

## **The Gulf Information War and the Role of Media and Communication Technologies**

### *Editorial Introduction*

ILHEM ALLAGUI<sup>1</sup>

BANU AKDENIZLI

Northwestern University in Qatar

The usual narrative about Arabian Gulf countries has been one of unity and close relationships. The air and trade blockade on Qatar from its neighboring countries, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, as well as from Egypt, proves that the aspired unity is probably just a myth and that the political divide is worse than ever nearly two years into the blockade. Media, information, and new technology are at the core of the divide and have contributed to igniting the crisis. This Special Section, with the scholars' contributions, offers some perspectives to think about media and technology as foci in this political conflict. It launches a debate about the information war, and this introduction notes a possible vulnerability for members of the larger academic community in the region who take part in this debate.

*Keywords: Gulf information war, communication technologies, academic freedom, Qatar, GCC crisis*

The diplomatic crisis—which at the time of this writing has passed its 600th day—with Qatar on one side, and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt on the other, raises a number of questions on several fronts. This is not the first time countries in this region have found themselves in a political rift—but this time, a diplomatic conflict is being fought aggressively on traditional and social media. The hack of Qatar's News Agency (QNA) and the fabrication of quotations attributed to the Qatari Amir escalated the crisis and raised salient issues regarding piracy, control, development, and use of media and social media not only by the regimes, but also by citizens. An otherwise interconnected group bound by fraternal and marital relations, *Khaljii* (tr. Arabian Gulf) nationals found themselves harboring antipodal emotions of love and hate.

---

Ilhem Allagui: [ilhem.allagui@northwestern.edu](mailto:ilhem.allagui@northwestern.edu)

Banu Akdenizli: [banu.akdenizli@northwestern.edu](mailto:banu.akdenizli@northwestern.edu)

Date submitted: 2019–02–13

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to express appreciation to Northwestern University in Qatar for the internal grant and gratefulness to Arlene Luck for the help and support she provided to this Special Section.

Copyright © 2019 (Ilhem Allagui and Banu Akdenizli). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

At the core of the present Gulf information war lies a political conflict. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt have accused Qatar of breaching prior agreements reached in 2013–2014 involving issues such as financing terrorism and Al-Jazeera's voice in MENA (Middle East and North Africa) (Sciutto & Herb, 2017), all infringements that Qatar denies. The political conflict has led to withdrawal of diplomatic representations in Qatar of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, along with an economic, terrestrial, and air embargo. In addition, the adversarial countries embarked on a series of mediatized attacks using both traditional and social media.

This conflict lends itself to study using a broad range of approaches, both conceptual and empirical. Momentous questions include how communication technologies are used for political battles; how modern communication systems represent new battlefields for rival countries; in what ways the emergence of a new type of war—information war—is motivated by the advancement of new communication systems; how the global information infrastructure make nations vulnerable to security attacks; and the impact of the warfare conflict on the GCC countries' relations, to name just a few. Another legitimate question to ask is: How comfortable are GCC scholars in addressing any of these research interrogations, knowing the boundaries to their research freedom, whether imposed or not?

With this Special Section, we aim to raise an academic debate about information wars, media and cyberdiplomacy, new media, and national security, as well as their impact on people's lives. However, such debates need open public forums, which we came to realize may not yet exist, given the submissions received. Such a premise made us think about academic freedom in the region, which is why we chose to start the editorial of this Special Section with this conversation: the saliency of the need for a bigger, uncontrolled space for debate. Following this introduction, we bring the conversation back to the use of digital media to ignite the conflict and the geopolitical challenges in the region. Then, we introduce the articles of this Special Section, which ask stimulating questions and reflect on the ongoing media war and cyberwar debate.

