotten’ Corner of the Arab Spring.”

<sup>36</sup> Saleh, “Tahrir al-sakin wa jadr al-mutaghaiyyur,” 41.

<sup>37</sup> Saleh, “Tahrir al-sakin wa jadr al-mutaghaiyyur,” 43f.

initial obstacles, Saleh argues, an authentic public sphere could emerge from the sit-ins. Participants started organising dialogue programmes and seminars, open discussions on social and political topics, while more and more intellectuals, human rights activists and media professionals joined their ranks. The conventional public discourse was challenged and alternative opinions on the economy, the labour market, constitutional reforms and on the rights of the Shura Council were openly discussed, paving the road to a dialogue between citizens and the Omani government.<sup>38</sup>

### The use of social media during the 2011 protests

After the positive experience of the Green March in using social media for mobilisation, the primarily spontaneous protest movement swiftly discovered the potential of Twitter and Facebook to serve its purposes. A decisive factor in this development was the reluctance of the traditional media in reporting on the events. The journalists' observations were not in line with the traditional media discourse, and hence for some time, they remained reluctant to report on the movement. This in turn enabled social media to claim the space that traditional media were neglecting and, soon, live footage of the protests spread on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, and sparked countless discussions about the nature of the protests, the use of police force, and the question of reforms. Moreover, after the footage of violent scenes and the deadly shooting of a protester in Sohar on February 27th 2011 had gone viral, protests spread to Muscat, where sit-ins were launched on February 28th and March 1st. Finally, a Facebook post with the heading "March 2 Uprising for Dignity and Freedom" called for country-wide protests and received over 2,300 likes.<sup>39</sup> Eventually, the traditional media saw themselves compelled to carefully start reporting on the incidents, gathering the pieces to regain control over the national discourse.

The events further triggered a considerable rise in the number of social media users since it opened both new channels of information and a platform through which to express thoughts and feelings. Internet access reached 60% of the population in 2012 (compared to 36% in 2008), mobile devices grew to a number of 5.3 million (2.5 million in 2007).<sup>40</sup> In the spring of 2011 alone, the number of Facebook users grew by 60.000 users to 280.000 and reached half a million in 2013.<sup>41</sup> In the same year, about 40.000 Twitter users sent approximately 3.4 million tweets a month. Moreover, most Omanis have used WhatsApp groups for communication, due to the higher degree of privacy.<sup>42</sup> With the increasing numbers of social media users, the previously relevant question of anonymity changed its path, too. Now that large numbers of citizens were posting, bloggers felt safer in using

<sup>38</sup> Saleh, "The Emergence of the Omani Public Sphere," unpublished paper submitted to Sussex University.

<sup>39</sup> Bakri, "Protests in Oman Spread from Port City to Capital," *The New York Times*, February 28, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Statistics of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), accessed June 2, 2014, [www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx](http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx).

<sup>41</sup> "Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter," Arab Social Media Report (Dubai: Dubai School of Government, 2011), 9ff.

<sup>42</sup> Transforming Education in the Arab World: Breaking Barriers in the Age of Social Learning, Arab Social Media Report (Dubai: Dubai School of Government, 2013), 13ff.

their real names and the safe space of pseudonyms lost its relevance. At the same time, social media was not only used as a tool to organise and report about protests: it was also used by concerned citizens to promote a more normative discourse and to call for calm and mindfulness. Some intellectuals tried to remind the protesters of the recent 40 year celebration of modern Oman and all its noteworthy achievements under the rule of Sultan Qaboos. Young people were reprimanded for their demands, and were challenged to rather post on what they had contributed to their society and country.<sup>43</sup>

## The public sphere and the spirit of freedom

The government was quick to respond to the protests by promising to create 50.000 jobs, reshuffle the cabinet, and increase minimum wages. In this way, it took the steam out of the movement and the protests ceded, given that the demands had been met to a great extent. At the same time, the taste of freedom of speech and expression during the sit-ins, and the openness with which political issues had been addressed, made it clear that a return to the culture of silence would be impossible. Citizens started to assemble in coffee shops and other public places to nurture this spirit of the emerging public sphere. Besides economic issues, they mainly discussed literature and cultural matters. The Light Foresight Initiative can be seen as one of the outstanding examples of this growing movement. Between 2011 and 2013, the initiative set up over 70 "cultural salons," and implemented numerous campaigns with political, economic and human rights content, with the goal to encourage a culture of reading among children and young people.<sup>44</sup>

