

The Role of Twitter in Shaping the Narrative During the Jamal Khashoggi Murder: Disinformation, Diplomacy, and Digital Power

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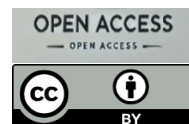
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Abstract

The paper studies how Twitter influenced people's views on the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. It looks at different actors, for example, governments, media companies, activists, and bots, who promoted their narratives with the platform. How Saudi officials used the internet to control the narrative, to spread untruths, and to interact with countries through diplomatic means is emphasized. Three main points in the paper are how Twitter became a part of the international conversation, who spread the impactful messages, and the influence of misinformation on the event's public understanding. To examine these points, theories like agenda-setting, disinformation, digital diplomacy, and Habermas's public sphere are used. The study covers the contents and the ways people talk about tweets by reviewing messages from October to December 2018, mainly using the hashtag #JusticeForJamal. It also examines social media messages side-by-side with news articles from well-known groups like The Washington Post, BBC, Al Jazeera, and Arab News. In general, the study reveals that Twitter was an essential place for people globally to react to this major political story.



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Introduction

Jamal Khashoggi was known as a Saudi journalist who reported for Saudi media about events such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, as well as the beginning of Osama Bin Laden's rise. Over several years, Prince Bin Salman was in the

royal family's good graces and worked as a government adviser. Still, in 2017, he was stripped of his roles and left the Kingdom for the United States. From that point, he started contributing a column to The Washington Post each month, which often discussed his objections to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's choices. In the first column, he wrote that he was afraid he might be arrested because of the prince's action against people who disagreed with him. Khashoggi visited the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 28 September 2018 to obtain a document certifying his divorce, so that he could go ahead with his marriage to Hatice Cengiz. He was scheduled to return for his passport on 2 October at 1:14 p.m. He was never seen after he entered the consulate. He placed his phone in Cengiz's hands and wished her to call a representative from Turkey if he was not released. She spent over 10 hours waiting outside, returned the next day, and never saw Khashoggi come out again.

In the year before he was killed in 2018, Jamal Khashoggi often experienced coordinated harassment attacks launched through Twitter. He started each day by seeing endless abuse and false news shared by people hiding behind fake accounts. These attacks were only a piece of a wider digital strategy by the Saudi government to control the public discourse and stop those opposed to its policies. Close to managing the operation was Saud al-Qahtani, a top advisor to the crown prince, who led a *'troll farm'* team in Riyadh. Lots of people were paid to spread positive messages about the government and attack the opposition. Twitter was turned into a strategic instrument of digital propaganda: trending hashtags, widely shared memes, and reporting of opposing accounts were used to fill the platform with propaganda and make critical thoughts rare. The way the campaign was developed demonstrates that authoritarian states may use open platforms to silence people.

Khashoggi realized the value of Twitter, which is why he joined forces with Omar Abdulaziz of Canada to launch *"Electronic Bees,"* a project created to stand against Saudi misinformation online. But things were put on hold just before Khashoggi was killed, as his last tweet warned that *"the Bees are coming."* The attack went further, as Twitter was eventually compromised as well. In that year, a Saudi staff member, Ali Alzabarah, was discovered reading private data of dissidents from Saudi Arabia. When he went to Saudi Arabia, he is said to have continued supporting the regime. It demonstrates that Saudi Arabia used Twitter less for social media than for governance, as diplomacy, monitoring online activities, and spreading rumors merged there. This case underlines the big influence Twitter has in steering public conversation and global affairs. His murder highlighted some main themes showing how Twitter affects today's

international political scene. The biggest tactic was using disinformation—officials created huge networks of fake accounts and bots to fill Twitter with pro-government posts, prevent dissent, and guide the public’s thoughts. The main purpose of these operations was to smear critics as well as ensure that independent news did not gain much attention through organized state-sponsored storytelling. As well, social media was a key way Saudi Arabia used public diplomacy to influence its global public image. Rather than follow normal diplomacy, the regime used online tools to present its actions in a positive way and sway the way foreigners viewed it.

It shows how new approaches, such as soft power and influence through digital tools, are rising. The government used social media to steer the way the world discussed Saudi Arabia, promoted its cultural policies, and tried to look progressive, but it still muzzled anything against its power at home or abroad. Twitter was a central place where lies, foreign policy, and online management collided after Khashoggi’s murder. Besides communication, the platform was used to control the news, hide responsibility, and preserve power by covering itself in an illusion of comfort and connection.

