



## Framing Saudi Arabia in The Us Media: A Comparison of The Washington Post's Pre and Post-Jamal Khashoggi's Murder Coverage

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### Abstract:

The Washington Post was at the epicentre when its columnist Saudi citizen Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in his country's Istanbul Consulate in 2018. His execution – for which, according to the United Nations special rapporteur, the state of Saudi Arabia is responsible – has damaged the image of the ambitious Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), who is keen to reform the Kingdom. Despite MBS' close friendship with Jeff Bezos, owner of Amazon, the coverage of Saudi Arabia and its "authoritarian prince" has changed dramatically after the incident. Whereas the agenda setting of the pre-Khashoggi framing of the Washington Post was to build a positive image of the Kingdom in overall, Khashoggi's critical opinion pieces of his country were an internal checks and balance. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argued that media sets the political agenda and shapes public opinion and reconstruct political reality. Hence, lobbying with media agencies was part of MBS' agenda before the incident happened, to create a positive public opinion. However, internal developments are more important in creating an image outside of the country. This article deals with The Washington Post's framing of Saudi Arabia's three months pre, and three months post-Khashoggi case coverage of totally 128 articles, to elaborate on the media narrative. The notion of modernization is examined as part of a communication symbol used by the Saudi regime. The analysis demonstrates how despite the positive coverage of reforms in the Kingdom, the Khashoggi case along with the Yemen war and US President Donald Trump's Middle East plan, has been influential in the establishment of a negative portrayal of the country. Politically considered as an authoritarian act, the assassination of the columnist Jamal Khashoggi left an incurable stain in the hands of the Crown prince Mohammed bin Salman. Ultimately, this case has sufficiently shown that political violence, press freedom, and human rights abuses are in the forefront in the Saudi regime.

**Keywords:** saudi arabia; the washington post; jamal Khashoggi; mohammed bin salman; authoritarianism

### Introduction:

"When I speak of the fear, intimidation, arrests and public shaming of intellectuals and religious leaders who dare to speak their minds, and then I tell you that I'm from Saudi Arabia, are you surprised?" was one of Jamal Khashoggi's last sentences in his column for The Washington Post (WaPo) two weeks before he was reported missing in Istanbul in October 2018. He was an extraordinary profile in the US media with his anti-Saudi regime articles for which he had to pay the price with his life. Yet, once again, this incident put freedom of speech and human rights at spotlight in the Middle East.

When Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) became the crown prince of Saudi Arabia in 2017 by replacing his nephew, he was portrayed as a young ‘liberator’ of the traditional conservative House of Saud. Along with his mastermind, Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), both leaders are following a secular Islamist ideology and repressive political agenda at home. Their relationship with the US President Donald Trump, and more importantly, with Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, enable them to get support from the Trump administration in geostrategic developments. As a matter of fact, the alliance between the young leaders, MBS, MBZ, and Kushner has been influential in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict too. When Kushner revealed the “Deal of the Century” to resolve the conflict in the Middle East, he had the back of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, it is an alliance against Turkey-Qatar who openly support Hamas and other Islamist movements in the Middle East and opposed Trump’s “peace plan”.

When Saudi Arabia’s mysterious prince spent three weeks in the US in 2018, six months prior to Khashoggi’s murder, it was interpreted as a “charm offensive” to develop new agreements with the technology sector in the Silicon Valley, and culture world in Hollywood in particular. The public relations (PR) pioneer Edward Bernays (1952, p.12) highlights that “informing people” and “persuading people” are two essential elements of public relations. Furthermore, “public relations help to establish and maintain mutual lines of communication” (Wilcox, Ault and Agee, 1992, p.7). Indeed, the trip was a PR tool to change the portrayal of the authoritarian regime. In fact, “Prince Mohammed does Hollywood” was the title of a Vanity Fair article that described MBS’ California trip. From Oprah to Bill Gates, from Henry Kissinger to The Rock, Saudi Arabia was welcomed by the most important business, politics and entertainment figures as never seen before. But while this trip had an intention to give hope to the West to invest in Saudi Arabia and help the young prince to modernize the nation, and reach his 2030 vision, free media, equal rights for women, punishment of homosexuality, and the war in Yemen since 2015 were only some of the burdens MBS had on his shoulders which framed a negative image of his country as it is the seventh most gender-unequal country globally according to the World Economic Forum.<sup>2</sup>

While the US media covered positively about Saudi Arabia in the first quarter of 2018, the Khashoggi case in the final quarter of the same year has changed the short-term achievements of the Saudi prince, leading the first phase of the modernization attempt to fail. This change has been very obvious on WaPo. Despite MBS’ close friendship with Jeff Bezos, owner of Amazon and WaPo, the coverage of Saudi Arabia and its authoritarian prince has changed

dramatically after the incident. Whereas the agenda setting of the pre-Khashoggi framing of WaPo was to build a positive image of the Kingdom in overall, Khashoggi’s critical opinion pieces of his country were an internal checks and balance. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue that the media sets the agenda and shapes public opinion and political reality. Hence, lobbying with media agencies was part of MBS’ agenda before the incident happened, to create a positive public opinion. However, internal developments are more important in creating an image outside of the country. In this regard, modernization was meant to be a symbol of political communication for Saudi Arabia which could not be successfully implemented with the Khashoggi case and the Yemen war in particular. In this regard, the research covers how MBS’ modernization as a symbol has failed, and how the brutal murder has played a key role for the credible sources in the US media to develop a critical editorial line against the young authoritarian ruler.

### Contextualizing Modernization:

Modernization is a polysemous notion that evolves over times. The encyclopaedic dictionary of public administration defines it as a term designating various transformations leading a society towards a future seen as modern, progressive and opposed to a past considered to be conservative and backward. In fact, the concept of the state modernization dates back to the 1980s, marked notably by the principles of new public management (Machiavelli & Charest, 2016). Modernity therefore implies a new vision of the world (Raulet, 1998). This implies that the understanding of modernity is perceptible over time. Also, to be modern is to assume a desire to break with the traditional methods. Hence, the modernization of a state or a society presupposes a form of rupture with the past.

