

On X, formerly Twitter, What journalistic Roles are exhibited by Online News outlets and Traditional Newspapers in Saudi Arabia?

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Received: 24/05/ 2024;

Revised: 01/06/2024;

Accepted: 22/06/2024

Abstract:

The current study sought to determine how various journalistic roles are performed by comparing news stories posted on X, formerly Twitter, by traditional newspapers and online news accounts in Saudi Arabia and the levels of engagement on X. The study shows that the Loyal Facilitator role is the most performed role in both news outlet accounts and that online newspapers had higher engagement levels on X, which corresponds with previous research on the topic.

Keywords: *X, formerly Twitter, Traditional Newspapers, Online News, New Media.*

1. Introduction:

The rise of social media has revolutionized the global news landscape. With the widespread use of phones, tablets, and laptops, accessing news has become more convenient, leading to a decline in traditional news consumption from television and print newspapers. X (formerly Twitter), founded in 2006, has significantly facilitated public access to news. In Saudi Arabia, X has gained considerable popularity as a news source and a platform for engaging with news content. In 2011, there were an estimated 115,000 X users in Saudi Arabia, which tripled by 2012. By 2015, the number of X users had risen to approximately 4.5 million; by 2016, it had exceeded 9 million. As of 2024, Saudi X users have increased to around 16.8 million, which continues to grow yearly (Oberlo, 2024). This means that journalists and news media outlets cannot afford to overlook X's popularity to effectively connect with a broader audience. The platform's extensive reach is strengthened by its ability to facilitate direct interaction between journalists, news media outlets, and the public and the seamless sharing of news stories through retweets. Even traditional media outlets, including newspapers and television stations, leverage X to disseminate their stories and engage with their audience.

More people are turning to X for news in Saudi Arabia because of the increased regulation and slow adoption of new technology by traditional media outlets

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(Fanack, 2023; Saudi Gazette, 2023). Many people have moved online to search for more sources of information, and they have found X as one place where they can get other sources of information. The major differences between traditional newspapers and emerging online-only newspapers in Saudi Arabia are that the former are not free from the constraints of timing, and the state imposes fewer laws on the latter (Saudi Gazette, 2023).

Even though online-only newspapers need to be licensed, the state is less likely to censor them. As a result, there is a difference in the journalistic roles played by reporters in traditional newspapers compared to those in online-only publications. With greater flexibility, journalists in online-only outlets are more likely to take on the watchdog role, holding those in power accountable. On the other hand, journalists in traditional newspapers are more likely to act as loyal facilitators, sharing information that aligns with state interests. To investigate this issue, this study conducted a content analysis of news stories posted on X by news outlets in Saudi Arabia, examining differences in journalistic role performance and engagement between traditional newspapers and online-only news sources.

2. Literature Review:

X is among the most prominent social networks, with over 500 million monthly active users as of 2024 and a significant focus on news sharing (Pew Research Center, 2023; Demand Sage, 2024). The platform enables millions of users to interact daily and discuss contemporary societal issues. Numerous studies highlight that X offers users a platform to engage with the global audience, seek new followers, conduct research, and stay updated with worldwide events. According to recent research, X remains a central hub for news consumption, with 53% of its users regularly accessing news on the platform (Pew Research Center, 2023). Users can maintain public, asynchronous conversations via various methods, including text messages, websites, and mobile devices (Mathews et al., 2022; OUP, 2023).

According to the Pew Research Center (2023), many news organizations use social media platforms, especially X (formerly Twitter), to attract active online users and engage with the content they release daily. Studies have shown a positive relationship between the adoption of social media by newspapers and increased online traffic, suggesting that X is a significant tool for attracting and maintaining online audiences and followers (Anderson & Caumont, 2014). The adoption of X by newspapers appears to be independent of any specific shocks to online traffic (Kalsnes, 2016). It is better explained when controlling for factors such as the quality of the newspaper and trends over time. While newspaper accounts on X significantly impact the news field, many news organizations also adopt other social media platforms to maintain their online news traffic and social media presence (Newman et al., 2023; Ofcom, 2023).

