

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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Government 2.0

The U.S. government's premier international radio and television broadcast organization, Voice of America (VOA), will continue to provide timely news and information to more than 130 million people worldwide while pursuing innovative ways to engage this audience, reports America.gov. The increasing use of the internet by VOA to interact with its audience signals its adaptation to the new digital era.

"We are just expanding our technical ability to do that while at the same time using state-of-the-art information technology to have a dialogue with people," says VOA Director Dan Austin.

In 2008, VOA awarded a contract to Alelo Inc. to develop an interactive web-based learning portal to teach English as a second language. The portal is extremely popular with college-age students in China and Iran, reports America.gov.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is also embracing new media, using the web to promote the agency and her role as the nation's top envoy, according to Associated Press (AP). In less than three months, Clinton's State Department has embarked on a digital diplomacy drive aimed at spreading the word about American foreign policy and restoring Washington's image.

AP explains that this is part of a broader outreach strategy spearheaded by President Barack Obama. However Clinton has also built one-diplomacy innovations developed during George W. Bush's presidency.

"New media is critical in this new era of diplomacy, where smart power and expanded dialogues are essential to achieving our foreign policy goals," said Cheryl Mills, Clinton's longtime confidante and chief of staff. According to internal State Department's statistics, there has

been a surge in interest in such technology. "The United States government is behind nearly everybody, except in certain discrete areas, in terms of technology," Clinton told department employees at a town hall meeting in February. "We are, in my view, wasting time, wasting money, wasting opportunities, because we are not prepared to communicate effectively with what is out there in the business world and the private world."

On her first two foreign trips, to Asia and then the Middle East and Europe, local bloggers were "embedded" with the traveling press corps, broadening the audience for Clinton's official meetings and public appearances, which often produced more personal than policy questions.

Clinton's staff says it plans to venture further into the realm of social networking, an animated online world called Second Life, and cell phone technology. The department hopes to follow through on a Bush administration organized project that brought together Facebook, Google, Howcast, YouTube, AT&T, MTV, Columbia Law School, Access360Media and Gen-Next for an Alliance of Youth Movements summit.

It also wants to expand on X-Life, a mobile phone game launched in February that is aimed at helping youth in the Middle East learn English and teaching them about American history, culture and values, comments AP.

However, Susan Hansell, reporting for The New York Times, explains that the government may be caught in a catch 22. Federal agencies must go through Privacy Impact Assessment (PIA) every time they create a new computer system, which has been an issue in adapting social networks, blogs, wikis and other web tools to their traditional operating methods in order to connect to customers and partners.

"We have a Facebook page," said one official of the Department of Homeland Security. "But we don't allow people to

look at Facebook in the office. So we have to go home to use it. I find this bizarre."

Referring to the US Constitution's first amendment, one person asked at a privacy conference, if the government has the right to remove offensive comments on a blog or social network page. Another issue is that there are at least as many pages created on Facebook that are about the agencies that are not officially sanctioned.

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VOA Director, Dan Austin

“For every Facebook page that represents itself as an official State Department page, there is another unofficial page,” one participant said. The government already maintains a list of all federal blogs, and some wondered if it should do the same for social networking pages.

Engaging with the Muslim World

Following the election of Barack Obama, one of the primary concerns for many observers was the restoration of America’s image, particularly in the Arab and Muslim worlds, according to Lawrence Pintak for the Christian Science Monitor. Pintak stresses that much more needs to be done and real engagement should start sooner than later.

“Despite the initial euphoria about the Obama win, cynicism among the world’s Muslims still runs deep, particularly here in the Arab world,” he points out. President Obama’s visit to Turkey is a symbol of overtly reaching out to what Americans would call “moderate” Islamists. Going to non-Arab Turkey also appears to be an effort to separate US relations with Muslim countries from US

policy toward the Arab world, adds Pintak.

Arabs still perceive US policies as biased in favor of Israel and although their perception of the US has improved since Obama’s electoral victory, they are still waiting to be convinced. Pintak argues, “The Obama administration must talk to all the players, not just those approved by Israeli or Arab regimes.”

Pintak warns that while Obama has successfully seized on the symbolism of outreach to the world’s Muslims, gestures are cheap in a region where lives are readily sacrificed in symbolic acts of martyrdom. Now he must follow up with real, concrete engagement.

Rami Khouri of The Daily Star concurs with Pintak, asserting that isolating some parties, such as the Islamists, may prove counterproductive. Khouri cites the British-led efforts to resume contact with the political wing of Hezbollah and the Obama administration’s interest in talking with “moderate” Taliban as examples of engaging with Islamists.

“The Obama administration must talk to all the players, not just those approved by Israeli or Arab regimes.”

Lawrence Pintak, director of the Kamal Adham Center for Journalism Training and Research at The American University in Cairo.

“It is now obvious that this once strict policy of isolating and opposing Islamist and other militant groups until they unilaterally changed their ways has not worked, and will not work,” writes Khouri. He explains that the past decade has shown the failure of sanctions and isolation policies.

The initial signals from the Obama administration suggest that it is looking for other means of dealing with or politically engaging governments and movements that it had traditionally confronted or tried to isolate.

While this change in attitude may generate meaningful conversations between the US and Syria and possibly Iran, these changes “may also carry the risk of offsetting their neo-rationalism with a resurgent Orientalism.” In other words, Khouri notes, “They will say that ‘carrots and sticks’ should be used to test the troublemakers and see if they are really able to have a meaningful political dialogue and eventually change their ways.”

Khouri argues that this approach may fail because it is based on the assumption that US-led policies are righteous and legal, and eventually the other camps must abide by them. Although it is uncertain as to how far these policies could go, “some signs of change are in the air, and they are encouraging.”