### **Is Academic Freedom in Crisis?**

The crisis presents itself to academics as an opportunity for exploration to make sense of the events and their triggers and possible consequences. However, little interest has manifested among scholars in the region to study this crisis. Other than expert opinions on blogs, LinkedIn or in some specialized press publications, so far, relatively few academic publications and research papers have investigated the crisis. For example, this Special Section has received no submissions from scholars affiliated with academic institutions in Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. This is disconcerting considering that the *International Journal of Communication* Special Sections relating to the Middle East issues have received several submissions in the past. One possible explanation we can offer is that academics may have an interest in the crisis, but have found themselves held back and have tried to avoid placing themselves in vulnerable situations. It is noteworthy that recently, there has been a notable conversation about limitations of freedom of expression in academia, especially in the region. The Middle East Studies Association (MESA) published a declaration at the opening of its 2018 conference that raised concerns about the deteriorating security conditions for researchers. The statement concludes with the assertion that pursuing academic projects and doing fieldwork in the Middle East have become hazardous.

In the dilemma of academic freedom in Arab countries' institutions, a fundamental question emerges: To what extent are academics confined and threatened by limiting political contextual conditions, and in what ways can an academic deal with or navigate within this context while pursuing research? This section attempts to reflect on the limiting circumstances of research and the growing concern of academic freedom in the Gulf and the Middle East region.

First, this text does not try to prove or demonstrate in what ways speech is restricted in the region, and in universities in particular; we take this for granted, as it is simply a fact. However, we may cite examples we know about, and we attempt to think about ways to enable research inquiry and its dissemination as it is meant to be.

Concern about academic freedom has become a global issue, and the Middle East is no exception. Discussing free speech in American colleges, Princeton professor Whittington (2018) writes,

free speech on college campuses is perhaps under as great a threat today as it has been in quite some time. We are not, of course, on the verge of returning to the rigid conformity of a century ago, but we are in danger of giving up on the hard-won freedoms of critical inquiry that have been wrested from figures of authority over the course of a century. (p. 4).

Academic freedom encapsulates the free decisions that faculty, students, and researchers can make to study any topic of interest without fear, threat, or motivation other than that ascribed to freedom of speech (Nelson, 2010). Academic freedom allows academics to "freely express their views in research and in the publication of results, in the classroom in discussing their subjects, and as citizens without institutional censure, when such views are appropriately and responsibly expressed" (Gappa, Austin, & Trice, 2007, p. 141).

### **About Academic Freedom in MENA**

Threats to academic freedom originate from the state and its censorship, but also can be found in religious ideologies and even societies (Virkama, 2015). While "the central mission of a university [is] to engage in skeptical inquiry in pursuit of the truth, there might well be ramifications for the scope of free speech on such campuses" (Whittington, 2018, p. 19). Such ramification may come from the society, or the institution itself. For instance, a debate that was to be held at Georgetown University in Qatar on October 9, 2018, was cancelled by the university<sup>2</sup> after a public backlash that heated up on social media—specifically, Twitter—as shown in Figure 1. Members of the society felt offended by the title of the debate, "Major Religions Should Portray God as a Woman": Some found it to be disrespectful to Qatar and to religion; others found it disrespectful to Qatari people and Muslims; some accused the event of attempting to change Islamic identity; and others went so far as to call for the closure of American universities in the country.

---

<sup>2</sup> In an official statement, the University explains that the event hosted by the Georgetown debating union did not secure the appropriate activity approval.



**Figure 1. Samples of people's reactions to what is considered provocative or offensive academic debate.**

Austin, Chapman, Farah, Wilson, and Ridge (2014) studied key elements of the academic work of a sample of expatriate faculty in the UAE and their implications for the faculty's satisfaction with and commitment to the institution. Whereas some faculty mention the freedom of inquiry they have, others point to the way the lack of job security limits their freedom of expression.

One administrator asserted that faculty members enjoy free inquiry and open discussion, but also observed that whereas nationals feel they can speak very openly, expatriates feel less free to be frank and tend to learn in which contexts they can do so. Several respondents noted that they are watchful about their comments in class because students have been known to go directly to administrators with complaints about faculty members. A number also indicated that they are careful and guarded in making criticisms or suggestions concerning their university. As one explained, "If you have some concern about the university, you cannot raise your voice [because you may be fired]. It means that I don't have freedom." Overall, expatriates' awareness of their lack of employment security serves as a de facto constraint on their willingness to speak openly on topics that could be considered controversial (Austin et al., 2014).