However, the theory of modernization seems difficult to implement in some regions. In this regard, Samuel Huntington (2009) has always regarded the Middle East as exceptionally immune to the cultural process of democratization. In the Arab world, indeed, modernization was related to new disparities and inequalities, marked by low and high classes established through peasantry and new bourgeoisie (Raymond Hinnebusch, 2006). The theory of modernization, which emerged in mid-twentieth century, takes root in the philosophy of the enlightenment. According to this theory, the modernization is a linear process which allows societies to reach development. In fact, each step taken toward modernization constitutes progress and advancement of a society.

From the 1980s, modernization was presented as an aspiration and an objective to be achieved (Arjomand, 2004). Thus, Armstrong (1997) argues that it is possible to detect at least three types of modernization processes. These are namely the adaption and

<sup>1</sup> Avi Shlaim, Emeritus Professor of International Relations at Oxford University, described the deal as a “diplomatic triumph akin the Balfour Declaration” for Israelis, and as “the latest act of western treachery” (2020).

<sup>2</sup> The Global Gender Gap Report, World Economic Forum (2017), Available at: [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2017.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2017.pdf)

redefinition of accepted practices; the adoption of new instruments or new techniques; and finally, the global or fundamental reforms. Moreover, the theory of modernization combines modernization with industrialization, progress and productivity. Thus, to adapt to new changes, societies would be condemned to take into account the process of democratization.

### Democratization in Saudi Arabia:

The term democratization is equivocal. It designates the establishment of democratic principles, the development of processes or reforms that promote democracy. It refers to the fact of making something accessible to the greatest number, to all social classes. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000) assimilated democratization to modernization, reform, and reinvention of new possibilities and opportunities. In politics, democratization is the process that allows a regime to evolve towards democracy or to strengthen its democratic character. In short, democratization is a process by which a political regime or an institution strives to put democratic principles into practice (Göran, 2000).

The close nexus between modernization and democratization is universally recognized as a greater economic healthiness, as well as an effective globalization in every domain. In Saudi Arabia, the process of modernization is characterized by new all-out reforms, such as the 2030 vision, initiated by the MBS regime with an aim of giving a modern face to contemporary Saudi identity. In fact, the immense oil wealth shaped the Saudi economy, giving an elite class of princes and businessmen tremendous opulence while the majority of the citizens remain in the status quo.

### Critical Theory and Modernization:

The concept of popular culture goes hand in hand with manipulation and mass control. Indeed, the entertainment that people enjoy with pop culture does not reflect their actual social, economic, or political interests, but instead it blinds them from questioning the dominant political system. The critical theory of Frankfurt School puts forward the manipulative mechanisms of capitalist society in the modern society. “The culture industry, by using tools like the media, prevents people from reaching a true understanding of their conditions. Moreover, the culture industry, by creating artificial needs for people, distracts them from their real needs” (Baudrillard, 2017; PP 13).

Notwithstanding, the critical theory claimed that “man can be more than a manipulable subject in the production process of class society” (Marcuse, 1968; 1988:153). Thus, the first theorists of Frankfurt School argued that the main objective of the critical theory was the transformation of the entire society into a ‘society

without injustice’, determined to achieve ambitions of freedom, peace and happiness (Horkheimer, 1968: 221-222).

According to Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) the culture industry functioned in such a way that the oppressed and influenced people would never realize that they were being manipulated. In doing so, the high classes take the lower classes’ minds by creating an illusion of happiness. In his masterpiece entitled *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse considers that once someone’s mind is under control, controlling his actions becomes simple. Joining Adorno, Marcuse wondered whether the informational and entertaining roles of mass media could be separated from their functions of manipulation and indoctrination. For them, modernism is dialectically in contradiction with mass culture. Thus, some modern and postmodern intellectuals like Foucault, Bourdieu, or Lyotard and Jameson claimed that the process of modernization is destroying the dominant ideology.

In the context of Saudi Arabia, popular culture plays a key role in shaping a new identity of generation. Correspondingly, Marcuse (1964) identified some societal dimensions of alienation occasioned by pop culture: political alienation, cultural alienation, economic alienation, subjective, inter-subjective and even objective alienation. Contextually, talking about the role of popular culture in the society, Walter Benjamin conceptualized it as the “politicization of art and the aestheticization of politics” by ruling classes. This aspect is quite perceptible in the Saudi Kingdom since 2016 with the tumultuous new reforms undertaken by MBS. In 1936, Benjamin has prevented this state of fact in his masterwork entitled *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* by demanding a revolutionary art; and accordingly, he invited the public to participate both critically but also enjoying artworks (pop culture).

According to Baudrillard (1994), there are four levels of images associated to the notion of pop culture. These are the objective image of a reflective reality, the denaturation of existing profound reality, the lack of objective reality, and finally the image connected to a profound reality of any kind. In Saudi Arabia, while high art is attempting to distinguish and criticize social defects and injustices of the current regime, the role of popular culture is to shape a new constructed identity in Saudi Arabia; ensuring de facto the domination and survival of the dominant system established by the MBS regime.

### Process of Modernization in Saudi Arabia:

Former US President Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) defined democracy as “the government of the people, by the people and for the people” (Magleby, Light and Nemacheck, 2013, pp. 9-10)<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Lincoln (1861-1965), nicknamed the Great Emancipator, was the 16th President of the United States of America. He headed the House of Representatives from 1847 to 1849, and then

the Presidency of The United States Of America from 1861 to 1865. Lincoln became famous after he preserved the Union during the American

Democracy is the exercise, directly or indirectly, of power by the people. It implies a social state characterized by the equality of all citizens vis-a-vis the law, having the same rights; or more fundamentally, having the right to have rights as Hannah Arendt (1951) underlined. All citizens are called to animate in an efficient and reasoned way the intellectual and moral life of the state. However, in order to have a democratic society it is necessary to get a pluralistic and diversified media landscape because press freedom is one of the fundamentals of a democratic state. Nevertheless, the role of the media is to make governors accountable for their actions (Philipp Bennet, 2005). But it can only be accomplished in a well-informed public sphere, in other words, in a democratic society (Habermas, 1962).

