

Nov 04, 2016 by [Abeer Al-Najjar](#)

KAUST and Social Networking: the New Face of Saudi Arabia ^[1]

Twitter has had a phenomenological influence on the international news media in the post-Iranian elections period in June 2009 onwards. Through the continuous 24 hour- cycle of tweets, the micro-blogging site was challenging the censorship applied by the Iranian government on all news media covering the confrontations following the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad . After years of state monopoly and censorship twitter and other social media sites and applications are making governments more concerned over news. Social media is placing more power in the hands of citizens in this region. For that reason, I believe that regional governments from now on will have to take a pro-active approach in conducting their public diplomacy campaigns and efforts. Learning from the business world, they have to be PREPARED before crises happen and have their plans in place.

One good example of indirect and productive public diplomacy efforts in this region is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA) prestigious project, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology(KAUST). KAUST is meant to be a leading research university and has been received very well in the foreign media, bringing very good publicity to the country in the international press. The promising project of the Saudi King has been a significant source of controversy in the Saudi media since its inauguration on the Saudi National Day on September 23, just a few weeks ago. Many of the Arab leaders were present at the inauguration ceremony, to mark the significance of the project to the Arab world at large including the Syrian and Yemeni presidents and the Lebanese prime minister, Senyurah, among others. The King presented this university as the realization of a 25 year-long dream, allocating about 12 billion US \$ to its endowment.

Much of the domestic criticism of this project has related to the way in which social life on campus is planned. Unlike all other educational institutes in Saudi Arabia, new rules have been applied to this university. The university is not administered by the Ministry of Education and is dealt with as an independent entity in order to circumvent the ministry's rules. KAUST has a non segregated campus in which men and women freely move around, use and interact in the same spaces, classrooms and offices. Moreover, on campus women are allowed to drive, a privilege they are not allowed elsewhere. Following the inauguration of KAUST, Sheikh al-Shatri, a member of the KSA's higher religious council, issued a fatwa (an advisory opinion) stating that the lack of segregation in KAUST is haram -- forbidden in Islam. The sheikh, according to many, was asked by the King to resign and he was out of office very soon after announcing his fatwa on Al- Majd TV. Many considered the KAUST story as part of the ongoing conflict between the kingdom's conservatives and liberals. Both the supporters of King Abdullah over KAUST (or, the liberals) and the conservative opponents have been using social media to bring about more support for their stance on this issue. Many groups were created on Facebook in support of Sheikh Shatri, and according to The National, many of the videos featuring him reciting Quranic verses and giving religious talks were downloaded on

YouTube after his resignation.

The campaign in support of KAUST is very active online too, as many of the students have created their own pages and groups. The university itself has clearly incorporated a social media policy; if you visit the university's multimedia homepage, it will take you to its pages on Flickr, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, in addition to embedded mini-videos of several university professors and employees praising the University. KAUST has a channel of its own on YouTube displaying videos of conferences, symposiums and campus life and community. The strategic goal of this use of social media is to appeal to an international audience. By depicting a new image compatible with the appreciation of scientific research and scholarship, it can move away from the international context within which the country has been viewed in the post 9/11 period and its identification with conflict and terrorism.
