

# Perspectives

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## Reporting the Revolution: The New Voice of Arab Journalism

by Lawrence Pintak

The ouster of Tunisian President Zine El Abdine Ben Ali and the ongoing regional fallout are just the latest examples of the degree to which a media revolution has shifted the power dynamics of the Arab world.

Much has already been written about how text messaging, Twitter, blogs and YouTube allowed news of the uprising to spread like electronic wildfire within Tunisia and to the public abroad.

But outside Tunisia, the majority of the Arab public kept abreast of developments in Tunisia not through social media itself, but via reporting by mainstream news organizations. Much of that reporting was generated by mining social media; however, the critical fact is that it reached the public through newspapers, magazines and, especially, television, which are serving as a megaphone that enable Tunisia's voices of change to reach the Arab public at large.

Spotlighting the forces of revolution is not the traditional role of the Arab media. Indeed, it is precisely the opposite. Through much of the second half of the 20th century, the majority of Arab news organizations were little more than mouthpieces for governments, political parties and economic oligarchs. The arrival of Al Jazeera in 1996 began to change all that. The much-documented "Al Jazeera Effect" has introduced a new ethos into Arab newsrooms that has shaken up Arab journalism.

Where they were once defenders of the status quo, Arab journalists are today change agents. More than 75 percent of Arab journalists believe the primary mission of Arab journalism is to drive political and social change. That was among the findings of a survey of 601 Arab journalists my team conducted in 2006, with support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

They see the lack of political change as the greatest threat to the Arab world, essentially tied with U.S. policy. Some 96 percent say the Arab world must be reformed and, most tellingly, one-third say that change must be "radical."

"The role of journalist is to criticize people... who are [acting] against the national interest," Tunisian editor Rashid Khashana told me as I was researching my recent book on Arab journalism. "The fundamental thing is [to] build a new society."

When asked their political allegiance, half identify themselves with democratic philosophy, eclipsing the traditional identifiers of Arab Nationalist, Islamist and Nationalist.

"We need democracy like you, we need freedom like you," Ahmed Mansour, host of the Al Jazeera program *Bela Hodood* (No Limits), told me.

Though journalists working for domestic news organizations are cautious in the degree to which they overtly criticize their own governments, they overwhelmingly see government as the main challenge to journalism.

"Any government in the world is an enemy to journalists," says Hamdi al-Bokari of the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate, "but in the Arab world, government is the first enemy to journalists."

"In the Arab world, government-controlled news organizations still ultimately serve as defenders of the regime."

With the rise of pan-Arab satellite television and the internet, the geographic worldview of Arab journalists is also changing. Fully one-third identify first with the Arab region; the Muslim World comes a close second. Only 15 percent identified first with their country of citizenship.

These figures show the degree to which Arab journalists are at the forefront of an emerging pan-Arab identity – call them border guards of a new Arab consciousness – focused on reshaping the region for a more politically-inclusive future.

Standing in the Al Jazeera newsroom a few years ago, I asked anchor Muhammed Krichen, an Algerian national, to define himself. "I am an Arab, Muslim journalist," he proudly replied.

This shift in journalistic ethos and worldview is not confined to the Arab world. A similar survey that will be published in the *International Journal of Press/Politics* in April, also supported by Rockefeller Brothers Fund, found that Indonesian journalists put support for a range of societal reforms at the top of their agenda. But unlike their Arab colleagues, they are not as aggressively-focused on driving political change, which fell sixth on their priority list.

In both cases, the stereotype about journalists in the Arab region and broader Muslim world being overtly anti-American were proven wrong. While U.S. policy gets very

negative marks from both groups, 62 percent of Arab and 68 percent of Indonesian journalists reported a favorable view of the American people.

Indonesians, it should be noted, were far less concerned about the effects of U.S. policy, with only 17 percent ranking it as the greatest challenge to the Muslim world; the economic crisis was the overwhelming concern at almost 60 percent.

Both groups saw their own lack of professionalism as the great challenge to the journalism industry in their respective regions.

These findings have important implications for U.S. policy in the two regions. Journalists can sometimes be a challenge to American officials as they attempt effective implementation of foreign policy – witness reporting about secret U.S. government cables released by Wikileaks – but they can also be allies, albeit sometimes reluctant.

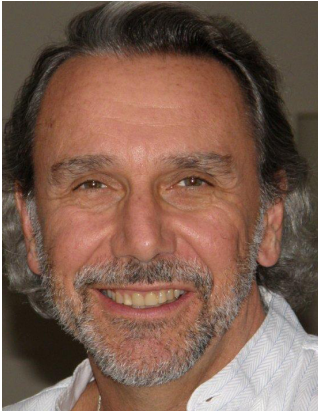
Understanding that at root, Arab journalists share America's stated desire for political reform in the Arab world and that Indonesian journalists are committed to an evolutionary improvement of the social and political climate in their country, can help provide an informed foundation upon which public diplomacy strategies can be built.

Make no mistake, the plethora of Indonesian media outlets that have emerged since the fall of President Suharto in 1998 has too often bred sensationalism and irresponsibility. Yet the media avenues to reach the Indonesian people are no longer dominated by the Suharto family and its cronies.

In the Arab world, government-controlled news organizations still ultimately serve as defenders of the regime. Witness Egypt's venerable Al Ahram, which has devoted much ink in recent weeks to arguments about why Egypt is not Tunisia – with comments like those of columnist Abdel Moneim Said, who advised, "Egyptian planners should not let such fallout from the Tunisian uprising needlessly complicate their task" – even as it reported on copy-cat self-immolations in Cairo.

Media also remains a vehicle for power politics, reflected in accusations from the Palestinian Authority that Al Jazeera's recent "Palestine Papers" bombshell – the release of thousands of pages of documents about Palestinian-Israeli negotiations – was part of a political campaign against President Mahmoud Abbas.

The difference is that in the old days, news of those immolations would never have seen print and an Arab news organization would not have had something called an investigative journalism unit.



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