

# IN MIDDLE EAST SIGHT

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*Change is in the air and the old rules no longer apply.*

*—Jon B. Alterman*

# Focus on the New Media

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# SHRINKING THE WORLD AND CHANGING THE RULES

by Jon B. Alterman

The Arab newspaper editor smiled a thin smile. "The censors are losing heart," he said to me simply. After a career in Arab journalism that began in the Middle East and then moved to London in the 1970s, the editor was seeing the old rules of his trade give way to new realities.

Over the last 20 years, and especially over the last decade, technology has introduced tremendous changes in the way Arabs receive information. Previously, information was largely the province of the state. Information ministries disseminated some information and controlled other information. While some countries had an indepen-

dently-owned press, only in Lebanon was there considerable freedom of expression. As Lebanon descended into civil war in the mid-1970s, the Lebanese beacon burned less brightly.

## Challenging the State

Technological developments have facilitated communication tremendously, and while completely free expression remains some way off in many countries, states' hold on the information their citizens receive is significantly diminished. Increases in telephone availability and the proliferation of fax machines in the 1980s were important

in this regard. The rise of truly international Arab newspapers, edited in London and printed simultaneously around the world, was important as well. More recently, Arab satellite television has broken numerous taboos, and its ascendancy (at the expense of state-run domestic television networks) is unmistakable. Further down the road, the Internet or some successor information technology will make communication

cheaper, faster, more copious, and ever more widely available.

Some argue that there is little new in all of this. The BBC's Arabic Service has a long tradition in the region, a reputation for accuracy, and an immunity to Arab government censorship. Skeptics say that authoritative information has always been available to whomever wants it. If people are misinformed, it is because they do not want better information than they have, not that they cannot get it. In addition, Gamal Abdel Nasser's Voice of the Arabs radio broadcasts in the 1960s presented listeners all over the region with alternative viewpoints.

So what is new with the new media? In fact, a great deal.

For one thing, the new media in the Arab world have vastly expanded the amount of information that is available outside the purview of government censorship. Fax machines allow the simultaneous dissemination of printed information to hundreds if not thousands of locations over ordinary telephone lines. Whereas printed booklets can be impounded and printing presses seized, fax machines are inexpensive, produce little incriminating evidence, and the faxes themselves can even be sent from overseas. Fax transmissions can be monitored, but it is relatively easy and inexpensive to connect a fax machine to a new phone line, allowing confidentiality of communications.

Even more important than faxes to the dramatic increase in information

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As a result of the new media, Arab governments are now forced to respond to public opinion, as well as try to shape it.

available to Arabs in the last five years has been the burgeoning popularity of satellite television. As the size and cost of satellite dishes plummet, more and more are sprouting up around the Middle East. Some two-thirds of the residents of the Gulf countries have access to satellite television, and while the numbers decline to something like 20 percent in Jordan and Lebanon and 10 percent in Syria and Egypt, satellite television's attraction to regional elites is unmistakable.

The satellite television broadcasts differ significantly from the domestic programming that they displace. For one thing, many of the regional broadcast companies—for example, the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC), Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), and the Arab News Network (ANN)—are owned by private individuals, and their broadcasts do not directly reflect the interests of any individual state. While some governments, particularly that of Saudi Arabia, retain informal influence over the shape of news coverage on many channels, the overall effect has been a dramatic increase in the variety of programming available to Arab viewers.

The biggest phenomenon in regional broadcasting is the Qatari channel Al Jazeera, which has made a conscious effort to present a wide variety of viewpoints that extend beyond the views of any individual government or group of governments. What Al Jazeera and the other satellite channels represent is a serious quest for an audience by Arab broadcasters after decades in which governments' information monopolies *guaranteed* them an audience. Their programming reflects not so much what a government wants viewers to know as what the viewers want to see on television. With some channels, this has meant a tip toward the sexually salacious (one joke has it that LBC's true name is the Arabic word "ilbisi", the command for a female to get dressed), and on others toward the politically salacious. From the viewers' perspective, the important thing is that choice has increased exponentially, not only in the number of outlets but also in the variety of views expressed on those outlets.

From the point of view of the govern-

ments of the region, the satellites pose a new kind of challenge. The Arab states are of relatively recent vintage. Indeed, Egypt was probably the only country with an established national identity before Britain and France carved up the Middle East after World War I. As the new states which emerged in the post-World War II period have asserted themselves and created national identities, they have used information outlets to help advance their efforts. In country after country, the media helped create a sense of national identity; at the same time, censorship (or more benignly, the difficulty of disseminating information across national borders) played a similar role fostering the development of those identities.

Now, however, information sweeps across borders relatively unimpeded. National media structures must compete with regional media structures that address regional audiences. While one regime may seek to use its national media to build support for government policies, the regional media might concurrently broadcast a contradictory message. Suddenly, governments must justify their policies rather than assert them. For the public, the explosion of contradictory information requires new skills to sort through the muddle and decide where one's sympathies lie.

### **Fostering Regional Identity**

In addition, a large group of Arabs is for the first time being exposed to the same information, in the same language (dialect differences aside), at the same time. This cannot but help build some sense of common identity. While



Hussein Shehadeh

**The rise of international Arab newspapers has weakened the state's control of the press.**

the result may not lead to Arab states sharing the same kinds of deep ties that mark the relationship between the United States and Canada, something akin to the ties between America and Britain might not be far off.