The liberal theory reminds us that the media are supposed to function as a fourth power, holding elites to account (Wheeler, 1997). Besides legislative, judiciary and executive powers, media power is crucial to control governmental actions, in other words it is a 'checks and balance' system. McCombs and Shaw (1972) observed that the media set political agenda debates in the public sphere by shaping opinions through content framings. Articulated in a similar context, Lippmann (1922, p.162) talks about "manufacture of consents" referring to the way mass media reconstruct reality. To be more specific, talking about information and politics, the political reality comprises three distinct categories (Kaid et al., 1991): objective reality (the real image), subjective reality (the desired image) and constructed reality (the images perceived through media).

The evolution and diversification of information and communication outlets - with the advent of traditional media and digital media platforms - were 'normally' supposed to bring about a wind of democracy in Saudi Arabian Kingdom. But paradoxically, as Kranzberg (1986) emphasizes, the evolution of "technology is neither good nor bad, nor it is neutral". Indeed, to contextualize this state of fact in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince knows how to utilise media to strengthen his power. What fascinated the West, James Piscatori (1983) points out, is the curiosity of an Islamic society rushing to modernize in a conservative dynasty. According to Piscatori (ibid.), the convergence of political and religious interests led to an alliance of great importance.

Saudi political figures used the media to shape reality and transmit messages directly to the public. In 1964, a press code allowed politics to interfere with media landscape concerning the diffusion of information related to important issues such as Islam, the royal family, or governmental actions (Piscatori, 1983). In consequence, the media ecosystem is closely inspected by the general direction

of broadcasting, press and publications. Hence, news can be systematically censored when it does not meet governmental approval. Since 1982 a royal decree obliges journalists to observe rigorous self-censorship concerning sensitive topics (ibid.). Subsequently, the authority of Prince Muhammad has considerably increased the number of arrests of journalists and bloggers (The Washington Post, 2018).

The murder of Khashoggi in 2018 reminds us that freedom of expression, human rights and media politicization in Saudi Arabian Kingdom still remain as an unsolved issue. In fact, according to Freedom House's 2020 report, freedom of expression is in danger in the Arab world because the region is immune from democracy. Piscatori (1983) reminds us that since the holy Qur'an is the constitution of the Kingdom, there could be no 'checks and balances' in the country. Accordingly, political leaders have used Islam to legitimate their system of governance (ibid.). This entails a cumbersome development, inhibiting creative responses to the dilemmas of modernization. To articulate it in a different way, the process of democratization faces several obstacles in Arab countries (Samuel Huntington, 1993). Hence, traditional Arab media, most especially television channels, are under governmental control. Khashoggi was concerned about the lack of freedom of expression in the Arab world. Yet, he was outraged by the brutal treatment of his fellow journalists in the Middle East in general and in Saudi Kingdom particularly.<sup>4</sup>

### **Saudi Kingdom's Smutted Reforms:**

In order to be socio-politically, ideologically and economically in line with the process of modernization, MBS implemented a new futuristic development plan called *Vision 2030* in April 2016. It was launched for the economic sustainability of the Kingdom to embark on a vast campaign of economic reforms (Tangi Ribeaux, 2018). The aim is to prove that the new young leader is willing and able to adapt to modern conditions with new legislations and reformed institutions. One of the main reasons behind this move is to get out of oil dependence and find outlets for his growing young population, strongly affected by unemployment. The young ambitious Crown Prince knows that his country needs economic reforms in order to develop a local industrial fabric to support this significant demographic weight. In fact, the economic dependence on oil is risky as it is dependent on the price of a barrel which can collapse at any time depending on geopolitical and global crisis as it has been seen during the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. Therefore, he saw the necessity to engage in new smutted reforms.

### **Modern History and New Reforms:**

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Civil War and brought about the emancipation of the slaves.

<sup>4</sup> The Washington Post. Saudi Arabia wasn't always this repressive: Now it's unbearable, (2018). Available at:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/09/18/saudi-arabia-wasnt-always-this-repressive-now-its-unbearable/?noredirect=on>



Globally, the modern Saudi state was born in the 18<sup>th</sup> century from the alliance of the Saud dynasty with the preacher Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, founder of Wahhabism (Anna Viden, 2014). Since the eleventh century Saudi rulers have found a way to exercise some freedom within the bounds of the divine legislation Sha'ria (Piscatori, 1983). Then, between 1773 and 1819 the first Saudi state was formed with a combined force united (ibid., p.63). However, the contemporary and geostrategic history of Saudi Arabia dates back to the discovery of oil in 1938. Concomitantly, extreme political and religious problems were at the origin of many historical reforms and constituted major trends in Arab-Islamic modern history (Mouline, 2010). In this regard, Saudis have prided themselves on the assiduous application of the Islamic norms and practices (Piscatori, 1983). "They have accomplished this by emphasizing their special role as guardian of the holy place, patron of the pilgrimage, and promoter of Islamic causes throughout the world" (ibid. pp. 65). Thus, Arab political leaders have institutionalized the religious authorities. By using force and manipulating an Islamic ideology, the Saudis have been able to create a nation-state and to foster a general loyalty towards themselves as a kind of super-tribe.

### New Whirlwind Reforms:

On the economic front, the societal reforms undertaken in recent years stem from a vast plan and intended to diversify the economy. This plan among different aspects, includes the sale on the Stock Exchange of part of the oil giant Aramco, as well as entertainment city in Riyadh, and gigantic development zone presented as the equivalent of Silicon Valley (Journal of Economics and Finance, 2016). Also, to boost Tourism sector, Riyadh announces the launch of a tourism project consisting of transforming around fifty Red Sea islands into luxury seaside resorts. Part of this development is a mega-project of a futuristic development zone in the northwest of the Kingdom requiring investments of \$500 billion (Zahraa Alkhalisi, 2017).

