The History of Television and Its Impact on Saudi Society

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Introduction

There is no doubt that we live in a world that depends heavily on technology in various fields of life. We use many different types of technologies and rely on them to accomplish many things. Our current generation differs from the generations before us due to the abundance of technologies such as the Internet, television, radio, cinema, and the merging of these technologies with each other. When I see the development of our dependence on these technologies daily, the following question comes to mind: To what extent have these technologies affected our society? According to Warren, McLuhan and Mumford believe that there are many “consequences of electrical technology for contemporary culture and society” (Warren et al., 1997, p. 35). I know that the answer for my question will be a bit longer if I tried to cover more than one type of technology, so in this paper, the focus will be on the history of television and its impact on Saudi society. In the beginning, I will provide a background discussion and explanation of the topic’s relevance and importance, which will lead to questions that I would like to explore. After that, I will discuss the sources that I have researched and their review of the medium’s historical development. I will also apply these sources to analyze my case study and discuss some issues related to development. At the end, I will provide my personal position on this topic.

We live in a world that contains many different kinds of media. Some of these media are less used, and some have dominated the way we live, such as the Internet. Television is one of these mediums that is still used today. The history of television is essential because it contains many different aspects, such as the economic, political, and technological aspects. Television, like other types of media, has an influence on many elements. Among the elements that have a higher impact on television is politics. According to Coffin, “Six out of ten members of the panel judged television to be the source of information, most helpful to them in making their voting decisions, and three-fourths believed that TV had exerted an influence on the election” (Coffin, 1955, p. 637). Also, television can impact the economic side greatly. According to Coffin, “Television’s impact on the national economy includes the direct economic contribution of television as a major industry” (Coffin, 1955, p. 640). Besides, television has a significant influence on different cultures and societies. According to Kellner, “Network television serves as an instrument of social control, promoting capitalist commodities and consumerist values, social conformity, law and order, authority figures, and the family” (Kellner, 1981, p. 31) as well as the religious aspect of television in some countries. Kellner believes that “television and the mass media are instrumental in promoting a new consumer ethic and hedonistic lifestyle that contradicts the older capitalist protestant production ethic with its emphasis on hard work, saving, delayed gratification, the family, religion, and other traditional values” (Kellner, 1981, p. 44). We can say that television has an influence on politics, cultures, economics, and religions. These influences differ according to the culture and the time that television was established in
these cultures. Because of my affiliation with the Saudi culture, the following question occurred to me: What is the history of Saudi television, and to what extent has it affected Saudi society, and what are the difficulties that Saudi television has faced?

TV history

In 1920, there was an emphasis on the topic of television. The crucial players on this topic were “Edouard Belin, a pioneer of phototelegraphy in France, Charles Francis Jenkins in America, the young Hungarian experimenter Dionys Mihaly, and the central figure in this review—John Logie. Baird’ in England” (Shiers, 1975, p. 388). The inventors suffered greatly due to the lack of tools, and many companies provided some assistance to develop televisions to be ready. In 1926, John Baird invented an infrared television system to capture images in the dark. After World War II, television became a decisive element in entertainment, advertising, shaping public opinion, and cultural dominance. According to Kellner, “American television has been instrumental in selling American values, commodities, and ways of life to other countries, and is thus a major force of cultural hegemony” (Kellner, 1981, p. 32).

Television faced some difficulties at its inception due to the frequency of programs and quality, but by the 1960s, television had evolved as well as its content. As Kellner said, “Television is perceived as a commercial medium which seeks to attract, entertain, and pacify its audience, while selling commercial goods and ideology” (Kellner, 1981, p. 39). Television at that time became one of the most powerful forms of entertainment by attracting the audience with what we can call “free entertainment,” and this entertainment was television earning “enormous sociocultural power over its audience” (Kellner, 1981, p. 39). This method has influenced different cultures. According to Kellner, television was “increasingly shaping basic attitudes, beliefs, values, and behavior” of the viewers. These influences differ according to the type of culture. According to Havick, “McLuhan insight is that a medium’s impact, particularly a new medium, depends on the nature of the current culture” (Havick, 2000, p. 281). Also, not all countries entered the television simultaneously, which led to the domination of some international cultures such as America, so American television’s history differs from Saudi television. In my research, I will focus on Saudi television’s history and its impact on Saudi society.

