problems, or development issues. Although the wire services were major players in the early days of the NWICO debate, they now completely ignore the debate and concerns raised by either peripheral nations or academic critics from core nations. Their philosophy and outlook is straightforward: basically, they do what they do because it works and is profitable. They are promoting their own lifestyle and outlook in other nations, particularly those in semiperipheral and peripheral regions, so that these areas can become future customers for their expanding range of services, which are quickly morphing into Internet e-journalism product lines. By default they are leaving to the emerging blogging world on the Internet the coverage of many stories which the wire services now consider too trivial or controversial. (For more on the blogging phenomenon see Chapter 6.)

Notes

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7. Jon Swan, "I Was a 'Polisher' in a Chinese News Factory," *Columbia Journalism Review* (March/April 1996), 34.
8. Much of IPS's coverage focuses on major United Nations conferences dealing with global topics. An examination of amount and kind of coverage provided by IPS, AP, and Reuters is found in C. Anthony Giffard, "The Beijing Conference on Women as Seen by Three International News Agencies," *Gazette* 61 (July 1999), 327–41. American newspapers do not use IPS stories.
9. http://www.ipsnews.net/about-us/, accessed August 29, 2013.

13

Arab Media and the Al Jazeera Effect

Lawrence Pintak

Introduction

There could have been no Arab Spring without the Arab media revolution. The long-simmering resentments that drove citizens into the streets in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere might have ultimately forced change, but the rapidity with which the uprisings spread was the result of a digital one-two punch that took the seeds planted in social media and spread them at lightning speed through satellite television.

Call it the Al Jazeera effect. The launch of the region's first all-news satellite channel in 1996 shook the very foundations of Arab journalism. Since the 1950s, Arab media had largely served as a mouthpiece for the region's regimes. All broadcasting outlets and most newspapers were owned by Arab governments, tame political parties, or regime friends. The term "television journalism" was an oxymoron. Investigative journalism was unknown.

Then the young emir of Qatar, who had recently deposed his father in a bloodless coup, decided to invest $140 million in a new channel with a mandate to freely report the news. The launch of Al Jazeera changed everything. Suddenly, television shows were discussing issues that ordinary people had only talked about behind closed doors. Political dissidents, militant activists, and, most shocking in a region where Israel's name was an epithet, even Israeli officials were being interviewed on television.

It was an inspiration to journalists laboring under the old model of media as government mouthpiece. Within a decade, independent or semi-independent newspapers, magazines, and television channels could be found from Morocco to Yemen – and everywhere Arab journalists were pushing the envelope of censorship and control. With the Arab Spring, that envelope began to burst.

Global Communication: Theories, Stakeholders, and Trends, Fourth Edition. Thomas L. McPhail.

History of Arab Media

The Arab media was born out of the chaos following the defeat of the Central Powers in World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This nascent Arab media fostered a shared sense of "Arabness" in the face of the now defeated Ottoman Turks and helped drive the rising political concept of Arab nationalism. Such politicization would remain the hallmark of Arab journalism. In his benchmark study, William Rugh classified the Arab media according to a series of typologies based on the prevailing journalistic ethos in each group of countries.[1] There were clear divisions between these numerous styles of media, but each reflected a level of politicization that, to varying degrees, remains today.

Lebanon was always the Tower of Babel of the Arab world's media. With the outbreak of civil war in the early 1970s, Beirut's streets became the battleground of the Middle East. A shifting array of militias acted as surrogates for the region's rival governments: pro-Iraqi militias fought pro-Syrian militias; Saudi-backed militias battled Libyan-funded militias; Nasserites fought Baathists; Christians clashed with Muslims; Sunnis struggled against Shiites. That chaos was reflected in the media. A cacophony of newspapers and radio stations represented the spectrum of the country's – and the region's – political ideologies. But even in the relative freedom of Beirut, there were limits. Control came not in the form of government sanctions, but in a bullet or remote-controlled bomb. One of the leading papers, Saudi-backed *Al Hayat*, was eventually forced to abandon Lebanon for London. The British capital would emerge as the Arab world's de facto media headquarter as *Al Hayat* was joined by another Saudi-funded paper, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, the Palestinian paper *Al Quds al Arabi*, and a variety of others. These would come to be known as the "pan-Arab media," produced outside the region but distributed across the Arab world.