However, Tariq Alhomayed points out in the Arabic version of Asharq-Alawsat that the West has decided to deal with extremists and extremism in quite “a reckless manner.” After the years of violence that characterized the Bush administration following the 9/11 attacks by Al-Qaeda, the call for openness by the Obama administration and tolerance towards extremism could be equally dangerous and unsettling for the region.

Alhomayed concludes that “openness for the sake of openness complicates matters further and sends out the wrong message.”

Halal TV

Egyptian Islamist members of parliament who accuse MTV-like Arab channels of corrupting youth, should welcome the launch of 4Shabab (For Youth in Arabic), which offers a music video alternative in line with religious sensitivities, reports Gulf News. The newly launched TV channel promises to reconcile traditional Arab values with the younger generation and to change the West’s negative stereotyping of Islam.

4Shabab features music videos by Muslim singers, as well as talk shows and soap

operas. “Our channel is the new tune of Islam [...] promoting dialogue and seeking to remove negative stereotypes of Islam and the Arabs,” says Ahmad Abu Haiba, managing director of 4Shabab. 4Shabab’s transmission is currently available in the Arab world and Europe.

The new television also presents game shows including one titled Who Wants to Be an Islamic Pop Star? 4Shabab is financed by eight Saudi and two UAE entrepreneurs. “I am not asking people to be Islamists,” explains Abu Haiba. “I just want to pass on the right messages through entertainment.”

Abu Haiba introduced the now-influential Egyptian preacher Amr Khalid to TV audiences in the Arab world on a popular show several years ago, notes Gulf News. He also produced many of Egypt’s women-orientated Islamic shows.

4Shabab is also an attempt to put Arab youth back on the right track, according to the Christian Science Monitor (CSM). Referring to other mainstream music videos broadcast in the Arab world, Abu Haiba comments on the discrepancy between the reality in the street and the image portrayed on the TV screen. “They smash our identity and confuse people, especially the younger generation. They give them a misunderstanding about their own lives.”

Mohamed Shawky, a filmmaker documenting 4Shabab’s launch, says that despite the disconnect between music videos and real life, most young people aren’t willing to turn on the channel. “It’s possible that a lot of people agree with Abu Haiba’s views, but that doesn’t mean they will stop watching mainstream videos and start watching his channel.”

Diaa Rashwan, an expert on Islamism at the Cairo think tank Ahram Center, says that the idea of Islamic music videos is nothing new. “It is part of a bigger trend: In Egypt over the last few years you have seen Coptic singers, and movies produced and performed by Coptic singers, actors, and actresses,” he points out. “It is a way for people to distinguish themselves from the society as a whole and to say ‘we have our own way of life.’”

Religious channels typically get a small share of the viewing audience, but video channels bring a much higher return. Experts believe Abu Haiba is the first to combine the two, reports CSM.

William Ward, managing editor of Arab Media and Society, an online journal, says that 4Shabab may appeal to both viewers and investors not because of Islam, but because it is also family-friendly. “It’s not necessarily about the Islamic nature of the channel,” he argues, “It’s just a more wholesome alternative.”

“But the reason why many Muslims turn away from the religion of their government is because they deeply loathe their government.”

International director of the Christian production channel, Arab vision.

In other related news, a first of its kind religious TV station is due to be launched in Algeria by the government in a broader effort to enhance national religious identity, reports Judy West for Religious Intelligence.

“The new TV station will air religious programs presented by Algerian Muslim scholars who will offer fatwas and preaching that are in line with the Maliki School adopted in Algeria,” said Minister of Communication Azzedine Mihoubi. According to West, this seems to be part of a concerted effort to shift Algerian TV viewers away from the diverging views of the religious channels from the Gulf, as well as the popular Arabic Christian satellite TV channels.

According to a media advisor, the channel is to provide a platform of moderation and disseminate the correct religious ideology.

The international director of the Christian production channel Arab Vision believes the Algerian authorities are trying to present a moderate view of Islam to counter the effects of

radical Islam disseminated by clerics and preachers on satellite broadcasts.

However, he notes that “the reason why many Muslims turn away from the religion of their government is because they deeply loathe their government. That may also explain why so many Muslims in Algeria are interested in the Christian faith.”

The Ministry of Religious Affairs is encouraging prominent Algerian religious scholars and teachers to use this medium to speak against terrorism in order to reach the goal of “achieving security and inviting terrorists to return to their senses.”

The TV channel will at first broadcast for eight hours a day, then gradually expand to a comprehensive national program of specialized channels, including one for the Kabyle culture and language, another targeting children, and a third featuring scientific programming.

The launch of Kabyle TV programs by the government is more an attempt at neutralizing the effect of Christian TV broadcasts than discouraging terrorism, concludes the director of Arab vision.

Freeman’s Resignation Remains Controversial

Charles Freeman withdrew from his nominated position as chairman of the National Intelligence Council last week following a weeks-long political firestorm in Washington which pitted the pro-Israel lobby’s strongest activists against what was seen as a push for moderate policy positions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, reports The Washington Post. Freeman’s resignation provoked both praise and criticism and contributed to a concern about President Barack Obama’s policy on Israel and his susceptibility to powerful interest groups.

A former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Freeman wrote a statement on the matter issued to several online outlets. “I do not believe the National Intelligence Council could function effectively while its chair was under constant attack by unscrupulous people with a passionate

attachment to the views of a political faction in a foreign country,” said Freeman.

Since Freeman’s nomination in February, the pro-Israel lobby, including former American Israel Public Affairs Committee official Steve Rosen and Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY), has persistently pursued efforts to overturn his nomination.

“A blow to hopes for a new approach to Israel-Palestine issues under the Obama administration.”

The Daily Star commenting on the resignation of Charles Freeman, President of the Middle East Council.