The history of Saudi television

The beginning of Saudi television

Television entered a particular class of society before others. In 1955, “the United States Air Force Base in Dhahran also had its own English-language TV service” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 136). In 1957, the Arab American Oil Company (Aramco) brought TV service to its employees in Dhahran. King Faisal (the third ruler of Saudi Arabia) was in Boston, “recovering from an operation in a hospital,” and was impressed by television at that time. According to Boyd, “In 1963, a royal decree was announced to the Saudi people authorizing construction of television stations in Jidda, the largest Red Sea port city, and Riyadh, the interior capital” (Boyd, 1970,
Television entered Saudi Arabia for everyone without exception in 1965. According to AlGarni, “NBC International provided technical and operational assistance to Saudi Arabia to establish its television service in 1965 in a package of assistance which also included training schemes and programming for a number of years” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 43).

The reasons for Saudi Arabia to have television

Because of possessing oil, Saudi Arabia had to have television services to establish an identity locally and internationally. According to Garni, “This would serve two functions it would effect a greater sense of untie and identity and it would promote the image of Saudi Arabia internationally, [and] it would assist Saudi Arabia in maintaining its position as the major center of Islam” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 133). Also, King Faisal believed that television would reduce illiteracy, provide entertainment, and transmit the social heritage between generations.

Besides, the Saudi government wanted television to strengthen the political sector. According to Boyd, “Saudi Arabia, believed a strong radio organization to be a necessary form of self defense against hostile regional radio propaganda” (Boyd, 1988, p. 25). King Faisal also believed that television is an essential tool for the royal family. According to Kraidy, “Television is a powerful ritual instrument in the hand of Saudi Arabia’s rulers” (Kraidy, 2009, p. 350).

The development of Saudi television

In 1965, the Saudi government contracted with the American Paul Hardman Company to establish two half-kilowatt plants in the capital city (Riyadh) and (Jeddah). On July 17, 1965, Saudi television started to broadcast some foreign programs such as Mickey Mouse. Even though television programs and producing live shows were scarce, Saudi television was the most exciting topic among the Saudi people. In 1968, three television stations were established in other cities, such as Dammam and Qassim.
In 1972, Saudi Arabia focused on developing television stations to be affiliated with the Intelsat satellite. At that time, the Saudi government needed to create a robust external identity, so the Saudi government suggested on Gulf Organization to make the Arabsat satellite project. Arab countries participated in this project to facilitate and improve forms of communication between the participating Arab countries. One of the signs of this project’s success is that in 1976, Saudi Arabia began broadcasting programs in color.

After the tremendous development of television in Saudi Arabia and making it easily accessible to most of society's strata, the Saudi government established the Riyadh Television Complex in 1983, with a cost estimated at 680 million pounds. At this time, the second Saudi channel was established, and it was broadcasting daily reports in English and French. The field of broadcasting and television in Saudi Arabia has been strengthened to become ready for local and international broadcasting. According to Boyd, “Saudi Arabia alone added 12 megawatts of mediumwave radio transmission power. Both during the day and at night it is possible to hear services from most Arab states” (Boyd, 1988, p. 26). This development aimed to achieve the highest ease of “reach both citizens and residents of other countries” (Boyd, 1988, p. 26).

The Saudi government focused on strengthening the foundations of Saudi television and neglected content production, which led to many problems with media production. These problems later affected Saudi society. According to Al-Garni, “Since the setting up of the television stations and setting up the television equipment were the dominant thoughts for Saudi officials, the content of programs was a secondary matter” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 139). At that time, Saudi society was a complex society that did not accept prejudice to religion in any
way, so it was challenging to provide television programs that fit the conservative society's needs. In my opinion, Saudi television faced many problems due to the culture of society.

Saudi television programs

At the beginning of the first broadcast days of the Saudi TV station, the broadcast time was short (two hours every day) due to the limited availability of content. According to Al-Garni, “Programs started at sunset with fifteen minutes of readings from the Holy Quran and sayings of the Prophet Mohammad, followed by readings from the daily newspaper for ten minutes. The rest of the time was divided between children’s programs, cartoons, slides, music, documentary films, and songs” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 144). The leading accreditation for programs on Saudi TV was from western countries, either by purchase or lease. The broadcast increased in the two Saudi channels until it reached 18 hours per day. Most of the content was imported from Egypt. “For a long time, STV depended heavily on an unalterable programming format consisting of cheap imports” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 145).