While the shift of the pan-Arab press to London brought a modicum of freedom to these largely Saudi-controlled publications, television news remained firmly in the grip of Arab regimes. All television stations and, with only a few exceptions, all radio stations were owned by governments. Inevitably, newscasts opened with the head of state and consisted largely of "protocol news," a mind-numbing series (almost exclusively) of men shaking hands, cutting ribbons, and drinking tea. For the most part, real news was nowhere to be found. For international coverage – even events in the country next door – these government channels relied largely on Western video news agencies based in the United Kingdom or the United States.

The seeds of modern Arab television news were planted during the 1990–1 Gulf War. If you happened to live in Saudi Arabia in the days after Saddam Hussein ordered Iraqi forces to invade Kuwait, it is likely that you were blissfully ignorant of the fact that war had broken out on your doorstep. For more than 48 hours after the invasion, the Saudi media remained silent on the conflict as the panicked House of Saud scrambled to decide how to respond. It was the equivalent of the French being unaware that Spain had invaded Italy. But not every Saudi was oblivious. Satellite dishes, though still illegal in most Arab countries, had already begun sprouting on rooftops across the region. And while there were no Arab satellite channels, there were plenty being beamed in from the West – among them CNN and the BBC, both broadcasting news in English 24 hours a day. For those with dishes, all eyes turned to these Western broadcasters.

Arab governments quickly realized that they were losing their stranglehold on information. Egypt immediately began broadcasting the output of its state-run TV channel via satellite; but it was just the same old turgid government newscast, devoid of any reporting from the war zone, received via satellite dish instead of an antenna. No one was fooled. Once the conflict was over and Saddam Hussein had been neutralized, the House of Saud set about dealing with this other threat to their rule – the loss of their monopoly on

information. In London they set up the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC), a pan-Arab satellite channel that combined entertainment with newscasts that more closely resembled those produced in the West. MBC was owned by members of the royal family rather than the government itself, so its reporters were freer than their colleagues at other Arab media outlets, but it still operated under clear strictures. MBC would eventually evolve into the MBC Group, the largest broadcast organization in the region, with a constellation of entertainment, music, sports and news channels based in Dubai. But that would come later, after the launch of Al Jazeera, the channel that changed the way Arabs saw the world and their own region.

Al Jazeera

Long before Al Jazeera became the channel the Bush administration loved to hate, it had earned the wrath of Arab officials from Morocco to Yemen. Appearing on Al Jazeera were political dissidents, Islamic militants, and all the other voices Arab regimes thought they had silenced. As a result, Al Jazeera's reporters were banned at various times from 17 of the 22 member countries of the Arab League.

The Saudis were particularly incensed by this upstart channel. Al Jazeera not only impinged on their near-monopoly of pan-Arab media, but the station also had the temerity to give voice to those who would question the House of Saud. As one Saudi newspaper wrote:

> The poisonous ideas that are conveyed via the Western satellite channels are easy to handle because the viewer knows the thought they are trying to convey in advance. However, when this poisonous thought is conveyed via an Arab satellite channel, it becomes all the more dangerous because it is concealing itself behind our culture.[2]

Ironically, given later accusations of bias and unprofessionalism, Al Jazeera's original news team were almost all veterans of the BBC's Arabic television service, which had withdrawn from an ill-fated joint venture with Saudi-owned Orbit TV when it became clear that the BBC and the Saudi royal family – not surprisingly – had different ideas about what constituted journalism. The channel's staff saw themselves as agents of democratic change in a region trapped in the grip of autocracies.

"Using the Western style, we have broken many taboos," Ibrahim M. Helal, then Al Jazeera's chief editor, told *New York Times*, "of course, we upset most other Arab countries."[3] The staff of Al Jazeera, and many outside the newsroom, saw that as a very good thing. One official in the Clinton White House called the channel a "beacon of light,"[4] and Israeli cabinet minister Gideon Ezra told the *Jerusalem Post*: "I wish all Arab media were like Al Jazeera."[5]

Then came 9/11 and Al Jazeera shifted its focus from the oppression of Arab regimes to the so-called "war on terror" and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Just days after the attacks of September 11, Al Jazeera aired the first of many videotaped pronouncements from Osama bin Laden. Without Al Jazeera, the al-Qaeda leader might never have achieved the mythic status he would come to enjoy. As the fireside radio chat was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "bully pulpit" – the means through which he reached the American people – during World War II, so too did the Qatar-based satellite channel serve as bin Laden's pipeline to the Arab and Muslim people as he launched his military and propaganda assault on the United States.