In Al-Khalifa's (2012) analysis, four types of X users are identified: daily chatters, information sharers, news reporters, and conversationalists. Daily chatters are consistently engaged, sharing opinions and participating in daily discussions. Information sharers, including media houses and media accounts, play a crucial role in disseminating specific information. News reporters, primarily news and newspaper accounts, are responsible for delivering crucial updates. Conversationalists engage in

comment sections, actively participating in conversations about posted content (Al-Khalifa, 2012).

Previous research has brought to the fore that X's interactive features significantly amplify user engagement, especially during real-time events (Hermida, 2010). Moreover, the platform's design fosters rapid information dissemination, as tweets can swiftly reach large audiences through retweets (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010). Furthermore, studies have substantiated that X is a pivotal tool for breaking news, often surpassing traditional media in reporting significant events (Bruno, 2011). This immediacy and accessibility underscore X's role as a primary news source for its users.

In 2015, the influential study by Rosenstiel, Sonderman, Loker, Ivancin, and Kjarval highlighted the profound impact of X on people's news consumption habits. Their in-depth research uncovered how X users and audiences engage with the platform, the influence of promoted tweets and advertising on news consumption, and how influential figures leverage X to gain followers. The study, involving approximately 4,700 social media users in the United States, revealed the overwhelming prevalence of X compared to other social media platforms. Notably, the study found that X is the primary hub for users' engagement with news and that X users tend to be younger than users of other social media platforms.

The findings have brought to light that an impressive 74% of X users access the site daily for their news fix. In comparison, an even higher 75% of X news users actively follow individual writers, commentators, and journalists. What is more, the study revealed that a significant 51% of non-X users had encountered tweets related to X, sourced from a variety of channels including newspapers (8%), internet search results (12%), X.com without signing in (22%), news articles (27%), friends (33%), and television (45%) (Rosenstiel, Sonderman, Loker, Ivancin, & Kjarval, 2015).

1. Use of social media by online newspapers in Saudi Arabia

Arab countries have witnessed a remarkable surge in the popularity of X. In Saudi Arabia, the number of X users skyrocketed from approximately 115,000 in mid-2011 to around 390,000 by mid-2012 (Al-Khalifa, 2012). A subsequent survey in 2014 revealed that this number had surged to 5.4 million (Salem, 2017). By 2018, the number of X users in Saudi Arabia had further increased to 9.9 million, demonstrating the platform's continuous expansion in the region (Statista Research Department, 2019). Social media is experiencing rapid growth, with X emerging as the leading platform for microblogging, particularly in Saudi Arabia (Al-Khalifa, 2012). This platform has become instrumental in spreading political news (Al-Khalifa, 2012). X has seen a surge in popularity, reaching 150 million daily visits in recent years (BBC, 2014). Its rapid growth and widespread use make it a crucial platform for accessing and sharing news (Al Jazeera, 2023).

As Al-Saggaf and Simmons (2015) highlighted, studying social media in Saudi Arabia provides two crucial insights. Firstly, traditional media's communication with the government is heavily controlled, limiting direct public discourse. In contrast, social media has empowered citizens to express their concerns more freely. For

instance, during the severe flooding in 2011, numerous tweets about the disaster circulated online, leading many Saudis to engage in discussions that held authorities accountable (Al-Saggaf & Simmons, 2015). Usually, amid crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, social media has proven invaluable for fostering direct communication between health officials and the public. This has increased transparency and better compliance with health guidelines (PLOS ONE, 2023). It demonstrates the pivotal role of social media in crisis communication and its capacity to shape public behavior and policy. Social media platforms like X have thus become essential tools for fostering communication and advocating for societal change due to their potential to drive social transformation (Al-Saggaf & Simmons, 2015).

The attention given to X by journalists, especially in Saudi Arabia, is remarkable. This platform is preferred over other social media platforms for publishing newspapers. However, the impact of journalistic roles has yet to be thoroughly evaluated. The focus on Arab nations is warranted, as the influence of social media platforms is particularly significant in these countries. A 2014 survey revealed that Saudi Arabia had over 2.4 million X users, surpassing X usage in the Arab region (BBC, 2014). Furthermore, recent studies emphasize the growing importance of social media for news dissemination in Saudi Arabia, highlighting its role in shaping public opinion and promoting transparency (Al-Rawi, 2023).

