

# Perspectives

Vol. II Issue 4, April 2010

## Arab Media: A Survey of an Imperfect Medium

by Dr. Morris Kalliny

Pan-Arab free-to-air satellite television in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) was, and remains a pivotal force in the ever-evolving Arab media landscape. Prior to the advent of satellite television in the early 90's, Arab media was limited mostly to state-owned newspapers, radio stations and terrestrial TV channels. Thus, Arab governments exercised a media monopoly and controlled the political narrative in the MENA region until the end of the 80's by shaping and influencing the opinions of the local population. More recently, technological innovations and the politics of marketing and advertising have resulted in a long-awaited democratization of the Arab media, opening new venues in the international market to the Arab press.

An independent Arab press did not appear until the middle of the nineteenth century, beginning with print outlets in Iraq, then Egypt, and Lebanon a few years later. It was not till 1908 that legal and political restrictions on the founding of newspapers were lifted, allowing a privately-owned press to develop in the region, leading to substantial growth in the industry throughout the region. Arab states established their own radio stations in the first half of the twentieth century, shortly after television began to make headway, starting in Iraq and Lebanon.

From the onset, the Arab press was closely tied to politics. This was certainly the case when governments in the region began their struggle for independence from Western colonial powers; the media became another means to battle foreign rule, serving indigenous political ends to mobilize the masses to their support. Subsequently, the Arab press became a compelling platform at the service of Arab nationalist movements, expounding on issues of anti-imperialism and nationalism. To this day, these themes remain popular. In the second half of the twentieth century, Arab governments tightened their grip on media institutions under the guise of protecting national unity, while making sure to minimize any public dissent.

And so, in the name of preserving national interests and supporting official policies, Arab governments exerted, and continue to exert, censorship over the media. Weak economic foundations further influenced the government's role in the development of Arab media. Low literacy rates and poor economic conditions forced media outlets to turn to their governments for funding, fostering a culture of political patronization that greatly restricted the editorial policies of the publications.

Regional presses (with the exception of Lebanon) quickly plunged into a downward spiral where reporting was skewed to the governments' liking and accountability

became an obsolete notion. Eventually, the once-diverse Arab press was reduced to a handful of state-owned and controlled newspapers, radio and television stations.

After years of dismal media standards, the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, granted \$150 Million USD to establish the Al-Jazeera satellite news channel, which began broadcasting in late 1996. Al-Jazeera embodied a new form of reporting, claiming to be more objective and independent than other state-funded counterparts, charting new territories that had long been forgotten in the region. For the first time, an Arab channel would cater to Arab audiences on issues that mattered to it most, having a definite impact on the local and regional political landscape, as long as it never criticized the hand that fed it. Unlike other media outlets in the region, the Qatari

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channel challenged Arab audiences by confronting them with the harsh reality of their daily life: poverty, repression, disparate and often conflicting cultures. The network addressed these issues through points of view seldom heard on Arab media, and tackled controversial political topics such as democracy, the rule of law and corruption. Until Al-Jazeera, governments had carefully ensured that the majority

of television content would be comprised of wholesome entertainment, harmless news and talk shows. In addition, Al-Jazeera was also the first Arab network to feature Israeli leaders, angering many Arab leaders accustomed to exerting tight control over state media.

The introduction of Al-Jazeera, followed by the growth of pan-Arab free-to-air satellite television networks, transformed the Arab media landscape into a booming market of pluralistic and independent media outlets. There are currently an estimated 529 free-to-air Arab satellite television channels, covering a wide range of issues

ranging from national and international news, to sports, religion and entertainment. Although most of these media outlets are privately owned, Arab governments still exert some control over satellite networks, and continue to push official policies through them. The Arab League Satellite Broadcasting Charter adopted in March 2008 by the Arab Ministries of Information illustrates how governments seek to further entrench state control over broadcasts while curtailing political expression. At the time, analysts posited that the Charter was a response by Arab governments to the relative freedom enjoyed by Arab satellite broadcasters, many of which are privately financed and encourage open political discussion of sensitive matters. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the two Arab countries that house the satellite platforms responsible for most Arab broadcasting (NileSat and ArabSat respectively) initiated the Charter, which was approved by 20 of the 22 nations in the Arab League. Lebanon was the only country to vote no, and Qatar, home base for Al-Jazeera, abstained. Provisions in the Charter formally allow signatory governments to deny a television station access to one or both of the satellites. As such, the Charter poses a potential threat to the burgeoning independent Arab media, and the rising standards for professionalism in the field. Once again claiming to preserve stability and security in the region, the Charter bans broadcasting material seen as undermining "social peace, national unity, public order and general propriety."

