

# Reporting a Revolution: the Changing Arab Media Landscape

Camera-phone videos of Egyptian police [torturing suspects](#) posted on YouTube.com. [Prostitution and masturbation](#) discussed on satellite TV. The Iranian president reaching out to Arabs on his own [blog](#).

The times, as [Bob Dylan](#) sang in another context, are a' changin'. Across the Middle East, new television stations, radio stations and websites are sprouting like incongruous electronic mushrooms in what was once a media desert. Meanwhile newspapers are aggressively probing the red lines that have long contained them.

Still, Arab journalists are jailed, assaulted or even killed on an almost daily basis, as reported in the documents to which we link at right.

Here in Cairo, it is sometimes hard to keep up with it all and so I shudder to think what it's like for researchers around the world. That is precisely why we have created this new online publication.

Actually, it is not, strictly speaking, "new." *Arab Media & Society* is the latest incarnation of the *Journal of Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, which has been the

pre-eminent publication covering satellite broadcasting in the Middle East and broader Islamic world since 1998.

When *TBS Journal* was founded two years after the launch of Al Jazeera, satellite TV was *the* story. Newspapers were moribund. Internet penetration was negligible. Media deregulation was an alien concept.

Now, there are [263 free-to-air](#) (FTA) satellite television stations in the region, according to Arab Advisors Group. That's double the figure as of just two years ago.

The impact of the pan-Arab satellite revolution is today felt at every level of Arab society – and in every form of media. Which is why *Arab Media & Society* is the logical incarnation of *TBS Journal*, covering not just television, but all forms of media and their interaction with society-at-large, from politics and business to culture and religion, as well as the way in which Arab media change resonates in the broader Muslim world.

Arab satellite television is not responsible for creating the internet (Al Gore takes credit for that...). But it has inspired everyone from the young would-be journalists in our classrooms here at the American University in Cairo to the bloggers about whom we write in this first issue, and who are the pioneers of a new form of activist citizen engagement in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Arab satellite television did not invent Arab journalism. But the largely unfettered approach it champions *has* changed how many Arab newspaper journalists view their own role.

And while not a single Arab head of state has been forced from office by satellite television, it has clearly impacted the way Arab leaders deal with their populations and how governments interact.

A [comment](#) written by founding editor S. Abdallah Schleifer in the first issue of *TBS Journal* in 1998 underlines just how far we have come: “There have been recurrent fears that the radical Islamic fundamentalist movement in Lebanon, Hizbullah, would launch a satellite station devoted to undermining the moderate Arab governments.” Not long after, Hizbullah’s Al Manar arrived on the scene. Its *raison d’être* may not be the undermining of Arab regimes, but its coverage of last summer’s Israel-Lebanon conflict galvanized audiences across the Arab world – many of whom switched to Al Manar from Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya – generating widespread support for Shiite Hizbullah among all Arabs, Sunni and Shia alike.

Public opinion forced Saudi Arabia and the Gulf regimes into reversing their policies, shifting from criticism of Hizbullah early in the war to ultimately praising Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah as an Arab hero.

Think about that: Arab governments changing their foreign policy in response to public opinion driven by the media. The public is talking back and the media is listening to them. And vice versa. Nasser must have rolled over in his grave.

Meanwhile, Sunni Arab regimes are using television as a weapon in their battle over who speaks for Islam. Egyptian- and Saudi-controlled satellites have been distributing a channel operated by Iraq's anti-American Sunni insurgency. [Al-Zawraa](#) mixes graphic footage of attacks on U.S. troops with vitriolic verbal assaults on Iran and its perceived Iraqi allies, including Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki, feeding a growing Cold War with Iran and its Shiite allies (after days of relentless jamming from an unknown source, Nilesat finally pulled the plug on Al Zawraa in late February but the channel continued to appear on Saudi-controlled Arabsat).

Al Manar and Al Zawraa offer a vivid reminder that the study of Arab media isn't just an academic exercise. The media is not only the new battlefield of ideas, but it may even be supplanting at least some of the more traditional battlefields.