Al Jazeera's top editors argued that any Western news organization with exclusive access to a major news figure would have done exactly the same thing; and, in fact, the four major American networks all ran the early bin Laden tapes until the White House appealed to their patriotism and the practice was halted. But it wasn't just the channel's relationship with bin Laden that rankled the Bush administration. Its reporters were inside Kabul showing the impact on civilians of the American bombardment of the Afghan capital; they were in Baghdad broadcasting live from the receiving end of the American "shock and awe" assault; and, later, they were inside Fallujah during the US siege of that Iraqi rebel stronghold. Al Jazeera's audience saw a grim and bloody side of these conflicts that was largely absent from American television screens, and the images were presented by reporters whose commentary reflected the general Arab sense of outrage.

"Arabic TV does not do our country justice," President Bush complained in early 2006, "they put out some kind – sometimes put out propaganda that just is – just isn't right, it isn't fair, and it doesn't give people the impression of what we're about."[6] What, to many Western eyes, was biased and sensational coverage was, to many Arab journalists, the natural response to events playing out in their front yard, not dissimilar from the flag-waving of the American media after 9/11.

"We belong to this Arab nation and we are there to cover from our own perspective," said Al Jazeera's chief editor, Ahmed Sheikh, "sometimes it may prove to be very difficult to be impartial. You find yourself carried away with your sentiments."[7] It was precisely that sensibility which so resonated with Arab viewers after decades of seeing their own region through the prism of a Western TV camera lens. "The genius of Arab Satellite TV is that it [has] captured a deep-seated common existential pain called Arab sensibility and turned it into a picture narrative that speaks to something very deep in the Arab psyche," according to Abderrahim Foukara, Al Jazeera's Washington, DC bureau chief.

Media Wars

The emir of Qatar did not launch Al Jazeera to salve the Arab psyche or because he wanted a membership card at the local press club. He did it for the same reason that he invited the US military to move its Gulf Central Command to Qatar – to make himself a player in the region. Though one of the world's richest countries, thanks to oil and natural gas, Qatar was a tiny peninsula – hence Al Jazeera's name, which translates as "The Peninsula" – jutting out from Saudi Arabia. Geographically and politically it was hidden in the shadow of its much more powerful neighbor. Until Al Jazeera, pan-Arab media had been dominated by the Saudis. Al Jazeera gave the emir the power to drive public opinion in directions the Saudis did not necessarily like. That is why, early on, Saudi Arabia banned Al Jazeera journalists from operating within its borders and unofficially barred its advertising agencies, which dominated the Gulf, from buying commercials on Al Jazeera. Then, on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq, the Saudis launched their own all-news satellite channel, Al Arabiya. Those two channels have, ever since, been at the heart of the media wars that occasionally wrack the region.

The 2008–9 Israeli assault on Gaza was one example. The Arab world split into two camps, with Qatar, Syria, and several Gulf states firmly backing Hamas, while Saudi Arabia and Egypt sought to limit the militant group's political gains at the expense of the more secular Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas. Al Jazeera's coverage was vivid and emotional, focusing on close-ups of dead and wounded children. Al Arabiya took a somewhat more cautious approach, eschewing the most gruesome footage and refusing to label the Palestinian dead as "martyrs." "Our coverage was closer to the people," Al Jazeera's Ahmed Sheikh told

this writer as a ceasefire was put in place. Nabil Khatib, chief editor at Al Arabiya, shot back: Al Jazeera, he said, was "satisfying the mob" and leading "a campaign for Hamas."

The degree to which the two channels reflected the politics of their respective patrons underlined the fact that the end of overt government ownership of television in the region did not usher in a period of unbridled media independence. Far from it. The rise of non-government media in the Arab world has been accompanied by the rise of a corporate feudalism, in which members of royal families, would-be politicos, and cronies of national leaders have come to dominate the media landscape. The Dubai-based MBC Group was emblematic of this trend. Controlled by a son-in-law of the late King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, it owned the top-rated satellite entertainment channels and Al Arabiya, along with a major stake in another regional giant, the Lebanon-based LBC channel, as well as the region's largest advertising agency and television ratings agency. Pan-Arab channels based in Egypt were largely in the hands of business interests close to Hosni Mubarak; Muammar Gaddafi's son had the monopoly on TV in Libya; and so the pattern continued across the region.