For entertainment, Saudi Arabia plans to invest \$64 billion in leisure, including projects to build cinemas and an opera house. After first concerts in December 2017, music lovers taste jazz in February 2018 at a festival, and also an opera draws crowds at the University of Riyadh (ibid.). In April, the country hosted its very first *Fashion Week*, in a version reserved for a female audience. And for the first time in 35 years, Saudis watched a cinema session open to the general public in Riyadh. In October 2017, MBS decided to reconnect with a 'moderate and tolerant' Islam, and underlined that "the people of Saudi Arabia will not spend 30 more years of their lives accepting extremist ideas, and we are going to destroy them now" (Hubbard, 2020).

Regarding the status of women, Saudi Arabia, one of the last countries in the world banning women from driving, announced that they would be able to drive as of June 2018 (BBC, 2018). In 1983, indeed, a few handful visionary academics had already warned about the demands of the new modernizing middle-class; embarrassed by the religious police and being uncomfortable with

some restrictions still imposed on women. Thus, in January 2018, women could for the first time attend a football match in a stadium. Saudi women are also allowed to start their own businesses without seeking the consent of a husband/male guardian, in order to stimulate the private sector. MBS used these reform politics especially in foreign trips and interviews with international media outlets. Yet, despite some developments, Saudi women still face difficulties and oppression at home. They must still obtain the permission of a family member for their studies or trips abroad. Having conceptualized the analytical framework of 'modernization', next chapter will concentrate on 'framing' which is applied in this research as a methodology.

### Framing Theory and Methodology:

Media framings have an impact on how people comprehend, understand or think about societal issues. Media coverages have always been framed throughout different angles of treatment or perspectives; leading the audience to interpret the information according to the news construction. Mediated information comprises three distinct categories: objective reality (real image), subjective reality (desired image) and constructed reality (images perceived through media) (Kaid et al., 1991). That is why mass-media is considered as distributors of ideology (Gitlin, 1980). Basically, this means that the so-called ideologies are constructed, manufactured or disseminated mainly via framings, or specific angles of treatment (the story focus). The concept 'framing' was initially coined by the British anthropologist Gregory Bateson in 1955 to describe how media select some aspects of apparent reality and mark them as more prominent in a specific communicative style. Framing can be highlighted as the ways of considering whether a glass is 'half full' or 'half empty'; depending on which aspect of the spectrum newsmakers decides to put forwards (Entman, 1993). Thus, framing is the way of "elevating information in salience" (ibid., pp. 53). There are two different types of framings in media coverage: episodic coverage and thematic coverage. More specifically, episodic coverage tracks a specific event in a straight line; whereas thematic coverage usually befalls later, several times after the event happened (Kimberly, 2008; pp.169-192).

In this research, our analysis combines both the episodic coverage (pre-Khashoggi murder coverage) and thematic coverage (the post-Khashoggi coverage). However, regarding our investigation, the news coverage of Saudi Arabia has become thematic after the assassination of Khashoggi in October 2018. Consequently, the analysis of episodic news framing of the pre-murder events in Saudi Arabia proves that WaPo coverages have turned to become thematic coverage after October 2018. In point of fact, 116 articles (91,40%) related to the Saudi Kingdom were frequently opinion article or analyses composed of specific labels such as democracy and justice, common themes like freedom of speech, and rhetorical associations marked by excessive use of adjectives and figure of speech such as oxymoron. These news frames have been published in the following sections: Worldviews, PowerPost, Business, The Fix, Opinions, DemocracyPost, Post Partisan, Global Opinions,

National Security, Politics, Nation & World, The Post's view, Fact Checker, and Middle East.

Furthermore, academics like Gamson (1993), Scheufele (1999), and Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) define framing as a process whereby conversationalists (communicators), intentionally or unintentionally, act to manufacture a point of view that underlines facts concerning a given situation; allowing people to interpret it in a particular manner. In the current research the issue of Khashoggi emphasises how media frames, especially the use of symbolism, shaped informational construction throughout the columns of the WaPo. Yet, framing can be considered as a form of agenda-setting, a process of communication which consists in directing the public's attention to a specific public issue (Kurt, 1940). In doing so, the framing concept in this article is parented to the indexing theory (Hallin and Mancini, 1986, Naim and Bennett, 1990).

This research aims to investigate how the use of symbolism affected the WaPo news coverage, changing its framing of Saudi Arabia after Khashoggi murder and focusing on the use of symbols like Khashoggi and Yemen war in their narrative. In this context, a symbol can be well-defined as distinctive sign, an explicit mark, or a specific word that labels or designates a constructed idea. Thus, symbols impulse media audiences to understand an issue in a particular way by going beyond the mere known facts and making their own interpretations. In 1974, the American sociologist Erving Goffman (1974, p.24) deeply discussed this concept and termed it as "schemata of interpretation". According to Goffman, "schemata of interpretation" allows people to distinguish, perceive, identify and interpret events, manufacturing de facto specific meanings (ibid.).

Moreover, since framing is defined as a way of structuring or presenting an issue, the consideration of the audience is the core question. In fact, it involves explanations and descriptions of an issue in a specific context; retaining the attention and most importantly the support of the audience. This means that the way the issue is framed always reflect the behaviours, attitudes and engagements of the audiences. Roaming alongside, handful of scholars argued that the quintessence of framing process is to provide a compact and tangible platform for examining how discourses are orchestrated in media ecosystem (Kimberly, 2008). Hence, the deliberate purpose of framing is to redirect people's concerns towards particular political subjects. As a consequence, news workers and media owners are often subjected to certain victimizations regarding their ways of approaching political issues (Chomsky, 1988). As an illustration, 94 international journalists, including Khashoggi, have been deliberately killed in 2018, and 251 have been jailed, reported the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in 2019. These numbers demonstrate how media news workers are globally menaced when they get involved in framing the dark side of political issues.

