



## Politics and priorities: Inside the Egyptian press

By Kenneth J. Cooper

**September, 2008.** Pressured by the Bush administration to expand democratic freedoms following 9/11, the government of Egypt four years ago granted a group of private businessmen a license to publish *Almasry Alyoum*, the first independent daily in Egypt in a half century.<sup>i</sup> Hisham Kassem, the founding publisher, suspects the government assumed the start-up whose name translates as “The Daily Egyptian” would fail, so issuing a license would placate an important ally without threatening the state-run media’s dominance.<sup>ii</sup> Instead, *Almasry* has thrived.

A year later, the government licensed another independent daily published by a partnership of the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Daily Star* of Lebanon and a second group of Egyptian businessmen. Technically, the license authorized the publication of the *Daily Star Egypt* as an insert into a foreign newspaper, the *IHT*, the global daily based in Paris. Published in English, the *Daily Star*, which changed its name to the *Daily News* in 2007 after the Lebanese partner dropped out, would have a self-limited circulation and therefore not present a significant challenge to Arabic state-run media.<sup>iii</sup> But publishing in English also would make the paper accessible to more of the diplomatic corps in Cairo and to cosmopolitan elites in the United States and other Western countries—potential trouble for a government sensitive about its image abroad for diplomatic and economic reasons.

In a country where most dailies are either state-run or party organs, both *Almasry* and the *Daily News* more closely resemble American newspapers in that they have private owners and profess political independence. The two private papers, though, are not exempt from the press restrictions found in Egypt’s media law and penal code. Officially, Egypt abolished censorship in 1952, but the Ministry of Information continues to monitor papers, admonish editors and subtly threaten to scrap entire press runs for violating “red lines.” These include the military and personal commentary about the President Hosni Mubarak, his wife Suzanne and son Gamal. Editors of both *Almasry* and the *Daily News* admit to practicing self-censorship to avoid legal confrontations with the government.

Given these constraints, what difference do the ownership structure and political nonalignment of *Almasry* and the *Daily News* make in what is published on the pages of the two papers? What news and perspectives do readers get that they might not in state-run media? How different is the social reality conveyed in their news coverage?

To answer these questions, I conducted a content analysis this spring as a Fulbright Scholar in Cairo, with assistance from a faculty member at Cairo University and her researchers.<sup>iv</sup> The papers analyzed were *Almasry Alyoum*, the *Daily News* and *al-Ahram*

“The Pyramids,” the established state-run daily founded in 1875 and the largest-circulation paper in Egypt. The research plan initially called for including the state-run, English-language *Egyptian Gazette* as a fourth paper, but back copies were not available. The content analysis covers the last half of 2005 and all of 2006 and 2007. When the study began in January 2008, those 30 months encompassed nearly the entire period the three papers had been published simultaneously.

Only domestic news coverage was evaluated to make the project manageable and because *Almasry* and the *Daily News* largely depend on wire services for international coverage, as does *al-Ahram* to a lesser extent. The sample was five “constructed weeks” of a randomly-selected Sunday, a randomly-selected Monday, etc. We evaluated one such week for the last six months of 2005, and two weeks each for 2006 and 2007.<sup>v</sup>

The analysis shows the three papers have different priorities in both overall coverage and front page story selection. These differences appear to reflect the relative weight editors give to various news values, the divergent composition of the papers’ readerships and disagreements about journalism’s mission and Egypt’s social realities.

During the study period, readers got slightly more domestic news stories from *Almasry* than *al-Ahram*, even though the state-run daily published more pages of news than *Almasry* every day of the week. The domestic story count in both papers was about five times higher than in the smaller *Daily News*.

In their coverage, *Almasry* and the *Daily News* emphasized domestic politics and human rights much more than *al-Ahram*. Sourcing in the private papers also leaned in a different direction. The privately-owned papers relied less on officials, who were by far the main sources of domestic news in *al-Ahram*.

In *al-Ahram*, the most frequent subject on front pages was government, whereas *Almasry* gave more weight to domestic politics, and the *Daily News* concentrated on human rights. The English-language paper’s focus on individual rights reached an astounding level: almost two-thirds of the stories the *Daily News* published about human rights ran on the front page.