"I'm competing against countries, not companies!" Mohammed Alayyan, publisher and chairman of the independent newspaper *Alghad* and CEO of ATV in Jordan, complained.[8] It was all a natural extension of a similar system of control in the pan-Arab print media. "*Al Hayat* is not a commercial project," the paper's then number two, Abdulwahab Badrakhan explained in 2005, "it is in the first place a political project, like *Asharq Al Awsat*. *Asharq Al Awsat* and *Al Hayat* never [make] money, and you can understand that because you can consider us as public relations."

Another manifestation of that competition–control model could be found in the so-called "media cities" that dotted the region. The first, and most successful, was created in Dubai, a city-state in the United Arab Emirates. Essentially a media duty-free zone, it promised both economic incentives and a hands-off political approach. That mix attracted regional channels like the MBC Group and its Al Arabiya channel, Western news organizations, such as Reuters, and broadcasters from various developing world countries where domestic strictures were constraining. Up the road, Abu Dhabi set up twofour54, a media city named for its geographic coordinates, which attracted, among others, a major regional CNN center. Egypt created a similar project where many of its home-grown satellite channels were based; and copy-cat centers sprouted up even in places like Syria, where media was tightly controlled. But the promise of freedom soon proved hollow.

Two private Pakistani channels based in Dubai Media City, GEO TV and Ary One, discovered the hollowness when Pakistan declared martial law in 2007; after the channels refused a demand from the Musharraf government to sign a new media "code of conduct," Emirati authorities gave them two hours to stop broadcasting. Officials left little doubt that the principles of press freedom on which Media City was supposedly based had taken a back seat to Emirati foreign policy. "As an entity within the UAE, Dubai Media City would also observe the broadcast principals of the country's foreign policy and prevent the telecast of news and material that would undermine those principles," said Amina Al Rustamani, executive director of Dubai Media City.[9]

Media and Change in the Arab World

Media remained a tool of power, whether political, economic, or religious. That was readily apparent as the ideological – and psychological – battles of the Arab uprising played out both on the streets and on the airwaves. These were as much media wars as physical battles. Through media, governments – and the families behind them – were seeking to control and

manipulate the pace of change. The contrasting coverage of the Syrian and Bahraini uprisings epitomized that. Coverage of the Syrian revolt on Qatari-owned Al Jazeera and Saudi-owned Al Arabiya was aggressively anti-regime, no surprise given that both governments were arming and financing the forces seeking to oust President Bashar Assad. But when the Shiite majority revolted against the Sunni Muslim monarchy in the Gulf state of Bahrain, a stone's throw from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, those same channels took a kid-glove approach, even as their governments sent in troops to put down the uprising.

Al Jazeera may have set the tone for an aggressive new style of journalism in the Arab world, but at the end of the day it was still owned by a government. Its "red lines" – the limits beyond which reporters venture at their own peril – included stories that might negatively impact on Qatari foreign policy. Across the region, "media freedom" remained a relative term. Every news organization worked within "red lines" dictated by a variety of factors including the country in which the news organization was located, ownership, and the politics of the outlet. "As long as you don't write about the king, the military, religion or sex you can cover anything you want," a Jordanian journalist said of reporting in that kingdom.[10]

But guessing exactly what was off limits was often the biggest challenge. "Even sunny weather can be censored if it is a bad news for agriculture. Taboo topics are updated by the government on a daily basis," explained Sihem Bensedrine, the editor of the online magazine *Kalima*, a frequent target of Tunisian government repression. "I do not think the political system is developed enough to encompass the truth," said another reporter.[11]

Local Journalism

The newscasts of the pan-Arab satellite news channels were dominated by the big stories of the day: Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, and the simmering confrontation between the Sunni Muslim Arab states and Shiite Iran. This was not unexpected. This was big power politics playing out on the Arab stage. What was missing was the street-level view of individual countries, cities, and villages. In the obsession with the dramatic issues of life and death on a grand scale, the questions of who was fixing the roads or the state of the schools were lost.

"There is a huge amount of information that is missing because the local stations will not provide it to the viewer and we do not provide it to the viewer because it is local," Nabil Khatib, news chief at pan-Arab Al Arabiya explained, "things that would make the Arabs better citizens by knowing more about their own realities they are not getting it from anywhere. So there is a huge portion of important data that is missing from their consciousness and this is negatively affecting any democratization process."