According to Scott MacLeod for TIME, many congressmen called for an investigation into Freeman’s dealings with Saudi Arabia. In a February 19 blog post, Rosen declared Freeman’s nomination “profoundly disturbing” because he was a “strident critic of Israel, and a textbook case of the old-line Arabism that afflicted American diplomacy at the time the state of Israel was born.”

Freeman denounced what he termed the lobby’s “character assassination, selective misquotation, the willful distortion of the record, the fabrication of falsehoods, and an utter disregard for the truth.”

Nonetheless, Foreign Policy concludes that due to the controversy, “Freeman’s presence at the NIC would engender sharp attacks on anything the intelligence community said, [and] the credibility of the intelligence product would suffer, not be enhanced.”

Following Freeman’s resignation, Schumer publicly said, “I repeatedly urged the White House to reject [Freeman], and I am glad they did the right thing.”

Several authors have come to

Freeman’s defense and declared the lobby’s claims to be false.

According to Philip Weiss for The American Conservative, “Freeman openly admires Israel: ‘The good has outweighed the bad in Israel for a long time. I would like to see Israel survive and prosper. Right now it is doing itself in and taking us with it.’”

Writing for Foreign Policy, Stephen Walt adds, “Because the case for never criticizing Israel and backing it no matter what it does makes little strategic or moral sense, advocates of that approach have no choice but to misrepresent their opponent’s arguments, and to try to portray them as wild-eyed extremists (i.e., ‘ideological fanatics’ or ‘paranoid’), in an attempt to marginalize them.”

While the White House has not publicly commented on the matter, many are concerned that the resignation will negatively impact Obama’s Middle Eastern policies and credibility.

The Washington Post cited fears from The Daily Star in Beirut, which viewed the resignation as “a blow to hopes for a new approach to Israel-Palestine issues under the Obama administration.”

Prior to resigning, Freeman told The American Conservative, “If the administration does not stick with me, then it’s destroying the argument that the Israel lobby is only a mythic entity and does not control the public space...It will show the world that it is not able to exercise independent thinking on these issues.”

The American Conservative included a statement from New York Times columnist Joe Klein, who said that Schumer and company have made Washington “even less hospitable for those who aren’t afraid to speak their minds, for those who are reflexively contentious, who would defy the conventional wisdom.”

Charles Lane, reporting for The Washington Post, said, “If Freeman’s attack on the ‘Israel Lobby’ means anything at all, it is that the president and his staff are either too weak to resist the machinations of these foreign agents – or are in cahoots with them.” Lane believes that Obama must denounce Freeman’s “insinuations” that the administration is closely connected to the Israel lobby to protect its position in the Middle East.

MacLeod is less worried. “I sense an underlying overall shift in approach to the Middle East in Washington, so I don’t believe that the Freeman episode signals that the hard-line pro-Israel forces will be dictating policy to the Obama White House.”

Freeman concludes his resignation letter by stating that the United States government and its peoples’ inability to consider Middle Eastern policies “opposed by the ruling faction in Israeli politics has allowed that faction to adopt and sustain policies that ultimately threaten the existence of Israel...This is not just a tragedy for the Israelis and their neighbors in the Middle East, [it] is doing widening damage to the national security of the United States.”

Despite the controversy, MacLeod notes, “No American president – none – has ever entered office with a clear determination for Middle East peacemaking and an equitable political and cultural sensitivity to both sides in the conflict.”

Clerics Ban Women from the Media

A group of Saudi clerics has urged the kingdom’s new information minister, Abdel Aziz Khoja, to ban women from appearing on TV or in newspapers and magazines, making clear that the country’s hardline religious establishment is skeptical of a new push toward moderation, reports Associated Press.

“No Saudi women should appear on TV, no matter what the reason,” the statement said. “No images of women should appear in Saudi newspapers and magazines.”

Although it increases pressure on the new minister, the recommendation is likely to have little effect. Khoja’s appointment was part of a government shake-up by King Abdullah that removed a number of hardliners and is believed to be part of an effort to weaken the influence of conservatives in the kingdom.

The call comes as women have made considerable strides in the Saudi media over the past few years, reports The Media Line. Women are increasingly gaining better access to the labor market, assuming higher-ranking positions in the media

industry such as editors or correspondents. According to the news site, the clerics' call to ban women from the media stems from a fear that "women are breaking out of their traditional role of housewives and are encroaching on areas that have been dominated by males."

"No Saudi women should appear on TV, no matter what the reason. No images of women should appear in Saudi newspapers and magazines."

Saudi clerics in a statement to the Information Minister Abdel Aziz Khoja.

The clerics' protests also come a month after widely criticized reforms by the king on new appointments to the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. The king also set a precedent by appointing a woman as a deputy cabinet minister.

Restrictions in the kingdom are particularly harsh for women, notes The Media Line. Women are still banned from driving and must be accompanied by a male guardian, usually a husband, a father or a close family member to do anything outside of the household. The king has spearheaded reforms instrumental to opening job markets to women and expanding education opportunities, according to women's rights activists in the region.

It is believed that the clerics' reformation rules would have a negligible impact on the king as his reshuffle removed a number of hard-line figures, reports One India. If anything, the clerics' protest is an attempt to exert pressure on the Ministry, concludes the news site.

Socio-political Twittering

New Media, such as blogs and social networking sites, are a growing form of mainstream communication connecting the world with social and political movements, reports Asharq Al-Awsat. The news site outlines the major sites that worldwide users visit daily: Facebook, Google, Twitter, Flickr, Craig's List and millions of blogs. This new media technology, with its mass communication and posting ability, both rivals and complements traditional media.

The Middle East, though late in picking up the internet, has the fastest growing internet use worldwide. Internet World Stats recorded growth by 1,296.2%, according to the Saudi Gazette. It is estimated that there are 490,000 Arab blogs and 2.5 million Arab Facebook users, as well as Arab versions of YouTube, Twitter and Flickr. These sites, especially blogs, have become important in national political discourse, particularly in Egypt, as they are a space for people to be openly politically active.

