“Do sneeze in my Face”- The Rejection of Anti-MERS Public Health Messages by Saudi Arabian Camel Farmers

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In 2014, the disease known as MERS, or Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, spread to near epidemic levels in Saudi Arabia. After an official inquiry, camels were found to be one of the main sources for the development of MERS. Almost ubiquitous in Saudi Arabia, camels have had an important role in the culture and history of that country. In an attempt to bring the rate of contraction under control, the government of Saudi Arabia told farmers to not have contact with their livestock. As a means of protesting this public health announcement, the farmers took to social media to post pictures and video of themselves kissing their camels. They claimed that the camels were completely safe, and that the government could not tell them to not socialize with the animals.

This paper seeks to analyze the rejection of a government-produced healthcare campaign, as well as the utilization of social media, from a Foucauldian perspective. Specifically, the discourse that is present between the government and the farmers and the power that is created by the posting of the images and videos will be analyzed. As it is a popular and proven method for uncovering the constructions of reality that permeate society, Foucauldian discourse analysis is appropriate lens to utilize.

The posting of the anti-camel avoidance images and video called into question the reality that was put forth by the Saudi government. The farmers asserted their own reality, one that was more in-line with the traditional identities that they held onto. However, their method for doing so entailed the use of modern technology, social media. This shows the ability of social media to allow for these identities to be brought forth into the public sphere, and used as a means of regaining power over oneself. Additionally, these findings have implications for global healthcare initiatives as they move into the 21st century, by showcasing the need to take audience world-view into account when making the statements such as the Saudi Government.