2.The Journalistic Role Approach

The study of journalistic role conception has emphasized understanding how journalists prioritize and shape societal information, which is crucial for analyzing journalistic cultures (Humanes, Alcolea-Díaz, López-del-Ramo, & Mellado, 2023). Developing a belief system is essential for any occupational group to claim professional status and provide meaningful work, reflecting the ideals and legitimacy of journalistic practices (Humanes et al., 2023). The evaluative concepts are the skills and means that distinguish different journalistic roles from one another.

Journalists play essential roles that embody the profession's core values, such as truth, accuracy, fairness, impartiality, and humanity. According to Mellado, Hellmueller, and Weaver (2016), journalists wield significant societal influence, playing crucial roles as information disseminators, interpreters, adversaries, and populist mobilizers. Their role as information disseminators involves providing factual reports to the public, a responsibility that directly impacts public perception. Their interpretive role entails analyzing and explaining the significance of news events, providing a lens through which the public can understand complex issues. In their adversarial role, journalists act as watchdogs, holding those in power accountable and ensuring a fair and just society. Furthermore, as populist mobilizers, journalists have the power to shape political agendas, a testament to their influence, and provide platforms for public engagement in political debates and issues of public interest, thereby fostering a participatory democracy (Mellado et al., 2016).

Journalists serve as interpreters, breaking down complex policies and issues for their readers. They also play an adversarial role, fearlessly challenging individuals in power and uncovering any wrongdoing in their administration. Furthermore,

journalists are crucial in disseminating and sharing news content with the public. These are just a few of the pivotal roles scholars have thoroughly explored concerning journalists. In his 2016 research, Vos emphasizes the adaptable nature of journalistic roles shaped by historical context. When examining the historical aspects of the journalistic role approach, three key characteristics emerge the interconnectedness of roles, the evolution of roles over time, and the specific functions of each role. The interconnectedness of roles highlights the flexible nature of journalists' intentions and actions.

It is important to recognize that internal journalistic practices do not solely determine the development and execution of journalistic roles but are also significantly influenced by external social and political factors. This dynamic interaction results in continuous redefinition and adaptation of journalistic roles to meet society's changing demands (Mellado et al., 2017). The flexibility and adaptability of these roles, as argued by Hanitzsch (2007), are vital for ensuring journalism's continued relevance and impact across different cultural and historical contexts.

Journalistic ideals can be tailored to fit the performance of these roles. For example, in the interpretative role, journalists can be crucial in explaining complex concepts and policies to the public. This role is just one of many that journalists fulfill, highlighting the dynamic nature of their work (Vos, 2016). The evolution of roles over time demonstrates that journalistic roles have a limited lifespan and change as that lifespan ends (Vos, 2016). Many journalistic roles have evolved over time, possibly due to prolonged periods allowing for significant transformations. These developments have led to a professional shift within the field (Vos, 2016).

Furthermore, certain roles within journalism have different lifespans due to various factors, including advancements in technology and shifts in societal expectations. According to Vos (2016), journalism historically served a prophetic role, where journalists made predictions in some of their articles, such as horoscopes. However, this prophetic role has largely become outdated. Initially associated with providing divine interpretations of events, the prophetic role gradually transformed as journalism adopted a more secular outlook, emphasizing factual reporting and analysis over spiritual interpretations (Vos, 2016). Atlay (2014) argues that these predictions have had a significant economic and social impact, which is one of the reasons for the evolution of this role over time.

This shift reflects the broader trend of roles adapting to maintain relevance in changing contexts, such as the transition from religious to secular motivations in reporting. Additionally, the watchdog role, a testament to the resilience and endurance of journalism, has enjoyed a longer lifespan due to its adaptability and alignment with democratic principles, illustrating how some roles can persist by evolving under new conditions (Vos, 2016).

Journalism plays a critical role in society by fulfilling normative and empirical functions expected by the public. Journalists seek guidance and legitimacy from various reference groups, such as senior journalists, political entities, the specific

audience of the news medium, the community, newsroom colleagues, and proprietors and management (Mellado et al., 2015). These reference groups influence journalists' professional roles and legitimacy in their societal functions. It is important to note that the roles of journalists can vary not only between different countries but also among different generations of journalists due to changes in careers, social dynamics, technology, and workplace environments in the journalism field. This dynamic nature of journalistic roles reflects the continuous evolution and adaptation required in the profession to meet changing societal needs (Vos, 2016; Mellado et al., 2015).