Advertising on Saudi television

In 1985 and 1986, advertisements were allowed on Saudi TV channels 1 and 2. The income from these commercials was considered as state income. According to Al-Garni, “all the income is transferred directly to the Ministry of Finance and National Economy as a national income” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 145). The Saudi government has taken steps to expand its control over Saudi television. According to Al-Garni, “In 1962, as a result of the development of media and due to the expansion of its responsibilities, the directorate was elevated by royal decree to the full status of Ministry. It is now called the Ministry of Information” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 146). The Ministry is fully controlling the censorship of any material on its channels, controlling newspapers and radio. The Saudi Ministry of Finance finances the Ministry of Information and obliges it to prepare and submit its annual budget as a package of Saudi ministries.

The Video Cassette Recorder and its impact on Saudi television

The video cassette recorder competed with Saudi television for several reasons, but the most important reason was the multiplicity of productive content from America, Europe, and Egypt. Also, “Most VCR material in the Middle East, like that in the rest of the developing world, is pirated” (Boyd, 1988, p. 27). The selling and rental prices were within reach. The cassette tape recorder was a source of concern for the Saudi government because it is possible that these pirated cassettes could be abused like what happened with the Iranian revolution in 1979. According to Boyd, “Of equal concern is the potential for cassettes to be used to disseminate subversive political or religious information” (Boyd, 1988, p. 27). The videocassette pressured the Saudi government to develop the field of television more and more.
Regulations of the Saudi Ministry of Information

Saudi television has suffered dramatically because of religious groups in Saudi Arabia. The Ministry of Information was forced to change some rules of Saudi television. The most important rule was revolved around the appearance of women on Saudi television. According to Al-Garni, “Women's appearances were confined to certain roles and certain types of programs, for example as hosts or guests in children's or women's shows” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 150). It was also necessary to follow the strict Islamic dress, cover the hair, and wear loose clothes to cover the entire body. Moreover, the Saudi government banned any Western films or programs from showing on its Saudi channel one and transferred them to the second Saudi channel.

In an attempt to control television media, the Saudi government established the Supreme Council for Media by royal order in 1981. This council made a vast media policy that suited Saudi society. The council consists of senior academics and officials in the Ministry of Information, headed by Minister of Interior Prince Naif bin Abdulaziz. According to Al-Garni, “The policy refers to the principles, goals, and objectives of print and broadcast media in Saudi Arabia. Emanating from Islam and based on its laws and beliefs, the policy aims at establishing belief in Allah and raising the intellectual, cultural, and moral levels of the Saudi citizens” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 152). The old policy was changed to become comprehensive and clear that aiming to develop Saudi society. The new policy focused on reducing the illiteracy rate among the Saudi people. According to Al-Garni, “Mass communication will deal directly and effectively to abolish illiteracy by adopting educational and scientific principles, dedicating educational programs to meet the needs of every age and mentality” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 153). Also, among the reforms in media policy, all media, including television, should be objective in presenting the facts and avoid exaggerations while guaranteeing freedom of expression.

This policy was written completely and comprehensively. It was concerned with the finer details, such as banning scenes that contain alcohol, indecent dress, any women’s sports, any religions other than Islam, any activity or reference to the Israeli religion, any scenes that related to betting or gambling, non-patriotic dance, and any “message that contradicts, opposes or criticizes Saudi rulers, the government and its principles and national policy” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 156). This policy led to reducing the opportunities for external production that contradict the policy, so it was necessary to search for an alternative to foreign programs and films that fit the people’s needs in terms of entertainment and religion and be compatible with the Saudi policy of media.

The Gulf Organization - based in Saudi Arabia - proposed establishing a production enterprise that would serve the common interests of the Gulf states. Their condition was that the production enterprise should use Gulf talent. According to Boyd, “They wanted productions dealing with Gulf cultural concerns in their own dialect” (Boyd, 1988, p. 29). The reason for proposing this partnership is that the Gulf states “share similar linguistic and conservative religious backgrounds, and are governed by ruling families with common defense goals” (Boyd, 1988, p. 26). According to Boyd, “The attempt to make state radio and television service
available throughout the Gulf area is a form of cultural and political communication” (Boyd, 1988, p. 26).

The impact of television on Saudi society

The entry of television into Saudi society has clearly affected the society, politics, and economy. According to Al-Garni, “It was apparent to any observer in Jeddah and Riyadh, that street traffic was very light during telecasting hours. People tend to accomplish their chores to free themselves to watch television. Some people used to crowd the store fronts to get a glimpse of something which was to change their social pattern profoundly” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 141). This high turnout on television indicates that there must be an impact on Saudi society. As I said before, television is like other types of mediums; all of these technologies affect societies, but these effects differ according to the medium, culture, and time. According to Havick, McLuhan believes that “a hot media technology introduced in a cool tribal culture tends to disrupt the traditional social ties, and it establishes new patterns of behavior and relationships” (Havick, 2000, p. 281). Reliance on international content was one of the biggest problems affecting Saudi society, especially religious groups. According to Al-Garni, “The heavy dependence on imported television productions and the relatively relaxed censorship rules, among other reasons, contributed to a number of violent reactions from the religious element” (Al-Garni, 2000, p. 151).