Research Objective and Questions

This study will analyze the way Twitter helped change the world’s perception of the Jamal Khashoggi murder. The aim is to analyze how Saudi authorities and others made use of disinformation, public diplomacy, and digital influence to guide world opinion, dodge taking responsibility, and respond to negative influences abroad. The research is guided by the following key questions:

- ***How did Twitter shape the public narrative of the murder?***
This question investigates the platform's role in spreading competing narratives, shaping public perception, and either amplifying or silencing certain voices in the aftermath of Khashoggi’s killing.
- ***What role did state and non-state actors play in online discourse?***
Here, the focus is on identifying the involvement of Saudi state-sponsored troll farms, bots, influencers, journalists, and ordinary users in constructing, contesting, or reinforcing specific narratives.
- ***How did disinformation and digital diplomacy operate?***
This question explores the tactics used to manipulate information flow, project state narratives as truth, and influence international opinion through soft power tactics embedded in digital platforms.

A mix of media and political communication theories is used to see how Twitter played a role in shaping what people heard about the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Among the theoretical lenses, agenda-setting theory, digital diplomacy, information warfare, disinformation theory, and the public sphere model by Jürgen Habermas were chosen. They outline the methods that states use to control information, guide what people think, and control what is said about them online.

Agenda-Setting Theory

In the year 1972, McCombs and Shaw coined the now-known Agenda-Setting Theory. The core premise is that public discourse is shaped by issues emphasized by the media. This is why their framework can be directly associated with our first research question: "How did Twitter influence the way people perceived the murder in the mass media?" Twitter, in the modern world of the Internet, is one of the key actors of such a game since it can promote specific stories, voices, and hashtags. Just hours after Jamal Khashoggi was killed, Twitter emerged as the real-time arena of competing narratives. The hashtags such as #JusticeForJamal and #KhashoggiMurder went viral, accumulating the anger of people worldwide and maintaining the case in the eyes of the public. There was also the pro-Saudi rhetoric, whose counter-narrative shifted the blame to Khashoggi, or how big a crime it was. This biased selection is the way the Twitter algorithm operates: it prefers posts that receive many likes, retweets, and comments, and thus, such posts are promoted, causing others to filter out. This means that what comes out as important in the public discourse does not necessarily have to be the most factual, but what finds the most attention or mileage in the emotional divide.

Conventional media do not simply take it easy, but as they base their coverage on Twitter trends to determine what earns coverage, they further enhance the agenda-setting intentions of Twitter. In one instance, the viral post on Twitter by prominent journalists or political figures latched onto the media discourse of the event in a particular way. That is, Twitter was not merely the reflection of community care; on the contrary, it influenced it in its formation. Twitter participated in reshaping the Khashoggi narrative, and it fits the regular curve of agenda-setting: rush of hearing, high involvement, and then a steady decrease. With new stories emerging, Khashoggi then sank into the digital limelight, a reminder that we only have so much time to spend on the media.

Digital Diplomacy

Digital Diplomacy Theory is based on the consequences of states utilizing digital platforms, particularly social media, to manage foreign relations, influence international opinion, and enhance national interests. The present line of inquiry can directly answer the third research question: How did disinformation and digital diplomacy work? After Jamal Khashoggi was murdered, Twitter became a platform on which the states attempted to manipulate the international image. To get Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman out of trouble and downplay the crime, Saudi Arabia used state-sponsored media sources and other government-friendly influencers to push the judicial proceeding and use Vision 2030 as a testimony of the reformation. These steps unveil the inner goal of digital diplomacy, setting aside reputation destruction and a display of soft power. It was based on the fact that all messages were focused on framing the killing as a rogue action, where Riyadh cooperated with investigations. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia organized visual content, hashtags, and emotive appeals to create a story of national responsibility and advancement. It was aimed at maneuvering the crisis and restoring international legitimacy.

By contrast, Turkey was able to use digital diplomacy to coerce Saudi Arabia. Turkish leaders published critical facts on Twitter and also leaked them to the media to continue to focus on the case to pin the Saudi leaders. Western governments and non-governmental organisations entered the Twitter discussion and called their leaders to be accountable, transparent, and to bring them to justice. The ensuing online realm turned into a battlefield with several players fighting to dominate the discourse. The impact of digital diplomacy, nevertheless, does not apply to official state undertakings only. Think tanks, interest groups, and one-time users are also involved in creating the perception by strengthening or antagonizing the reported position. These non-state actors bring a pluralistic and complex angle to the discourse, and they infuse ambiguity between official and grassroots communication. Digital diplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy since it is instant, extended, and in most cases, informal. It does not have the old gatekeepers and states access the international audiences directly. This real-time-ness in the Khashoggi case allowed players to affect the discourse in the moment and have continued to have control of the media narrative on the international scene.