With these initiatives, a grass-roots civil society evolved that encouraged independent activities and debates based on people's concern and care for the future of their country. However, from a state perspective, these movements jeopardised control over the population and therefore over political developments and national security, and the ruling elites feared public disorder and chaos. Already during the protests, numerous demonstrators and activists had been arrested, and later on, independent social initiatives such as the cultural salons and the Light Foresight Initiative were discouraged from holding their meetings.<sup>45</sup> Due to this narrowing of public space, Omanis started moving back into the realm where the entire movement had emerged from, and which the government was able to control, but could not entirely thwart: the virtual space of the internet and social media. The Light Foresight Initiative started publishing video interviews with Omani writers on YouTube, discussing their books and engaging young people through video competitions.<sup>46</sup> The

<sup>43</sup> Al-Zidjaly, "From Oman with Love"; Mohammad Al Bahlani, "Al-I'lam al-iliiktruniyya wa dawruhu fi thawrat Fibrā'ir," in Al-Rabi' al-'umani, ed. Said Al-Hashimi (Beirut: Al Farabi, 2012), 123f.

<sup>44</sup> Data available on Light Foresight Initiative at: [http://light-foresight.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/2011-2013\\_14.html](http://light-foresight.blogspot.co.uk/2014/01/2011-2013_14.html), accessed on June 5, 2016. See discussion in Nasser Saleh, "The Question of 'Being' and the 'being' of Omanis on Social Media" (master's thesis, Sussex University, 2015), 33f.

<sup>45</sup> Al Ma'amri, "An salunat al-thaqafiya wa la'aba al-qitt wa al-fi'r," *AlFalaq*, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Saleh, "The Question of 'Being' and the 'being' of Omanis on Social Media" (master's thesis, Sussex University, 2015), 34.

links to these videos were widely spread on Facebook and Twitter.<sup>47</sup>

Obviously, the shift of the public sphere from sit-ins to social media also triggered numerous challenges. On the one hand, already during the protests, the rise of citizen journalism caused a flood of information that could often not be verified. It not only made room for polarisation, but also for cynicism and insults, which were counter to both the law and Omani cultural standards. Many young people actually discovered public space and individualism only through the virtual world of the social media, and considered Twitter and Facebook a revolutionary space to express – and experiment with – their newly-found freedom. Some of them crossed red lines, which had never been crossed before, by posting verses mocking the Sultan. They had little awareness that their writings, even though virtual, fell under Omani jurisdiction, and eventually, they were arrested and condemned for *lèse-majesté* in August 2012.<sup>48</sup> The government used this case to demonstrate its control over social media content and to showcase that bloggers were legally responsible for their writings. Pictures of the young people (being arrested?) were published in a daily newspaper, which was considered shameful for the families. Eventually, they were pardoned by the Sultan in March 2013.<sup>49</sup>

In this environment, an additional phenomenon emerged, when Turki Al-Balushi launched Oman's first online newspaper Al-Balad Oman in May 2012. Al-Balushi saw the gap in the news coverage that was created through the lack of impartial reporting in the traditional media on the one hand, and the lack of credibility and quality in social media on the other. By creating an online news portal based on independent, investigative journalism, which does not shy away from sensitive topics avoided by other papers, and feeding its content into social media outlets, he was able to set a new standard for Omani journalism and to contribute to the emerging social sphere.<sup>50</sup>

### Virtual public sphere and government responses

Whereas dispersing the emerging public sphere in 2011-2012 had been relatively easy for the government through its "carrot and stick policy,"<sup>51</sup> the virtual public sphere was – and still is – much more difficult to deal with. The authorities initially tried to ignore it, hoping it would subside just as the sit-ins did, but they soon realised that the momentum was much more powerful than in the days of Sablat Al-'Arab. Facebook and Twitter could not be regulated like web forums and blogs, and their content was much less controllable. As a

<sup>47</sup> As a matter of fact, between 2013 and 2016, Facebook accounts almost doubled to 900.000, and Twitter accounts reached a number of 250.000. However, in the context of the emerging social sphere, it has to be taken into account that large parts of the population are hardly interested in discussing public affairs and that, after the enthusiasm of the 2011 protests, many young people just returned to the previous status quo. Like in any other society, the large majority of internet and social media usage is concerned with personal and commercial interests. It is assumed that the number of citizens actively involved in shaping a virtual public sphere consists of ca. 2-3% of the population. Personal interviews by the author, May 2016.

