

Do National Political Systems Still Influence Arab Media?

By William A. Rugh

Abstract

This essay is intended to revisit the thesis I advanced in a study of Arab mass media first published in 1979, and updated in 1987 and 2004, that the most important variable influencing the political role of media channels in the Arab world is the national political system in which they operate. Recent changes in information technology, especially the growth of satellite television, have had an impact on Arab media, making national borders more porous, but I would argue that existing national political systems are still a dominant variable affecting the structure and behavior of Arab media. Just as changes in Arab domestic political circumstances in the past have brought about changes in the media systems that operate within their borders, the domestic political factors that exist today still have a major influence Arab newspapers, radio and even television, which in turn remain the most important means of mass communication.

Introduction

In introducing the relaunch of this journal, Co-Editor Lawrence Pintak borrowed a refrain from a popular Bob Dylan song. In the media world of the Middle East, Pintak observed, the

times are “a’ changing.” He is not wrong: across the Arab World new media are unsettling old structures, practices and institutions more profoundly than in the many years I have been studying and commenting on the Middle East. But it is my contention that important themes of continuity overlay this rapid change—themes which will no doubt endure for many years to come. In my view, national politics still play the crucial role in shaping the media environment of any given Arab country.

My line of thinking on this issue is not new. Since the late 1970s, the primary focus of my research has been on the relationship between Arab mass media—defined as newspapers, radio and television—and the political environments in which they operate. Over that time, I have published three books analyzing the relationship between politics and media in the Arab world.¹ By means of interviews with many experts throughout the region, I have sought to discover how media editors are affected by the political system they live in. I have explored to what extent they, as Arabs and as citizens of their various countries, are subject to the constraints and imperatives that come from Arab governments, laws, cultural values and economic realities. How do political and other factors influence the way Arab newspaper editors make decisions on writing headlines and presenting news, and how they write their editorials? Overall, I am less concerned with the non-political content of the mass media, although in my books I have devoted some attention to that as well.

¹ *The Arab Press*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1st edition 1979, 2nd edition 1987, and *Arab Mass Media*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004. The first two books used the term “Arab press” in the title, by which I intended to mean print media and broadcasting, but to avoid giving the impression that I was only talking about print media, in the third book I changed the title to “Arab Mass Media”.

My research has consistently confirmed to me that the most important causal variable affecting the political role of the mass media in each country is the underlying political system that prevails in that country. Other factors such as geography turned out to be not very important. The mass media system in Lebanon, for example, seemed less like the media in neighboring Syria and more similar to the media in Morocco. Morocco, in turn, was quite unlike the media in its neighbor Algeria.

In my books, I have tried to look at Arab media on several levels, discussing regional characteristics that are common throughout the Arab world, and also looking at each Arab country, as well as selected individual media channels. In addition, I have developed a “typology” that classifies several countries into groups that seem to have similar systems. Over the course of the three decades in which I have studied Arab media, one thing has become abundantly clear: that on all of these analytical levels, the most powerful factor influencing the structure and functioning of the media in the political process is the actual political reality that prevails in each country at a given time.

Between the publication of my second book (*The Arab Press*, 1987) and my third book (*Arab Mass Media* 2004), very significant changes have taken place in Arab media. Since 2004, important developments have again altered the nature of Arab media, changes to which this journal is testimony. So it is pertinent to revisit my main thesis, and to examine whether it is still

valid, given all the changes that have taken place recently in the information environment. This essay is intended to do that.²

Essentials of the thesis

In a classic study of the press, Siebert, Peterson and Schramm presented four theories of the role the press plays in society.³ In the study, they reported that the media could be classified in a typology of four distinct types, namely authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and Soviet communist. However, their study dealt only with media systems in the West and the Soviet Union, and the authors themselves recognized that their analysis did not apply outside the political context in which the media systems they described had functioned. They said that their main assumption was “that the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates.”⁴

As I examined the role of the media in each Arab country, this assumption increasingly struck me as valid and useful. The media in each country could only be understood by looking at each country separately and examining its unique political realities. At the same time, there seemed to be some similarities between groups of countries in the functioning of their media, and

² Noha Mellor’s book, *The Making of Arab News*, has devoted a chapter to taking issue with my typology, and although its author has unfortunately misunderstood many of my main points, I do not intend to devote space in this essay to correcting her errors but instead will try to summarize and reevaluate my basic approach. For her criticisms, see chapter 3 in Noha Mellor, *The Making of Arab News*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. At the request of a journalism class at AUC, I wrote a detailed paper correcting her misreading of my book, and I shared it with her, but I have not published it.

³ Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, Four Theories of the Press, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1963, chapters 1-4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1

I developed a typology that divided the Arab world into first three, and later four, sub-categories. But it was similarities *in their political systems* that ultimately led to this division of Arab countries into a typology of categories of media types.

How did the typology work?⁵

I called the three original media categories in my typology the mobilization, loyalist and diverse types. Following are the characteristics of each type, in brief.

Where the mobilization type of media system exists, the political process in that country is strictly controlled by a small, aggressive ruling group that faces no significant opposition. There are no competing political parties or elections. The regime has a monopoly of power and makes sure that press does not criticize the national leaders or the basic policies of the government, either in news play or editorials. The regime not only prevents the media from expressing any opposition or deviation from the official line on politically sensitive matters, but it actively uses the media as a tool to mobilize popular support for its political programs. That is why I have called this a “mobilization” media system. At first glance, the media appear to be “nationalized”, but in fact ownership is not the key, since the regime or its agents may own some newspapers but it does not necessarily own all the media directly, and may allow newspapers and

⁵ Readers interested in more details of the typology can consult the extended descriptions in the books.

magazines to remain in private hands.⁶ But the regime exercises strong controls over all media, whether direct or indirect. It is able to do so through agents of the regime such as a single political party that is the only one allowed. The regime also controls the press through personnel it appoints, and guidance it issues through a single national news agency; moreover, its control is facilitated by self-censorship in the very restricted political environment that exists.

The countries in the “loyalist” media group also have political systems in which there are no political parties or competitive elections, and the political environment also does not encourage dissent to be expressed against the government. But the regime adopts a more passive attitude toward the media than is the case in mobilization systems, and does not seek aggressively to exploit the media to mobilize the public for specific political purposes as the mobilization system does. It leaves the print media in the hands of private owners, but it does insist that all media refrain from criticizing the most important policies of the government. It achieves this by using indirect means, such as by having laws passed that strictly circumscribe what the media are allowed to do, as well as provide penalties for non-compliance, and give government agencies such as the information ministry the authority to monitor the media and enforce regulations. Laws typically prohibit media criticism of the head of state or the military, or of religion or even of friendly governments. As a result of these political and legal restrictions, the media are consistently loyal to the regime in power, hence the label “loyalist” media systems. Newspaper editors and reporters may occasionally criticize lower-level bureaucrats, but as a rule they are very careful not to go too far, because of the prevailing political environment and the laws that discourage dissent.

⁶ Mellor, *op.cit.*, pp. 59, 70 misunderstands this point on ownership.

In the third group of countries, a very different political environment leads to a “diverse” media system. Contrasting and competing political parties or groups can express their views relatively freely. Some restrictions on freedom of expression exist in the laws, but they are relatively minimal or not strictly enforced. All newspapers are owned by private individuals or political parties, and they diverge substantially in their editorial policies. Many newspapers openly criticize the government from different angles, although some newspapers tend to defend the policies of the government. In this more open political environment, therefore, the press as a whole is rather diverse in its editorial policies affecting news play and commentary, and therefore I have called this a “diverse” system. Citizens all have the opportunity to be exposed to a fairly wide variety of opinion and interpretation as expressed in their newspapers, so that even if the only information they have access to is local papers, they are exposed to a diversity of viewpoints.

Political changes cause shifts in categories

It is important to note that these media categories are not static, because they are fundamentally rooted in existing political systems. When a political system changes, a transformation takes place in the media system.