The advent of digital media has brought about a seismic shift in the landscape of journalism, significantly broadening the scope of journalistic responsibilities. Journalists are now actively engaging with their audiences and harnessing multimedia platforms in unprecedented ways. This transformative shift has led to the emergence of innovative journalistic models and practices, with a strong focus on audience interaction and the integration of digital tools in news production (Humanes et al., 2023). These developments underscore the adaptability and resilience of journalistic practices in response to technological advancements and evolving societal expectations (Humanes et al., 2023).

The roles of professional journalists, as outlined by Mellado in 2015, are not just a list, but a diverse and complex set of dimensions: intervention, watchdog, loyal facilitator, service, infotainment, and civic. Each of these roles is not just a label, but a unique aspect of the journalistic voice, linked to intervention, which involves using the first person, adjectives, demands or proposals, interpretation, and taking sides (Mellado, 2015). Power relations give rise to loyal facilitators and watchdogs, whose responsibilities are not just tasks, but crucial functions. The watchdog's responsibilities include critiques, questions, conflict, denouncing, investigative reporting, external research, and covering trials and processes. The loyal facilitator is not just a supporter, but a promoter of regional and national policies, maintaining a positive image of the political and economic elite, supporting institutional activities, highlighting the nation's progress and triumphs, fostering patriotism, and promoting the nation (Humanes et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the service role provides the audience with practical information and advice on daily life. In contrast, the infotainment role engages the public by focusing on sensationalism and emotional content (Mellado, 2015). On the other hand, the civic role, which is not just a role but a responsibility, emphasizes educating the public about their rights and responsibilities and encouraging their active participation in civic life (Humanes et al., 2023). This dimension empowers the audience, making them an integral part of the journalistic process.

The audience approach comprises three essential elements: service, infotainment, and civics. Service provides valuable tips, advocating for consumers, and addressing daily issues. Infotainment covers various engaging topics, including emotions, scandals, and personalization. Civics involves citizen issues, credibility, education about rights and responsibilities, and supporting citizen movements (Mellado, 2015). These distinct roles allow researchers to analyze diverse journalistic approaches in news stories. Moreover, the service role characterizes digital native

newspapers, emphasizing practical information and advice (Humanes et al., 2023). The infotainment role, prevalent in popular newspapers, often integrates entertainment elements to maintain audience interest (Mellado & Lagos, 2014). The civic role focuses on the audience as citizens, providing information on their rights and responsibilities and encouraging participation in civic life (Mellado et al., 2021).

Hanitzsch et al. (2011) conducted a comprehensive comparative survey involving 1,800 journalists across 18 countries to understand their role perceptions, ethical views, and epistemological orientations. Their findings reveal that globally, monitoring the government, maintaining non-involvement and detachment, and providing political information are considered essential journalistic functions (Hanitzsch et al., 2011). Additionally, the study highlighted that values such as factualness, impartiality, adherence to universal ethical principles, and information reliability are internationally valued, though their importance varies across different nations. The significance of separating opinion from facts, objectivism, and the degree of interventionism also differ across regions. Western journalists are generally less supportive of actively promoting ideas and more inclined to adhere to universal principles (Hanitzsch et al., 2011).

In contrast, journalists from non-Western contexts are more interventionist in their role perceptions and demonstrate greater flexibility in their ethical views (Hanitzsch et al., 2011). Also, the research highlights that the differences in journalistic roles and practices are influenced by the specific social, political, and cultural environments in which journalists operate. This leads to a rich diversity in journalistic cultures worldwide (Mellado et al., 2012). This diversity necessitates a nuanced understanding of how these roles manifest in practice and how external pressures and internal newsroom dynamics shape them (Hanitzsch et al., 2011).

3. Hypotheses/Research Questions:

Considering the literature on journalistic role performance and how that might play out in the context of news published on X in Saudi Arabia, the following hypothesis and research questions are proposed:

H1a- News stories tweeted on X from a Saudi traditional newspaper will exemplify more service roles than stories posted from a Saudi online news outlet.

