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Saudi Arabia's Anti-Cybercrime Law: Controlling Online Discourse and Digital Privacy

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Introduction

Saudi Arabia is in the midst of an unprecedented transformation, driven by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ambitious Vision 2030, a strategic framework designed to diversify the Kingdom's economy and modernize its society. This sweeping agenda, while promising an era of openness and digital advancement, is simultaneously reshaping the landscape of online discourse and digital privacy through a sophisticated and evolving legal framework. At the heart of this duality lies the Kingdom's Anti-Cybercrime Law, a critical piece of legislation that has undergone significant revisions, most notably in 2022, profoundly impacting how individuals and organizations interact within Saudi Arabia's digital sphere.

This book, *Saudi Arabia's Anti-Cybercrime Law: Controlling Online Discourse and Digital Privacy*, delves into the intricate details of these legislative updates and their far-reaching consequences. It scrutinizes the expanded penalties for online criticism, the increasingly sophisticated mechanisms of data surveillance, and the escalating restrictions on internet services. Far from being isolated legal amendments, these policies are meticulously examined within the broader context of Vision 2030, revealing a deliberate strategy to harness the power of digital technologies while simultaneously exerting greater control over information flow and individual expression. The tension between modernization and control, progress and restriction, forms the central theme of our exploration.

The Kingdom's journey towards digital transformation, as explored in early chapters, is undeniably dynamic. However, this journey is not without its complexities, particularly concerning fundamental human rights. As Saudi Arabia embraces technological advancement, the enhancements to its cybercrime laws raise significant questions about the balance between national security, social order, and individual liberties. This book provides a detailed review of these updates, connecting them directly to the modernization goals championed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, while also engaging with the persistent criticisms from international human rights organizations regarding the implications for freedom of expression and digital privacy.

Through a comprehensive analysis, we will unpack how the 2022 amendments to the Anti-Cybercrime Law redefine the boundaries of acceptable online behavior, impacting everyone from casual social media users to journalists, activists, and multinational corporations operating within the Kingdom. We will explore the mechanisms of enforcement, the scope of surveillance, and the implications for data protection, offering critical insights into the operational realities of these policies. By examining case studies of high-profile prosecutions and the evolving role of the Saudi Cybersecurity Authority (NCA), readers will gain a nuanced understanding of the

practical application and societal impact of this legislation.

Ultimately, this book aims to provide an indispensable resource for policymakers, legal professionals, academics, human rights advocates, and anyone seeking to comprehend the evolving digital landscape of Saudi Arabia. It offers a critical perspective on how a nation striving for technological leadership navigates the inherent challenges of managing online discourse and safeguarding digital privacy in an increasingly interconnected world. By dissecting the legal intricacies, socio-political motivations, and human rights implications, we offer a comprehensive and timely examination of Saudi Arabia's assertive approach to digital governance in the Vision 2030 era.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Kingdom's Digital Transformation Journey

Saudi Arabia, a nation historically synonymous with oil wealth, is meticulously charting a new course for its future, one that is increasingly paved with fiber optic cables and powered by algorithms. This ambitious pivot, encapsulated within Vision 2030, is fundamentally transforming the Kingdom's economic, social, and technological landscapes. At its core, this vision seeks to diversify the economy away from its traditional reliance on hydrocarbons, fostering innovation, and positioning Saudi Arabia as a global digital powerhouse. The digital transformation journey is not merely about adopting new technologies; it's about fundamentally rethinking how the nation operates, interacts, and prospers in the 21st century.

This journey began earnestly with the official launch of Vision 2030 in 2016, a roadmap crafted under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. It signaled a clear intent to move beyond incremental adjustments and embark on a comprehensive overhaul. The initial phase involved extensive planning and strategy development, bringing together experts to envision a diversified and sustainable future. Digital transformation was quickly identified as a cornerstone of this future, a powerful enabler for achieving the Vision's broader objectives. The Kingdom recognized that a robust digital infrastructure and a digitally literate populace would be essential for unlocking new opportunities and enhancing the quality of life for its citizens.

A significant part of this transformation has been the massive investment in digital infrastructure. Over the past six years, Saudi Arabia has poured more than \$27 billion into enhancing its digital capabilities. This substantial commitment has resulted in remarkable improvements in connectivity and internet speed. As of 2025, Saudi Arabia boasted a near-universal internet penetration rate of 99%, with mobile internet speeds averaging 216 Mbps, placing it among the top five G20 countries for mobile internet performance. This rapid expansion of connectivity is a testament to the Kingdom's dedication to building a world-class digital backbone.

The rollout of 5G technology has been particularly instrumental in this digital leap. Saudi Arabia was an early adopter of 5G networks in the MENA region, and by 2025, 5G coverage had reached over 80% nationwide, nearly double the global average. Riyadh, the capital, leads the charge with over 95% 5G coverage, solidifying its position as a globally connected smart city. This widespread availability of high-speed internet is crucial for driving growth in various digital sectors, including e-commerce, telecommunications, and a burgeoning array of digital services. It's the digital

equivalent of building superhighways, enabling faster and more efficient movement of data and ideas.