Information Warfare and Disinformation Theory

The strategic use of digital tools by state and non-state actors to shape political narratives is explained by information warfare and disinformation theory. These theories demonstrate how online discourse, especially following Khashoggi's murder, turned into a battlefield for perception management, which is consistent with the second and third research questions. To cast doubt on Khashoggi's character, shift the blame, and mislead the global audience, pro-Saudi actors on Twitter employed influencers, trolls, and bots. Instead of persuading, these concerted efforts sought to sow enough doubt to splinter public perception and weaken consensus. Emotional manipulation, such as inciting fear and nationalism, was another tactic used by disinformation campaigns to undermine opponents and strengthen allegiance. In the meantime, reformist messaging persisted through official state channels, resulting in a dual narrative approach.

Public Sphere (Habermas)

A framework for examining how Twitter influenced international discourse following Khashoggi's murder is provided by Habermas' theory of the public sphere. His concept revolves around people debating public issues logically. In part, Twitter served this purpose by promoting public accountability, worldwide discussions, and real-time updates. This demonstrates how Twitter facilitated conflicting narratives and influenced public opinion, which answers the first research question. However, the platform's democratic potential was undermined by the growth of online harassment, disinformation, and propaganda. These dynamics demonstrate how influential people swayed free discussion, which is consistent with the third disinformation research question. Twitter was therefore susceptible to manipulation even though it served as a digital public sphere. The theory aids in elucidating the potential and constraints of digital platforms in promoting authentic discourse regarding global issues.

Methodology

The study uses qualitative content analysis as its approach. Researchers will look at Twitter data from October to December 2018, which was the time period after Khashoggi's death. All the data comes from tweets sent by accounts of verified news, along with government officials from Saudi Arabia and Turkey, activists, and bot-detection reports. Significant hashtags and buzzing trends will be monitored and examined to find the main issues, who is involved, and which information is false (Timberg & Dadouch, 2021). A further aim is to use discourse

analysis to see how language, framing, and symbols affected the public's understanding of the incident. Recurring words and phrases, appeals to emotions, and the way stories are structured will get special attention. Using these ideas and tools, this research will show how Twitter turned into a place where countries pushed messages and helped form the story of a highly political murder.

Agenda-Setting Theory as a Guide

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Qualitative Content Analysis of Twitter Posts

They mainly use qualitative content analysis as their main method. It requires searching and examining Twitter messages concerning the Jamal Khashoggi case. Tweets from October to December 2018 are considered, as these were the days in which most people commented on the killing. The data consists of tweets shared on Twitter.

- Official news media
- Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States sent their government officials.
- Well-known journalists and human rights defenders
- Bots and troll accounts spotted in reports from bot monitoring are named.
- Hashtags such as *#JusticeForJamal*, *#Khashoggi* and *#SaudiArabia* have recently been popular.

To examine a tweet, its ideas, style, message, and the amount of user interaction (likes and comments) will be checked. With this approach, the study can follow how stories spread and who shares in shaping them. For an illustration, how did the Turkish officials exploit Twitter to show the evidence involved in the case? How did the connections to Saudi Arabia use strategies to avoid or downplay these revelations? It will further look into how specific tweets were noticed more, drawing attention away from other themes. Apart from analyzing content, discourse analysis will show how language was used to describe and explain the murder. For this, you must study the most important hashtags, statements, and ways words are used. #JusticeForJamal helped present the protest as a human rights matter, whereas alternatively, the other hashtags talked about ‘new laws’ or suggested the protest was aimed at upstaging the ‘**truth.**’ It will examine the impact of important actors like:

- People in government positions.
- There are political commentators.
- People who support the government through their work.
- Accounts managed by bots.

Media Triangulation

To validate the findings and add depth, the study will use **media triangulation**. This involves comparing the Twitter data with coverage from mainstream media outlets like *The Washington Post*, *Al Jazeera*, *BBC*, and *Arab News*. This helps to identify how Twitter narratives aligned with or clashed with traditional media reporting. For example, if a claim made on Twitter was later confirmed or disproven by journalists, it reveals the accuracy and intention behind that online narrative (MacDonald, 2023). Triangulation also helps separate genuine grassroots campaigns from coordinated disinformation efforts.