"Who needs Camp David when you have Facebook?"

Pierre Tristam, editorial writer and columnist at the Daytona Beach.

"Twitter...is an online service that allows anyone with an account to send short - 140 characters - messages to anyone following you," says Jeremy Wagstaff for The Jakarta Post. Twitter, he argues, may be the future of news, as people post links, their blogs and news through SMS messages, making it a fast filtered global network of verbal exchange.

New Media use in the Middle East is poised to increase as Facebook recently launched versions in Arabic and Hebrew. Pierre Tristam, editorial writer and columnist at the Daytona Beach, argues on About.com that this will increase access

to the social networks and suggests that Facebook's ability to instantly translate between the two languages may end the 60-year divide between the languages and people. He jokes, "Who needs Camp David when you have Facebook?"

One politically motivated movement on Facebook, reports the Middle East Times, is a group entitled, "To Obama: Letter From the Bloggers and Facebook Activists in the Middle East." The group was started by Arab youth bloggers, Egyptian Abdel Rahman Mansour and Saudi Abdel Majeed Saud, who were inspired by President Obama's message. They hope that this open letter will reach the new president and serve as a space promoting dialogue between the US and the Middle East.

Additionally, new networking sites specifically geared towards Muslim users are developing and growing in popularity across the global online community, writes Eva Lamppu in Inquirer.net. One of these sites, Muxlim, is an English site that serves as a space to unite anyone interested in Islam, particularly Muslims living in the west. The site has all the major social networking features, but is specifically focused on Islam and welcomes all Muslims, both conservative and liberal, to open discussion.

Governments are jumping on the new media bandwagon as well, according to Menassat. The news site reports that Israel is working online to improve its image in the international community. Israel is now trying to counter the horrible images of the Gaza war through its own online campaign by using popular sites such as YouTube and Facebook with the hope of changing public opinion.

Not all states are supportive of the New Media trend; there is talk in the UAE of banning the popular site YouTube. Such a ban would follow the recent banning of photo-posting site Flickr. In a Global Voices Advocacy posting, the UAE's Telecommunication Regulatory Authority is said to have explained that the site will not be banned but will be closely regulated by the government.

Al-Zaidi Gets the Boot

Anthony Shadid reports in the Washington Post that Muntadher Al-Zaidi, the thirty-year-old journalist who rose to fame after hurling his shoes at then-President George W. Bush during an internationally-televised press conference, received a sentence of three years imprisonment for the incident. His lawyers have thirty days to appeal, which they plan to do, and many hope for a pardon. Critics charge that the sentence is an overreaction that stains Iraq's already-sullied record of an inability to protect press freedom.

“Instead of hurling a shoe in the name of those widows and children, he should have asked president Bush how he feels about having tens of thousands killed and millions displaced as a direct result of his actions.”

Salam Pax, Iraqi Blogger.

Al-Zaidi, a reporter for Al-Baghdadia television, has been held in prison in Baghdad's Green Zone since the incident, reports The Guardian.

CNN reports that President Bush brushed off the incident as an expression of freedom, saying, “First of all, it's got to be one of the weirdest moments of my presidency [...] Here I am getting ready to answer questions from the free press in a democratic Iraq, and a guy stands up

and throws his shoe. ... I'm not angry with the system. I believe that a free society is emerging, and a free society is necessary for our own security and peace.”

Al-Zaidi's actions inspired mixed reactions. Salam Pax suggests in The Guardian that Al-Zaidi “might have expressed eloquently with that shoe what many of us felt about Bush and his war [...] Instead of hurling a shoe in the name of those widows and children he should have asked president Bush how he feels about having tens of thousands killed and millions displaced as a direct result of his actions.”

Despite some criticism, Al-Zaidi generated overwhelming support from across the globe. Even Salam Pax's critical article declares that Al-Zaidi “should by no means face jail.” Hundreds of web pages and Facebook groups have sprung up to honor his act.

CNN reports that one site entitled, “Guy Who Threw His Shoes at Bush” has roughly 270,000 visitors. According to the American Chronicle, a Saudi Arabian offered \$10 million to buy the shoe, and the daughter of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi awarded Al-Zaidi a medal of courage. The incident even inspired an online game where players throw shoes at a cartoon President Bush called, “Sock and Awe.”

The Washington Post reports that Al-Zaidi's chief defense attorney Dhia Saadi plans to appeal the decision, emphasizing that Al-Zaidi's action was an “honorable” act of expression and outrage at the occupation of Iraq, rather than assault. “It wasn't a rocket, it was a shoe,” Saadi said. “He was only expressing his feelings. What he could see was the blood of Iraqis at his feet when he watched the US president speaking about his achievements in Iraq.”

A member of Code Pink says, “If he had wanted to hurt George Bush, he would have chosen a different weapon,” according to Agence France Presse. Al-Zaidi himself said, “I was not trying to kill the commander of the occupation forces of Iraq.”

The Christian Science Monitor reports that, “Whether or not Bush was a guest is indeed the crux of Al-Zaidi's defense – and he had 16 defense lawyers ready to argue that case. Al-Zaidi claimed Bush

wasn't invited here, so he can't be guilty of insulting a visiting dignitary.”

While Al-Zaidi had evidently practiced the shoe-throwing, he pled not guilty to the charge of assault on a foreign leader, according to The Guardian.

Al-Zaidi shouted “Long live Iraq!” amidst cries from his family and supporters. According to AFP reports, Al-Zaidi's brother Uday said, “This is a political court. Muntazer is being treated like a prisoner of war. He is not a normal prisoner ... This decision has been taken by the prime minister's office.”

