

EVOLUTION OF NEWS SERVICES IN THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC)

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Abstract: This study explores the evolution of electronic news services on the Internet in Gulf Cooperation Council States (GCC). This research contains surveys from a number of media professions and a number of users from GCC countries, in addition to the perception of the providers and users of the news services. Attention was focused on the rapid evolution of Internet technology. The study also discusses to what extent GCC media organisations have exploited Internet. It is found that GCC news services have exploited the Internet technology and increased over a short period of time. Despite this, it seems that the GCC suffers from difficulties, such as Internet infrastructure weakness, Arabic font and acute shortage of personnel specialising.

1 INTRODUCTION

This century has witnessed more than one innovative change in communications technology. From the telephone, which allows people to keep in touch over any distance, to the omnipresent broadcasts of television and radio that have turned our world into a global village, each technology has altered society in unforeseen ways. However, before the abovementioned media types, there was newspaper, which is the oldest source for news.

Experts categorise mass media into two fundamental types according to the production method: the print media, including newspapers; and, magazines; and the broadcasting media including radio and television. Over the past two centuries, news coverage was provided by newspapers and magazines. However, during the past fifty years, television has become an increasingly powerful medium.

Recently, the marriage of computer technology and technology of industrial communications satellites has led to deluge of news, information, images, ideas and opinions across and between continents in an instant: written, heard, and visible.

Schiller stated that the new information technologies—and here television, cable, and the

communications satellite must be included along with computers—have enabled the corporate sector to intrude massively in a nation's culture and opinion making, (Schiller, 1992).

Our newest communications revolution is based on digital technologies ... Just ten years ago the Internet was virtually unknown outside of the research and higher education communities. It allowed the exchange of e-mail and the transfer of files among a relatively small group of scientists who could collaborate on projects and share information. Today this same underlying technology supports a thriving information space with many millions of participants, (Coyle, 1997).

The Internet has put the world with its science, art, civilisation, ideas and information within human reach in an affordable and easy way. Also, because of the Internet, interactive media has been used for the first time in the history of the human communication. This means the recipient is able to publish and receive at the same time. "The equipment-free aspect of reality ... has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology, (Lunenfeld, (1999).

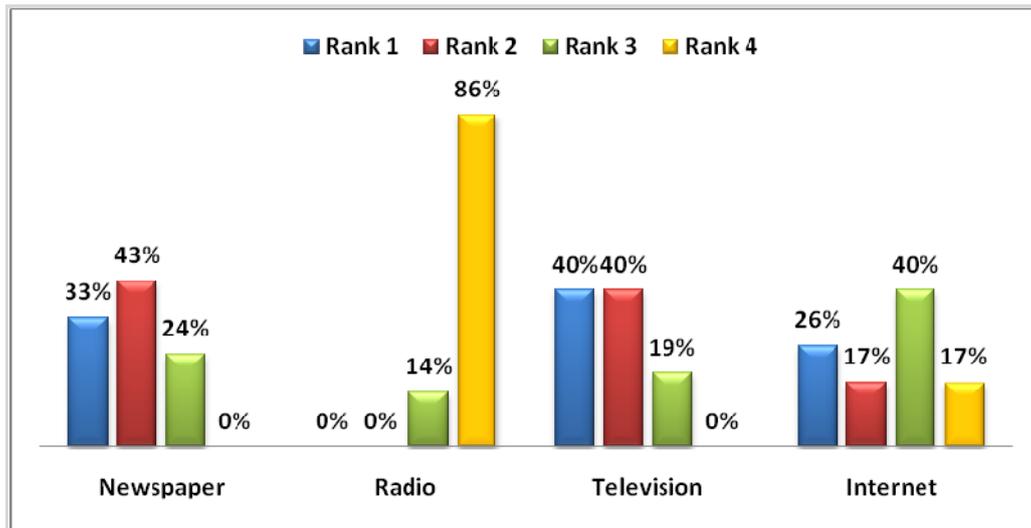


Figure 1: Ranking media services (favourite means to follow-up news).

Thus, it can be seen that the Western World today has received the benefit of the Internet ever since it was established. It is believed that the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC) have been able to benefit from worldwide development in Internet technology, though there have been many determining factors of the electronic media, such as language and Internet infrastructure.

The aim of this research is to study the evolution of the electronic news services in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC) in the Middle East region via the Internet in an attempt to uncover technology trends that may help this industry. It also compares electronic media of the GCC States with that of the *BBC Arabic* electronic news services.