Twitter as a Political and Diplomatic Arena in the Jamal Khashoggi Case

The murder of Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018 changed how Twitter is used in politics and diplomacy. Following the incident, Twitter was transformed into a place where governments, political groups, and other actors attempted to influence the opinions of people. It was also popular as a tool of political messaging, disinformation, and digital diplomacy, particularly in the Middle East (Ritzen, 2019). Similarly, recent studies indicate that there is a transformation in platform governance and political communication on Twitter/X. The platform is

becoming a place where political actors set agendas and shape the discourse in the public, making the need to improve rules and governance even greater (Naranjo-Vinueza et al., 2025). According to other works, in the case of Khashoggi, the talks in both Arabic and English were influenced by bots and coordinated accounts. This produced emotional and divisive stories in the various language groups (Zeid, Frissen, and Scherr, 2024).

The Rise of Twitter in Political Communication

Twitter has emerged as a significant political communication medium in the world. It enables information sharing, which can be viewed worldwide immediately. It is not subject to the same rules as traditional media (Analyzing digital propaganda and conflict rhetoric, 2024). It can be directly interacted with by many users, such as politicians, governments, journalists, and ordinary people. Twitter is also utilized by both governments and opposition groups in countries where there is great media control to distribute rival views. Twitter was instrumental in the Khashoggi case in influencing the discussion. Users were quick to respond and made alternative versions of the story. Turkey posted information about the incident in phases via Twitter (Timberg & Dadouch, 2021).

This continued to keep the world focused on the case and mount pressure on Saudi Arabia. The Turkish officials and their supporters took to Twitter to emphasize the investigation and condemn the act. Simultaneously, Saudi accounts attempted to refute the reports or make them appear politically agendas. By doing so, Twitter was transformed into a platform that provided real-time news updates and rival stories rather than just being dependent on the traditional media. Disinformation is currently regarded as one of the greatest challenges to states and popular confidence. It has been found that misinformation travels rapidly on social media and can undermine democracy through influencing the opinion of the masses (Surjatmodjo et al., 2024). This diffusion is justified by algorithms, emotional content, and the structure of platforms, which contribute to misinformation being more viral than true information, according to other studies (Chaudhuri et al., 2024).

Twitter's Influence in Shaping Real-Time Narratives

TV and radio news have to pass through editors, but Twitter gets updates out immediately. The murder of Khashoggi was first learned by people worldwide through a tweet, rather than on television. On Twitter, #Khashoggi, #JusticeForJamal, and #SaudiArabia became places for people worldwide to talk

about Jamal Khashoggi's murder. Competing narratives quickly emerged, being debated, and being altered (MacDonald, 2023).

The way news travels so fast give it huge advantages, as well as major drawbacks. This gave activists and journalists a way to organize, yet it also let misinformation and planned disinformation infiltrate the discussion. People from Saudi Arabia using Twitter and bots shared lots of information, making it seem like Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood, or Turkey were using the killings for their own benefit. This demonstrates how digital tools can push ideas and change moods in the public when the main sources of information are unclear or delayed.

Public Diplomacy and Information Operations

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Twitter in Middle East Geopolitics

The Khashoggi case cannot be separated from the broader geopolitical rivalries in the Middle East. Countries like **Saudi Arabia**, **Turkey**, **Qatar**, and **Iran** have all developed strong Twitter presences as part of their political strategies. For Saudi Arabia, Twitter is a space to promote Vision 2030, project Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as a modernizer, and counter critics (Zeid, Frissen, & Scherr, 2023). For Turkey, it is a platform to challenge Saudi narratives and assert moral leadership in the Muslim world. During the Khashoggi episode, this geopolitical competition was visible on Twitter. Turkish media accounts linked to the government were active in exposing new details. Qatari-linked platforms

like Al Jazeera amplified these messages, not just out of journalistic duty, but also due to their own rivalry with Riyadh. In contrast, Saudi-backed accounts attempted to discredit Turkish claims or distract attention with unrelated topics. This battle of narratives reflects the use of Twitter as a space where regional power struggles play out in front of a global audience.