Beyond raw connectivity, the Kingdom's digital transformation journey is characterized by a strategic focus on e-government initiatives. The Digital Government Strategy, deeply rooted in Vision 2030, aims to deliver seamless, citizen-centric, and efficient digital services. This involves digitizing a vast array of government services to reduce bureaucracy and improve accessibility for citizens and residents. Platforms like Absher and Tawakkalna have revolutionized how individuals interact with government entities, making everything from renewing licenses to accessing health services far more convenient.

The establishment of entities like the Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority (SDAIA) further underscores Saudi Arabia's commitment to becoming a leader in the digital economy. SDAIA is not only responsible for overseeing the Kingdom's artificial intelligence (AI) strategy but also acts as the national data protection enforcement authority. This strategic focus on AI aims to position Saudi Arabia among the top 15 countries globally in AI by 2030, with a particular emphasis on developing AI applications across critical sectors such as healthcare, energy, education, and transportation. The annual Global AI Summit hosted in Riyadh serves as a testament to this ambition, gathering policymakers, researchers, and industry leaders from around the world.

The concept of "smart cities" is another prominent feature of Saudi Arabia's digital transformation. Ambitious projects like NEOM, Qiddiya, and the Red Sea Project are not simply adding digital layers to existing infrastructure; they are envisioning entirely new urban ecosystems built from the ground up with technology woven into their very fabric. NEOM, a colossal \$500 billion megacity project, is perhaps the most audacious example, aiming to be a global hub for innovation and sustainable living. It's designed to integrate advanced technologies such as AI, IoT, and blockchain to create a fully connected urban environment, operating as a "cognitive" city that proactively serves its inhabitants.

Within NEOM, "The Line" stands out as a visionary 170 km-long linear smart city designed for nine million residents, which aims to eliminate cars and streets, relying instead on high-speed transit. It's envisioned to be powered entirely by renewable energy, setting a new global benchmark for sustainable, high-density living. These smart city initiatives are living laboratories for the future of urban environments, generating innovations that could have global applicability. They showcase the Kingdom's willingness to invest at an unprecedented scale in cutting-edge technology and urban design.

The growth of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) market is a clear indicator of the success of these digital transformation efforts. The Saudi Arabia ICT

market reached USD 45.74 billion in 2025 and is projected to reach USD 72.20 billion by 2034, exhibiting a compound annual growth rate of 5.04%. This expansion is driven by Vision 2030's digital transformation goals, the widespread 5G rollout, and significant investments in smart cities and cloud localization. The ICT sector's contribution to GDP has seen a fourfold increase, rising from 2% to 8.4%, reflecting the rapid expansion of e-commerce, fintech, and cloud services across the Saudi economy.

Furthermore, the National Transformation Program, launched in 2016 as the first Vision Realization Program under Vision 2030, has been instrumental in accelerating the Kingdom's digital journey. This program has focused on digitizing government services, empowering the private sector, and fostering economic partnerships. The impact extends to creating new job opportunities in emerging sectors and significantly increasing women's participation in the workforce. Indeed, women's participation in the ICT sector alone surged from 7% in 2017 to 29% in 2022, a remarkable leap.

The Kingdom's commitment to digital advancement is also evident in its ambition to become a global leader in artificial intelligence and big data by 2030. This involves comprehensive strategies encompassing AI research, talent development, regulatory frameworks, and commercial deployment. Investments in computing infrastructure, including data center development and semiconductor ambitions, further highlight this strategic direction. The aim is to build an AI-friendly ecosystem that supports the implementation of data analytics solutions and smart city initiatives.

The ongoing digital transformation also encompasses the gaming and esports sector, identified as a strategic growth area. The National Gaming and Esports Strategy, launched in 2022, aims to create 39,000 jobs in the sector by 2030 and establish Saudi Arabia as a global hub for gaming investment and events. This reflects a broader effort to diversify entertainment options and engage with a youthful, digitally native population. The Savvy Games Group, a subsidiary of the Public Investment Fund (PIF), is leading the Kingdom's substantial investments in this rapidly growing industry.

All these initiatives collectively paint a picture of a nation undergoing a profound digital metamorphosis. The investment in infrastructure, the strategic focus on AI and smart cities, and the concerted effort to digitize government services are all aimed at creating a dynamic, knowledge-based economy. This digital evolution is not without its complexities, particularly when considering the regulatory frameworks being developed to govern this new digital landscape. However, the overarching theme is clear: Saudi Arabia is determined to carve out a leading role in the global digital economy, transforming itself from a traditional oil giant into a tech-forward nation.

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