“I consider the decision harsh. He was charged with assaulting a foreign leader on an official visit, but I don't believe it was an assault,” says Saadi. “We will contest the decision and try to get the verdict overturned.” Saadi also emphasized the fact that Al-Zaidi had already spent three months in prison, where he was reportedly tortured with methods like electrical shock. The family is also filing a lawsuit against the security guards who beat Al-Zaidi after the incident.

Some of the many others calling for a fair appeal include the Doha Center for Media Freedom (DCMF), reports The Peninsula. Hajar Sumoni, a research officer for DCMF, says, “We have decided to send a letter to the Iraqi authorities requesting to have a fair appeal trial, as we see the first trial was not fair but politicized.” Sheikh Suhail Uqabi, a Shiite cleric in the Sadr stronghold of Kufa, also came out in strong opposition to the sentence.

The Associated Press reports that “the speed of the trial, which took two relatively brief hearings, was likely to feed widespread suspicion among Iraqis that Maliki's US-backed government orchestrated the process.”

Some analysts point to the larger picture. Larry Derfner points out in U.S. News & World Report that “Iraqi press freedom is deceptive.”

Derfner writes, “News media have flourished in Iraq since Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003, with some 200 print publications, 60 radio stations, and 30 TV channels in five different languages. However, most of the news outlets are partly funded by Iraq's myriad sectarian factions and political parties, and the coverage obediently reflects those biases.

So while there is now freedom of the press in Iraq, that freedom does not extend to journalists so much as it does to those who pay their salaries.”

Further emphasizing this point, Ammar al-Shahbender of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting says, “The real problem here is that all sides will be practicing self-censorship on issues relating to their own direct interests.”

Media: Fueling or Discouraging Conflict?

Mirroring the conflict on the ground, the Arab-Israeli conflict online “resembles a combat zone, a place for explosive blogs and talkbacks along polemic lines,” writes Ethan Pack at Foreign Policy In Focus. Partisan reporting of the “facts” has created a contrasting and contradictory narrative of the Gaza conflict.

Israel, through the YouTube page of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), showed footage of Hamas militants and rockets, while Al-Jazeera and Hamas-run Al-Aqsa focused on “corpses, overcrowded hospitals, and destroyed property.” Al-Jazeera English’s YouTube page reported a 600% hike in hits during the Gaza fighting, making it the most watched English-language news station online.

Mohamed Salembasit, reporting for The Peninsula, attended a session of the fourth Al-Jazeera Forum on Reporting the War on Gaza. Alain Gresh, deputy director of France’s Le Monde Diplomatique, argued that Al-Jazeera’s coverage of the Gaza conflict “played a major role in showing the suffering of people in Gaza Strip.” Moreover, Israel’s defeat in the “mediawar” was partly due to Al-Jazeera’s successful countering of Israeli “propaganda.”

Also at the Al-Jazeera Forum, Ramesh Mathew of the Gulf Times reports that speakers agreed that Al-Jazeera had “helped the world better understand the “realities” of the Middle East crisis and also forced Israel to end its aggression on the Hamas-ruled Palestinian territory much earlier than most people expected.”

“The onus was on our correspondents to bring to the world the hardships suffered

by more than a million people of the Palestine territory,” Al-Jazeera editor-in-chief Ahmed El-Sheikh claimed. Further, El-Sheikh argued, “We succeeded where the western media failed miserably. Our correspondents risked their lives to be with the affected people of the region.” However, Robert Fisk, Middle East correspondent for The Independent, disagrees with El-Sheikh’s claim that Western media had ignored the plight of the Palestinians. Fisk also accused Al-Jazeera’s Arabic channel of having a pro-Palestinian bias, but did acknowledge that coverage on Al-Jazeera English had struck more of a balance.

“The onus was on our correspondents to bring to the world the hardships suffered by more than a million people of the Palestine territory.”

*Al-Jazeera editor-in-chief
Ahmed El-Sheikh.*

In The Philadelphia Bulletin David Bedein focuses on media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict in general. Bedein lambastes the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC), the official channel of the Palestinian Authority (PA), for “celebrating” the anniversary of a major Palestinian terror attack.

The 1978 attack, in which 37 Israeli bus passengers and American nature photographer Gail Rubin were murdered, was described by a PBC narrator as “one of the most important and most prominent special actions... which was carried out by a group of heroes and led by the heroic fighter Dalal Mughrabi.”

Bedein thus accuses the PBC and the PA of “incitement.” Herb Denenberg, a colleague at The Philadelphia Bulletin, echoes Bedein’s sentiment. Denenberg criticizes the “hero worship of those who butcher men, women and children,”

claiming this worship is “widely held in the Palestinian and Arab world.”

Denenberg also excoriates The Philadelphia Inquirer’s Trudy Rubin for her allegedly skewed reporting of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Complaining that Rubin “is not offended by the slaughter of innocents,” Denenberg contends that Rubin is too interested in critiquing Israel’s anti-terror policies, but has “no complaints or concerns about the parade of terrorists and child-killers that Hamas and the Arabs have tried to get into Israel.”

Denenberg characterizes Rubin’s writing as “biased, fraudulent and dishonest,” and quotes his brother Mike Denenberg who asserts that anti-Israeli writing only succeeds in “[delaying] the conditions that might actually bring peace, and encourages the violence, terrorism and wars the Arabs/Muslims have used against Israel.”

However, Ethan Pack believes that despite appearing as a “repetitive cycle of belligerence,” media coverage of the Gaza conflict and cyberspace negotiation in no way serves to encourage and incite violence, but instead inspires peace.

“The online give-and-take may suggest a wider capacity for mediation in real time,” Pack argues, “reflecting a popular interest in listening to what the other side has to say.”