2 DISCUSSION

With regard to following-up the news, respondents were asked to rank the following items; newspaper, television, radio and Internet in order of importance (1 – 4), where each item should be ranked separately. 40% of the respondents rank television as a first means for receiving the news, while 33% of the respondents rank newspapers highest. 26 percent of the respondents rank the Internet highest for following the news. Radio was not given much importance by the respondents classified it as either first choice or second choice for following the news. 86 percent of respondents rank radio as forth method for receiving the news. This shrinkage of radio listening in the GCC countries could be attributed to the shortage of radio channels. It is also believed that

it is because most programs concentrate on religious lectures, sermons, hymns, and meditation music and songs. The importance of the Internet is evolving: 40 percent of the respondents rank the Internet third for news, while 30 percent rank it highest, (Figure 1).

Based on the findings of this study, 45 percent of the respondents believe that electronic news services would replace the traditional media, while 40 percent of the respondents say that Internet media maybe replace traditional means. This indicates that people in GCC countries foresee a replacement trend. Only 15 percent of the respondents believe that electronic news services would not replace the traditional media, (Figure 2).

Brian Cruikshank conducted a global study entitled *Internet Threatens Traditional Media*, he stated that rather, it [the Internet] has become a conduit for accessing, sending, and receiving content, both audio and video, that is increasingly replacing traditional media and the communications infrastructure" (Cruikshank, (2003).

Respondent were asked (how do you value the evolution of electronic news services on the Internet in GCC compared to the world?) As for rating the evolution of electronic news services globally, the majority (74%) of the respondents think that there has been a rapid development of electronic news services around the world, while five percent of the sample regards development as slow.

However, when the respondents were asked the same question but related only to the GCC countries, about 60% reckon that there has been moderate speed of evolution in electronic news services in the GCC countries, in comparison with its evolution in the rest of world, (Figure 3).

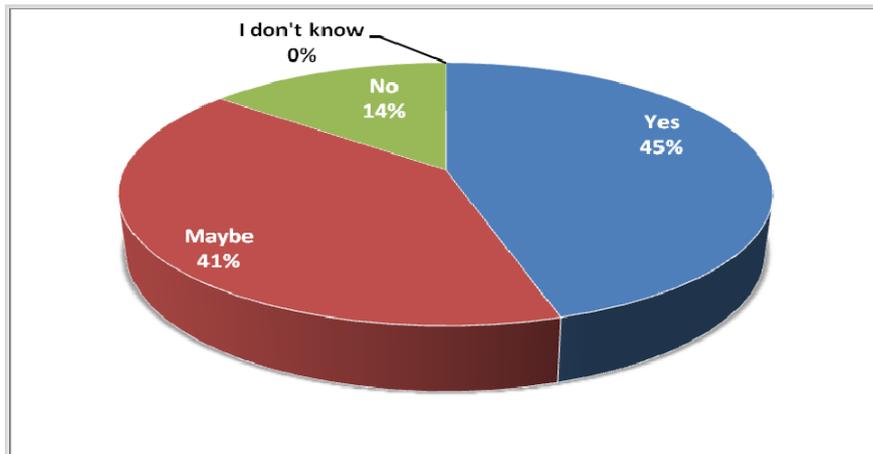


Figure 2: Electronic News Services would replace the traditional media.

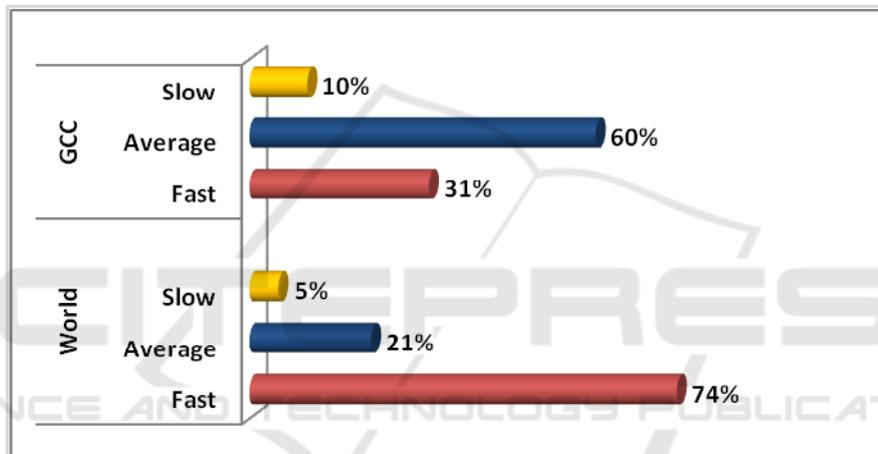


Figure 3: How do you value the evolution of electronic news services on the Internet in GCC compared to the world?