H1b- News stories posted on X from a Saudi online news outlet will exemplify more watchdog roles than stories posted from a Saudi traditional newspaper.

Q1- What is the most performed journalistic role exemplified in news stories posted on X from both types of news outlets?

Q2- Which type of news outlet (traditional newspaper or online news site) in Saudi Arabia has higher engagement levels on X?

4. Method:

The study employs a quantitative content analysis focused on news stories tweeted by two Saudi news outlets, Sabq and AlRiyadh. These two outlets were selected for a some reasons. First, they are both pioneering news outlets in the Kingdom. Second, both outlets established X accounts around the same time and have strong followings. Sabq established its X account in July 2009, two years after it

started publishing on the internet (Sabq, 2020). According to its X account, the news outlet had about 13 million followers as of February 2020. AlRiyadh has also been active on X. It established its X account in August 2008 (AlRiyadh, 2020), and had about 4.5 million followers in February 2020. A final key reason why the researcher settled on the two news outlets is because of their distinctions. AlRiyadh is a traditional print newspaper that has been publishing since May 1965 (Alzahrani, 2016). AlRiyadh's newspaper and X account are separate entities. In contrast, Sabq's news content is purely online. In the Kingdom, Sabq is categorized as an e-newspaper, while AlRiyadh is categorized as a traditional newspaper (Al Maghlooth, 2014). The government inserts its notices in the print newspaper, and some government departments and ministries subscribe to traditional newspapers (Alghasha'ami 2014). Therefore, the revenue sources of the two news outlets differ.

The content analysis examined tweets published by the two newspapers from April 2016 through January 2020 that linked to a full and current (i.e., published at the time of the post) news story. The analysis excluded tweets that commented on the news but did not link to a full news story. The research focused on this period because it aligns with Saudi Arabia's mission to achieve certain economic aspirations and transform the lives of its citizens through Saudi Vision 2030, a plan whose themes include the realization of a thriving economy, a vibrant society, and an ambitious nation (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2020). The plan describes economic reforms aimed at strengthening the Kingdom's economic power and transforming the economy to ensure that other sectors beyond the oil industry will thrive (The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2020). Through the initiative, the government also seeks to create employment opportunities for its citizens and initiate reforms in other sectors such as defense and tourism. Vision 2030 is also pegged to the Kingdom's need to embrace more accountability and transparency.

Data for the analysis were collected from the X feeds of the two newspapers using an open-source crawling program written in Python by a range of developers (Henrique, 2017). The code was amended to reflect the nature of the study (e.g., time frame and the two X accounts used). The final Python code was further modified to alter the decoding mechanism so that it could retrieve Arabic tweets. Previous studies have utilized the same data collection method (See Albishri, Tarasevich, Proverbs, Kioussis, & Alahmari, 2019; Ernala, Rizvi, Birnbaum, Kane, & De Choudhury, 2017; Napitu, Bijaksana, Trisetarso, & Heryadi, 2017; Tavazoei, Conversano, & Mola, 2017; Uysal, Yumusak, Oztoprak, & Dogdu, 2017). X data mining resulted in a large number of tweets (156,598), and a systematic random sample of 500 news stories from the two news accounts was pulled and analyzed. Every 280th tweet from each population sample was coded until the researchers reached 500 tweets (250 from AlRiyadh and 250 from Sabq).

1. Variables:

The codebook in the present study was adapted from an existing codebook used in several journalistic role performance studies (Journalistic Role Performance Project, n.d.). The researchers coded each tweet for the following initial variables: the posting date and the public response via digital prosumer metrics, including the

number of retweets and number likes/hearts received by each news story tweeted. Tweets were further analyzed for the presence or absence of six professional roles: Interventionist, Watchdog, Loyal Facilitator, Service, Infotainment, and Civic.