Technology has played a significant role, as well, in facilitating the exchange of information between Arabs living abroad and those in the Arab world. On the one hand, Arabs abroad can monitor events in the Middle East with unprecedented ease. International Arabic newspapers are available in major European and North American cities, and more than 30 of them can be read daily over the Internet. Arabs can also watch satellite television broadcasts in Europe and, increasingly, in the United States. Finally, the Internet is a huge resource for Arabs to plug into news and culture from the Middle East, either by passively reading news and information or by actively participating in any of the numerous discussion groups on topics of interest to Arabs.

Equally important, Arabs abroad can contribute to debates in the region. All of the major international Arabic pub-

lications are produced in the West (mainly in London) by expatriate Arabs, and many of the satellite television stations are headquartered there, too. The result is a huge opportunity for expatriate Arabs to participate in shaping Arab public opinion by writing for newspapers and magazines and appearing on television. Internet chat groups and discussion boards, participation in which is independent of the location of the participants, offer still more opportunities, albeit on a smaller scale, for expatriate Arabs to be involved in regional debates. In these capacities, Arabs expose other Arabs to still more information not readily available in the region and further erode the bounds of censorship.

### New Rules

The changes described above hold out the prospect of rather different Arab politics than we have seen in the last several decades. Long accustomed to molding public opinion through the restriction of information, Arab governments are now forced to respond with different tools. The point was driven home last spring when a BBC-produced documentary on the Arab-Israeli conflict showing on MBC charged that King Hussein had tipped off the Israelis to the coming of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Rather than censor the broadcast, which they could not do, the Royal Palace had to issue a public denial of the accusation. For some Jordanians, it was a clear sign that the rules had changed.

The result for many governments is a need to be more cognizant of public opinion both within their borders and in the region as a whole. While public opinion still does not dictate government policy in Arab countries, governments have had to grow more supple than before, seeking to shape public opinion but also to respond when that opinion is out of step with governmental action.

None of this is necessarily to suggest that we are on the brink of a new democratic dawn in the Arab world. Television has some educational role, but it is primarily an entertainment medium. It lends itself to spectacle more than analysis, and if American television coverage is any guide, televi-

sion tends to reduce politics to entertainment rather than make entertainment political. The Internet has also proven to be something of a mixed bag for highbrow debate. Sexually explicit sites continue to draw a huge audience, and the Internet greatly facilitates communications between isolated extremists who can experience a new sense of community through the new medium.

Rather than leading to democratization *per sé*, the technological changes now underway seem likely to lead to a restructuring of power relationships in the Arab world. With a decreasing ability to control information, states will have to share power more and more, both domestically and regionally. Some states are likely to resist such power-sharing, and in the intermediate term this may lead to localized instability. Whether forms of government will change is an open question, but from a purely analytical point of view current forms appear adequate to deal with the challenges of the coming years as long as the governments play the hands they have with some degree of skill.

### Who Pays?

The changes described will be shaped by two factors. The first is how the increased flow of information will be paid for. The traditional American model of television, for example, is that viewers watch programming for free in exchange for also watching commercials. Cable television (and, more recently, satellite television) has changed this arrangement in the last two decades, charging customers a monthly fee for access and offering premium channels in exchange for additional fees. The American system requires a fair amount of money in the system—among networks, among advertisers (whose spending makes much of the original programming possible), and among viewers (who buy advertised products, and are often willing to pay monthly subscription fees that can exceed \$600 per year).

In the Arab world, the viewers are often the missing part of this equation. Most Arabs live not in the relatively affluent Gulf, but in middle-income countries like Egypt and Syria, and relatively few spend enough to represent a

highly attractive market for advertisers.

In addition, marketing is not very advanced in the Arab world, which makes identifying and targeting consumers a precarious business. Few if any of the regional television stations have a good sense for the size of their regional audience, let alone its breakdown into marketing subgroups, making it harder for them to charge advertisers for reaching that audience.

In the absence of a developed marketing infrastructure, stations have turned to governments—or individuals closely allied with governments—to cover their losses. In the longer term, a continued reliance on governments will tend to slow (but not prevent) the media's role as an agent of change in the region.

The other factor which may inhibit the media's role as an agent of change is if governments successfully inject themselves into the delivery of the new media. In several countries—Qatar, Egypt and soon, we are promised, Saudi Arabia—the government rebroadcasts satellite programming over a so-called “wireless cable” system. The advantage to consumers is a wide range of choices at low cost, and the advantage to governments is that they maintain a role between the broadcast and the viewer. While such systems have not yet become widespread in the region, they offer a potential avenue for governments concerned about the effects of satellite television to re-exert control.

It is a fear of losing control that appears to be guiding the actions of many regional governments. Censorship of print information has increased in the last two years, and confrontations between the government and the press have been especially vocal in Jordan and Egypt. Contentiousness over print censorship, however, is likely to be short-lived. Amidst the flood of new information reaching the Arab public every day, governments are trying their best to reassert control over public discourse. In so doing, they are like generals fighting the last war. The information ministries across the region appear to have lost sight of the fact that fewer and fewer Arabs are reading in Arabic, and more and more are pointing their satellite dishes at the skies. Change is in the air, and the old rules no longer apply. ■