One of my objectives is to discover; whether GCC media companies have benefited from Internet technology or not? According to my questionnaire survey, half the respondents agree that media companies in GCC countries have exploited Internet technology in order to present a substantial online electronic news service. This percentage of the respondents is supported by 26% who strongly support this trend, (Figure 4). It is notable that users agree that GCC media companies have exploited Internet technology to in order to meet the demands of their audience, since it is reported that the GCC region has the highest percentage of users browsing Internet compared to Arabs world. In a study entitled '*Arab Online Advertising*', conducted by the Media Consultancy Group in 2004, it was stated that in the GCC 39% of Arab countries have the highest Internet usage. The study also reported that despite the fact that GCC countries have the smallest population size, they have the highest levels of

Internet use, which is possibly the reason for the increased traffic. The relatively high levels of Internet use in the Gulf could be due to high income, the presence of educated expatriate workers, and high standard of literacy.

In terms of the Arabic language, just above half of the respondents believe that Arabic language does not represent an obstacle for electronic news services from a social perspective, while ten percent of the respondents think Arabic presents an obstacle from a social perspective. On the other hand, and from a technological perspective, the greatest percentage (36%) of the respondents believe that Arabic represents an obstacle for electronic news services, while 33% of the users believe that Arabic does not represent an obstacle from a technical aspect, (Figure 5).

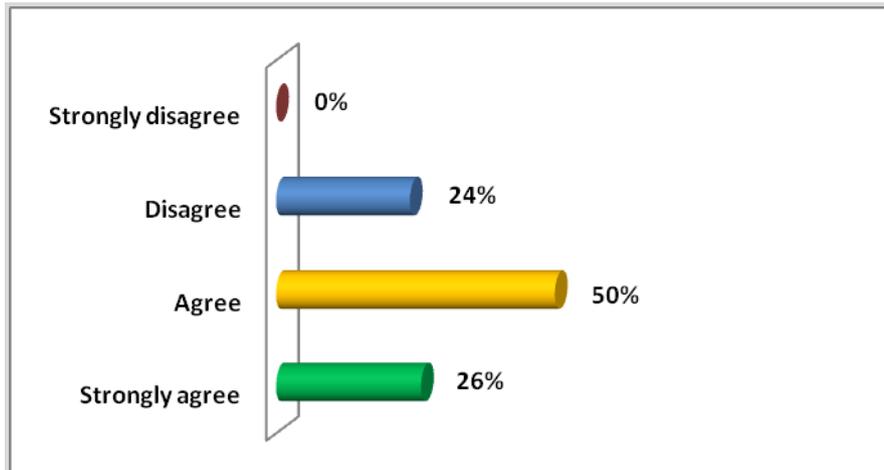


Figure 4: GCC have exploited the technology of Internet for presenting a substantial online electronic news services.

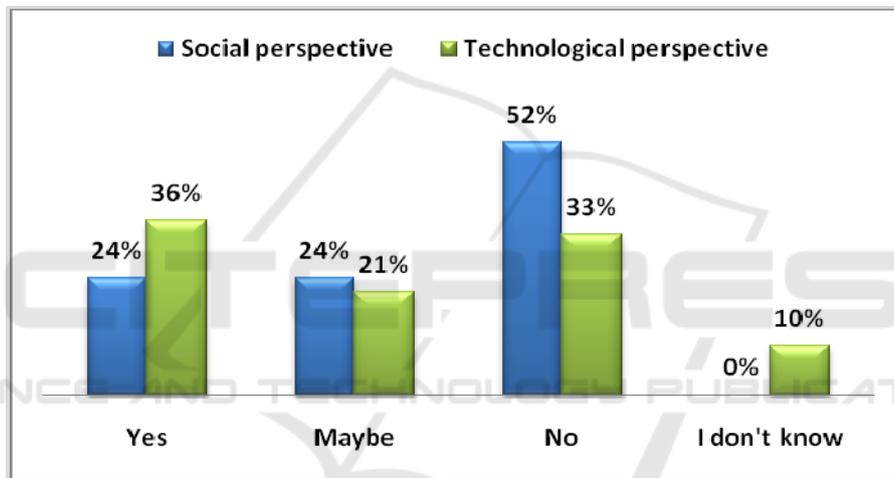


Figure 5: Arabic language is an obstacle from a social or technological perspective.