Nor were they getting that from the state-run broadcasters. "On the local level we ignore the local aspects of interest to the people, such as raising children and educating them and leave these national issues for larger issues such as Iraq and Palestine," Abd el-Latif el-Menawy, then head of news at Egypt TV, confirmed. "This is one way that some of the state-owned channels use to escape, because of their inability to tackle local topics. Most of [my] colleagues working in the local media lack the concept of local news."

The reason those channels wanted to "escape" such stories was that these were the areas that caused trouble. For the most part, Arab governments were happy to have their broadcasters fulminating about Israel or focusing on American military actions in Iraq, but they quickly became uncomfortable if the "red lines" around local politics, human rights, or even the domestic economy were crossed. And while the pan-Arab broadcasters occasionally touched on these stories, it was usually only when they became of major regional interest,

as in the case of labor unrest in Egypt or pre-election clashes in Bahrain. Otherwise, they were, by definition, *local* stories of little interest to the satellite channels' broad regional audiences. In the West, the national networks, like CBS in the United States or the BBC in Britain, focus on the national and international stories while their local affiliates in places like Binghamton or Birmingham report on the potholes and school board meetings. In the Arab world, there was no equivalent.

That would begin to change with the Arab Spring. During Egypt's 18-day revolution, Cairo-based satellite channels ignored previous restrictions that had prevented them from producing news and 24/7 coverage of the uprising. Once Mubarak was overthrown and the focus of the regional satellite channels shifted to other revolts, the local stations became a critical source of information about the gritty day-to-day developments for Egyptians trying to understand this new political landscape.

Change Agents

That Arab journalists helped drive the Arab revolts was inevitable. In the decade after the launch of Al Jazeera, the very ethos of Arab journalism was transformed. Even among editors on government-controlled newspapers, there was now a desire to push the envelope. A survey of journalists in 13 Arab countries found that 75 percent of them said the prime mission of Arab journalism was to drive political and social change.[12] The same survey found that, despite accusations of anti-American bias, 62 percent of Arab journalists had a positive view of the American people, though, not surprisingly, their attitude toward the Bush administration's Middle East policy was almost unanimously negative. Half the journalists surveyed described their political philosophy as "democrat," and about one-third said reform must be "radical," and a majority of the journalists saw their own governments as posing as great a threat to the region as US policy.

In the face of such sentiments in the newsroom, governments continued to fight a rearguard action against these journalistic insurgents. Those efforts came in the form of laws and regulations, such as the much criticized 2008 Arab League Satellite Media Charter, a retrogressive Big Brotheresque document that reaffirmed the right of governments to pull the plug on satellite broadcasters for a host of vague reasons that included perceived insults to Arab leaders. More chillingly, the backlash against the media also included widespread intimidation, assaults, and jailing of journalists across the region, and, in some cases, their murder. Arab countries regularly landed at the bottom of the Freedom House list of countries where media is free,[13] and their leaders were just as regularly among those named "predators of press freedom" by Reporters Sans Frontières.[14] As Salaheddine El Hafez, secretary general of the Arab Journalists' Association, told a press freedom conference in late 2006. "The margins of freedom for the Arab press are severely limited and we have evidence of that in our daily lives."[15]

Arab governments kept talking about media liberalization but in most parts of the region so-called press "reform" laws failed to strip away regulations under which journalists could be jailed for the slightest perceived transgression – and often *increased* the level of control. Truth was no defense. Many journalists found themselves jailed for libel as the result of stories that were factually correct.

In Egypt, where media regulations adopted in 1995 were referred to by journalists as the "Press Assassination Law," the 2005 election brought a slight loosening of the reins on media, but once the last vote was tallied scores of journalists – including women – were attacked, beaten, threatened, or jailed. "Egyptian journalism," said Osama al-Ghazli Harb,

chief editor of *Al Siyasah Al Dawliyah*, "is developing on a tortured journey owing to political manipulation." In Iraq, the deadliest place in the world for reporters and home to scores of newly created media outlets, journalists were being killed if they were perceived as being too close to the government, too close to the resistance, or too close to particular political parties. "Sometimes they target journalists just to scare journalists in general," according to Al Arabiya executive editor Nabil Khatib. Militant groups ran their own pseudo news agencies and one motive for the attacks was to make it impossible for other news organizations to operate. "They are supplying the media [with information and footage] and they pressure you in a way to impose their agenda on you," Khatib explained. "Of course we refuse, because we do not want to be used by any party whoever it is – so we pay the price." The tactics were effective. By the spring of 2007, Al Arabiya had lost 11 staffers to violence in Iraq, several in targeted assassinations, and was left relying largely on local freelancers. "You feel that you are covering the war as if through glass," Khatib lamented.