The entering of television into Saudi Arabia had a massive impact on Saudi society, but it continued to develop and grow due to the Saudi government's strategy and the policy established by the Saudi Ministry of Information. The problem was in the imported content. According to Al-Garni, “here is a widespread belief that the excessive importation of foreign cultural products, in this instance television programs, can damage or even destroy identities” and societies. (AlGarni, 2000, p. 3).

Objections and reactions of Saudi society

Even though the Saudi government attempted to develop television content to be compatible with Saudi society, there were several objections that led to the creation of many problems among society. King Faisal and the Ministry of Information tried to absorb the anger of religious groups by including religious programs on Saudi television, such as reading the Qur’an and hadiths, transmitting the five ritual prayers, the Grand Mosque, and many others. According to Al-Garni, King “Faisal stated that this public service is charged with great responsibilities since it has access into every house and comes in touch with every individual and every group of people. What is being broadcast or publicized through this service must serve our religion, Our homeland, and our people” (Al-Garni, 2000, p.140), but this was not enough for some religious groups in Saudi Arabia.

The woman’s appearance on Saudi TV led to the anger of the religious groups in Saudi Arabia, and they attacked the Saudi TV station in Riyadh, but the Saudi government took control of the situation at that time. This was not enough for some religious groups. In 1979 Juhayman Al-Otaibi and his group attacked the Grand Mosque in Mecca and occupied it. According to AlGarni, they “used the loudspeaker system to announce their demands pertaining to the
The unIslamic content of television programming" (Al-Garni, 2000, p.140). The Saudi government liberated the Grand Mosque after 15 days of occupation. Saudi television was developing rapidly, but religious groups influenced and slowed it. The occupation of the Grand Mosque incident affected not only television but also all Saudi society. The Saudi government backed down, fearing coups’ formation, so they tried to fulfill the extremist religious groups’ demands, and indeed this happened. This made the Saudi society more conservative and radical.

Due to the high demand for television, many Saudi businessmen and princes have resorted to investing in television. They focused their investment on non-Saudi channels for several reasons. The most important reason is that these channels are “target Saudi viewers from Beirut, Cairo, and Dubai, locations where Saudi censors do not hold sway” (Kraidy, 2009, p. 350). As Kraidy said, “Saudi businessmen who began acquiring pan-Arab media in the 1970s now control (Al-Hayat), (Asharq-Al-Awsat), the multichannel (MBC group) based in Dubai, several religious radio and television stations, in addition to stakes in various channels based in Egypt (al-Risala) and Lebanon (LBC)” (Kraidy, 2009, p. 348). Rotana groups were established in 1987, and it consists of entertainment and music channels, and Prince Al-Walid bin Talal Al Saud owns it. In 2007, Al-Walid merged the Rotana channel with the Lebanese LBC channel because he was among the investors in LBC since its inception with Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz, the current king of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The policy of the LBC channel was utterly different from Saudi television’s policy. According to Kraidy, “LBC’s screen aesthetic reflects a socially liberal Lebanese ethos, characterized by ostensible mimicry of Western consumer lifestyles, slick production values, informality in newscasts and talk-shows, and, most importantly, the ubiquity of alluringly dressed women” (Kraidy, 2009, p. 350). This channel’s impact on Saudi society was huge because the Saudi ruling family owns it.


Invest in television
As I mentioned earlier, women’s appearance on television was limited to some roles and had many conditions, but these conditions do not apply to non-Saudi channels, such as the Lebanese LBC channel. In 2003, Prince Al-Walid bin Talal funded the Star Academy show, which was shown on the LBC channel - a reality show that depicts 16 men and women (eight women and eight men from different Arab countries) in a building containing 60 cameras. Two Saudi men participated in this show. This show caused an intense conflict between the Saudi community. According to Kraidy, “Institutions, clerics, royals, journalists, intellectuals, conservative militants, and liberal activists in the kingdom entered the fray by issuing religious rulings, enacting policies, writing newspaper columns, submitting letters to the editor, or appearing on talk- shows because of Star Academy” (Kraidy, 2009, p. 345).