Ursula Lindsey (2013) for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reports the event of the brief arrest of an Arab politics professor at the London School of Economics (LSE) who was meant to give a presentation on

Bahrain politics in the UAE. LSE cancelled the conference, and the professor was not allowed to enter the country. The article points to different ways in which security intermixed with academics:

Universities in the UAE must obtain security clearances to hire professors [which is a common practice among institutions in the GCC countries] and invite speakers, and public debates of any kind are tightly monitored. And ever since the Arab spring, academics and human-rights groups have noted, the space for free public discourse has been shrinking. (Lindsey, 2013, para. 11)

Romanowski and Nasser (2010) investigated the meaning of academic freedom among faculty members at a GCC university in Qatar, concluding that the understanding of this freedom is controversial and inconsistent among faculty members. They add that faculty often practice avoidance and self-censorship. Just like journalists who are often blamed for self-censorship, faculty in authoritarian countries would avoid discussing controversial subjects with their students or in research explorations. Recognizing the role of state power, and what threat to their safety and stability their critical thinking may bring about, faculty members adjust to the cultural and political climate and avoid exploring sensitive or taboo subjects and opinion making, limiting opportunities for new knowledge.

#### **How to Put in Place a System That Enables New Knowledge?**

A campus as a safe place for thinking is a dream for many academics, in MENA and beyond. Unlike in Western universities, where the concern about lack of academic freedom may center on funding or interference, in universities of the region, the concern is tightly linked to termination of contracts and personal safety, first and foremost. Imprisonment or torture of academics has been a lived reality in Tunisia under dictator Ben Ali, in Egypt under Mubarak, and even recently in the UAE, with the life imprisonment sentence of the British student Mathew Hedges before he received a pardon. The recent case of Jamal Khashoggi, killed and vanished by Saudi authorities (although not an academic but a journalist), is another extreme example of punishment for freedom of thought and freedom of speech. Tarnishing the country's image abroad is often the concern of state powers.

With a few exceptions, researchers have little interest engaging in critical thinking and developing new knowledge if their security is at risk. When state powers become committed to the value of education without borders and to developing new knowledge, researchers will find a positive environment for scientific exploration. It would be simplistic to say that political reform is key to achieving freedom of expression. Institutions, faculty, and the state should work together to move toward freedom of expression and engage in producing all kinds of knowledge in educational institutions and universities in the region.

The intellectual environment cannot improve without providing the foundation of scientific exploration and creativity: the liberty of thought and the willingness to seek the truth. Once there is common understanding of what these mean and what they entail, it is possible to work without fear. Creating the opportunity to involve these agents—faculty members, researchers, educational institutions, and state representatives—and engage them in bringing their own perspectives to discuss knowledge creation is one possible way to improve academic freedom in the region.

It is with this understanding and belief that we approach this special section and offer some perspectives in understanding and reflecting on the Gulf information war and the role of information and communication technologies.

### **Traditional Media in the War of Words**

In the first days of the crisis, right after the spread of the attributed speech by the Amir on May 24, 2017, audiences found themselves spectators of an information war playing out before their eyes. Newspaper stories, TV shows, and news programs on TV satellite channels were filled with discussions in which one side insulted the other. Moreover, readers and viewers in the region witnessed low standards of media practice and a lack of media ethics. It is no surprise that media coverage is favorable to governments, considering the types of ruling regimes in the region. Several of these media institutions historically have served as propaganda channels for their states, and given that they operate under such controlling regimes, it is evident that media institutions have little or no room to be objective or truly investigative. Speaking about the way officials interfere in the messaging and impose specific coverage and stories, a Saudi editor reports that he was told, "These are orders, not suggestions" (Al Omran, 2017)—a statement that testifies to the absolute political control of media by the regimes.