Anyone who read all three papers every day over those thirty months would have been struck by the profound difference in what editors at each considered the most important domestic news. Rarely did they put on the front page a story about the same development on a given day. That happened about 1 percent of the time among the three papers. No more than 6 percent of the front-page stories in any two papers matched on the same day. An alert daily reader of all three papers would have good reason to wonder if the editors were living in the same country.

All three papers published domestic news stories produced by a mix of staffers, wire services and other publications. The *Daily News*, with its tiny staff, depended the most on the wires while *al-Ahram* picked up the largest percentage of stories from other publications or contributors. In *Almasry*, about 80 percent of domestic stories were staff-written, which some researchers in the United States regard as a prime measure of quality.<sup>vi</sup>

The three papers shared several shortcomings in their domestic coverage. In a developing country where at least 20 percent of the population is poor, none devoted

much attention to poverty, illiteracy or job training.<sup>vii</sup> All three allowed the government to shape business coverage. Across the board, officials were the dominant source of news about business and the nation's economy at a time when Egypt's economic liberalization was a major story.

### **Domestic coverage**

In absolute numbers, *Almasry* published 3 percent more domestic news stories than the larger *al-Ahram* did.

Several factors may account for this surprising finding. *Almasry's* predominant interest is in Egypt, as its name suggests. *Al-Ahram* may have published more international news, even after cutting back its foreign bureaus in 2005. It also carried more advertising, reducing available space for news. In addition, the two Arabic language papers target different audiences.

"*Almasry* is an Egyptian daily," observed Mirette Mabrouk, the founding publisher of the *Daily News*. "*Al-Ahram* is read around the Arab-speaking world."<sup>viii</sup>

Hazem Abdel Rahman, one of two managing editors at *al-Ahram*, said about a tenth of the paper's daily circulation of 500,000 to 600,000 (other journalists say the number is half that or less) goes to Persian Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia.<sup>ix</sup>

The *Daily News*, the thinnest of the three papers with eight to ten pages, published less than a fifth of the approximately 2,200 domestic stories that *Almasry* and *al-Ahram* each ran.

Because the papers vary in size, a comparison of the subjects emphasized in domestic coverage was made in proportional terms. Stories were categorized into 15 subjects and "other." Some were broad enough to represent entire sections, like sports, business and culture/lifestyle. Others were narrower, such as corruption, Islam and protests.

*Al-Ahram* devoted a larger percentage of its domestic stories, compared with the other two papers, to six subjects: education, health, housing, Islam, labor and culture/lifestyle. *Almasry* emphasized a different six: corruption, crime, domestic politics, protests and sports. For the *Daily News*, the prime subjects were business, the Gaza border and human rights.

### **Behind the editorial priorities**

*Al-Ahram's* managing editor Abdel Rahman cited different reasons for the paper's mix of priorities. He described education, health and housing as "interests of the Egyptian people." They are also basic needs that Egypt's government has a large role in fulfilling. The government also sets wage levels for much of the workforce, the labor issue that *al-Ahram* wrote about most often.

Abdel Rahman indicated the focus on Islam was a conscious one. "If it is something concerning Islam, it is given the first degree of importance because the Egyptian people are religious," he said. Finally, he called the significant amount of space given to culture, such as art and books, a tradition at what is "considered the elite newspaper in the Egyptian press."<sup>x</sup>

In addition to religious coverage, the top news value for *al-Ahram's* editors appears to be the broad impact of government functions and cultural expressions of faith and creativity. Abdel Rahman's use of the phrase "the Egyptian people" evokes a nationalistic mission of journalism, as spelled out in the nation's constitution and code of ethics issued by the Supreme Press Council.<sup>xi</sup>

By contrast, Mabrouk, the former *Daily News* publisher, described *Almasry's* priorities as "what people care about."<sup>xii</sup> The paper does have a populist feel that runs close to the passions of Egyptians, but there are other possible explanations.

Each of the domestic subjects that *Almasry* emphasizes involves conflict, suggesting that it is the leading news value for its editors. The focus on the conflict in laws being broken, changing the system of governance and even athletic teams competing contributes to the sense of energy found on *Almasry's* pages.