Al-Jazeera Grows on the International Media Scene

Despite its international audience of 140 million households in 40 countries, Al-Jazeera English has a “fight on its hands to conquer America,” according to Rowena Mason at the Daily Telegraph. As a broadcaster in the Arab world, “associated in the popular mindset with terrorist videos” and erroneously accused by former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld of showing hostage beheadings, “the endeavor begins to look near-impossible.”

Tony Burman, managing director of Al-Jazeera English, remains optimistic and ambitious. “We want to rival CNN and BBC World in size and quality,” Burman states. To do so, Burman has focused news coverage on the developing world,

hired journalists from well-respected rivals, and is attempting to shatter old myths about Al-Jazeera. Al-Jazeera English's strength lies in its non-Western international scope argues Burman, "We are an alternative voice."

Though charges of anti-Western bias remain, Al-Jazeera English is marketing itself as a serious news channel. "We don't devote time to celebrity or salacious crime stories," says Ben Rayner, the executive producer of European news. "We are serious about investigative stories."

At the fourth annual Al-Jazeera Media Forum held in Doha, Wadah Khanfar, Director General of Al-Jazeera, also spoke of a time of "great transformation" for Al-Jazeera and Arab media, reports The Peninsula. In a changing multi-polar world, "there is a need for media to better understand the realities on the ground," Khanfar argued.

The Middle East, "a cradle of different faiths and known for old civilizations and rich culture," and home to a dynamic, shifting political landscape, reflects the complexities that Khanfar described. Unlike Al-Jazeera, Khanfar claims, Western media has "failed to understand the reality behind what is happening in the Middle East region."

Richard Gizbert, host of a show on the evolution of the media on Al-Jazeera, argues in Journalism that "there simply is very little media analysis of media." Gizbert sees Al-Jazeera's focus on online video content as a "no brainer." According to Gizbert, "let's adapt to something where we don't need people, and it doesn't cost us any money - even I can figure that one out."

In winning the prestigious Concentra Breaking News Award, Al-Jazeera English's "continued exceptional coverage" has been recognized, Burman argues in a press release on AME Info. Al-Jazeera's Subina Shrestha, who journeyed up the Irrawaddy in May 2008 following Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, won the award.

Shrestha reported on the aftermath of the cyclone, focusing on the disaster's human cost. According to Burman, "Subina's excellent reporting when faced with perilous hurdles exemplifies Al-

Jazeera's fearless journalism."

Meanwhile, Al-Jazeera Children's Channel has also scooped an award, winning the Egyptian Ministry of Culture's Golden Award for the Best Arabic Long and Short Feature Films at the 19th Cairo International Film Festival for Children, announces AME Info. Christiane Salem, the channel's public relations manager, says the award reflects Al-Jazeera's role in "maximizing children edutainment in the industry."

In related news, Arabian Television Network (ATN), the broadcasting arm of the Arab Media Group (AMG) that transmits programming to over 36 million households, has won the Best Broadcaster of the Year Award at the fifth annual Digital Studio Awards, reports AME Info.

Maryam Al Falasi, General Manager of ATN, remarked, "2008 was a landmark year for us... Our goal is to be the biggest entertainment network in the UAE in the next two years."

Meanwhile, three Lebanese journalists have received the prestigious Inquirer journalism awards, reports the Daily Star. The Inquirer awards recognize outstanding investigative journalism. Riyadh Qubaisi of New Television earned the top prize for his expose on the issue of weapons in Lebanon. His New Television colleagues Firas Hatoum and Ogarite Dandash also won awards for their reports on Lebanese street children and torture.

Finally, the annual Arab Media Forum has been scheduled for May 11-12. Organized by the Dubai Press Club, and held under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Forum will draw 600 guests and 50 speakers to discuss the future of Arab media.

Media Developments in the Gulf

Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh recently vowed to free up the state-

monopolized broadcast media as he pardoned a journalist who had been sentenced to six years in prison, reports Agence France Presse.

At a press conference, the Yemeni president declared he had charged the Ministry of Information with "swiftly drawing up a bill authorizing the setting up of satellite radio and television channels by individuals or non-state organizations."

"The draft legislation also provides courts with the authority to revoke licenses or suspend operations of media outlets for a minimum of 180 days if the institution violates the law."

Alexandra Sandels, reporter for Menassat.

The news agency AFP notes that Yemen has a flourishing independent press, but, in an impoverished country where illiteracy is high, control of the broadcast media is paramount. The journalist was released in September 2008 after US criticism.

This also occurs in the midst of a controversial media law that was recently approved in the UAE by the Federal National Council, causing a stir among press freedom groups, comments Alexandra Sandels for Menassat. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) declared it to be another legal means to further muzzle free speech.

Sandels explains that the content of the new legislation is purposefully vague so that false accusations or politically

motivated charges can be brought against journalists. She points out, “The draft legislation also provides courts with the authority to revoke licenses or suspend operations of media outlets for a minimum of 180 days if the institution violates the law.”

While many consider the legislation a major step backward in the UAE, which is generally praised for its relatively free media environment, some Emirati journalists are in favor of the proposal, claiming the provision will serve as a protection mechanism for their industry.

“It’s not to stop bad news,” said Abdullatif Al-Sayegh, head of the Dubai-based Arab Media Group. Rather, it is to prevent journalists “digging for bad news” he said.

The draft law was adopted in the midst of a sharp economic downturn in the UAE. But government officials are saying that the draft bill is in “no way a response” to the ongoing financial turmoil or an attempt to restrain media coverage of the crisis. They claim the draft legislation was born two years ago, at the height of the UAE boom.

Kate Bulkly, writing for The Guardian, agrees that the vagueness of what might be considered “damaging” is worrisome to journalists and reporters as the fines are heavy, especially in the context of the global economic downturn.