However, despite the Charter, the pan-Arab free-to-air satellite industry remains one of the most independent media environments available, allowing for the development of hundreds of topical channels and freer space to touch on contentious and sensitive topics such as sex, homosexuality and religious beliefs.

While this expansion is a step forward, it has come at a cost. Many sectors of Arab society have become confused and frustrated by the deluge of channels and the constantly revolving standards. In addition, the lack of framework to adapt to these changes, leave the parameters of this new freedom to be redefined and interpreted. However, the internet has brought a new venue to challenge the grip of Arab governments.

Considered an information revolution, new media has revived the debate over freedom of speech, providing a new platform to challenge state censorship.

The April 6th Movement in Egypt, which gathered political activists online via Facebook, was unprecedented in the country. The group was among the first to turn to the internet to seek a public platform they cannot access in the national media. Started by Esraa Rashid and Ahmad Maher in the spring of 2008 to support workers in El-Mahalla El-Kubra, an industrial town, activists called on participants to wear black and stay home on the day of the strike. Bloggers and citizen journalists used Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, blogs and other new media tools to report on the strike, alert their networks about police activity, organize legal protection and draw attention to their efforts. Eventually, the movement provided a context for deeper reflection on freedom of speech and media, nepotism and corruption in Egypt.

Although new media clearly offers a substantially democratized platform, issues of professionalism, journalistic standards in reporting and accountability

are even greater. Most online authors are not trained journalists, and consequently many articles are lacking in quality and content. The lack of professionalism remains substantial enough to question the validity of social media and bloggers as reliable sources. Training programs and formalization of this 'citizen journalism' could eventually address these problems.

Despite the dramatic developments in the pan Arab free-to-air satellite broadcasting and the proliferation of new media, major challenges remain. The Reporters Without Borders 2009 Press Freedom Index evaluated 175 countries on the basis of media freedom, ranking the majority of Arab countries at the bottom (Yemen 167, Syria 165, Saudi Arabia 163, Libya 156, Sudan 148 and Egypt 143). According to a recent study published in April 2009, carried out among 600 journalists in the Arab world, 71% of the persons interviewed considered "professionalism" as the most significant challenge to journalism in the region, followed by "government control."

On one hand, Arab media is currently a booming environment with constant development and new players. On the other hand, government repression and censorship continue to thrive. Thus, press freedom lags behind many societies that have comparable levels of media content. While there may now be an overabundance of information sources in the Arab world, few of them offer a substantial difference in quality.

One of the remaining challenges to Arab media is the lack of accountability. Media outlets operate under considerable governmental pressure and influence, and citizens in most parts of the region have been denied a means of holding their governments responsible. In many democratic countries, the media plays an integral role in encouraging transparent political discourse. Consequently, an independent media is crucial to achieve a political environment that truly serves the citizens of the Arab world. Laws controlling the media and criminalizing free speech in Arab states have encouraged self-censorship by journalists, leaving the media struggling to strike a balance between efficacy and survival.

The ban of certain media outlets, programs, reporters or hosts, or even of entire networks serve as a warning for those who may consider crossing the line. One recent example came on March 25, 2010, when the Bahraini government issued an order prohibiting the media from reporting on a minister accused of having been involved in money laundering. Actions such as this continue to hinder the advancement of the freedom of press, and it will take major political changes in the region to substantially alter the media environment.

It is estimated that the Pan-Arab advertising revenue has increased significantly, reaching \$7.5 Billion USD; however levels of expenditures remain too low to significantly challenge state censorship in the media for now. The Middle East has been for the past 15 years the theater of significant changes and progresses in the media, and technology has been pivotal in making some strides towards greater freedom of expression. As the Arab mass media becomes more sophisticated, citizens, journalists and the governments will have to figure out the rules of the game to establish a new framework that takes into account all stakeholders.

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