The respective attacks and insults in the media increased and would not ease from the Qatari side until the Government Communications Office (GCO) in Qatar issued a press release titled "Don't Insult Countries, Leaders or People," urging the population to refrain from insulting opponents and adopt a more civic attitude:

Allah the Whole Mighty said in the Holy Quran: "Dost thou not see how Allah sets forth the similitude of a good word? It is like a good tree, whose root is firm and whose branches reach into heaven" (Ibrahim, Verse 24). Based on the principles of our true Islamic religion, our humanitarian values and our authentic Qatari culture, we call on all those who live on this good land to rise and continue to avoid responding similarly to the abuses that spread in various means of mass communication. We also call upon you to show more responsibility, of which you are well known, and not to insult countries, their leaders or peoples, while guaranteeing the right of every Qatari citizen and resident to express their opinion for showing the truth and reality in a peaceful manner, always keeping in mind the Islamic and Arab values. (Government Communications Office, 2017)

In Qatar, the vehemence of local media reaction mirrored what society was thinking and what real life felt like following the shock of the blockade.<sup>3</sup> Citizens were vocal about their feelings of shock and betrayal (see Mitchell & Allagui, 2019, this Special Section), and local media were loud enough to make the disappointment and anger clear.

---

<sup>3</sup> Qatari Director of the Government Communications Office, Saif Al-Thani, at a public talk at Northwestern University in Qatar (November 15, 2017).

This information war consists in the purposeful and strategic use of fake news in the GCC conflict. The episode began with a speech attributed to the Amir of Qatar, which Qatar denied immediately. However, media outlets in opposing countries continued to spread the speech as fact (Tharoor, 2017). Fake news, deceptive information, fabrication of news, and spread of rumors are some of the labels for creating, reporting, and disseminating false information. Although not new, fake news has become more popular with the increasing use of social media, and it is believed that the use of fake news is only increasing (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Users on social media in the region were quick to point out fake Twitter accounts that spread fake/false news and to warn against propaganda; “#don’tparticipateinsuspicioushashtags,” a hashtag that began trending in August 2017, is a typical example of this (Jones & Abrams as cited in Akdenizli, 2018). Social media is not the only platform for spreading false news and articles to a global audience; mainstream media are equally responsible because they have carried on with stories mounted not only for the domestic audience, but also for foreign audiences.

The latter is another battleground among adversarial countries, each attempting to influence foreign perceptions in key countries like the U.S., the UK, and, to a lesser extent, some European countries. During this time, Qatar invested in lobbying and advertising campaigns abroad mainly to gain support, to prove that the blockade violated international law, and to eliminate or at least address the mediated image of supporting terrorism inflicted by opposing countries. For example, according to *The New Arab*, Saudi Arabia funded TV advertising spots that were placed on NBC4 on July 23, 2017, targeting politicians in Washington; the message was that Qatar finances terrorism and destabilizes allies in the region (“Anti-Qatar ‘Terrorism Ads,’” 2017). Sky News Arabia aired a UAE-sponsored documentary referring to Qatar’s support of Al-Qaeda. Qatar, on the other hand, invested in newspaper ads, promoting its position as a strategic U.S. partner in fighting terrorism, creating jobs and hope abroad; other ads highlighted shared education values between the U.S. and Qatar (Reinl, 2017). It is of note that many Middle Eastern experts, based on previous and ongoing experience, believe that this investment in lobbying and advertising efforts to sway politicians’ and public opinion has little effect. Tracing the history of Arab lobbying through several events (such as the 1967 nationalism, the 1991 Gulf War, or the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center), Dania Khatib (2016) writes about how poor, nonstrategic, and ineffective Arab lobbying is. Her main point is that these efforts fail because they are based on short-term needs and “[are only implemented] when the need arises for specific issues and [do not] build a narrative” (p. 77).

Feelings are mixed about such campaigns. While the Qatari GCO director<sup>4</sup> justifies these ads as being factual and having the strategic purpose of countering opponents’ campaigns, Rami Khouri writes that “these campaigns have zero impact. It’s just another way for smart Americans and Londoners to make money in contracts with unsophisticated Arab zillionaires who think that ads on buses will change U.S. government policy” (Reinl, 2017, para. 26). But it is clear that international news outlets are a battleground. For example, Saudi Arabia, a fierce opponent of Qatar, commissioned an early survey that was published in its newspaper *Arab News* two months after the start of the blockade. The survey reported that fewer than 3 in 10 Americans saw Qatar as a friend or an ally to the U.S. (Flanagan, 2017). Of course, one needs to

---

<sup>4</sup> Qatari Director of the Government Communications Office, Saif Al-Thani, at a public talk at Northwestern University in Qatar (November 15, 2017).

take such information with skepticism given that it originates from an adversarial country, at least at the moment, leaving little room for reliability.