Dr Hasan Qayed al-Subaihi, an assistant professor of mass communication at the UAE University and a former journalist, insists that this media law has to be put in perspective. “We have some restrictions about religion and about not insulting officials, but criticism is allowed if it is fair. In my opinion, the diversity of publications is growing up and also freedom is improving,” he says.

To become law, the draft requires approval from the government and Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed, president of the UAE and ruler of Abu Dhabi, who has been a major proponent of applying western standards to local journalism, Bulkly points out.

Although there have been signs of growth in the media over the past year, most of the Arabic and the English-language print media in the Emirates are

having to cope with a fall in advertising spending of 15% to 20%.

Increase in Layoffs Despite Media Growth

With media hubs growing in the Middle East, companies are seeking to meet international standards with pan-Arab content, according to correspondent Chris Forrester for The Guardian. Despite the Middle East’s rich culture, its creative quality in broadcast media, by any international standard, is poor, he adds.

Although the market is flooded with more than three hundred satellite channels, Forrester asserts that no more than a dozen have any real merit. The problems stem from a lack of a business plan and the fact that many channels are “more ‘vanity’ vehicles for their owners than real businesses.” The issue of mercurial advertising has also had an adverse effect on programming.

“There has been criticism that the Middle East’s advertising spend cannot support more than a few dozen successful channels but I would argue that if a channel isn’t making a profit, then what is it doing on TV? I think all the channels on Nilesat are making a profit and find our audience of interest to them,” says Salah Hamza, chief executive officer of Egyptian satellite operator Nilesat.

There is clearly more growth to be had in the Middle East, and in the past few years a flurry of media hubs have been created, including the giant 35m sq ft Media Production City in Cairo completed in 1996, and more recently Dubai Media City, which opened its doors in 2000.

The development of foreign companies and international partnerships in Dubai have also facilitated better training and improved norms for media companies in the region.

However, according to The Media Line, the burgeoning media landscape in the UAE has not proved immune to the global malaise affecting the publishing and broadcasting industries. Drastic cuts

in advertising budgets have resulted in a wave of layoffs in the regional industry.

The region’s biggest publisher, ITP, announced just three weeks ago that it was closing nine magazines and laying off 60 employees in a bid to streamline the organization and refine operations, reports the news site.

Fellow publishing house and another significant player in the market, Arab Media Group (AMG), has also made cuts to its operations, but remains reluctant to confirm numbers. Reports suggest that the number of staff let go could be around 300, with AMG currently employing around 2,000 people.

Dubai Holding, the government-owned group with subsidiaries stretching from property to the media sector, announced plans to cut its marketing and advertising budget by 25% this year in response to the economic slowdown.

The Media Line explains that the layoffs in Dubai come in stark contrast to reports that Abu Dhabi’s flagship newspaper, The National, is on the verge of launching an Arabic version.

The paper, which is bankrolled by the Abu Dhabi government, was founded less than a year ago and has recruited journalists from across Europe and North America; its editor Martin Newland previously helmed the Daily Telegraph in the UK.

e-Revolution Challenges Government Control

International policy specialist Farooq Mitha argues at Tampa Bay Online that the satellite revolution has brought significant changes in the way Arabs receive information. The rise of the internet has hampered the control of information by Arab governments and has shaped the way young people in the region come to see policies.

Referring to the Al-Jazeera effect, Mitha continues, “Al-Jazeera injected a level of journalistic freedom into a region

that was and continues to be largely dependent on censored media.” Today, government officials must defend their policies on the air, and ordinary people have the opportunity to comment on current events.

“We must consider the impact of these new modes of disseminating information... As the Arab world turns to a variety of sources for news and information, our policies will be increasingly scrutinized.”

Farooq Mitha, International policy specialist.

The internet has also had a liberating effect as tools like Facebook, MySpace and other blogging sites have become the source of information for young Arabs. Today’s Arab generation turns to the internet for information and no longer relies on state-controlled media.

“Internally, the increased flow of information continues to cause concern for Arab governments whose citizens will no longer simply swallow information fed to them daily by the tightly censored media,” comments Mitha. Consequently, regimes in the Middle East have taken steps to try to restrict the usage of certain internet sites and the activity of bloggers.

Mitha adds, “We must consider the impact of these new modes of disseminating information... As the Arab world turns to a variety of sources for news and information, our policies will be increasingly scrutinized.” He concludes that as the US seeks to win

hearts and minds across the Middle East, “our policies must be carefully thought out and implemented in ways that can be used to gain the trust of the Arab street.”

In other news, the Ministry of Information and Culture of Saudi Arabia is planning to improve electronic journalism as part of its new plan to promote e-media, reports the Saudi Gazette. While journalists are supporting the creation of an official electronic newspaper industry, they are still waiting for the authorization to go ahead with the project. Although discussion of e-journalism started back in the 1990s, no approval was ever given.

“The phenomenon of having an official website for each newspaper is really only an attempt to fight the creation of an electronic newspaper industry,” said Abdullah Balbaid, Editor-in-Chief of Radians Information Network.

According to Balbaid, developing e-journalism is still considered a risk by some, especially as there is no clear definition of journalists’ rights and responsibilities. “The ministry issued its new plan to promote e-media by providing a system of regulation in cooperation with the Arab Media Standing Committee. This system will make clear the rules under which e-journalism can operate,” said Abdurrahman Al-Hazza’a, senior official in the ministry.

Saudi journalists have asked for an updating of Saudi media laws, in which the launching of e-journalism will be an important step in the world of e-media.

Censorship Still Rampant in the Mideast

The issues of press freedom and internet censorship came to the fore this week as media rights group Reporters Without Borders released a report entitled “Enemies of the Internet,” writes Voice of America News. The report expresses concern about internet censorship and other various threats around the world to free expression online.