In visual communication framing consists of presenting visually symbolic elements especially in relation to the subject through a strategic arrangement in such a way to give a specific connotation

(Kimberly, 2008). Entman (2003; pp. 417) claims that "the words and images that make up the frame can be distinguished from the rest of the news by their capacity of stimulating positively or negatively (objectively or subjectively) different sides in a political conflict". Thus, it consists in keeping the audience's focus on the framed topic.

As mentioned earlier, this investigative research found out that when it comes to the news framing concerning the Saudi Kingdom, the WaPo's post-Khashoggi coverage focuses mostly on Khashoggi's murder, the Yemen war, and Trump's Middle East politics in their narratives. This is what Entman (ibid.) conceptualized as dominant frames, that is to say the frames which dictate the outlines of the discussions. For him, certain frames turn to become more dominant than others via three distinct variables: the motivations, the power and the strategy, and the cultural congruence (ibid, pp.421). While investigating the WaPo's framing of Saudi Arabia, the current research demonstrates that the episodic news framing has turned to become a thematic coverage after October 2018.

Next chapter will analyze the findings of the research in detail.

### **Methodical Analysis: Pre and post-Khashoggi coverage of Saudi Arabia:**

Khashoggi was one of the rare journalists who dared to raise his voice against the authoritarian Saudi regime. He was frequently denouncing the Kingdom's foreign policy regarding the diplomatic relationships with Qatar and the habitual tensions with Yemen, Lebanon, Egypt and Iran. Khashoggi also used to criticize the regime's tyranny against media professionals and journalists in Saudi Arabia, and in Arab world more generally, through the columns of the WaPo. Hence, his voice was silenced on October 2018 in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. Notwithstanding, exploring the news framing, our analysis in the following lines will ponder on WaPo's pre and post-Khashoggi affair's coverage of Saudi Arabia and its Crown Prince MBS's actions for six months in total. Concretely, during the first three months preceding Khashoggi's assassination, nine articles have been published; whereas the next three months following the murder, a total of 119 articles has been written by the WaPo. That is to say the number has been multiplied by twelve.

### **The Pre-Khashoggi Affair's Media Framing Of The Washington Post:**

In this part we focus on the articles dealing with Saudi Arabia published three months before the incident in October. Three of these articles have been written by Khashoggi himself. Khashoggi's articles were about human rights, freedom of speech, fear, intimidation, arrests, and public shaming of intellectuals in Saudi Kingdom. The nine articles produced before Khashoggi's murder focussed respectively on the following themes:

- I. The Kingdom's reputation harmed by regional crisis management entailing poor diplomatic

- relations with the international community;
- II. A call to end violence and restore dignity in Islamic world;
- III. The waves of intimidations and arbitrary arrests of Saudi intellectuals, clerics, journalists, and social media stars;
- IV. The press freedom and more generally the lack of democracy in the Arab world;
- V. The US-Saudi relations about the Muslim Brotherhood issue in Egypt;
- VI. The life under authoritarianism, despotism, embezzlements and corrupt regimes in Arab countries;
- VII. The coup in Egypt and its repercussions in the entire Arab world;
- VIII. The ambivalent relations Assad-Salam and the spread of terrorism in the region;
- IX. The tensions between the Saudi government and Canada.

In his very first article published in the WaPo in September 18, 2017, Khashoggi criticized the brutal repression orchestrated by MBS and explained his decision of leaving Saudi Arabia to live in the United States with the following words:

“I have left my home, my family and my job, and I am raising my voice. To do otherwise would betray those who languish in prison. I can speak when so many cannot. I want you to know that Saudi Arabia has not always been as it is now. We Saudis deserve better.” Five months later, in February 2018, Khashoggi underlined that MBS “should learn from the British royal house that has earned true stature, respect and success by trying a little humility himself” (Washington Post, 2018). Being open for criticism is one of the main aspects Khashoggi suggests as a fundamental way of gaining respect abroad. In his last article before he was murdered, Khashoggi was deliberately urging MBS to put an end to the war in Yemen, and avoid irreparable damages that it could carry on. “The crown prince must bring an end to the violence and restore the dignity of the birthplace of Islam,” Khashoggi said by highlighting his religious belief at the same time (Washington Post, 2018).

In other words, the terms that recurrently appeared in the news contents related to the Saudi Kingdom were coloured by critics and denunciations regarding the way of ruling. The words violence, ambivalent relations, arbitrary arrests, despotism, authoritarianism, corruption, democracy, and freedom were used to depict the reality in Saudi Arabia. However, these episodic news framings of Saudi Arabia will shift to a thematic coverage after the premeditated killing of the WaPo columnist.

These episodic framings were focused on the dark sides of the Kingdom’s method of governance. Thus, the pre-murder coverage of Saudi Arabia, qualified by Kimberly (2008) as ‘episodic news framing’ concerned namely the restrictions of women’s rights (August 2<sup>nd</sup>), the diplomatic tensions between the Saudi Kingdom

and Canada (August 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>), the responsibility of Saudi Arabia in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood issue (August 28<sup>th</sup>), the Saudi’s involvement in Yemeni conflict (September 1<sup>st</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>), and finally the lack of freedom manifested by a lot of persecutions, intimidation and arrests of intellectuals and human rights activists in the Arab World (September, 18<sup>th</sup>).