Witness Beirut in the waning months of 2006. In an earlier era, the assassination of Christian leader Pierre Gemayel would likely have been the spark that ignited a new round of civil war. But instead, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese supporters of the so-called March 14 Movement took to the streets in a televised reprise of the rallies that forced Syria's withdrawal. Then, in answer days later, hundreds of thousands of Hizbullah supporters staged their own mass protests, likewise transmitted live, 24/7

across the region and around the world. For the moment, the power of the camera had trumped the power of the gun.

Not surprisingly then, Lebanon is home to the region's latest all-news offering, a spin-off from Future TV, controlled by the family of the late Rafik Hariri. Unlike other regional news channels, this one is aimed primarily at the domestic market.

Other regional newcomers include the Dubai-based family channel [al-Aan](#), and OTV, a youth-oriented station which will broadcast the first newscast presented in colloquial – in this case Egyptian – Arabic. It will be produced in partnership with *Al Masry Al Youm*, Egypt's leading independent newspaper.

As with so many other Arab media outlets, the messages are mixed. Owner and telecom mogul Naguib Sawiris says the news will take on the “sarcastic” tone of some U.S. cable broadcasts, but he adds that the entertainment programs will avoid the kind of controversial issues that "[gets one into trouble](#).”

And then, of course, there is [Al Jazeera English](#), which has made tiny Qatar a global media player.

Make no mistake, not all of this change – or, perhaps, even much of it – has to do with freedom of speech in the classic sense. Or even about making money, which few – if any – satellite channels actually do.

A desire for political influence is probably the biggest factor driving channel growth. But ego is a close second. “Everybody wants their own channel,” one media executive recently told me, shaking his head over one of the latest entries.

But TV isn’t the only playing field for Arab power brokers. More than 90 private radio stations can now be heard in the Middle East and North Africa. In many cases, “private” is a relative term, with owners carefully vetted, heavy government involvement, and/or rules preventing the channels from broadcasting news.

One of the more innovative examples is Ammannet.net, a pioneering online radio venture founded by Palestinian journalist Daoud Khuttab. It was recently awarded Jordan’s first private radio license. As Khuttab describes in an audio interview in our multi-media section, the station takes a determinedly community-oriented approach.

Meanwhile, aggressive new newspapers, like *Al Gad* in Jordan and Egypt’s *Al Masri Al Youm*, chip away at the boundaries of traditional print journalism.

Media reform is the watchword of the day in capitals like Rabat, Amman and Abu Dhabi. Egypt, which once dominated Arab broadcasting, is drafting a proposal to privatize its bloated media sector (Egypt Radio-Television Union employs some 38,000 people). Other governments are doing the same. Yet many Arab [journalists fear](#) it’s all just show.

Whatever the motives of individuals or governments, the fact remains that media in the Arab world, as elsewhere, is a microcosm of, and catalyst for, society.

The U.S. and other Western governments are betting money – *lots* of money – on the idea that media can make a difference. US AID has poured millions into Arab media reform – \$15 million in Egypt alone. Various individual European governments are backing ventures like Ammanet.net and media watchdog groups, and the European Commission is also getting its wallet ready.

All this is why *Arab Media & Society* was created. The new name is designed to better communicate the journal's writ to the broad audience of policymakers, researchers, journalists and media executives and others in the Arab world and beyond.

We also believe the new web-only format better serves our global audience. As regular readers of *TBS* know, the journal has been published in both print and web versions for the past two years on a semi-annual basis. But in a field that changes daily, stories were sometimes dated before they even left the printer.

With the new incarnation, the journal will shift to a quarterly basis, with additional timely articles posted on a regular basis as events warrant (For those of you still attached to paper, articles are available in PDF format for easy download and printing).

The technology of the web also opens up many new possibilities. Podcasts, video streaming, interactive book reviews; we'll be experimenting with many of these in the months to come.

This is not to say we are creating a blog. Far from it. The journal will contain a mix of thoughtful analysis, in-depth interviews and peer-reviewed articles written by journalists and scholars. Some, like this one, will include links that make it easy to find more depth.

The goal is to provide usable knowledge and valuable perspective. A few articles will be written by authors with an axe to grind, but affiliations will be posted front and center. So, too, we will do our best to provide the other side to articles that consciously reflect particular political viewpoints

The bottom line: A range of ideas, approaches and a broad vista of information that, we hope, will provide an evolving portrait of a region in the throes of historic change.

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