<sup>48</sup> AFP, "Omanis Appeal Jail over Insulting Sultan," *Your Middle East*, October 24, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Greenslade, "Omani Sultan Pardons Jailed Bloggers," *The Guardian*, March 25, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> See Al-Balad Oman, <http://albaladoman.com/>, accessed March 12, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Al-Shaqsi, *Masirat al-Islahat fi Sultanat Oman*.

first reaction, the paragraph in the national media law, which prohibited any statement that could “jeopardize national security,” was expanded to explicitly include online publications in October 2011.<sup>52</sup> In this way, a legal limitation on freedom of expression was enforced. This legislation translated into an increasing numbers of arrests of bloggers and online activists, while blogs and video footage were deleted. Moreover, internet censorship became a useful tool to block political and human rights related websites.<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, the government saw itself increasingly compelled to address the pressure emanating from the internet by becoming active online, too. This started with increasing surveillance and virtual counter-campaigning, where government agents used pseudonyms to engage activists on social media.<sup>54</sup> Over time, however, the authorities developed a more constructive approach to contributing to virtual public space. They launched their own social media departments to spread information and interact with citizens, and a sophisticated electronic voting system for the Shura elections was developed. Nevertheless, intellectuals and activists point out that the government uses social media as a normative tool for public services. What is still lacking is an authentic “culture of participation,” of public consultation, where citizens have the feeling that their concerns are being heard and taken seriously. Many Omanis still feel left out, both in terms of being informed about and involved in policy-making processes.<sup>55</sup>

### Public Sphere and Societal Transformation – What Has Social Media Achieved?

Looking at the impact of social media on enhancing the concept of the public sphere in Oman since 2011, some key elements stand out, both in terms of what they have achieved, and in what they have not. First of all, social media has made a decisive contribution to enhancing government-citizen interaction. Social media is the first public space that has led the government to respond to and adopt communication channels chosen by the population, and bottom-up feedback has opened the door for a two-way channel that is characteristic of the social sphere. An example of this development is the recent debate on the hike in the oil and fuel prices. With the intention to end ongoing discussions and complaints on social media, the Undersecretary in the Ministry of Oil and Gas declared in a statement on his private Facebook account that the price hike would make a difference of merely the price of “one Shawarma” per month. The response on social media was overwhelming. Reactions ranged from outrage about his “lack of respect for the poor” to cynical caricatures, depicting cars getting fuelled with Shawarma.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> “Press and Publication Laws Tightened in Oman,” Gulf News Oman, October 10, 2011. <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/oman/press-and-publication-laws-tightened-in-oman-1.888988>.

<sup>53</sup> Al Bahlani, “Al-I’lam al-iliktruniyya wa dawruhu fi thawrat Fibrā’ir,” 124-126. Personal interviews by the author, May 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Al Bahlani, “Al-I’lam al-iliktruniyya wa dawruhu fi thawrat Fibrā’ir,” 124-126; Personal interviews by the author, May 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Personal interviews by the author, May 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Al-Balad, <http://albaladoman.com/>, accessed on April 3, 2016.