Consequently, the WaPo used the dominant frames of ‘authoritarianism’ and ‘international crisis’; characterized by the use of sub-frames such as freedom of expression, human rights (especially women’s rights), repression, etc. on the one hand; and on the other hand, Yemeni crisis, the Muslim brotherhood, and Canada over a human rights activist. More crucially, 88,88% of the articles produced during this time were opinion articles. As an illustration, we can have a descriptive look at the following headline: ‘Saudi Arabia’s crown prince is taking the kingdom back to the Dark Ages’ (July 19, 2018). Seen through the symbolism perspective, the use of the label ‘Dark Ages’ refers to the ‘pre-enlightenment’ period of the history. This symbolizes a context of social injustice, anarchy, in which there is no freedom, nor democracy. This idea opposes the concept of modernization advocated by the Crown Prince. In this article, it is possible to enumerate labelling connotations such as “democratic mechanisms”, “the royal family’s newest generation”, and also the use of connotative adjectives, comparatives and adverbs such as “absolute monarchy more firmly and vociferously than (...)”. These labelling expressions demonstrate the commitment of the WaPo to purify the Kingdom’s dark sides. Similarly, the label “absolute monarchy” was used eleven times, the word “democracy” used seven times and also some repetitive qualifications like “human rights, arbitrary detentions” constituted the main articulations of this article. Also, the use of the euphemistic phrase “absolute monarchy” has a symbolic meaning here. Considering that euphemism is a figure of speech which consists in attenuating the expression of facts or ideas in order to soften reality. It is a phrase used to avoid saying an unpleasant or offensive word. Here the euphemism “absolute monarchy” refers to the dictatorial, authoritarian, totalitarian and anarchic power of the prince. Visually, the Prince Mohammed was framed in a close up shot heading the article. Besides, in order to symbolise the lack of freedom in the Saudi Kingdom, a video describing human rights associates MBS’s image with unveiled women in a driving car and other public events.

Two weeks later, the next article depicted the arrest of “2 more women’s rights activists” by the Saudi regime (August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018). Five days later, the following editorial criticized the “Saudi Arabian diplomatic ruptures with Canada” few days after Ottawa denounced the arrests of activists in the Saudi Kingdom (August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018). The article privileged the use of visual elements to describe the issue. The caption was linked with a video describing the suspension of trades and investments with Canada. Also, another illustrative picture inserted in the middle of the text showed MBS speaking to the Russian President Vladimir Putin during a meeting in Moscow. Metaphorically, this underlines the willing of the Saudi regime to revitalize its diplomatic relations abroad. The

next day (August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018), Khashoggi wrote an article in which he argued that “Saudi Arabia cannot afford to pick fights with Canada”. The article was illustrated with a medium shot image of Ensaf Haidar, the wife of a jailed Saudi Arabian blogger named Raif Badawi. Once again, the questions of human rights and freedom in the Arab world were indexed by WaPo. The same scenario continued the following day (August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018) with an article portraying the intensifying disputes between Saudi Arabia and Canada regarding the imprisoned human rights activists.

The next article was published three weeks later. Khashoggi came back with another article focusing on the Muslim Brotherhood and the implication of the Arab world (August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018). This article went beyond the Egyptian crisis to denounce “tyranny, repression, corruption and mismanagement” in the entire Arab world. Khashoggi claimed in this article that Egypt’s 2013 coup led to the “loss of a great opportunity to reform the entire Arab world”. He went further arguing that “the eradication of the Muslim Brotherhood is nothing less than an abolition of democracy and a guarantee that Arabs will continue living under authoritarian and corrupt regimes”. Making allusion to the situation in the Saudi Kingdom, he mentioned that “there can be no political reform and democracy in any Arab country without accepting that political Islam is a part of it”. The Islamization of politics can be regarded as the fact of dictatorial rulers who hold demagogic speeches to denounce the dangers of Western secularism, perceived as a threat against the Arab Muslim values (Yves Aubin, 2019). Saudi Arabia presents this specificity within the Arab world, to be a religious state, in which the Wahhabi Islam constitutes the foundation of its legitimacy. In order to prevent tensions likely to weaken the power of the Royal family, despite its efforts, MBS decided therefore to depoliticize Saudi Islam with cultural, social and economic reforms.

Finally, the articles published in September focused particularly on the crisis in Yemen. Thus, the first column posted this month was visually full of interpretations. Actually the article displayed a long shot picture of mourners attending a funeral for people, mainly children, killed in a “Saudi-led coalition airstrike on a bus in northern Yemen” (September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018). The image exposed countless coffins aligning in a long queue the victims of the “unjustified Saudi attack”. Ten days later, the second article of September invited MBS to end the war and it also described how he conflict in Yemen had soured the kingdom’s relations with the international community. The article warned that “the window for achieving a resolution to the conflict is rapidly closing (...) and the longer this cruel war lasts in Yemen, the more permanent the damage will be” (September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018). Once again, this article played sensationally on the visual symbolism by associating the images of the victims in a mass funeral in the northern Yemeni city of Sa’adah. Ultimately, the very last article of our pre-Khashoggi affair analysis, published on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018, showed Trump

shaking hands with MBS in the White House. This article posted in the section ‘Global opinion’ criticized vehemently the “fear, intimidation, arrests and public shaming of intellectuals and religious leaders” in the Saudi Kingdom. Ironically, this article has been written by Khashoggi who linked the Crown Prince’s ascension to the throne with the “recent wave of arrests”, incarcerations (imprisonments) and assassinations in Saudi Arabia. Once again, the deliberate use of the metaphor “wave of arrests” denotes the beginning of an authoritarian calamity that can continue occurring unpredictably in the future.

### **The Post-Khashoggi Affair’s Media Framing Of The Washington Post:**

Before analysing the post-murder framing of the WaPo it is necessary to have an analytical look at how the killing of the Saudi columnist has complexified the relationships between the US and Saudi Arabia. The analysis of the pre-murder coverage of Saudi Kingdom in the previous part has sufficiently demonstrated that the WaPo journalist used to be very critic vis-a-vis the Kingdom’s policies and the actions of the royal family. In all hypotheses, Khashoggi’s murder became somewhat impossible to be easily ignored by the international community. And accordingly, the entire framework of the Saudi Arabian government is deeply concerned because it is henceforth difficult to legitimate its actions abroad. Following the historical dissidences including the columnist’s murder event, the U.S. Congress had decided to limit the arm sales to the Saudi kingdom (cf. HR7070)<sup>5</sup>. Even if the U.S. decides not to end the bilateral relationships with the Saudi Kingdom, there will necessarily be serious limitations in terms of cooperation.