### ***Cybersecurity as a New Geopolitical Challenge in the Region***

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, among the six GCC countries, Qatar, alongside Oman, is the best prepared to face cyberattacks (Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU], 2018). Yet, the Qatar blockade was sparked by the hacking of its news agency. In December 2017, Saudi Aramco was hacked by malicious software, and the UAE frequently reported cyberattacks (a total of 86) earlier in 2018 (EIU, 2018). Cyberattacks have become the new nightmare for the GCC.

Cyberattacks are

socially or politically motivated attacks carried out primarily through the Internet. Attacks target the general public or national and corporate organizations and are carried out through the spread of malicious programs (viruses), unauthorized web access, fake websites, and other means of stealing personal or institutional information from targets of attacks, causing far-reaching damage. (NEC, 2018)

Whereas cyberattacks can be multifaceted, cyberterrorism is confined to political and social fields. Cyberterrorism is defined as

the convergence of terrorism and cyberspace . . . generally understood to mean unlawful attack and threats of attack against computers, networks and the information stored therein when done to intimidate or coerce a government or its people in furtherance of political or social objectives. (Dunning, in Redins, 2012, para. 2).

In a 2012 foreign policy article, author Thomas Reid writes that cyberwar is still to come. He reviews several cyberattacks, and while referring to the constituents of acts of war—(1) violence, (2) purpose, and (3) political—Rid (2012) comes to conclude that cyberwar is “more hype than reality” (p. 80). Yet, looking further into the crisis, the cyberattack on Qatar in 2017 was certainly reality. The repercussions of the initial hack and the subsequent bot army activities (see Jones, 2019, this Special Section) were violent, purposeful, and political—violent because thousands of people were affected as they were expelled from blockading countries, families were divided, causing emotional distress and hardship, animals were left at borders, and camels perished in the desert. The situation could have been more physically violent if it escalated to an invasion and an armed conflict, which seems a likely plan of Saudi Arabia (Emmons, 2018). It was purposeful, given that adversarial countries presented to Qatar a list of 13 demands, including the closure of Al-Jazeera. It was political, because there is evidence of who actually was the intruder. Thus, cyberwar is here, it is real, and, in this occurrence, it used media, information, and information technologies.

As stated, the cyberattack on the Qatar News Agency (QNA) involved uploading a fake story on the news agency’s website. The story involved a speech from the Amir on Iran, Hamas, and Israel as a pretext for the blockade, along with the appearance of related posts on the QNA’s Twitter feed. This cyberattack



campaign was coordinated with the press to support the narrative and increase the reach to audiences. Another component that added to the orchestrated expert interventions on partisan media in opposing countries was the use of trolls. Trolls grow around Twitter and typically amplify and heat up conversations and provoke, deceive, or offend users from a specific community while forming a trend; “by deceiving and provoking others, trolls disrupt a rational debate to distract the participants of a debate” (Bulut & Yoruk, 2017, p. 4097). In the specific case of the blockade crisis, trolls emerged from fake Twitter accounts. Initially trolls were used to amplify the story around the presumed speech of the Amir and to emphasize the presumed association between Qatar and terrorism. Further, by creating hashtags in support of the blockade, the electronic trolls began aggressing users, intimidating and attempting to silence others. Hacking other accounts and planting spyware in mobile devices and email addresses were additional tactics (Al-Jaber, 2018). Trolls also focused on rejecting Doha’s denial about attributed statements on the QNA website and, among other activities, creating a labeling trend: “Saudi and Emirati-linked Twitter accounts, which were found to be bots, repeatedly tweeted about Sheikh Tamim being the ‘Gaddafi of the Gulf,’ in reference to Libya’s former leader” (Al-Jaber, 2018, para. 7). The ultimate objective is to sway the Arab audiences who increasingly get their news online.