This flood of public reactions has caused the government to be more careful when it comes to social media, but also to policy-related announcements in general. Officials are now taking public reaction into account, which contributes not only to a first step toward reciprocity, but also an increasing culture of transparency, honesty, and respect towards citizens and their opinions. The power of social media enables people, to a degree, to watch and thus influence government action. Citizens have moved from being the “observed” to being the “observers.” As a consequence of social media pressure, government organisations have launched public consultation sessions with renowned intellectuals and businessmen, which could, in case this concept becomes more established, contribute to a stronger interaction between the government, the private sector and an emerging civil society.<sup>57</sup> Second, on the social level, one could argue that social media has helped initiate the rise of Omani society as an entity separate from the government, creating one of the foundations for a social sphere to emerge. For without the dialectic between government and society, there is no space for public discourse and dialogue. And it was not only the state, but also the normative culture, which inhibited the emergence of public space and alternative discourses. The internet and social media were the tool which helped open the door towards alternative sources of information and expression, questioning the concept of a national “truth.” Also, in the case of illiterate people and citizens in remote areas, this has had a major impact: anyone can now express their point of view through a cell phone camera, and the clips find their way to people across Oman through YouTube and Facebook. The phenomenon of “alternative truths” has led to the rise of a social awareness, especially among young people, and this awareness has in turn allowed for the formation of a new consciousness both as individuals, and as a social collective beyond tribal and religious norms. This newly-found awareness has created new patterns of confidence and self-expression, which has allowed citizens to shake off the initial anonymity in the virtual space and to post with their real names. As Saleh puts it, social media gave Omanis for the first time the feeling that they actually “exist” in Heidegger’s sense.<sup>58</sup> And finally, this awareness has also translated into the “real world,” transforming the standards of society. A striking example of this interaction is the case of a group of protesters in 2011, who demonstrated for the rights of imprisoned bloggers, whom they only knew from virtual space. These protesters were arrested, too, and as a consequence, they met the bloggers, whose rights they had defended, for the first time face to face.<sup>59</sup>

Third, in the cultural domain, social media has created an emerging culture of debate and interaction, an initial culture of public opinion. Since public debates took – and still take – place mainly in the virtual social space, social media has played an important role in shaping a culture of dialogue and public interaction between citizens of different opinions on political and social matters. This phenomenon, which evolved in the streets of Omani cities during the actual sit-ins of 2011, reached a much larger impact in the virtual space

<sup>57</sup> Personal interviews by the author, May 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Saleh, “The Question of ‘Being’ and the ‘being’ of Omanis on Social Media,” 38.f.

<sup>59</sup> Personal interviews by the author, May 2016.

in the aftermath of the protest movement. On the social level, it is further reflected in inter-gender relations, which have undergone a remarkable transformation over the past few years. Many families are still opposed to male-female interaction beyond the accepted framework of the workplace and universities. In traditional public space, such as in malls, restaurants or the beach, conversations between the genders are kept to a minimum, dating is discouraged, and arranged marriage is still common. Whereas in the 2011 sit-ins, women were part of the movement and mingled with their fellow male protesters, this was an exception to regular public life. Virtual space, on the other hand, offers young women the opportunity to express themselves and their individual identities as artists, writers, or activists. They have contributed with a female or feminist point of view, to oppose male dominated discussions on Twitter and Facebook, and have thus contributed to a culture of respectful inter-gender relations.<sup>60</sup>

At the same time, there are a number of issues in constructing a public sphere that social media has not solved, and might not be able to solve. First and foremost, social media has obviously played a central role in commercialising society, and just as in any other society, it has enhanced people's consumerism, distracting them from the actual concerns of public life. Only a very small number of Omanis use the virtual space of social media to enhance the public sphere. And those who do contribute are often not immune to cynicism and obstructive contributions.

In addition, although the current government consultations with representatives from society might lead to basic civil society structures, until today, no authentic civil society movement has crystallized in Oman. Moreover, the notion of public libraries, which intellectuals have advocated as a space of self-education and intellectual exchange, has not materialised. As soon as online initiatives, such as the Light Foresight Initiative, made their way into the "real world," they were absorbed or discouraged by the government. Until today, intellectuals hand their social and political analyses directly to the relevant ministries, rather than publishing their findings. In this way, they do not contribute to the public sphere, but as they argue, at least their voice will be heard by the authorities.<sup>61</sup> This also raises the question of social leaders. Although Oman has a large number of highly educated and capable intellectuals and social activists, the concept of "social leadership" is still young to Omani culture. Leadership – other than the Sultan's and the ruling elite's – is often socially frowned upon.<sup>62</sup> This might explain the fact why, although there are many active Twitter and Facebook users with large numbers of followers, the highest numbers of followers go to commercial entities, such as Oman Air (1.3 million followers), Times of Oman (370.000 followers), and the telephone company Ooredoo Oman (200.000 followers). These are followed by a Cultural Awards site, the Royal Opera House, a sports club, the Public Authority for Consumer Protection and a shopping mall. The only social figures with a noteworthy following are Sayyid Nasr Al-Busaidi, the Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign

<sup>60</sup> Saleh, "Social Media and Everyday Life," 10f. Whereas on a global level, Facebook is dominated by female users, in Oman, most users are male.