Even in Al Jazeera's home country of Qatar, while the emir took steps like creating a center to defend media freedom around the globe, his advisory council was demanding harsh penalties for journalists who criticized the government. One top Egyptian cleric demanded that journalists who insulted the government be lashed with a whip. Others, often shadowy figures working for governments or extremist groups, went even further. One Tunisian journalist had his fingers cut off before being murdered; female journalists in Egypt were sexually assaulted by police agents and warned there was more to come if they did not avoid certain stories; in countries from Yemen to North Africa other women journalists found themselves the targets of government-sponsored sexual smear campaigns; and in Lebanon, journalists were afraid to turn the ignition key of their cars after a string of bombings left two of the country's best-known journalists dead and a talk show host maimed.

It wasn't only governments that journalists feared. Religious groups sought to frog-march journalists according to their own agendas, whether militant jihadists in places like Iraq, Yemen, and Algeria, or more traditional religious institutions. In Saudi Arabia, a religious court ordered journalist Mansour Nogaidan of the daily *Alriyadh*, to receive 75 lashes for calling for freedom of speech and criticizing Wahabism, Saudi Arabia's strict interpretation of Islam.

"I am not exaggerating when I say the Arab press is witnessing one of the worst periods of its life," Salaheddine El Hafez, vice editor-in-chief of Egypt's *Al Ahram* newspaper and secretary general of the Arab Journalists Association, told a press freedom conference in late 2006. "The margins of freedom for the Arab press are severely limited and we have evidence of that in our daily lives."[16]

Bloggers, Citizen Journalism, and New Media Activism

The lack of media freedom in many Arab countries meant that bloggers took on an importance that rivaled that of their colleagues in the West. By one count in 2009, there were close to 40,000 active Arab blogs. The vast majority of those were personal diaries, but a sizable proportion provided politically driven reportage on local events within their own countries. Egyptian bloggers, who constituted about one-third of the Arab blogosphere, have been at the forefront of this Arab form of "citizen journalism." They

broke numerous stories that were off limits to the mainstream Egyptian media, most famously by posting online videos of Egyptian police torturing ordinary citizens. Their influence stemmed not from the number of people who viewed their blogs, in part because Internet penetration remained low in Egypt and many parts of the Arab world, but in the ripple effect produced when mainstream reporters picked up and republished their stories. Bloggers represented the cross-section of Arab politics. But they were only one manifestation of new media in the Arab world. "Facebook Girl," a young Egyptian political activist, rose to prominence when she started a group on the social networking site aimed at supporting striking workers at a time when Egypt was also suffering from a shortage of bread. The group became the focal point for a national strike and inspired other groups around the region.

While the leaders of the Facebook group were overt activists, the line between bloggers and journalists was much more blurred. Some of the bloggers were journalists seeking an outlet for stories they could not publish in mainstream media. A small but influential group of Egyptian bloggers who gained notoriety from around the time of the 2005 Egyptian presidential elections represented a hybrid of frustrated young activists who sometimes acted as journalists – breaking stories of official torture, sexual harassment, and other controversial events – but also writing highly opinionated, sometimes libelous, and often obscene essays, insisting all along that they were not journalists. "Yes, I'm biased and I like it this way," blogger Mahmoud Saber told one interviewer.[17] It was these young web-savvy activists who later provided the digital spark that ignited the 2011 uprisings.

Despite fears among US policymakers that online activists were driving anti-American opinion, an exhaustive study by Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society found that "bloggers are far more concerned with domestic political issues than with the United States or its wars in the region. Criticism of domestic political leaders is the most frequent political topic … followed by criticism of terrorism."[18]

The debate over the difference between a blogger and a journalist intersected discussions of the political nature of Arab journalism. The assassinations of journalists in Lebanon, widely assumed to have been the work of operatives controlled by the government of Syria, underscored the overlap between politics and journalism in the Arab world. One of the victims, *An Nahar* publisher Gibran Tueni, was a leader of the anti-Syrian political bloc in the Lebanese parliament, and the other two were outspoken opponents of Syria's military presence in Lebanon.