Digital Influence and Soft Power

Today, government accounts on Twitter link up to work on influencing messages shared all around the globe. This is called soft power, which means influencing others' thinking by using values, culture, and information, rather than by force. Social media has clearly become an important part of a country's soft power, making its influence clear in the Khashoggi case. Turkey used it to let people know that it protects justice and freedom of the press. Those in Saudi Arabia used it to display the country as safe and free from any blame (Zeid, Frissen, & Scherr, 2023). Winning an audience's trust greatly helps this type of influence. If used effectively, Twitter allows a government to influence the way the world sees certain events. If disinformation is discovered, the country's reputation may be harmed. This means Twitter now carries a lot of risk and influence over global diplomacy.

The Twitter Narrative on Jamal Khashoggi's Murder

Timeline of the Narrative (October 2018 Onward)

On Sunday, October 2, 2018, Jamal Khashoggi went inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul and could not be seen coming out. Within a few hours, the #Pizzagate controversy appeared all over social media, led by Twitter. Reporters in Turkey and unknown users started to say that Khashoggi had died. Many people around the world got their first updates from these tweets. Turkish authorities eventually confirmed the account was fake, though the first signs were noticed on Twitter (Timberg & Dadouch, 2021). Between early October and the end of November, new political happenings were mainly shared, debated, and argued on Twitter. Phases of Turkish leaks included publishing security video, releasing audio recordings, and revealing the names of the hit squad, which were all made public initially by journalists and tweeted by verified account holders. By doing this, the story remained interesting. Every new leak made headlines for a new news cycle. (MacDonald, 2023) By comparison, posts linked to Saudi Arabia said the statement was fake and put the blame on Qatar and Turkey. It was not until a few weeks later that Saudi Arabia accepted that Khashoggi had died, and the situation

again changed. Those who continued to pressure the company on Twitter celebrated this confession. So, the events in this story are also about how Twitter helped the world respond and stay informed as the incidents unfolded.

Key Turning Points in the Online Discourse

Certain important moments on Twitter shifted how the talk unfolded. The first important development was CCTV footage appearing in which Khashoggi was entering the consulate. People questioned his story after no footage of him leaving appeared. The second was when people spoke about the Saudi hit squad of 15 which became known everywhere on the internet. The activists posted their photos, names and links to Saudi security sites on Twitter to form a strong online presence. The asset fell in value after the release of audio recordings. Only excerpts from the tapes seemed to be made available, while Turkish authorities mentioned them on Twitter and in interviews. The reports made it clearer that Khashoggi was murdered while inside the Saudi consulate (Zeid, Frissen, & Scherr, 2023). The latest major change occurred after the CIA supposedly found that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) was behind the killing. Many accounts on Twitter published posts suggesting that MBS was responsible for ordering the murder, usually with memes, cartoons, and popular hashtags. Changes and developments throughout the campaign were really pushed forward with Twitter. It gave individuals a voice, and their actions, statements, and posts formed the story's plot, compelling governments and the media to respond.

Key Hashtags and Trends

Hashtags were important in setting up and delivering the narrative. #JusticeForJamal came to be the most used hashtag among activists, journalists, and human rights organizations. It insisted that Saudi officials answer for what happened and stressed that Khashoggi was a journalist and critic. Because of the hashtag, people internationally joined forces to campaign online. **#SaudiCrisis** and **#MBS** were used very frequently over the period. The first showed the global criticism Saudi Arabia faced, and the second demonstrated a clear link between the Crown Prince and the killing (Ritzen, 2019). Accounts from Turkey and the Gulf also used hashtags in Turkish and Arabic, which trended. Some expressions were entirely conversational, such as "Katil Kim?" (*"Who is the killer?"*). In parallel, pro-Saudi social media users urged support using hashtags #WeSupportMBS and #FakeNewsTurkiye, but these did not reach many people outside of Turkey. Twitter later removed a number of accounts because their activity was suspicious, suggesting these accounts were likely involved in

spreading disinformation, acting like digital battlefields each one representing a narrative, a side, or an agenda. They helped organize information, attract attention, and build emotional connections with audiences.

Role of Turkish and Saudi Digital Propaganda

Turkey's digital approach was focused and effective. By leaking key information and framing the issue as a human rights crisis, Turkey gained international sympathy. The use of Twitter helped bypass slow diplomatic channels and reach the public directly. It also allowed Turkey to portray itself as a defender of free speech, despite its own controversial record on press freedom. Saudi Arabia's digital response was defensive. Initially, it denied everything. When denials failed, the strategy shifted toward blaming "rogue agents" and distracting from leadership involvement (MacDonald, 2023). Pro-Saudi Twitter campaigns tried to change the topic, discredit Khashoggi, or question the credibility of Turkish sources. Research later revealed that thousands of pro-Saudi Twitter accounts were part of a larger network used to spread regime-friendly content. These networks were involved in previous campaigns supporting MBS and attacking Qatar. In this case, their goal was to manage public perception, both inside and outside Saudi Arabia. This digital battle highlights how propaganda has moved online. States are now investing in digital influence, not just to promote policies but also to protect their images during crises (Naranjo-Vinueza et al., 2025).