<sup>61</sup> Personal interviews by the author, May 2016.

<sup>62</sup> Personal interviews by the author, May 2016.



Affairs (17.500 followers), and Sayyid Khalid Al-Busaidi, the Chairman of the Oman Football Association (11.800 followers), both members of the royal family.<sup>63</sup>

### 5. Conclusion and Future Prospects

Social media has had a remarkable impact on social development in Oman over the last fifteen years, from giving people a voice, to promoting government-citizen interaction, to transforming gender relations. Observing the emergence of the social sphere in the framework of the conservative, paternalist Sultanate, one might argue that it can be characterised by citizens exploring the dimensions of a newly discovered public space, testing the boundaries, and finding new strategies for dealing with government reactions. This “cat and mouse game”<sup>64</sup> started out in the virtual world of internet forums in the early 2000s and took to the streets in pro-Sultan demonstrations in Muscat in early 2011. These were followed by a nation-wide protest movement with a number of aspects, most notably the rise of the peaceful sit-in culture, in which Omani citizens for the first time claimed a voice and freedom of expression beyond the virtual sphere. Whereas the protest movement itself ended rather swiftly, both through reforms and arrests, it was this spirit of freedom that led Omanis to carry on the movement in “cultural salon” initiatives, which encouraged a broader public to use this space to make their voices heard. In 2012, the movement returned to the virtual sphere, by now much better equipped than before 2011. On the one hand, the social media scene in 2012 was well-established, and on the other, citizens had experienced the power of their individual voice, and had found a new self-awareness beyond the patterns of traditional society. In this way, they became part of establishing a society in response to the state, and hence enabling the dialectic between state and society. The government attempted to take back control over this powerful movement through reforms, stricter legislation and arrests, yet eventually, it saw itself compelled to join social media in an attempt to regain the upper hand. However, the culture of expression and participation was by then deeply entrenched in the awareness of an increasing number of bloggers and online activists. This phenomenon has found its peak in the fact that citizens are now in the position to openly criticise public policy and government officials, which has once more changed the rules of the game.

These dynamics might eventually lead to an authentic culture of reciprocity, of increasing engagement of the population, and a constructive dialogue between the state and its citizens. Such a solidification of the still fragile (and virtual) public sphere, and its translation into “real life” policies was never more urgent than it is today, in a time when unemployment figures are on the rise and the government has to cut public spending due to the dwindling oil prices. A diversification of the economy away from the oil sector requires young talents, and these talents can only be fostered through an education system that

<sup>63</sup>“Socialbakers,” Oman Statistics, accessed January 14, 2016, [www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/oman/](http://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/oman/).

<sup>64</sup>Al Ma’amri, “An salunat al-thaqafiya wa la’aba al-qitt wa al-fi’r.”

encourages independent and innovative thinking. Social media could lead the way as a tool for government and civil society initiatives, making engaged citizens an essential part of the transformation process and supporting them in shaping the future of their country.

## Bibliography

"Oman Media Sustainability Index." IREX. Accessed May 8, 2016. <http://www.irex.org/resource/oman-media-sustainability-index-msi>.

"Socialbakers." Oman Statistics. Accessed January 14, 2016.

Al Bahlani, Mohammad. 2012. "Al-l'lam al-ilikruniyya wa dawruhu fi thawrat Fibrā'ir." In *Al-Rabi' al-'umani*, Edited by Said Al-Hashimi. Beirut: Dar Al Farabi.

Al Balushi, Turki, Al-Balad, online newspaper, accessed on April 3, 2016, <http://albaladoman.com/>.