### ***Arab Audiences Exposed to Geopolitical Disputes***

Arab audiences are heavy online news consumers. In fact, behind socializing, consuming news is the next most popular online activity (Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government [MBRSG], 2017). Politics and current affairs are among the most popular types of news (Dennis, Martin & Wood, 2017). Increasingly, Arab readers are moving away from news outlets owned by the government and toward news outlets owned by private/corporate organizations (Dennis et al., 2017), which speaks to the loss of trust in the former. Nearly 4 out of 10 people in the region have news apps installed on their smartphones (MBRSG, 2017). Despite their high consumption, Arab Internet users are aware of the dangers of fake news; 43% say they are very concerned about the spread of false news online, and 33% say they are concerned (MBRSG, 2017).

After the 2017 Gulf crisis sparked, discussions and conversations on social media quickly mirrored the aggressive conversations on government-owned channels; more important, people from each of the adversarial countries rallied behind their countries and leaders, by choice or forced-choice, considering the sanctions imposed on those who expressed sympathy toward the opponents. The UAE was the first to ban demonstration of sympathy toward Qatar on social media, making such actions punishable by a jail term of up to 15 years and a fine of at least AED 500,000 (US\$136,000; Akdenizli, 2018). Soon after, Bahrain declared that any expression of sympathy toward Qatar or opposition toward the measures taken by the Government of Bahrain would result in a fine and up to five years’ imprisonment (Oxborrow & Nelmes, 2017). This speaks to how threatened GCC governments still feel about the use of social media, even eight years after the Arab uprisings—events they reacted to by tightening media control and increasingly monitoring social media use.

It is reasonable to believe that the severity of penalties in relation to social media use has become a concern for the population. Case in point, the percentage of those who said that privacy concerns led them to change the way they use social media increased from 30% to 66% in the UAE, and from 24% to 67% in

Saudi Arabia, while the sharpest increase was registered in Qatar, with 71% in 2018 compared with 21% in 2017 (Dennis, Martin, & Hassan, 2018). Additionally, the percentage of UAE nationals who declared they are worried about the government checking what they do online nearly doubled between 2013 and 2018 (jumping from 25% in 2013 to 47% in 2018). In Saudi Arabia, this proportion of Saudi national Internet users concerned about the government checking their social media usage increased from 46% in 2013 to 58% in 2018.

While Internet users are increasingly concerned with privacy and being monitored, they simultaneously argue for tighter regulation. This is particularly true for Internet users who are UAE nationals; the proportion arguing for tighter regulation has drastically increased over the last five years, from 29% in 2013 to 66% in 2018. The percentages of those who agree to tighter regulation in Saudi Arabia have remained stable (59% in 2013 vs. 60% in 2018), while significantly fewer Qatari nationals agree with such tighter control (59% in 2013 vs. 45% in 2018).

This Special Section of the *International Journal of Communication* engages in the debate regarding the role of information and communication technologies in regional conflicts and sociopolitical transformations. Today, emergent technologies have proved to be tools for both uniting and dividing.

#### **Articles in This Special Section**

This Special Section on the GCC crisis brings together five articles and presents important research on the many different facets and patterns of the crisis.

Two of the articles in this Special Section deal with the ever-growing problem of social media: fake news and fake accounts. Marc Jones, in "Propaganda, Fake News and Fake Trends: Weaponization of Twitter Bots in the Qatar Gulf Crisis," explores the use of Twitter bots and how they have been primarily instrumental in increasing negative information and propaganda from the blockading countries toward Qatar. The manipulation of trends and promotion of fake news are not new practices in the Twittersphere. Jones specifically demonstrates how anti-Qatar tweets from specific political figures were instrumental in presenting the illusion of Qatari opposition to its Amir, thus further contributing to information pollution online.

Ahmed Al-Rawi (2019) concentrates on hackers. His article, "Cyber-Conflict, Online Political Jamming, and Hacking in the Gulf Cooperation Council" not only chronicles the practice of government-led hacking in the region, but also aims to redefine hacking as a form of online political activity aimed at compromising, undermining, weakening, and pressuring oppositional groups and members, as evidenced in the Gulf crisis.