Media Amplification

People didn't just publish their own statements on Twitter—it also set trends for what traditional media focused on. Many US newspapers and news channels included tweets directly stated by officials, journalists, and activists in their main reports. The interaction demonstrates how Twitter interacts with traditional news organizations. Hatice Cengiz's tweet to President Trump made big headlines because it was so emotional. CNN, BBC, and a number of other channels covered new evidence revealed by Turkish officials shortly after they tweeted it. Hashtags made it easier for journalists to spot public response and discover what topics were being discussed the most. Sometimes, the lack of quick information from other sources made media outlets rely on Twitter for up-to-the-minute news. It leads to debate about ethics, but also reflects the important role Twitter has in news today. Editorial teams now analyze social media and the topics popular online to find out what's important.

Disinformation Tactics Identified

One of the main ways disinformation worked during the Khashoggi case was by using a lot of fake bots and accounts. Soon after the murder of Khashoggi became known, thousands of automated or semi-automated accounts on Twitter started sharing pro-Saudi messages. Such accounts used different methods to boost some slogans, keep sharing the same points, and attack people who spoke against Saudi Arabia. The idea was to show broad backing for the Saudi government and block any calls for justice on Khashoggi's behalf. Many of these accounts would synchronize their tweets. They posted many tweets together, including common hashtags (#WeSupportMBS, #FakeNewsTurkiye) and shared content that looked alike. Pretending the posts had more likes helped the Saudi narrative seem bigger than it really was. Large-scale advertising is still a big part of modern propaganda, since it influences people just by repeating the same messages. These organizations would also try to control people's attention and shift the focus of stories. Pro-Saudi people redirected the talk about the murder by posting about different matters (MacDonald, 2023). As an example, they pointed out Saudi Arabia's economic policies or persuaded readers that Qatar and Turkey, which oppose Saudi Arabia, were smearing the country. Such methods were carried out to sow confusion among people and ease some of the pressure on the Saudi leadership. The smear campaign against Jamal Khashoggi's reputation was very harmful. Attempts on social media were made to distance the masses from the king by labeling him with such names as traitor, terrorist supporter, and conspirator against Saudi Arabia. They use these personal attacks to damage the victim's image and decrease the support the public shows. By focusing on Khashoggi personally, these campaigns hoped to excuse why the government denied it happened (Jones, 2021).

Twitter's Role in Hostile Narratives

It was mostly on Twitter that these negative stories were shared. Pro-Saudi and pro-Turkish actors took opposing views on the platform. In Turkey, state-linked profiles described the murder as both a human rights breach and a lethal command from Saudi top officials. They posted private conversations, official comments from diplomats, and proof of their accusations. But Saudi materials typically tried to deny, manage damage, and discredit anything Turkey claimed (Zeid, Frissen, & Scherr, 2023). This digital war stood in for the major geopolitical rivalry between these countries. Because Twitter enables millions to join the conversation, the case of Khashoggi became a constant battle in the media. Besides countries near China, the story was shaped by views from the West.

Western users and the media spoke out against the killing and highlighted Saudi Arabia's human rights problems. Still, some accounts from the West disagreed, like those that thought Turkey was trying to make its rival weaker. That was proof that Twitter carried the opinions of many political interests, not only those of the main opposing sides. The different views showed that Twitter is a good representation of what happens in international politics (Naranjo-Vinueza et al., 2025). It makes it easy to see the divisions between nations, showing and increasing the conflicts we experience in real life online.

Platform Accountability

Many argued about who should take responsibility for misinformation on the platform during the Khashoggi Twitter narrative. Spam, misinformation, and coordinated inauthentic actions are not allowed on Twitter. But it took weeks for many pro-Saudi bot networks to be noticed and dealt with during the Khashoggi case. Types of organizations need strong evidence to prevent people from being blocked easily. Even after Twitter took action and suspended thousands of fake accounts, it was often too late to prevent big damage to public discussion (Ritzen, 2019). Some also pointed out that Twitter seemed to change its content moderation rules from one case to the next. Twitter's Arabic and Turkish teams allegedly failed to catch much pro-Saudi disinformation, which allowed these campaigns to last for a longer time than those posted in English. Here, Twitter demonstrates the challenges that digital companies have in supporting speech, sharing news, and preventing the spread of harmful propaganda. Since the platform is global, it makes it powerful and, at the same time, is an area that may easily become the target of political activities.