The respondents were asked their opinion on whether Arabic language has any weak points from a technical or design aspect. Just under half (48%) of the respondents believe that Arabic has no weak point, while others express a variety of opinions, (Figure 6).

I believe that this shows an increase in the amount of relevant and localised content published in Arabic language, which will have a positive impact on electronic news services in the GCC countries.

One of the questions related to the most attractive feature of the news services. Respondents were requested to rank on a scale from 1 (most attractive) to 5 (least attractive), (Figure 7). The findings indicate that the greatest percentage (57%) ranks speed of updates as the most attractive factor, while design is considered as the most attractive

factor by 22% of the respondents. Clarity of information on the web comes in third position (16%) and content comes in fourth (11%), while the minority (8%) rank visual and audio materials highest, which could indicate that users encounter a real problem with receiving stream data. This could reflect the weaknesses in most of the GCC Internet infrastructure. One might conclude that users avoid running audio or video content because of the slow connections.

From the figure, it can be seen that 'speed of updates' is attracted users to visit an electronic news website. However, the other factors believed to be important for news service providers in order to maintain their website visitors.

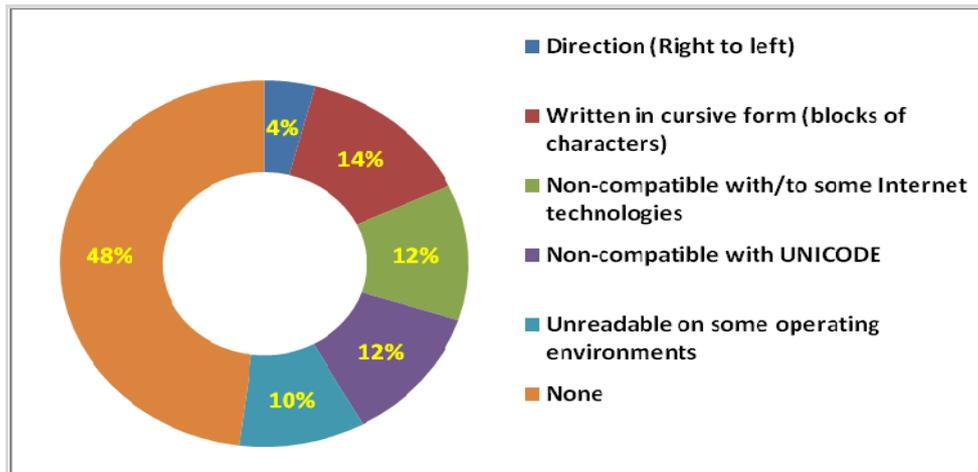


Figure 6: Arabic technical problems.

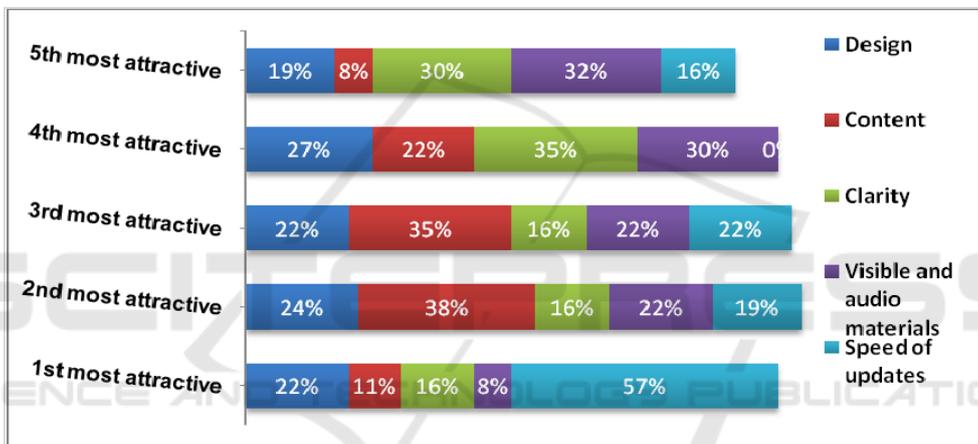


Figure 7: Most attractive features in Electronic News Services website.