Citizens and residents of the region voiced their opinion on social media in various ways. One of the most apparent was the news sense of nationalism. Many users were quick to share songs and cartoons to manifest support for their respective leaders. The drawing of Qatar's Amir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani by Qatari artist Ahmed bin Majid Almaadheed became an avatar for many social media accounts. The streets were no different. In their analysis of car decals of citizens and expatriate residents in Qatar, "Car Decals,

Civic Rituals, and Changing Conceptions of Nationalism,” Jocelyn Sage Mitchell and Ilhem Allagui exemplify how diplomatic crises may influence civic nationalism and increase communal belonging in a plethora of different ethnic narratives of belonging.

International diplomatic crises are natural in the international news agenda. Though the crisis may have not registered high on a scale of importance for the majority of the world—albeit for a brief moment when Donald Trump, arguably the world’s most prolific Twitter user, set the tone—it would not be wrong to suggest that, aside from occasional paid op-eds and advertisements, the crisis remained largely unexplored in international media. One of the established facts in international news coverage studies is that proximity matters, as do economic, political, and cultural ties. The last two articles of this Special Section demonstrate these points.

Turkey was one of the first countries to state allegiance to Qatar from the beginning and has been in ever closer ties with the country politically, economically, and culturally. In their article, “Presenting the Gulf Crisis to the Turkish Public: A Computational Approach to Mapping Media Frames,” Ivo Furman, Erkan Saka, Savas Yildirim, and Ece Elbayi present how news organizations in Turkey demonstrated a united pro-Qatari stance in the coverage of the crisis, highlighting the deep-rooted problems evident in media ownership structure, ideological positioning, and government stance within media in Turkey.

Qatar is home to a significantly large expat and migrant population. Most recent estimates of expatriates by country of citizenship show that people from India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Philippines constitute almost three quarters of all foreigners in Qatar (De Bel Air, 2017). “The Gulf Crisis and Narratives of Emotionality in Nepal’s English-Language Press” by Subin Paul examines the media discourse on the crisis and its effects on what he considers “one of the most marginalized populations in Qatar”: the Nepali migrant workers. The analysis reveals not only how international news, when reported, is framed from a local angle, but also some possible divergent practices when it comes to employment of emotion in Western versus Eastern journalism.

### References

- Akdenizli, B. (2018). Twitter as an instrument of foreign policy: Qatar and the GCC. In R. Miller (Ed.), *The 2017 Gulf crisis: The view from Qatar* (pp. 147–156). Doha, Qatar: Hamad bin Khalifa University Press.
- Al-Jaber, K. (2018, November 11). Troll army: A weapon for Arab authoritarian regimes. *The Peninsula*. Retrieved from <https://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/opinion/11/11/2018/Troll-Army-A-Weapon-for-Arab-authoritarian-regimes>
- Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211–236. Retrieved from <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>

- Al Omran, A. (2017, August 4). Gulf media unleashes war of words with Qatar. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/36f8ceca-76d2-11e7-90c0-90a9d1bc9691> (by subscription)
- Anti-Qatar "terrorism ads" air on U.S. television. (2017, July 27). *The New Arab*. Retrieved from <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/7/27/anti-qatar-terrorism-ads-broadcast-on-us-television>
- Austin, A. E, Chapman, D. W., Farah, S., Wilson, E., & Ridge, N. (2014). Expatriate academic staff in the United Arab Emirates: The nature of their work experiences in higher education institutions. *Higher Education, 68*, 541–557.
- Bulut, E., & Yoruk, E. (2017). Digital populism: Trolls and political polarization of Twitter in Turkey. *International Journal of Communication, 11*, 4093–4117. Retrieved from <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/6702/2158>
- De Bel Air, F. (2017). *Demography, migration, and the labour market in Qatar*. Gulf Labour Market and Migration (GLMM-EN- No.2/2017). Retrieved from [http://gulfmigration.org/media/pubs/exno/GLMM\\_EN\\_2017\\_03.pdf](http://gulfmigration.org/media/pubs/exno/GLMM_EN_2017_03.pdf)
- Dennis, E.E, Martin, J.D. (2018). *Media use in the Middle East*. Retrieved from <http://www.mideastmedia.org/survey/2018/>
- Dennis, E.E., Martin, J.D., & Wood, R. (2017). *Media use in the Middle East*. Retrieved from <http://mideastmedia.org/survey/2017/>
- The Economist Intelligent Unit. (2018, April 3). Cyberattacks: Is the GCC prepared? *The Economist*. Retrieved from <http://www.eiu.com/industry/article/806588464/cyber-attacks-is-the-gcc-prepared/2018-04-03>
- Emmons, A. (2018, August 8). Saudi Arabia planned to invade Qatar last summer. *The Intercept*. Retrieved from <https://theintercept.com/2018/08/01/rex-tillerson-qatar-saudi-uae/>
- Flanagan, B. (2017). Doha "losing fight for U.S. public opinion." *Arab News*. Retrieved from <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1140111/middle-east>
- Gappa, J. M., Austin, A. E, & Trice, A. G. (2007). *Rethinking faculty work: Higher education's strategic imperative*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Government Communications Office. (2017, June 8). *Don't insult countries, leaders and people* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/2017/06/08/dont-insult-countries-leaders-people/>