The operationalization of each role was borrowed from the Journalistic Role Performance Project (n.d.). The Interventionist variable concerns whether the journalist has an explicit voice in the story or not; in other words, in the news story, does the journalist use an interpretative reporting style and call for action? The Watchdog variable focuses on ensuring that news content protects the public interest and seeks to hold elites accountable. To achieve this, journalists do investigative reporting, interpret for the public information on judicial and administrative processes, and offer constructive criticism. The Loyal Facilitator variable has two facets: journalists cooperating with those in power and treating the information they get from them as credible and supporting the nation-state through positive coverage of events taking place in their country. This role also includes promoting a sense of belonging. The Service role variable focuses on the readers' self-interest. This includes reviewing how news coverage impacts readers' everyday lives and providing consumer information. The Infotainment variable uses narrative discourse to entertain and thrill the public. Finally, the Civic variable analyzes the connection between journalism, the citizenry, and public life in terms of how citizens react to news content, and the impact of journalism on social development and education of citizens about their duties and rights.

2. Inter-coder reliability:

For an intercoder reliability test, two trained individuals fluent in Arabic coded the same 10 percent of news story samples from Sabq's and AlRiyadh's X accounts. Intercoder reliability was determined using Krippendorff's Alpha. After several rounds of training, the intercoder reliability scores for the journalistic role variables were: Intervention role, 0.73; Watchdog role, 0.81; Loyal-facilitator role, 1; Service role, 0.92; Infotainment role 1; and Civic role, 1.

3.Results:

The first hypothesis, H1a, suggested that news stories posted on X from the traditional newspaper AlRiyadh would exemplify and more Service roles than stories posted by the online news outlet Sabq. This was tested using a Chi-square test of independence. The number of tweets that exemplified the Service role was the same for both sources, 25 each, or 10% of each sample. The Chi-square test revealed no significant difference in the mean number of tweets exemplifying the Service role for the two news outlets.

H1b suggested that news stories posted on X from the online news outlet (Sabq) would exemplify more Watchdog roles than stories posted by the traditional newspaper (AlRiyadh). The number of tweets that exemplified the Watchdog role by Sabq (38) was greater than that of Al-Riyadh (31). However, the Chi-square test revealed no significant difference in the number of tweets exemplifying the Service role for the two news outlets.

RQ1 asked which journalistic role was most performed in the news stories posted on X from both types of news outlets. The analysis revealed that 27.8% of the

tweets depicted the Loyal Facilitator role, 17.6% depicted the Civic role, 16.4% had an Interventionist role, 14.4% an Infotainment role, 13.8% the Watchdog role, and 10% the Service role. The Loyal Facilitator role was the most commonly performed role, both among all news stories and also when the two news outlets were examined individually, as shown in Figure 1.

Tweet Role	Present (%)
Loyal Facilitator Role	27.8%
Civic Role	17.6%
Interventionist Role	16.4%
Infotainment Role	14.4%
Watchdog Role	13.8%
Service Role	10%