Connection to the Role of Twitter in Shaping the Narrative

The scandal around Khashoggi demonstrates both the message-sharing benefits and the false information risks that come with Twitter. One side of the story is that Twitter made it possible for journalists, activists, and human rights defenders to post the news, offer evidence, and hold onto attention from the international community. The platform allowed the victims to share their stories and encouraged people to demand justice. At the same time, Twitter turned into a center for digital propaganda, with both state and non-state actors using fake accounts, robots, and negative campaigns to alter how events were reported (Zeid, Frissen, & Scherr, 2024). Because people misunderstood the issues, it made it difficult for nations to respond together. It shows that Twitter is more like a battleground now for disinformation and diplomatic efforts. Online battles of

opposing viewpoints try to impact worldwide opinions, influence policy discussions, and affect someone's reputation.

Twitter, Diplomacy, and International Pressure

Jamal Khashoggi's murder in October 2018 was an event that touched many people, and social media, especially Twitter, quickly contributed to making it a major international controversy. The platform was used in diplomacy, advocacy, and putting pressure on governments and international organizations, which affected their actions and responses. Here, we see how Twitter gives states and non-state groups a chance to influence debates, exert influence, and call for accountability.

Twitter as a Tool of Diplomatic Pressure

At first, officials in Turkey realized that Twitter played a big role in getting the world's attention on the Khashoggi case. Turkey made use of prominent accounts and officials on Twitter to promote the murder abroad and turn it into a concern for people across the world, not just for Turkey and Armenia (Timberg & Dadouch, 2021). Turkish officials consistently used Twitter to share statements, leaks, and information about the investigation, which kept the case fresh in the media and put pressure on Saudi Arabia. Turkey chose digital diplomacy as a smart move. Streaming the case on Twitter worldwide led people and organizations around the world to demand that the government and companies involved tell the truth and do the right thing. Promoting its foreign policy by using Twitter is an example of digital diplomacy for Turkey. Turkey was able to present it as a violation of human rights and freedom of expression, which made it hard for Saudi Arabia to manage the way the narrative was told (Zeid, Frissen, & Scherr, 2023).

Because of this, Twitter became Saudi Arabia's main platform for public relations and damage control. The Saudi authorities and their allies denied allegations, focused on changes they are making, and tried to frame themselves as victims of a political operation. Saudi Arabia tried to use Twitter to support MBS and attempt to lessen the damage to his image abroad. In their tweets, the Saudis talked about economic advances, efforts to fight terrorism, and promoting modern changes. It was a way, within soft power efforts, to make sure allies and people investing internationally were reassured, with criticism from around the world increasing. Saudi Arabia turned to Twitter to deal with negative comments and use social media quickly and actively in diplomacy.

Global Reactions via Twitter

As well as being used directly, Twitter allowed political leaders, UN officials, and diplomats to speak up and steer the global reaction. A lot of people with influence posted on Twitter to criticize the murder and ask for justice. Leading politicians in Western democracies, such as the US and European states, used Twitter to urge Saudi Arabia to be more honest and accountable. On the platform, UN special rapporteurs and human rights bodies raised worries about impunity facing journalists and the obstacles to reporting (Zeid, Frissen, & Scherr, 2023).

Many journalists and international media organizations reported new things and did investigations, encouraging many people to talk about the case. Because of the constant updates, it was difficult for Saudi Arabia to escape attention, and the case remained a concern for diplomats. What the US President said online about the Flower Vase Epoch brought greater attention to the issue from international leaders and made it a key issue for policy circles.

Findings

The theory of agenda-setting was invented by McCombs and Shaw in 1972 and states that the media can influence the views of the population by choosing which problems should be discussed. Twitter has a significant role in this process in the digital age as it draws some attention to certain issues, hashtags, and voices, and constrains others. This can be used to explain how the general knowledge of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi was formed online. Following the incident, Twitter turned into a battleground of competing accounts. Hashtags like #JusticeForJamal and #KhashoggiMurder gained popularity and continued to raise awareness throughout the world. Meanwhile, pro-Saudi posts posted counter-narratives, which minimized the severity of the incident or shifted the blame. The algorithm of Twitter also revealed the posts that had the highest activity, including likes and retweets. Consequently, emotional and popular messages could reach a larger number of people as compared to pure factual information.