Al Ma'amri, Sulayman. 2013. "'An salunat al-thaqafiya wa la'aba al-qitt wa al-fi'r." *AlFalaq*, 2014.

Al-Azri, Khalid. *Social and Gender Inequality in Oman: The power of religious and political tradition*. London: Routledge.

Al-Hasani, Abdulmonam. 2006. "Teaching Journalism in the Arab World: Recent Obstacles and Future Plans in Oman." Paper presented at the IAMCR Conference in Cairo, July 23-28, 2006.

Al-Hasani, Abdulmonam. 2011. "Malamih min ta'rikh al-sihafa al-'umaniyya." In *Al-Sihafa al-'umaniya – al-tatawarat al-rahina wa tahadiyat al-mustaqbal*. Muscat: al-Muntada al-Adabi.

Al-Hashmi, Said (ed.). 2012. *Al-Rabi' al-'umani*, Beirut: Dar Al Farabi.

Al-Hashmi, Said. 2011. "Taghayur fi al-dakhil wa taghayur fi al-kharij." *Gulf Center for Development Policies*.

Al-Hashmi, Said. 2011. "The Omani Spring: Towards the Break of a New Dawn." *Arab Reform Initiative Brief* 52.

Al-Salmi, Hussain. 2013. *Oman's Basic Statute and Human Rights: Protections and Restrictions*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag.

Al-Shaibany, Saleh. 2011. "Omani journalists face jail for corruption article." *Reuters*, September 22, 2011.

Al-Shaqsi, Obaid. 2013. "Readership and Readers' Perception of Omani Newspapers." *Global Media Journal – American Edition* 1222 (2013).

Al-Shaqsi, Obaid. 2013. *Masirat al-islalat fi Sultanat Oman*. Doha, Qatar: Al Jazeera Centre for Studies.

Al-Zidjaly, Najma and Cynthia Gordon. 2012. "Mobile Phones as Cultural Tools: An Arabian Example." *Intercultural Management Quarterly* 13/2 (2012): 14-17

Al-Zidjaly, Najma. 2011. "From Oman With Love". *New York Times*, March 7, 2011.

Al-Zuaydi, Ali ("Al-Daris"). 2011. "Al-Qissa al-kamila li i'tiqali wa mahakamati wa 'audati ileykum jaded." Al-Saha al-'umaniya.

Arab Advisors Group (AAG). 2016. "Informa 2011 MENA Media Guide." [www.arabadvisors.com](http://www.arabadvisors.com). Accessed May 8, 2016.

Arab Social Media Report (ASMR). 2011. *Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter*. Dubai: Dubai School of Government, 2011. Accessed May 8, 2016. <http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/UserManagement/PDF/ASMR%20Report%202.pdf>.

Arab Social Media Report (ASMR). 2013. *Transforming Education in the Arab World: Breaking Barriers in the Age of Social Learning*. Dubai: Dubai School of Government, 2013. Accessed May 8, 2016. [http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/UserManagement/PDF/ASMR\\_5\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/UserManagement/PDF/ASMR_5_Report_Final.pdf).

Bakri, Nada. 2011. "Protests in Oman Spread from Port City to Capital." *The New York Times*. February 28, 2011.

Kutschera, Chris. 1970. "Oman: The Death of the Last Feudal Arab State." *Washington Post*, December 27, 1970.

Correia, João C. 2011. "The Meanings of Public Sphere: is there any democratic role for the internet?" In *Public Sphere Reconsidered. Theories and Practices*, Edited by João C. Correia and Rousiley C. Maia. Covilhã: LabCom Books.

Deibert, Ronald J. 2009. "The geopolitics of internet control: Censorship, sovereignty, and cyberspace." In *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, Edited by Andrew Chadwick and Philip Howard. Abingdon – New York: Routledge.

Frenette, Micheline and Marie-France Vermette. 2011. "Young adults involvement in the public sphere: A comparative international study." In *Public Sphere Reconsidered*, Edited by João C. Correia and Rousiley C. Maia. Covilhã: LabCom Books.

Gardiner, Ian. 2006. *In the Service of the Sultan: A First Hand Account of the Dhofar Insurgency*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword.