Table 1: Presence of journalistic roles in all news stories

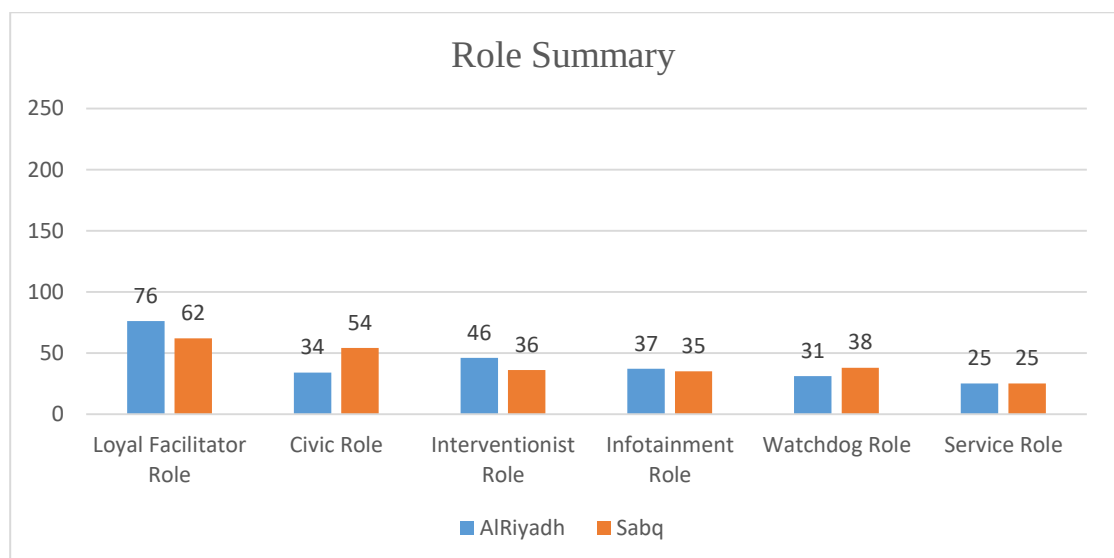


Figure 1: Role frequencies separated by news outlet

RQ2 asked which type of news outlet (traditional newspaper or online news site) had higher engagement levels on X. The mean number of retweets was 44.14, while the average number of likes was 48.76. Some tweets had 0 retweets and 0 likes. The total number of retweets was 22,069, and the total number of likes was 24,378. Differences in the engagement levels of the tweets between the two news outlets, indicated by the number of retweets and the number of likes, was measured through the use of independent samples t-tests. The analysis revealed that Sabq news posts had significantly more retweets ($M = 19,536$, $SD = 132.60$) than Al-Riyadh's news posts ($M = 2,533$, $SD = 15.38$), $t(255.7) = 8.04$, $p < .001$. Similarly, the analysis of the sum of likes revealed that Sabq news tweets received significantly more likes ($M = 21,162$, $SD = 123.96$) than Al-Riyadh's news tweets ($M = 3,216$, $SD = 13.71$), $t(255.09) = 9.08$, $p < .001$.

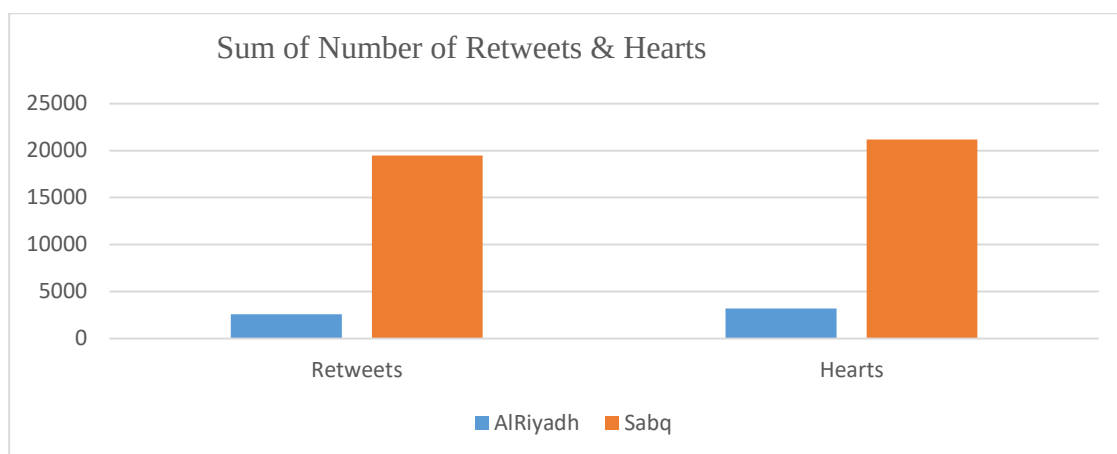


Figure 2: Sum of number of retweets and Hearts by news outlet

4. Discussion and Conclusion:

The current study sought to determine how various journalistic roles are performed by comparing news stories posted on X by traditional newspaper and online news accounts in Saudi Arabia. The study contributes to the state of the journalists' knowledge in Saudi Arabia by highlighting the performance of the journalistic roles of the two media outlets on X to draw attention to the differences. Therefore, the study suggests that the journalists' performance needs to be revealed to advance the understanding of the journalistic role performance in Saudi Arabia for academics and practitioners as well.

The findings revealed that tweets from the online news site, Sabq, get more engagement than tweets from the traditional newspaper, Al-Riyadh, by a statistically significant margin. Also, the analysis revealed no significant difference in the mean number of tweets exemplifying the Service and Watchdog roles between the two news outlets. Lastly, the Loyal Facilitator role was the most commonly performed.