In the past, during the second and third quarters of the twentieth century, the most dramatic changes in media systems have occurred in those countries that ended up falling eventually into the “mobilization” category. Looking at Egypt, Iraq, Syria, the Sudan, and Algeria, I identified four phases of media development, namely the colonial, factional, non-

partisan and mobilization phases. After emerging from foreign colonial rule, these countries all had political systems (for different periods of time) that involved a competition among political groups that was reflected in the press, and the government at the same time was restrained in its attempt to suppress freedom of expression. Then when competition among parties and groups declined and the government asserted more controls over public expression, the nature of the press system changed. Finally, when a ruling group took over that was able to suppress public dissent, the press system changed again.⁷

The basic political conditions inside individual Arab countries remained fairly stable during the 1980s and into the 1990s, and as a result the media systems did not change very much during that period. During the past decade, however, significant political changes have taken place in a number of Arab countries, and this had the effect of modifying the media systems in those countries. As a consequence, some media systems shifted categories.

For example, a very significant transformation in the Yemeni political system in the 1990s, involving the emergence of multiple political parties and freer elections, led Yemen's media system to move from the mobilization to the diverse category. And in 2003, when the national political situation in Iraq changed dramatically after the US-led an invasion and occupation of that country, the Iraqi media system as a result also changed dramatically. Because the new Iraqi media system that emerged was quite diverse, in part because of U.S. and British policy, I have included it in the diverse category with some caveats.⁸

⁷ Arab Mass Media, op.cit, pp.43-38 see especially table 3.1 on p.44

⁸ Arab Mass Media, op.cit., pp.116-17, 170, 209-10, 243-44

And changes in the national political systems of four countries—Algeria, Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia—during the 1980s and 1990s created new conditions for the media in these countries. Because of these political changes, the four countries did not fit well in any of the three media categories described above. In many ways the national political systems and their media systems of these four in fact turned out to be similar, so I created a fourth media category. I named this fourth category “transitional.” The crucial similarity was that the media systems in these countries were being debated publicly and likely to change. But it was not easy to foresee how they would develop in the future because the political systems themselves were somewhat unsettled. Moreover, unlike the three original categories that had fairly straightforward rules, these systems were quite complex, containing strong elements of government control and influence, alongside elements of freedom and diversity. Some newspapers, typically the larger circulation ones, tended to be more supportive of the government, while others, typically owned by private individuals and political parties, had more limited circulations and were more likely to criticize the government. Their freedom was reinforced by the existence of multiple political parties. But the regime had some advantages in the explicit and implicit taboos and red lines that existed, plus laws and economic incentives and disincentives.

The other twelve countries have remained in the media categories that they have occupied for some time because the political conditions there have not changed substantially. The fact that media systems change as a result of changes in the political environment validates the basic premise that national political realities are a major variable influencing Arab media. And in the future, if political conditions do change anywhere, it is likely that the media systems

will also be subject to change. This may happen, for example in Iraq, when the American presence there ends.

Radio and television

It should be noted that the structure and functioning of Arab radio and television has always been somewhat different from print media. Nearly all Arab governments (Lebanon being the most obvious exception), directly controlled all radio and television, with no private broadcasting allowed. There were differences between countries that to some extent mirrored the mobilization/loyalist/diverse breakdown of the print media, but they were not as pronounced because all Arab regimes wanted to control broadcasting directly and not permit private ownership. So I separated out broadcasting from print media, since the latter required more detailed and nuanced analysis. Broadcasting has changed recently, but fundamentally the state still regards radio and television as more sensitive politically than print media, and therefore tends to give it more attention.

Clearly, the most dramatic changes in broadcasting have occurred during the past decade because of the emergence of Arab satellite television, and also the impact of the Internet.

Several studies have been made of Arab satellite television with particular emphasis on the Al Jazeera effect. There is no question that Al Jazeera has had a major impact on Arab media and on the Arab discourse. Subjects that were once taboo in Arab media are now openly debated

not only on Al Jazeera but to some extent on other Arab media. Al Arabiya Television has become a close rival of Al Jazeera. And even the content of Abu Dhabi Television has become more contentious than it once was, in large part as a result of competition from Al Jazeera and the other satellite channels.⁹