Saudi society was divided into supporters and opponents of this show. Some of them were watching these contestants even when they were sleeping, and some had removed the LBC channel from their television. The matter developed until it reached the Islamic Committee for Fatwas - the highest-ranked in Saudi Arabia - and issued a ban on watching Star Academy and voting on it, participating in it, or even discussing it. The main reason for its prohibition was because of male and female interaction. Besides, “an Imam (prayer leader) at Mecca’s Great Mosque called Star Academy a ‘Weapon of Mass Destruction” (Kraidy, 2009, p. 352). This media event did not stop Prince Al-Walid bin Talal, on the contrary. He encouraged the Saudi participant and continued his support for the show. He “sent his private plane to Beirut to bring Hisham’ Abdel Rahman back to Saudi Arabia after the young Saudi won Star Academy 2” (Kraidy, 2009, p. 354).

The future of Saudi television

According to Boyd, “Governments will continue to own and operate the electronic media because they believe it is in their best interests to do” (Boyd, 1988, p. 32). There is no doubt that Saudi television's future is still and will continue under the management of the Saudi government because of the religious standing, but if the government changes to become non-strict in Islam, what will happen to Saudi television? Of course, the Saudi media policy will change, and this is what is happening now under the government of the young Prince Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud (the Saudi Crown Prince) and his 2030 vision.

The Saudi Vision 2030 has already begun to transform Saudi society. This change included Saudi television. We can now see that women are equal to men in Saudi media content, and Saudi society has accepted this idea. Moreover, Saudi channels have increased, and their entertainment and educational content. In 2019, SBC - a new Saudi channel - produced a reality show in which there is a mixing of women and men and did not face criticism like the old reality shows. From here, we can see that the contents of foreign television influence Saudi society. I do not think that television alone influenced Saudi society, but it was one of the influential mediums.

The effect of the Internet on television

There is no doubt that the invention of television and their entry to various societies greatly affected the radio, but the question is to what extent has the internet affected television?
According to Havick, “Because the Internet is substantially different from television, the impact of the Internet on a television-dominated culture will be massive” (Havick, 2000, p. 273). If the internet can influence a culture that was dependent on television significantly, it will influence television as a medium.

When the Internet entered Saudi society, it did not strongly affect television for several reasons. The first reason was financial. Many Saudis could not afford the Internet and so continued to use television for several years. Also, the Internet required a level of skills such as reading and writing, while television did not require these skills, so many Saudis at the time were not ready for this development. So, we can say that the Internet at its beginning did not affect television, but the critical question is, is the Internet recently affecting television?

According to Havick, “The Internet will not duplicate or displace television, but the Internet will operate as another dimension of communication” (Havick, 2000, p. 285). I can call the Internet “the mother of media” because it developed the fields of journalism, films, radio, and television as well as Havick said, “Internet use will continue to grow, and rather than supplanting television, the Internet will operate jointly or in an integrated manner with television” (Havick, 2000, p. 276).

**Conclusion**

The history of television is an important topic that shows us how different societies accept media and the extent of their influence. My research focused on Saudi television and the extent to which Saudi society is affected by television. King Faisal bin Abdulaziz introduced television to Saudi society because he thought television would develop Saudi society and reduce illiteracy. I agree with King Faisal when he saw that television was necessary for his people to track the development and achieve the maximum level of prosperity for his people.

The strict religious groups were the only obstacle to the development of Saudi television. The Saudi government faced many difficulties because of the television content, which was inconsistent with the Saudi society. The appearance of women on television led to many problems, including an attack by a strict religious group on the Ministry of Information in the capital, Riyadh, and the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. These groups demand a change in the ruling family due to the appearance of women on Saudi television.

The Saudi government continued to confront this religious extremism and prevailed over it. Nowadays, we can see apparent differences between the old Saudi society and modern Saudi society. The new Saudi government restored moderate, non-extremist Islam by given women their rights and other elements. Like other media types, the effect of television on Saudi society and the Internet helped it develop education, reduce illiteracy, and increase entertainment among the community.

With the crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman and Saudi Vision 2030, we can see that Saudi society has evolved and has become more accepting and open. The percentage of women working in the media increased to become equal to men; they were allowed to drive; the presentation of various religions on the media was accepted. In 2020, a series has been produced called “Umm Haroun,” which is about a Jewish doctor named Umm Harun, who suffers from many problems due to her Jewish religion. It was shown on Saudi channels and gained wide popularity. This shows us the extent of the change that has happened to Saudi society and the extent of television’s influence on it.
References


[3] https://doi.org/10.1080/08838157009363626