As reflected in the results of the Chi square test, there was no significant difference in the number of tweets by Sabq and Al-Riyadh that exemplified the Watchdog role, as the two news outlets operate under the same restrictions imposed by Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture and Information. This may be the explanation of why journalists consider themselves more in a cooperative and supportive position in their government and official policy ties. In general, non-western media outlets' performance tended to be more flexible in its views towards ethics, which has been emphasized in Hanitzsch et al. (2011) that impartiality and reliability of information varies from nation to nation.

Despite the difference not being statistically significant, the means showed that news stories posted on X by the online news outlet exemplified the Watchdog role more than stories posted by the traditional newspaper, which emphasizes the traditional newspaper's Loyal Facilitator role, which attracts less engagement on X than tweets from online news sites like Sabq. The lack of proper restrictions on online

content provides a window for individuals to express themselves more easily online through social media platforms such as X. Governments generally focus primarily on traditional newspaper content and less on online journalism (Alnajirani et al, 2018).

Considering other journalistic roles across both news outlets, the Loyal Facilitator role was exemplified in 27.8% of tweets — more than any other role — signifying power relations in which the journalistic role in Saudi Arabia is inclined more to the promotion of national policies. This role highlights the Kingdom's triumphs and progress to promote patriotism among the citizens (Mellado, 2015). This portrays the supportive nature of non-western media outlets that are involved in the active promotion of ideas and social change and adhere less to the universal principles of journalism.

Sabq news gets significantly more engagement than Al-Riyadh – almost four-fold – since it focuses on social journalism that aims to encourage citizens to engage in societal affairs. Perhaps online news accounts have higher engagement than traditional newspaper accounts because they are premised on providing instant access to diverse news stories that greatly benefit the consumers. As noted in Sambrook (2010), online news sites allow audiences to interact with journalists, and in some cases participate in actually producing the news (unlike traditional media such as newspapers).

Although this study has captured the journalistic role performance on X, one of its limitations is that it has failed to address the credibility issue. The advent of X and other social media platforms has changed the scope of news and given both the public and journalists more power to exploit their freedom of expression (Alnajirani, Bajnaid, Elyas & Masa'deh, 2018). These developments have shaped the concept of social/digital media engagement and free expression in the country but cast doubt on some of the news content published on social media platforms. Traditional media, new media, and citizen journalists (including bloggers) are competing for audiences across the globe. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, blogs came into existence in 2003 and have been competing with traditional media since then (Alnajirani et al, 2018). The consequence is that some news is disseminated to merely to attract the attention of the public and may lack credibility. Further, this study is limited in that it only examined data from two news outlets and the results cannot be generalized to all online or traditional newspapers in the country.

Increasing numbers of people in Saudi Arabia continue to gain access to online news content. By the end of 2016, for instance, the number of X users in Saudi Arabia had already passed the 9 million marks, with trends showing that the number was likely to increase in the future (Alotaibi, 2017). Similar trends have been replicated in other countries. This means that a fake or compromised tweet can be accessed by millions of people. In Arab countries, governments generally tend to provide news outlets with content they wish to disseminate to the public, which sometimes casts doubt on the credibility of the news shared on online platforms by traditional media (Alotaibi, 2017). This study has focused on two major news outlets – Sabq and Al-Riyadh – which are based in Saudi Arabia. Generally, the credibility of the X posts from the media outlets in most countries is dependent on several factors, including the

media outlets' reputation for disseminating credible news. Other factors that come into play in regard to the credibility of online content include the ethical standards that the media outlet adheres to (Alotaibi, 2017).

A final limitation of the present study is that it did not establish how X acts to maintain its own credibility. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, X has been taking action to reduce the spread of fake news in the Kingdom through its platform. In 2019, X removed over 5,000 accounts suspected of disseminating unreliable information (New York Post, 2019). Future research should explore the credibility of news in Saudi Arabia, comparing online newspapers with traditional newspapers to investigate if this factor affects the journalists' performance and the level of audience engagement with news on social media. Another limitation is that the news contents was only obtained from one social media platform, X. Al-Riyadh and Sabq have accounts on Facebook, X, YouTube, and Instagram. An analysis of multiple social media platforms would draw a complete image of the real situation. Future studies could compare journalistic roles of the news content on various social media sites, such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube as news outlets rely on them to reach a larger audience.

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