Many Arab journalists saw no contradiction between political engagement and their role as journalists; they sought to balance their obligations as Arab citizens and their responsibilities as Arab journalists. "You have a very big responsibility [as a journalist]," said Ibrahim Hamidi, a Syrian who was *Al Hayat's* Damascus bureau chief, "but this responsibility has two faces. I do not run after scoops because I know a lot of scoops that may harm the country. I might be not objective, but it is the country that you live in that really matters more than your job. The priority is the safety of your country."

Yet corruption was the norm in many newsrooms. An "envelope culture" prevailed, in which it was accepted practice for cash to change hands for stories. It was a product of the abysmal salaries at all but the top satellite channels. New reporters at Egypt's government-owned newspapers were paid in the $80- to $90-a-month range and the situation was only slightly better at the private papers, while the monthly salary for a newly hired journalist at state-run Egypt television and radio was just $35. The official salary for top editors was often measured in the hundreds, rather than thousands, of dollars. Even in Saudi Arabia, with its high cost of living, the average starting salary for a reporter was about $920 a month. Journalists there jokingly call it "the beggar's job." "You come up short either way," said *Arab*

News executive editor Somayya Jabarti, "low pay and trouble getting serious stories published." One poll found that 40 percent of Arabic-language journalists said they would reprint a press release in return for a gift. "It's the whole structure of the job," Jabarti explained; "if they are well paid and well-trained, they won't need the gifts or envelopes."

Individuals were not alone in being tempted by bribes. According to Abdel Bari Atwan, editor-in-chief of the pan-Arab Palestinian daily *Al Quds Al Arabi*, his paper was regularly offered "subsidies" by governments ranging from conservative monarchies to radical nationalists.

In the survey mentioned above, Arab journalists chose the lack of "professionalism" and "ethics" as the greatest challenges to their industry. "There is no comparison, to be honest, between the press in the West and the press in the Arab world," according to Osman Mirghani, deputy editor-in-chief at the Saudi-owned pan-Arab newspaper *Asharq Al Awsat*. He saw Western journalists as far more professional than his Arab colleagues, adding: "Having said that, the press in the Arab region is developing, is evolving and I think is moving forward."

The predominance of opinion in the Arab media was another issue. Al Jazeera's Code of Ethics stated that its reporters must "distinguish between news material, opinion and analysis to avoid the pitfalls of speculation and propaganda."[19] Yet its airwaves, and the pages of most Arab newspapers, were thick with opinion masquerading as reportage. Such an intermingling was rooted in the history of Arab journalism. Constrained from reporting facts, newspapers served as the mouthpiece of governments, so readers turned to them as reflections of governmental thinking. Former *Al Ahram* editor Mohamed Hassainein Heikel is revered as one of the greatest Arab journalists, even though he doubled as adviser and confidante to the late Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser.

No incident better illustrated the differences between Western and Arab journalism than the controversy over the publication of cartoons regarded by Muslims as insulting to the Prophet Muhammad. Originally published in a Danish newspaper, the cartoons eventually sparked outrage across the Arab world, with riots in Beirut and Damascus, where the Danish embassies were attacked and burned. Many Western journalists immediately defended the paper's right to publish the cartoons on the basis of freedom of speech. But Arab journalists responded that media freedom must be tempered with respect and responsibility. "When I insult your religion or your feelings it is crossing the limits of freedom of expression," Salama Ahmed Salama, Egypt's most respected columnist, said during the crisis. "For many Europeans, such things are not so important, but here religion is a daily food and we cannot just accept this." Elements within the Danish Muslim community, and their counterparts in the Arab world, exploited the crisis for their own political ends, but that did not change the fact that it highlighted the sensitivity Arab journalists brought to such issues. "Freedom of expression is only half of the truth," Rashid Khashana, Tunis correspondent for the pan-Arab daily *Al Hayat*, observed at the height of the debate; "the second part is that we must respect things sacred for Christians, Muslims and Jews."

Restrictions on criticism of figures in power were a constant barrier to Arab journalists, but at the same time, many genuinely subscribed to the view first laid out by pioneering Lebanese publisher Boutros al-Boustani in the late nineteenth century. "In order for newspapers to be beneficial to society," al-Boustani wrote, they must avoid publishing stories that violated "the right principles."[20] To be sure, not everyone agreed. But in the above-mentioned study, 80 percent of Arab journalists surveyed partly or completely agreed with the statement "Journalists must balance the need to inform the public with the responsibility to show respect."[21]

Emerging Models

One example of that "balanced" approach to journalistic responsibility could be found in Abu Dhabi, where some 200 veterans of major US and European newspapers filled the newsroom of the *National*, a flashily designed paper modeled on Singapore's *Straits Times*. Founded by Martin Newland, the former top editor at Britain's *Daily Telegraph*, who later handed over the reins to Hassan Fattah, a former *New York Times* Middle East correspondent, the paper was ultimately owned by the government of Abu Dhabi via the country's $850 billion investment fund.

