

Contributing to a Nascent Public Sphere: Accounts of the Shura Council in Omani Media After the 2011 Constitutional Amendments

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Abstract:

This paper examines the contribution of Omani media to the public sphere following the 2011 constitutional amendments, focusing on how media coverage informed citizens about the enhanced role of the Shura Council and its relationship with the government. Drawing on public sphere theory and Dahlgren's (1995) structural and representational framework, the study analyses the Council's eighth term (2015–2019) through a mixed-methods approach. It combines quantitative content analysis of 408 news items from five print and online outlets, thematic analysis of media portrayals, and 32 semi-structured interviews with journalists, political commentators, Shura Council members, and government officials.

The findings reveal uneven coverage that frequently privileged government sources despite the Shura Council's expanded powers after 2011. Three themes emerged: compliant, supportive, and critical. The critical theme, particularly evident in online outlets, suggests that sections of the media contributed to a nascent public sphere by providing space for political commentators who challenged government positions. This occurred alongside an authoritarian turn following the Sultan's illness in 2014 and growing dissent on social media. The study extends political communication research beyond Western contexts by demonstrating how media may enable limited public debate within an authoritarian or absolute monarchy while remaining shaped by institutional and constraints.