Greenslade, Roy. 2013. "Omani Sultan Pardons Jailed Bloggers." *The Guardian*. March 25, 2013.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1971. *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*. Berlin: Luchterhand. <http://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/oman/>

Katzman, Kenneth. 2016. *Oman: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy*. Congressional Research Service.

Kyriakopoulou, Kalliopi. 2011. "Authoritarian states and internet social media: Instruments of democratisation or instruments of control?" *Human Affairs* 21/1 (2011):18-26.

Lynch, Marc. 2012. *The Arab Uprising – The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*. New York: Public Affairs.

Mansour, Antoine. 2016. "Planning for Economic Diversification in Oman". <http://www>.

oea-oman.org/03-Mansouier.pdf. Last modified 2012. Accessed May 8, 2016.

Nassar, Siham. 2011. "Khasa'is al-sihafa al-'umaniya shaklan wa madmunan". In *Al-Sihafa al-'umaniya – al-tatawarat al-rahina wa tahadiyat al-mustaqbal*, 43-151. Muscat: al-Muntada al-Adabi.

Nasser, Hosni Muhammad. 2011. "Al-Mashhad al-sahafi fi Sultanat 'Uman". In *Al-Sihafa al-'umaniya – al-tatawarat al-rahina wa tahadiyat al-mustaqbal*, 181-225. Muscat: al-Muntada al-Adabi.

O'Rourke, Susan. 2011. "Teaching Journalism in Oman – Reflections after the Arab Spring." *Pacific Journalism Review* 7/2 (2011):109-129.

Papacharissi, Zizi. 2009. "The Virtual Sphere 2.0: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Beyond." In *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, Edited by Andrew Chadwick and Philip Howard, 230-245. Abingdon – New York: Routledge.

Plekhanov, Sergey. 2004. *A Reformer on the Throne: Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said*. London: Trident Press.

Royal Sultani Decree No. 49/1984 on Press and Publications, accessed on June 5, 2016, [www.omaninfo.om/module.php?module=pages-showpage&CatID=162&ID=522](http://www.omaninfo.om/module.php?module=pages-showpage&CatID=162&ID=522).

Rubin, Neville. 1979. *Government Publications Relating to Zanzibar, 1860-1963*. London: EP Microform.

Sablat 'Oman, accessed May 12, 2016, <http://avb.s-oman.net/>.

Saleh, Nasser. "The Question of 'Being' and the 'being' of Omanis on Social Media." Master's thesis, Sussex

Saleh, Nasser. "Social Media and Everyday Life in Oman." Unpublished. Paper submitted to Sussex University

Saleh, Nasser. "The Emergence of the Omani Public Sphere in 2011." Unpublished. Paper submitted to Sussex University.

Saleh, Nasser. 2012. "Tahrik al-sakin wa jadr al-mutaghaiyyur." In *Al-Rabi' al-'umani*, Edited by S. Al Hashmi, 36-46. Beirut: Dar Al Farabi.

Telecommunications Regulatory Act (Royal Decree 30/2002), accessed on June 15, 2016, [www.ituarabic.org/coe/2005/Interconnection-05/Documents/Additional-2b.pdf](http://www.ituarabic.org/coe/2005/Interconnection-05/Documents/Additional-2b.pdf).

Taswir, Tarang. 2012. "Study of Converging Perspectives: Youth Viewership of Internet Video Content and Traditional Television Sets in Oman." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2/11 (2012): 265-275.

Teller, Matthew. 2012. "Why social media – not violence – could bring change to Oman." *BBC News*, November 8, 2012.

Vaidya, Sunil. 2011. "Message of Green March Protestors Delivered to Sultan Qaboos." *Gulf News*, February 23, 2011.

Wasty, Sulaiman. 2014. "Socioeconomic Reforms in Oman: An Uncertain Sustainability?"

Middle East Institute, January, 29, 2014.

Windecker, Gidon. 2015. "Oman: Medien und Modernisierung im Land des Weihrauchs." In *Arabische Medien*, Edited by Carola Richter and Asiem Difraoui, 319-330. München: UVK.

Worrall, James. 2012. "Oman: The 'Forgotten' Corner of the Arab Spring." *Middle East Policy Council* 19/3 (2012).