Yet the satellite television channels are subject to some constraints imposed by political realities in each country. Even Al Jazeera, the media outlet that tends most to break taboos and to criticize Arab governments, pays attention to the national political environment of its home country, Qatar. A conservative Gulf state, Qatar subsidizes Al Jazeera, although it claims the channel is an independent entity. Qatar has long had a “loyalist” media system, and its newspapers still fall into that general category. Al Jazeera however has taken on a different role that seems revolutionary and not consistent with Qatar’s past history. Yet for three reasons, the basic rule, that national political circumstances are very important for the media, also applies to Al Jazeera. First, this channel first emerged as a taboo-breaker after a significant political change took place in Qatar when the ruler was deposed by his son, who was determined to undertake some reforms in the direction of political liberalization. Secondly, Al Jazeera’s aggressive political attitude can be seen to some extent as the result of a policy decision by the new ruler to put his country on the map by way of constructing a different international image from his neighbors, and using Al Jazeera to stir up controversy in a controlled way. Third, because of Qatar’s small size and the fact that Al Jazeera focuses on regional and international news that is of interest to the Arab world as a whole, there is little of real interest in Qatar for this channel to focus on, and therefore it has few Qatari taboos to challenge. In practice, Al Jazeera tends not to

⁹ Interview with the UAE Information Minister

raise controversial issues that directly affect the political status quo in Qatar. In fact, there are limits to what Al Jazeera does, and after offending most Arab governments by one program or another, it has recently adopted a code of ethics that indicate it is trying to some extent to moderate its tone. But Al Jazeera now has some protection from criticism because other channels are also challenging taboos.

In short, Al Jazeera is on the one hand an example of pushing the boundaries of what is possible politically on Arab television, yet at the same time, its behavior tends to reinforce the basic thesis that domestic political concerns are very important for the media.

Other new media

I have confined my study only to newspapers, magazines, radio and television, because these were the only means of communication that were “mass media”, edited from a single point and intended for the general public. Moreover, I believe that print media, radio and television remain the most important channels of communication reaching mass audiences in the Arab world, despite the rapid growth and spread of newer means of communication such as e-mail, websites, blogs, videocassettes, DVDs, and SMS text messaging. The new media do not reach the almost universal audiences of the older ones, because of their cost and their novelty, and because of illiteracy barriers. Therefore I have excluded these newer channels, as well as older ones such as fax messages, movies, point-to-point radio, telephone and telegraph, that are of a different nature. These are all fascinating and very important, but to try to analyze all of them

would have required another entire book, and I believe that drawing the line around truly mass media, intended for the general public, was a reasonable delimitation. Happily, excellent work is being done by some scholars on these new media, and the subject matter is growing so rapidly that it probably deserves special treatment.

Offshore media

In my research, I excluded media that were intended for audiences outside the Arab world, even if they were in Arabic, such as so-called émigré newspapers published in the West, because they function in a political environment that is quite different from the one that prevailed inside the Arab world, and therefore their content and purpose were substantially different.¹⁰ But I did include the newspapers (and later satellite television broadcasts) that were controlled by Arabs and originated from Europe if their intended audiences were *inside* the Arab world. In these outlets, editors faced concerns and constraints similar to those editors sitting in offices in Arab cities. In my 2004 edition I devoted an entire chapter to these media because they are important.

It is true that these offshore media behave slightly differently from media based inside the Arab world, because they are not subject to all of the same constraints. However they are circumscribed by the political realities in the Arab countries, and thus even these newspapers must follow the basic rules of other media.

¹⁰ Mellor, op.cit, pp. 51, 61-63, 70 includes émigré newspapers.

For example, editors of *Al-Hayat* and *Asharq Alawsat* sit in London but they must think about their readers living in Arab countries when they make their editorial decisions. They must be mindful of the direct and indirect restrictions on newspaper content imposed by the various Arab governments because they want their newspapers to be distributed in Arab countries and the governments there have the means to stop or inhibit distribution. These editors must also be mindful of the possible impact on their advertising revenues in various Arab countries when they make decisions on news play and editorials.

Globalization and regionalization

Although my analysis focuses attention on the nation-state and its influence over the media as it relates to audiences within Arab national borders, my writing has always taken into account cross-border flows of information, a factor that has increased dramatically in recent years.

