How the Media Covered the Issue of Women Driving in Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Saudi Arabia is considered as the largest country in the Arabian Peninsula and the second largest Arab state. Saudi Arabia is believed to be the only country in the world that forbid women from driving cars. Although Saudi women have played crucial roles in the development of many aspects of Saudi society, such as education, politics, and social changes, Saudi women still struggle to gain some of their rights, like driving cars. Throughout history, feminists in Saudi Arabia have launched many campaigns to defy driving ban by utilizing different strategies, including the use of social media. Women activists in Saudi Arabia consider social media as a significant platform and a safe place to express their opinions, perceptions, and identities in a conservative society. Therefore, social media, particularly Twitter becomes as a primary channel for Saudi women activists to gain supporters, discuss feminine issues, and ask for their rights in Saudi society. The issue of driving ban in Saudi Arabia has attracted both local and global mainstream media as well as human rights organizations for a long period of time resulting in a huge pressure on Saudi authority to amend the law and allow women to drive.

Thus, this paper aims to look at how major Western newspapers have covered Saudi women driving issue and to compare it with Saudi newspapers coverage during one of the most important Saudi women driving campaigns, October 26th driving campaign, in 2013. In this paper, the researcher incorporated a content analysis method, specifically textual analysis, for more than 20 articles of local and global online newspapers that discussed Saudi women driving issue, such as the guardian, CNN, Reuters, USA Today, BBC, NBC, ABCNEWS, the Independent, and Al-Arabiya. This study is based on the collection of all the news and articles that have been written from September 24, 2013 and until November 5, 2013. This period of time is selected because it is conjoined with the campaign that calls women to defy the ban in Oct 26, 2013 in Saudi Arabia. For news and article collection process, Google search engine were used to find the news and articles by entering some key terms, such as women, driving in Saudi Arabia and women defy driving ban in Saudi Arabia.

The results of this study suggested that there were significant differences in the media coverage of Saudi women driving issue between the local and global online newspapers. Almost
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All of the articles that have been written by Western newspapers in regards to Saudi women driving just covered one side of the issue. Particularly, all articles addressed and covered the opinions of Saudi women who support women driving and overlooked the opponents of women driving in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, most Western newspapers coverage stated that banning Saudi women from driving is a violation of their human rights. Unlike Western newspapers coverage, Saudi local newspapers coverage were more balanced in providing the opinions of both sides. Moreover, the researcher realized that most Western newspapers support women to drive and defy the ban in the Kingdom without paying attention to the consequences of motivating women to break the law in Saudi Arabia. Also, most global newspapers have covered this issue from Western ideologies and perspectives ignoring the differences between the two cultures.

This study suggests that the media is an important tool to convey the activists’ messages to the targeted audience during any social changes or movements. Thus, the media should present both sides in any social movements in order to provide a better, and fair understanding of the problem and to help people to overcome and solve the issue of concern.