*Almasry's* attention to corruption, domestic politics and protests also suggests the paper interprets journalists' mission more as a government watchdog, as American journalists do, than as a nationalistic advocate in the *al-Ahram* mold. This American influence can be traced to founding publisher Hisham Kassem, who said he developed his conception of journalism working in Egypt as a translator and fixer for American and British newspaper correspondents.<sup>xiii</sup>

The priorities of the *Daily News* reflect its cosmopolitan, English-reading audience. The top subjects have international interest, including business coverage while Egypt is expanding its links to the global economy. Rania Al Malky, editor of the *Daily News* since mid-2007, cited human rights as the paper's top priority for coverage and indicated it was a subject that received almost automatic consideration for the front page.<sup>xiv</sup>

### **Front page coverage**

For each paper, the domestic subjects most frequently on the front page were similar, but rarely the same.

*Al-Ahram's* top subject was "other," at 31 percent of front page stories. In the state-run paper, these "other" stories were usually about routine governmental actions in parliament or the ministries. Sports was second at 13 percent, followed by domestic politics at 11 percent.

In *Almasry*, domestic politics was the leading subject, at 31 percent. Human rights and "other" tied for second at 13 percent.

In line with their editorial priorities, the prime subject for the *Daily News* was human rights, which accounted for 28 percent of front page stories. Business was a close runner-up, at 23 percent, followed by "other" at 14 percent.

The papers seldom ran stories about the same event on the same day. In 2 ½ years, such a front-page match occurred among all three papers just seven times, or about 1 percent of the combined total of their front-page stories. Front page story overlap occurred most often between *al-Ahram* and *Almasry*, amounting to 5-6 percent of their front page output. But matches in the two Arabic-language papers declined each year, suggesting

the upstart *Almasry* has gained enough confidence to stop emulating the market leader and also sufficient access to knowledgeable sources to set its own news agenda.

This study period encompassed the country's first multi-party elections for president and parliament in the fall of 2005 and the campaigns that preceded the votes.

*Almasry* led the other two papers in attention to stories about domestic politics because of the breadth of its reporting on parties other than the ruling National Democratic Party, whose meetings and pronouncements remained the focus of political coverage in *al-Ahram*. Over the entire sample, *Almasry* published more than twice as many stories about political party activities and statements as *al-Ahram* did (59 to 26).

The front pages of both papers on August 10, 2005, about a month before the presidential vote, illustrate the contrast in their political coverage. *Al-Ahram* offered a single political story, a wrap-up about the pending announcement of the list of presidential candidates. The first subheading reported the ruling NDP's promise not to interfere in the elections; the second, the National Unity and Progress party's decision to boycott the polls.

*Almasry* ran a package of four stories, all played above the fold. Their headlines referred to four political parties. The lead article was on the ruling party, its election-day goal of "50% of Eligible Votes for Mubarak" and the NDP's campaign promises.

The off-lead story was about the promises of the leftist Wafd party. In the center of the page, a third story reported "9 Excluded Candidates File Grievances with the Presidential Election Committee." The subheading quotes one candidate as throwing his support to Ayman Nour, the Ghad party leader who was ultimately a distant runner-up to Mubarak. The fourth story was a separate account of the National Unity and Progress party's boycott, played beneath the lead story on the NDP.

Managing editor Abdel Rahman acknowledged this narrow, partisan scope of *al-Ahram's* coverage during the 2005 election season, which he said he had urged reporters to broaden. He predicted that goal will take a few more years to accomplish.

"Our reporters over the years only used to cover...the party of government," he said. Reporting on opposition parties "on an equal basis, disregarding your own affiliation—this was something very hard. It takes an effort to breed a new generation of journalists who are capable of covering the opposition and the government."<sup>xv</sup>

Mohammed Samir, a managing editor of *Almasry*, suggested that *al-Ahram*, besides being the official voice of the government, has traditionally been the organ of the ruling party because its journalists grew accustomed to competing against only party papers and concluded "we are the NDP paper."<sup>xvi</sup>

## Sourcing

The main sources for slightly more than half of the domestic stories in *al-Ahram*, 54 percent, were government officials. That figure rose to nearly 70 percent for front-page stories. Managing editor Abdel Rahman suggested the paper's dependence on official sources had been even higher in the past and predicted it will decline more in the future.<sup>xvii</sup>

In *Almasry*, the principal sources for 52 percent of its domestic stories were members of the Egyptian public. Officials shaped 39 percent, but the paper relied more heavily on government sources for front-page articles, 52 percent of them, a level that surprised managing editor Mohammed Samir.<sup>xviii</sup> Official sources include those in the central government and the governorates, which *Almasry* covers rigorously.