In the past, when national governments had more control over Arab media, there were always some cross-border information flows. Some people listened to the BBC from London, VOA from Washington, or the Voice of the Arabs from Cairo, or they were able to import foreign newspapers. Others who happened to live in border areas where television from a neighboring country was visible, could watch that. But many people only had access to the media that were produced within the borders of their home countries, and those media were heavily influenced by the political circumstances in those countries. In Saddam's Iraq, for example, the public essentially had access only to information and ideas that Saddam wanted

them to have, since he presided over a mobilization press, banned foreign print media and jammed foreign broadcasts.

Today the situation has changed because of greater globalization and regionalization of the media, especially due to satellite television. As a result, many more people have access to information produced outside the borders of their home countries. This has made the Arab media picture much more complicated than it once was. The controls that state governments once had have been eroded somewhat because many more alternative sources of information and comment have now become available to the Arab public. Yet national political, economic and cultural constraints and influences have not disappeared, and thus the analysis I have offered still has some validity.

To be specific, on the global level the phenomenon of cultural “convergence” involving the dissemination of Western media products and imitation of non-Arab innovations in Arab media, has had an impact. The style and format of a number of Arab television programs have been influenced to an extent by Western TV programs, as Marwan Kraidy, Marc Lynch and other scholars have pointed out in their interesting recent studies. There are echoes of American debate programs in the Al Jazeera’s contentious discussion shows, and Arab reality shows, especially those that involve viewer voting such as *Super Star* and *Star Academy*, have taken format ideas from the West.¹¹

¹¹ See the special section on reality TV in the *TBS* print edition, vol.1, no.2, pp.7-84, especially Marwan Kraidy, “Reality Television and Politics in the Arab World”, and Marc Lynch “Reality is Not Enough”; also Marc Lynch, Voices of the New Arab Public, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005

Nevertheless, the Arab television producers have been careful to adapt and modify Western program format ideas to make sure that the content fits within local Arab political and social norms. The experience of MBC in trying and failing to replicate *Big Brother* in Bahrain in 2004, for example, showed that there were clear limits to the importation of Western ideas into Arab television.¹² Also, when Arab television producers have presented Western material (such as Hollywood films) on Arab television channels as originally prepared for a Western audience, they have carefully reviewed it in advance to be sure it is acceptable within the political and social norms of the Arab country that they are in.

On the regional level, the proliferation of satellite television channels in Arabic, by and for Arabs, has also had a powerful impact on the media scene. Al Jazeera broke taboos, but other Arab channels also brought news and commentary in Arabic into Arab homes in ways that had not happened before. Yet considering the picture as a whole, and looking at the amount of access that various Arab groups have to information and opinion, it is clear that the cultural, economic and especially political conditions that exist in individual countries still influence media behavior in important ways. The trend to greater regionalization and globalization of media has therefore complicated but not completely negated the usefulness of an analysis that focuses on national political systems.

Local political and social realities are still important, despite globalization and regionalization of the media, and they still affect the access to news and information that individual Arabs enjoy. Thus in a country where the diverse system exists, like Lebanon, the

¹² Idem.; for details of the Bahrain story, see *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, vol. 1, no.2, pp. 14-17, 33, 56-57

citizens of that country still tend to have access to a greater variety of sources of information and opinion than they do in countries where mobilization systems exist as in Syria. It is true that in both Lebanon and Syria people watch satellite television coming from outside their borders, but the media environments, and the political systems in which the media operate, are still different.

Modifications in any analysis of Arab media must be made on a continuing basis, because the Arab media scene is changing rapidly now. It is no longer as static as it was in the past, and to paint an accurate picture we need to follow closely the media developments in each Arab country and the region as a whole, adjusting our analysis accordingly. Significant changes have taken place in the past decade, in contrast to the immediately preceding decades, making shifts in the typology necessary. It has therefore now become more difficult to predict what will happen to media systems in the coming years. It may be, for example, that more countries will follow the recent examples of Yemen and Iraq and move into the diverse media category because of changes that take place in their national political systems. And media in other countries, perhaps affected by the great increase in cross-border media penetration from satellite television and the Internet, may show increased signs of diversity, and even become “transitional” as they seek a new formula for media organization. At the same time, individual media outlets, such as Al Manar, may become more strident voices for advancing specific political agendas of reminiscent of a mobilization broadcaster as their patrons struggle against their political adversaries. Yet Al Manar is only able to play that role because it exists within the permissive environment of the diverse Lebanese media structure that is in turn based on a pluralistic Lebanese national political system.