3 CONCLUSION

The respondents prefer to follow-up news by television, while radio comes last. It was found that traditional media may expect to see decline in audience ratings. There has been rapid evolution of news services in the world, while it has been average in GCC countries relatively. The study found that media organisations have employed most internet technology. The Arabic language was not dilemma to the Arabic news services, in spite of some difficulties. I found that audience prefer news services that update news continuously.

4 PROVIDERS INTERVIEW

This section contains an analysis of collection of the data and test study hypothesis. I will analyse the interview findings of journalists, web designers and executives, followed by analysis of their questionnaire.

The questions were designed to serve the objectives of my study. In terms of interview, a closed interview was conducted due to the interviewees' time constraints, due to the nature of their work. The media respondents were thereby enabled to address what they feel is of real importance to them. The closed interview has an obvious advantage over the open interview. This style of interview is common in survey research, (Berndtsson et al., 2002).

4.1 Profile of the Interviewees

The interview was conducted with journalists, executive's editors and web designers working for GCC media. Their agencies are located in London and have offices around Arab world. The respondents consist of 4 out of 6 interviewees from different specialist fields. Unfortunately, two of the initial candidates refused to participate.

Two interviewees are from the *Al Hayat newspaper*; the executive editor and a graphic designer. The other two were from *Asharq Alawsat newspaper*, including electronic editor and journalist.

4.2 Discussion of the Interview

The interviewees were asked whether electronic news services in GCC have encountered any obstacles during the process of evolution. The majority believe that GCC electronic news services have faced many problems, both technical and political. Respondents consider that technical obstacles exist in the lack of Internet technologies such as an infrastructure. It seems that the GCC suffers from low bandwidth of transmission which is vital in electronic news services especially Internet broadcasting. Moreover, it was mentioned that GCC has no standard legislation in terms of Internet connectivity. In addition, Arabic font was considered a problem, as there is no standard font used for websites. The majority of the respondents also think that Arabic language has faced a real challenge. This challenge is represented in the lack of the use of Arabic language to express domain names, HTML tags and HTTP protocol. However, an attempt was made by Internet Services Unit in Saudi Arabia (2001), using Arabic in a domain name. From political aspect, GCC news services experience from restrictions due to bureaucratic routine, which can be frustrating.

The candidates were asked whether their organisations had specific journalists/editors (technojournalist) with a computer/Internet background for their web site. Most of the respondents said that their company had no specialist journalists for their electronic news services. The majority emphasised that what is written in the traditional news is very similar on the web. There was a feeling that appointing specialist journalists for web sites is crucial to their electronic news services, because they believe that "electronic journalist" can write articles using the Internet knowledge better than one who is unaware of the

potential of the technology. For this reason "we have decided to appoint electronic journalist to work only for our website" said Ahmad Asfahani from the *Al Hayat newspaper*.

The interviewees were asked about the role of Arabic language from a technical perspective, whether it plays a negative or a positive role in terms of maintaining their electronic news service. The answers were varied. First, part of the respondents believe that there is some difficulties concerning Unicode, for example, in some cases, when viewing a web page source file, the Arabic language characters are displayed in decimal code which cannot be read. Users may find a page unreadable until they reset their browser encoding. They also think that graphics software does not support Arabic. Second, some think that the Arabic language has slight problems such as, language direction; the number of Arabic alphabets (28); and Arabic driver for some printers are not always available. However, it is believed that these problems are not a big issue. Third, some believe that the Arabic language has no problems at all.

With regard to exploiting Internet technologies in GCC countries and to what extent GCC States have exploited Internet technologies, the majority of the responses were positive. They believed that the GCC in general has employed the Internet technologies in its electronic news services. Furthermore, it is believed that the U. A. E. is pioneer in this respect followed closely by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

When asked whether they believe Internet news services would replace traditional media, (3 out of 4) of the respondents stated that Internet news services will replace the traditional media in the long run, because of the Internet generation, and the rapid increase and availability of computer industry. However, other people do not believe in this trend. Some said it is possible but not within the next couple of years.

When questioned, about the future of the GCC Internet news services, 3 out of 4 believed that electronic news services on the Internet will witness a tremendous development due to the expected development in Internet technologies. In addition, it is believed that Internet technology has crushed media censorship and monopolisation, which will force GCC governments to change their policies to keep on track. (1 out of 4) thinks that the GCC will be obliged to go in the direction of cyberspace whether they want to or not, due to the accelerated development in the Internet technologies.