The post-murder media thematic framing focused on the use of dominant frames such as Yemen and most notably the Khashoggi affair. In doing so, the WaPo mainly used the following sub-frames: Coalition, Saudi military strikes, the responsibility of Saudi government, violence, indiscriminate civilians killing, cruel war, and cease-fire. On the other hand, there are sub-frames such as justice, media politicisation, conspiracy, freedom of expression, trial, arrests, threats, fear, oppression, investigation, and impunity. Furthermore, the symbolic coverage of Khashoggi affair became so programmatic after October 2018 that it has created a thematic frame of authoritarianism in the Arab world. In doing so, the consistent linking of Khashoggi’s murder with the press freedom in the Saudi Kingdom was most regularly perceptible in the editorial articles, and the news titles were ironically formulated. To be specific, it is possible to illustrate this state of fact with the titles such as “Saudi Arabia’s investigation of Jamal Khashoggi’s murder is a complete farce” (December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018), “How a chilling Saudi cyberwar ensnared Jamal Khashoggi” (December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018), “Saudi crown prince exchanged messages with aide alleged to have overseen Khashoggi killing” (December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018), “the Saudi

<sup>5</sup> If the H.R. 7070 passes at the Congressional votes and becomes a law, it would mean the end of the US–Saudi relations because the United

States could no longer provide any security assistance to the Saudi Arabian Kingdom.



crown prince is a protected pariah at G-20 summit” (December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018, 104), “The Saudi crown prince should fear the long reach of justice” (November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018), and so forth. Most remarkably, 86 articles among a total of 120 (71,66%) focused primarily on Khashoggi case.

Due to the considerable number of articles, we will categorise the analysis of this section in terms of monthly focus. As a consequence, during the first month of Khashoggi’s assassination, 80 articles have been produced by the WaPo. 67,22% of the published articles has been written in October. Only 23 articles (28,75%) posted this month made exception of Khashoggi case. The rest of the coverage specifically put emphasis on “justice for Khashoggi, the lack of Press freedom, oppression, investigation and impunity in the Saudi Kingdom” as major frames in October 2018. In the second month, from November to December 2018, 24 articles were published and the last month consecrated 15 articles dealing with the Saudi Kingdom.

Besides the Khashoggi’s spectral affair thematic frames abovementioned, the other major themes developed during these three months underlined majorly the US-Saudi arms trades, the Yemen crisis, and also the Saudi new reforms especially regarding the pop culture in relationship with modernization. Thus, an analytical article posted in the section “Fact Checker” on October 11<sup>th</sup> detailed the US President “Trump’s \$110 billion arms sales to Saudi Arabia” negotiated during his first trip in the Saudi Kingdom in 2017. Most importantly, a video in this article shows Trump explaining the reason why the US should continue doing arms business with Saudi Arabia. For him, “the Kingdom is spending \$110 billion in military equipment and other things and if we (the US) don’t sell it to them (Saudi Arabia), they will buy it from Russian or from China. And this doesn’t help us when it comes to jobs (...). This is an all-time record and we don’t want to stop it and let Russia or China get that money (...)” (October 11, 2018). Hence, the use of this visual communication in the article was significant because it helped to portray the willing of the American government to keep doing arms business with the Saudi Kingdom just a week following Khashoggi’s disappearance. Yet, the main intention behind the business deal between the US and Saudi Arabia was to cover the murder of the Saudi regime by showing the American public that the relationship with the Saudi monarchy is vital to create new jobs, which meant to be a critical political communication tool for Trump in 2020 elections.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 2018, an article published in the ‘Business’ section depicted the impact of Khashoggi affair in the country’s new reforms. It was qualified as a “Davos in the Desert”. A term coined by the WaPo to elucidate the attempt of the Saudi Crown prince to implement a more moderate form of Islamic state “open to all religions and to the world”. Talking about MBS’ new economic reforms, the article clarified that “Saudi Arabia is the biggest economy of the region, and the current reform plans rely on opening it further to private investment”.

Another article entitled “the myth of the modernizing dictator”

(October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018) displayed a video depicting the Crown Prince’s economic and social reforms called “Vision 2030” program; somehow considered by the WaPo as a “reforming autocrat who wants to modernize and lead his nation out of its backward and benighted past”. Crucially, the use of the concept “modernizing dictator” covers a symbolic meaning. As a figure of speech, it is an oxymoron; two opposite words used together to portray reality. Two days later the following article focused on the role of Saudi Arabia in the Yemeni War. According to the WaPo the Crown Prince made “many mistakes because of arrogance and inexperience” (October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018). Also, in the caption, a deplorable image of a Yemeni victim receiving treatment in a hospital located in the city of Hodeidah was deliberately displayed in order to catch the attention of the readers about the impact of the conflict. Finally, the very last article of our sample was essentially a visual element entitled “Turkish TV airs movement of bags it says may be linked to Jamal Khashoggi’s murder”. The video posted on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019, shows someone carrying bags interpreted by the footage as the remains of the slain journalist Khashoggi.

## Discussions:

The analytical part of this article pursues two mains objectives. Firstly, to comprehend the use of both episodic and thematic framings of Saudi Arabia by the WP between July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018 and January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019. Thus, exploring theses six months news framing, the analytical part of the research concentrates expressively on the WaPo’s pre and post-Khashoggi coverage of the Saudi Kingdom. The table 1 below gives us a panoramic view on the WaPo framing elaborated between this interval of time (*See Table 1 for more details*).