Challenges facing the study of Arab media

There are several challenges that must be dealt with in studying Arab media today.

First, the topic of cultural “convergence” involving the dissemination of Western media products and imitation of non-Arab media innovations deserves more study. One question is how far regionalization and globalization have influenced Arab media content. Another is how non-Arab ideas have been adapted to fit the Arab social and political environment—a question that should help shed light on the characteristics of that environment. The Danish cartoon controversy, for example, illustrated the diminished size of our world because of the information technology revolution, and also it revealed some aspects of Arab media behavior.

Secondly, an important new development in the field of communication has been the blurring of the lines between news and commentary on the one hand and entertainment on the other. My focus has been on news play and editorial commentary because that is where the politically important content of the media have been found, and consequently where the state authorities and other political actors have focused their attention. Now politically interesting content has appeared in entertainment programs like the rapidly proliferating Arab “reality television.” As several astute observers have pointed out recently in important studies published in this journal’s predecessor, *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, and elsewhere, Arab reality TV has become an important vehicle for conveying politically interesting ideas, and it has also, at the same time, become a mirror that reflects some important political realities of the Arab

world. Thus, for example, such entertainment programs as *Star Academy*, that are supposedly non-political, turn out to have significant political content that some scholars have begun to study.¹³ That is an important line of inquiry that needs to be pursued further, and it can probably be best done by native speakers of Arabic because they understand linguistic and cultural nuances well.

A third challenge is that there are now many more channels of information available to Arabs than in the past, and to some extent they influence each other. But as a practical matter one must be selective, because it is impossible to analyze everything. How should the selection be made? As noted above, I have confined my study only to newspapers, magazines, radio and television, because these were the only means of communication that were “mass media”, edited from a single point and intended for the general public, and they reach large audiences. Yet it is important that studies be undertaken to analyze the newer means of communication such as e-mail, websites, videocassettes, DVDs, and SMS text messaging, as some have started doing.¹⁴ This can be probably be done best in parallel to studies of print and broadcasting.

Fourth, even when the subject is of manageable size, determining influence over the content of the media is difficult. Editorial decisions in news selection and editorial writing cannot be easily pinned down by quantitative analysis, a method that would not work for 18 countries because of the sheer volume of material. In my studies I depended instead on the

¹³ See Kraidy and Lynch, cited in footnote 11.

¹⁴ E.g. Habib Battah: “SMS: The Next TV Revolution”, TBS 2006, and see Lawrence Pintak and Marc Lynch in *Arab Media and Society*, March 2007

opinions of reliable observers, being careful to include observations from people with different political points of view.¹⁵

A fifth challenge is how to cope with the important question of the impact of Arab media on Arab politics. I dealt with that subject only very briefly in my studies, but others have looked into it in more detail.¹⁶ Some observers expected that the “Al Jazeera effect” and the spread of Arab satellite television and the intensification of pan-Arab discussions would lead to significant growth of Arab democracy. Others say that these expectations do not seem to have materialized, at least so far.¹⁷ This issue, too, deserves further study, although it is difficult to gather reliable data on it.

Conclusion

The many new developments in Arab media deserve close scrutiny by serious students of Arab media. Yet I remain convinced that national political systems that exist in each Arab country remain a very significant factor in determining the role of Arab media in politics. Although that factor has been diminished somewhat because of new communication technology, it is still potent and must be taken into account.

¹⁵ This was a technique I had used in the 1960s when I wrote my PhD dissertation on “The Politics of Broadcasting in Germany”, and it seemed to work well enough to give me a reasonably accurate picture of the role of the media in the political process.

¹⁶ Marc Lynch, Voices of a New Arab Public, passim., and “Reality is Not Enough” op. cit, pp.35-43

¹⁷ Marc Lynch, “Reality Is Not Enough”, pp.29-45

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