Traditional media also trended on Twitter, making its impact on agenda-setting more effective. The news companies tended to cover the already popular stories on the internet. By doing so, Twitter was able to not only affect the online conversation but also the mainstream media. Twitter plays both constructive and destructive roles in the Khashoggi case as well. It assisted journalists, activists, and human rights organizations in disseminating information and demanding accountability. Nevertheless, it also turned into a location of fake information and

propaganda, with fake accounts and organized campaigns being attempted to sway the opinions of the population (Zeid, Frissen, & Scherr, 2024). As a whole, Twitter was a contentious arena in which various actors tried to influence the world discourse.

Digital diplomacy can be defined as the utilization of social media as a tool by states to affect the views of other states, control foreign affairs, and defend their own interests. Twitter emerged as a useful platform of digital diplomacy in the context of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. It was adopted by different actors to influence global narratives and react to the crisis in real time. Empirical data reveal that Saudi Arabia has been using Twitter to control its global reputation. It took state media and positive narratives to position the incident as an act of rogue individuals. It also propagated ideas of reforms, including Vision 2030, to demonstrate improvement and modernization. These were to diminish criticism and help Saudi Arabia regain its reputation around the world. Twitter was used differently by Turkey. The Turkish officials disseminated information step-by-step and updated information about the investigation. This continued to put the case on the international radar and pressure on Saudi Arabia. NGOs, media groups, and many Western governments also entered into the debate and insisted on accountability and transparency. As revealed in this case, digital diplomacy does not confine itself to state-level communication. Journalists, organizations, and ordinary users, or non-state actors, also have a role in international debates. Consequently, digital diplomacy is rapid, transparent, and very competitive in contrast to conventional diplomacy. According to this study, Twitter played a significant role in influencing how the world saw the Jamal Khashoggi murder case. Multiple actors, including activists, international media outlets, Saudi government agents, Turkish officials, and automated bots, attempted to exert control over the narrative on the platform, which turned into a contested space. The results show that Twitter was used by both state and non-state actors as a strategic soft power tool to affect diplomatic outcomes, in addition to being a platform for digital expression. Using the theoretical framework of digital platforms, we can examine how Saudi Arabia used content flooding, strategic silence, and coordinated both campaigns to combat bad press and refocus public attention. At the same time, Turkey created a counter-narrative that emphasized justice and global accountability through its digital engagement, particularly through leaks and press conferences that were aired on Twitter.

In addition to confirming the body of research on platform geopolitics and disinformation warfare, this dual use of Twitter offers a novel perspective: the platform's algorithm-driven, fast-paced, open-ended design amplifies the voices

with the strongest coordination, not necessarily the most reliable information. Perception management had a greater impact than official statements in this scenario, as the digital battlefield expanded traditional diplomacy into algorithmic territory. The results highlight that narrative power now exists in real-time interactions influenced by hashtags, viral content, and well-planned digital campaigns rather than being the sole purview of traditional media or diplomatic channels. This change has significant ramifications for the integrity of global discourse, particularly during times of crisis involving geopolitical sensitivities and human rights abuses.

Conclusion

This study examined how Twitter influenced public perceptions of the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, emphasizing the ways in which both state and non-state actors used the platform to present opposing viewpoints. The study discovered that Twitter was a disinformation minefield as well as a diplomatic battlefield through a qualitative examination of digital behavior and content patterns. Pro-Saudi bot networks and government-aligned users aggressively promoted counter-narratives meant to shift blame and thwart international scrutiny, while journalists and activists used the platform to call for justice and transparency. Given the theoretical frameworks of agenda-setting theory and digital diplomacy, these findings highlight the increasing importance of social media platforms in geopolitical communication, especially in times of global crisis. Twitter was not a neutral platform; networked propaganda, algorithmic amplification, and deliberate silencing techniques all actively shaped the platform. The study also supports the body of research on digital authoritarianism, which shows that authoritarian governments are increasingly using digital tools to project power and stifle dissent outside of their borders. These manipulations occurred with little oversight because there were no official regulatory mechanisms in place. This has wider ramifications for digital platform accountability, global media literacy, and the direction of international human rights advocacy. Although the murder of Khashoggi was the main focus of this case study, it also identifies trends that apply to more general global events where social media narratives have a direct impact on public opinion and diplomatic relations.

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