In terms of interactivity, most of the subjects deal with audience's contributions automatically

using web technology (software) with some human control of the contents. They also believe that audience participation is very important to their electronic news services. For instance, the respondents pointed out to the *Al Jazeera* Channel's by-line: "the *Al Jazeera's* electronic news services are a forum for who has no forum".

Furthermore, interviewees were asked if they have special tools or software that can filter unwanted contents that come from audience contribution rather than relying solely on human control. The media respondents' answers were negative. It seems that GCC electronic news services are still not in a position to have such a tool for extracting information. The minority believes it should work that way, whereas the majority think that human beings should mediate in order to control the content of audience contributions.

The final question to the subject was how they predict GCC Internet news services in the future. A vast majority believes that Internet services will change in the future. Accordingly, GCC news services will develop their electronic news infrastructure to meet the new generation's demands. However, a minority believe that GCC news services cannot develop their infrastructure in most of GCC countries due to the monopoly of the Internet by the governments.

4.3 Preliminary Conclusion

The four media professional were asked to give important information which was not covered in the interviews. The media professional reported that most users prefer interactive sites. Moreover, young people are not interested in reading, especially hardcopy of newspapers. It appears that next generation will not build their personal library as before. Future libraries might consist of DVDs, CDs or PC. The slowness of the Internet and connection problems in GCC were reported.

Arabic language support is one of significant issues that face interviewees. From the study I conclude that GCC trying to make a good efforts in developing their internet infrastructure in order to deploy internet over wider area of their countries.

On the other hand, the respondents were very attracted by the subject of my study and this encouraged me to do more work on mobile interactive mass media.

5 MEDIA PROFESSIONALS' SURVEY

We have recently analysed the interview findings. In this section I will study the survey of Media Professional. It contains some of the survey questions followed by respondents' profile, and then analysis and discussion of the findings. Finally, preliminary conclusion will be given.

5.1 Questionnaires Questions for Media Professional

The questionnaire was distributed to executive, journalists and web designer in GCC media organisations. The sample of Media Professional consists of thirteen respondents.

5.2 Profile of Media Professional

The greatest number (69%) of the respondents is male, and 31% of the respondents are female. The shortage of female workers in GCC media may be interpreted by cultural issues in these countries, where it is believed that media occupation should be monopolised by men and this idea persists.

The highest percentage (62%) of the respondents' ages range between 31 - 45 years. This indicates that the respondent's age group has quite good experience in the field of media. It also indicates that the respondents have witnessed the evolution of the Internet since it was formed. 23% of respondents are aged 20 - 30. No one in the respondents aged over 60.

The majority (69%) of the respondents have been awarded undergraduate degree. Only one respondent has a postgraduate degree.

The greatest percentage (54%) of the respondents is web designers, while 23% of the respondents are executives. Journalists were the smallest amongst the respondents by number. I believe that because the study relates to the Internet, the questionnaire was passed on to those with a computer background such as web designers, and this may explain the greater percentage of web designers in the sample.

The majority (56%) of the respondents use Windows XP while 31% of the respondents use Mac OS. It is noticeable that newspaper companies quite rely on Mac OS in order to produce substantial electronic news services, particularly in terms of graphic design.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The Internet is accounted the most important achievement for information networks technology in our contemporary world, which has facilitated to all Internet users to access and benefit from all of services and information without any restrictions and geographical frontiers or regional.

The study explored the evolution of the news services in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC) via the Internet. I have examined the technology and services that used in this regards. This study surveyed the history of the media starting from printed means to the Internet. It also conducted field study on news services in the GCC countries.

It is found that the GCC news services have increased over a short time. Despite the evolution in online news, mass media has faced many problems, such as Internet infrastructure weakness, Arabic font and acute shortage of personnel specialising.

The study stated that GCC states have exploited Internet technologies over most their news services. The evolution of GCC electronic news services cannot be separated from developments in Internet technology. Editors' and journalists' opinions in GCC countries are similar to their peers around the world, especially with the evolution of the new media in the light of advanced technologies.

The research studied three selected electronic news services in terms of technology used; layout of the website and services provided and compared them to the BBC Arabic news service. Finally, the researcher has built an electronic news service for a real implementation in order to recognise some of the difficulties that face GCC media organisations.

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