A total of 128 articles has been collected during the abovementioned period of time. Throughout our detailed examination of these articles, several distinctive labels emerged. The labelling of the news produced before Khashoggi’s murder attempted to establish democracy in the Saudi Kingdom, as well as the motives of the Crown Prince’s implications in the crisis occurred in Yemen, Egypt and Canada. The articles thumped especially on the mass arrests, the torture and imprisonment of intellectuals and activists, the lack of freedom and women’s rights in the Saudi Kingdom, marked by totalitarianism at all levels. Consequently, the Crown Prince’s multiple new reforms intending to modernize the Saudi society and to revitalize the Kingdom’s economy constituted an aspect of the news framings.

In evaluating the media thematic portrayals of the Saudi Kingdom by the WaPo after Khashoggi’s assassination, two major frames prevailed. These main themes framed by the WaPo after October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018, are notably the justice for Khashoggi, the Yemen war instigated by the Saudi authoritarian regime, and Trump’s Middle East politics. All over our analysis, we demonstrated that the episodic framing of Saudi Arabia turned into a thematic framing when Khashoggi’s affair occurred. Also, we have shown via our analyses how modernization including pop culture, marked by

MBS' Saudi Vision 2030 whirlwind reforms, is used as a symbol to change the minds of the new generation in the Saudi Kingdom. Talking about visual framings, the image of MBS appeared 69 times (including photos and video) in the WaPo news columns between July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018 and January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019. Besides, throughout the post-murder articles, the visual frames constituted 72% of

Khashoggi' images (pictures, caricatures, and videos) as illustrations of the news articles. This demonstrates clearly that the pre-Khashoggi episodic coverage framed exceptionally the authoritarian personality of MBS while the post-murder thematic framings focused especially on Khashoggi affair.

Pre-Khashoggi affair media framing of Saudi Arabia (July 2 <sup>nd</sup> - October 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 2018)	Post-Khashoggi affair media framing of Saudi Arabia (October 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 2018 - January 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 2019)
<p><b>International crisis:</b></p> <p>Violence in Yemen, Egyptian crisis, Diplomatic relations with Canada over a human rights activist.</p> <p><b>Authoritarianism:</b></p> <p>Lack of freedom, human rights, repression, jails.</p>	<p><b>Jamal Khashoggi:</b></p> <p>Justice, the premeditated assassination, politicisation, the Saudi-Tukey relations, Trump-MBS relations, America's military partnership with Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom's dark side, the theory of conspiracy, the Kingdom's economic reforms, Press freedom, trial, arrests, threats, fear, oppression, investigation, impunity.</p> <p><b>Yemen:</b></p> <p>Coalition, military support, the responsibility of Saudi government, peace, Saudi attacks, the indiscriminate civilians killing, cruel war, cease-fire.</p>

**Table 1:** A summary of pre and post-Khashoggi media framing by the WaPo.

## Conclusion:

When Rupert Murdoch's Fox News entitled one of its articles about Saudi Arabia as "Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman says women are 'absolutely' equal to men, continues modernization push", it was not a surprise at all due to its pro-Trump editorial agenda that, once again, revealed its true face during the Black Lives Matter protests after George Floyd, an African American, who died after a police officer knelt on his neck. But when credible news sources like the Time magazine characterized MBS' US trip as a "charm offensive", it was clear that the controversial visit of the authoritarian leader was bought by the US media. However, after a very short period of time, when the Khashoggi incident happened, the media coverage has changed significantly. Credible sources like The New York Times, The Wall Street

Journal or CNN International has revisited once critical editorial line of the Saudi monarchy. The WaPo was among the most attentive news organizations even before the Khashoggi case. The analysis in this research has demonstrated the shift in pre and post-Khashoggi framing. This research has examined how the framing of a country changes after the Khashoggi incident, and how WaPo played a key role in revealing the truth for their national and international audience. Yet, the unofficial collaboration between the WaPo and Turkish authorities was a benefit for Turkey in many ways. It could be used as a drip-by-drip strategy in sharing secret service sources such as different visual and audio recordings from the incident with the WaPo, and enable to reach to a wider audience based on the fact that the US media outlet is a credible source of information.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore this incident was an opportunity for the populist Islamist President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to

<sup>6</sup> According to Statista's 2019 research, the Washington Post is considered as one of the most credible newspapers in the US. 56%

believes that it is a credible source, which is significantly higher than The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, Available at:

make up his negative image regarding freedom of expression and human rights. In this regard, it had an impact on Turkey's credibility, who leaked information to national media such as public broadcaster TRT, and pro-government sources A News, but also to international media outlets such as the CNN International and the WaPo.

The analysis has shown that the editorial line of the WaPo has changed threefold after the incident in October 2018. Firstly, it has used the murder of Khashoggi to pressure on Saudi Arabia, in particular on MBS, who, according to the UN rapporteur, was directly involved in the killing. Press freedom and human rights abuses of the Saudi regime were in the forefront. The relationship with Canada over a human rights activist was an opportunity to stress on the oppressions of Saudi Arabia. Secondly, it has intensified the pressure on Trump's Middle East politics, particularly with regard to the arm deals with the Kingdom. Later, it had an impact on the coverage of Trump's 'deal of the century' and Saudi Aramco. Thirdly, the coverage of the Yemen war was used against both the Saudi monarchy and the Trump administration. Whereas MBS used reforms and his *Vision 2030* as part of positive political public relations tool to "influence and establish beneficial relationship" with the West (Strömbäck and Kioussis, 2011, p.8), the WaPo developed its editorial line in post-Khashoggi era regarding Saudi regime on three aspects, the Khashoggi case itself, Trump and the Yemen war. It has promoted a certain narrative with the post-Khashoggi coverage by selecting some aspects regarding a case, as Bateson (1955) underlined. Yet, the coverage of mainstream media and the initiations of international institutions have not been sufficient to reveal the Khashoggi case with all necessary details as his body is still missing. Hence, according to the World Press Freedom Index (2019), Reporters Without Borders' report highlighted that "internationally recognized principles of justice have not been respected" during Khashoggi's posthumous trial occurred in December 2019.

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