Specifically, the report singles out

12 nations that have “systematically restricted their populations from accessing online news and information deemed ‘undesirable,’” continues the news site. Among these countries are Egypt, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia.

“We’re not talking network management issues here but, rather, the imprisonment of cyber dissidents, online news and information censorship and government-sponsored efforts to scramble or jam online content... It’s not a pretty picture,” comments journalist Roy Mark of eWeek.

“Syria has blocked more than 160 websites deemed critical of the government, as well as social media sites such as Facebook, Skype, YouTube, and the popular blog platform blogspot.”

Alexandra Sandels, reporter for Menassat.

Alexandra Sandels for Menassat highlighted censorship abuses in Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Syria and Egypt in light of the Reporters Without Borders report.

In 2008, a special governmental commission was established in Saudi Arabia “to tackle terrorism, fraud, pornography, defamation and ‘violation of religious values’ on the internet, notes Menassat. Additionally, prominent Saudi blogger Fouad Al-Farhan was detained for several months without official charges after he posted an entry on his blog about the “advantages” and “disadvantages” of being a Muslim.

“In Tunisia, bloggers have become fed up with the strict web censorship policies of President President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali to the extent that they organized a ‘day against blog censorship’ last year,” reports Menassat. Websites including Dailymotion, YouTube and Facebook are filtered regularly in Tunisia because of content critical of the president’s policies

Likewise, “Syria has blocked more than 160 websites deemed critical of the government, as well as social media sites such as Facebook, Skype, YouTube, and the popular blog platform blogspot,” continues Menassat.

Five cyber-dissidents are currently behind bars in Syria for their online writings. Most recently, a Syrian court sentenced a 64-year old dissident on Sunday to three years in prison for “weakening national feelings” after he published articles that were critical of the political system, reports the International Herald Tribune.

In Egypt, cyber-dissidents such as the April 6 movement, writes Menassat, “are more often facing higher risks of battling the government as they become bolder in their online criticism of the regime of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.” According to Reporters Without Borders, at least three Egyptian cyber-dissidents are currently imprisoned in Egypt.

Because of Egypt’s record, the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) issued a letter to President Mubarak protesting “the relentless campaign of persecution against internet journalists and bloggers by Egypt’s various security services.” In the letter the CPJ criticize the fact that bloggers, “who lack the relative institutional protections provided to some - though not all - journalists who work in traditional print and broadcast media, have been targeted with particular ruthlessness.”

Meanwhile, Egypt began circulating a resolution among delegations from the 47 countries serving on the UN Human Rights Council that reportedly calls for further “limitations” on speech that could be construed as defaming religions, reports the Taipei Times.

According to the news site, “Egyptian and international human rights groups said they feared the change

could leave human rights law open to misinterpretation.” Associate Middle East director at Amnesty International Hassiba Hadj-Sahraoui remarked that “it’s ironic that Egypt is portraying itself as a protector of these principles of freedom of expression and religion, when it imprisons people for their religious beliefs.”

The Vancouver Sun adds that “human rights groups say authoritarian governments could use a resolution along the lines of the Egyptian text to justify targeted crackdowns.”

Legal Battles over Torture

While Congress debates whether senior Bush administration officials should be held responsible for torture, humiliation and indefinite detention of prisoners during the “war on terror,” some of those prisoners are filing a number of lawsuits, reports The Washington Independent. President Barack Obama argues that these cases should be dismissed on the grounds of national security, while the Justice Department claims that the plaintiffs are entitled to have their cases heard.

“Technically, the Obama lawyers have not abandoned the argument for broad presidential power, just implied that such authority is unnecessary to get them what they want.”

Harvard Law professor Noah Feldman.

In one case, Rasul v. Rumsfeld, currently pending at the United States Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit, four British citizens who were abducted in Afghanistan and sent to Guantanamo Bay claim they were imprisoned in cages, brutally beaten, shackled in painful stress positions, forced to shave their beards and watch their Korans desecrated. They were finally released in 2004 without charge.

“They have sued former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other senior Pentagon officials for their treatment,” reports The Washington Independent.

Some legal experts believe the court should stay away from judging policymaking, whether the ultimate policies applied turned out to be legal or not. “If we’re talking about holding a particular individual liable, we’re talking about drawing a straight line between opinions given and acts done,” said Daniel Richman, a professor at Columbia University law school.

“At the end of the day people who really were hurt by the government in ways that are legally offensive ought to have some sort of forum to get compensation or vindication,” he adds.

However, what seems to be most disappointing to Obama supporters is that he is toeing the Bush administration line on the matter, according to Harvard Law professor Noah Feldman for The New York Times. Feldman explains that while the Bush administration emphasized the President’s rights in overriding American and international law “to defend the country,” the Obama administration remains silent.

“Technically, the Obama lawyers have not abandoned the argument for broad presidential power, just implied that such authority is unnecessary to get them what they want,” says Feldman. He further points out that traditionally the laws of war were designed and established for struggles occurring between two states, which was not true of the detainees accused of terrorism.

The concept of the unlawful enemy combatant is deeply rooted in international law and custom, including the Geneva Conventions. It refers to those who violate the laws of war by killing civilians or fighting out of

uniform, and thus are not entitled to prisoner-of-war status.

According to Feldman, the Obama administration intends to expand presidential power to detain suspects “beyond the strict language used by Congress when it gave President Bush authority to carry out his war on terrorism.”

In place of the “enemy combatant” definition, the Obama administration now claims the right to detain anyone who “substantially supported” terrorists, Feldman adds. But the words “substantial support” do not come from international law any more than Bush’s “enemy combatant” did.

President Obama is stuck with the detainees Mr. Bush left him, and some may pose real danger. Faced with this conundrum, and pressed for answers by judges who are rightfully impatient, the administration is hurrying to reframe existing powers in new legal doctrines, insists Feldman.

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