- Jones, M. (2019). Propaganda, Fake News and Fake Trends: Weaponization of Twitter Bots in the Qatar Gulf Crisis. *International Journal of Communication*. Gulf Information War special section, 13, 1-26.
- Khatib, D. (2016). Arab Gulf lobbying in the U.S.: What makes them win and what makes them lose and why? *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 9(1), 68–81.
- Lindsey, U. (2013). Canceled conference revives concerns about academic freedom in the Persian Gulf. *The Chronicles of Higher Education*, 59(26). Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Canceled-Conference-Revives/137559>
- Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government. (2017). *The Arab world online*. Dubai, UAE. Retrieved from <https://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/d01358ac-8557-4954-b27f-95ddc5caef5f/The-Arab-World-Online-2017>
- NEC. (2018). *What constitutes a cyber attack?* Information Management. Retrieved from [https://www.nec.com/en/global/solutions/safety/info\\_management/cyberattack.html](https://www.nec.com/en/global/solutions/safety/info_management/cyberattack.html)
- Nelson, C. (2010, December 21). Defining academic freedom. *Inside Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2010/12/21/defining-academic-freedom>
- Oxborrow, I., & Nelmes, S. (2017, June 5). UAE and Saudi Arabia cut ties with Qatar. *The National*. Retrieved from <https://www.thenational.ae/world/uae-and-saudi-arabia-cut-ties-with-qatar-live-updates-1.24574>
- Redins, L. (2012, October, 5). Understanding cyberterrorism. *Risk Management*. Retrieved from <http://www.rmmagazine.com/2012/10/05/understanding-cyberterrorism/>
- Reinl, J. (2017, August 3). Gulf diplomatic war with Qatar opens front in U.S. media. *The Middle East Eye*. Retrieved from <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/gulf-diplomatic-war-qatar-opens-front-us-media-809826419>
- Rid, T. (2012). Cyberwar will not take place. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 35(1), 5-32. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2011.608939>
- Romanowski, M. H., & Nasser, R. (2010). Faculty perceptions of academic freedom at a GCC university. *Prospects*, 40, 481–497.
- Sciutto, J., & Herb, J. (2017). Exclusive: The secret documents that help explain the Qatar crisis. *CNN*. Retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/10/politics/secret-documents-qatar-crisis-gulf-saudi/index.html>

Tharoor, I. (2017, June 6). The Persian Gulf crisis over Qatar, explained. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/06/06/the-persian-gulf-crisis-over-qatar-explained/?utm\\_term=.9e9c0c3afc9b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/06/06/the-persian-gulf-crisis-over-qatar-explained/?utm_term=.9e9c0c3afc9b)

Virkama, A. (2015). Maghreb, higher education and academic freedom. In Z. Gross & L. Favies (Eds.), *The contested role of education in conflict and fragility* (pp. 237–154). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.

Whittington, K. E. (2018). *Speak freely. Why universities must defend free speech*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.