"We are part of a broader reform initiative," said Fattah, defending the paper's relatively toothless approach to covering the country, "by definition, we will push boundaries and try to make change, but in the Arab world change does come slowly." The truth of that statement was underscored by a new UAE media law implemented not long after the paper was launched, which included heavy fines for carrying "misleading news" that harmed the economy or for insulting members of the government or royal family.

The fact that Arab journalists themselves held a nuanced view of their role emphasizes the danger of generalizing about the state of Arab journalism. On some levels, the situation was dire; the reports from press freedom groups like Reporters Sans Frontières and the Committee to Protect Journalists made for grim reading. Yet barely a month went by without the announcement of another satellite channel being formed or newspaper license being issued. Indeed, at a time when the news industry in the United States and Europe seemed on the brink of collapse, prospects for Arab journalists were bright. While the graduates of Western journalism schools faced the very real prospect of unemployment, Arab news organizations were besieging the few journalism schools in the region with offers to hire their graduates.

In some ways, the balance of power in international media was shifting from the West to the Arab world, with its vast wealth and newly emergent media. A decade after launching Al Jazeera, Qatar created an English-language sister channel, Al Jazeera English, in the hopes of gaining the same kind of influence in the global South that the Arabic channel had given it in the Arab world. It soon emerged as a major player on the global media scene, winning praise from US secretary of state Hillary Clinton and other world leaders for its coverage of the Arab Spring. That success gave birth to an entire family of news channels in places like Turkey, the Balkans, and Indonesia. But penetration of the United States remained elusive as the channel fought the perception that Al Jazeera was a "terrorist" network. Finally, in early 2013 Qatar's deep pockets allowed it to buy a piece of the US market. Its $500 million purchase of Current TV, founded by former vice president Al Gore, cleared the way for the launch of Al Jazeera America, a new US-based channel that competed with the American networks on their own turf.

Conclusion

"Journalism is a part of change," Prince Bandar bin Khaled al Faisal, the owner of Saudi Arabia's *Al Watan* newspaper and grandson of the late King Faisal, said on the sidelines of a 2005 international media conference he had helped fund, "and this conference is an effort to say, 'OK, maybe we should expedite the process a little bit because we really do have a lot to lose.'"

Just how much they had to lose became evident with the 2011 media-driven uprising. In its wake, governments continued to struggle with how to cope with this new media

landscape and, for those still in power, how to avoid losing ultimate control. For some, that meant tightening the noose on journalists; for others, bolstering their own "tame" media owned directly or via proxies; for many governments, it was a combination of both. None were just throwing open their doors. Even Qatar, home of Al Jazeera, tightly controlled its own domestic media, and post-Mubarak Egypt was marked by efforts to impose draconian new press restrictions.

Such contradictions were common; government responses often reflected a lack of understanding of the new rules of the game. That was evident at the height of the Egyptian uprising, when the government-owned Egypt TV broadcast images of a peaceful Cairo even as bloody clashes occurred on the street in front of television headquarters.

Beyond satellite television and newspapers, social media were helping change the rules of the game. The information dam had become a leaking sieve. The "democratization of media" meant even the poorest peasant was likely to have a mobile phone, giving him or her access to a new world of communications. The Syrian uprising offered a case study, as media-savvy opposition activists fed the world a steady stream of footage documenting the carnage, even when "mainstream" reporters were unable to penetrate the country.

For Arab journalists, before and after cascading revolts, it was one step forward, one step back, a half-step forward. They were inspired by the change they were helping to achieve, but daily they were also forced to cope with the realities of reporting in societies built on secrecy and, after the revolts began, fighting a rearguard action.

Ultimately, Arab governments would never be able to completely control the flow of information across their borders. But that didn't mean they would not continue to try, just as Arab journalists would cling to the conviction that, as Yemeni editor Hamzi Bokari put it, "Journalism is a weapon of mass destruction for oppressive governments."

Notes

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