On February 18, 2006, for instance, the paper reported the first cases of the avian flu in Egypt, in birds only, with two stories on the top of the front page. The lead story focused on the responses of the central government, quoting the Cabinet Council's spokesman. The other described emergency preparations in several governorates, citing two governors. *Al-Ahram's* single front-pager—which did not lead the paper—concentrated on the central government and conveyed a sense that Hosni Mubarak had anticipated the problem and was in control of the situation.

Of the three papers, the *Daily News* was the least dependent on official sources. Their words shaped 30 percent of all domestic stories and 32 percent of front-pagers. About 20 percent of all stories and those on page one had “other” sources, a category that includes representatives of foreign governments and international human rights groups. Activists, Egyptians and foreigners, are quoted often in the *Daily News*, giving its pages an activist feel. Al Malky, the current editor, said the paper has had less access to government sources than *al-Ahram* and other state-run papers.<sup>xix</sup> In the *Daily News*, members of the Egyptian public were the type of source quoted most often in all domestic stories, 46 percent, and in 32 percent of front-page articles.

### Origin of stories

In *Almasry*, 81 percent of domestic articles were produced by staffers or correspondents, compared with 66 percent in *al-Ahram* and 44 percent in the *Daily News*. This is a partial measure of what on the Web is called “unique content.” (It is partial because articles from contributors can also be unique.) Staff production is also more subject to quality controls. *Almasry* led *al-Ahram* in this rough measure of journalistic quality because a third of *al-Ahram's* articles came from other media or contributors, twice the proportion found in *Almasry*.

Managing editor Samir indicated *Almasry* aims for a high percentage of staff-produced stories. “This is fine. It is expected,” he said.<sup>xx</sup>

The *Daily News*, which started in 2005 with four writers and has grown to seven, got a third of its articles from wire services. The other two papers hardly ever ran wire stories on domestic subjects.

### Shared shortcomings

The three papers wrote few stories about poverty, illiteracy or job training. In 2 ½ years, together the newspapers published 17 articles on poverty, the same number on job training and a dozen on illiteracy. The dearth of coverage indicates none of the papers consider Egypt's poor an important part of their audience and their problems as of much interest to relatively prosperous readers. Some critics have cited a similar pattern in American dailies, which have increasingly targeted their content to upscale readers whose disposable incomes appeal to advertisers.

“We are making an effort on this,” said Abdel Rahman of *al-Ahram*. “We are giving much more attention to ordinary people, the poor, on the front page because we want to be near them...This may alleviate their grievances. They get assured that the state, everyone in society, is caring for them.”<sup>xxi</sup>

Coverage of business and the economy is relatively abundant in the Egyptian dailies. Official sources dominate that coverage, allowing the government to essentially shape coverage of its ongoing economic liberalization program. Nearly two-thirds of business stories cited officials as the main source. Such an imbalance is difficult to imagine in a newspaper in America, where “private business” is redundant. But Egypt’s government still owns enterprises and, despite loosening its grip, maintains a long regulatory reach.

In the three papers, trade and business expansions were the most common topics of the coverage, contributing to its boosterish tone.

*Almasry’s* Samir said the government essentially rules business coverage because leaders of private business shy away from challenging official perspectives in print for fear of financially-painful retribution. Independent business analysts in Egypt, Samir said, either lack credibility or detachment because they do business with the government.<sup>xxii</sup>

Some Egyptian journalists, Al Malky of the *Daily News* said, have criticized the paper’s business coverage, saying, “You sound like *al-Ahram*.” She noted, though, the economic liberalization “starts from the government,” so officials are prime sources. She also described the paper’s upbeat coverage of Egyptian business as a counterbalance to the anti-government tone of its human rights coverage. “At the same time, we cover the good stuff, the business,” Al Malky said.<sup>xxiii</sup>

## Conclusion

In the 2 ½ years covered in this study, *Almasry Alyoum* and the *Daily News* presented their readers with more news about domestic politics and human rights, proportionately, than *al-Ahram* did. For human rights coverage, this is also true in the absolute story count. *Almasry* ran almost twice as many articles on the subject as *al-Ahram* did, and the *Daily News* published a few more than the state-run daily.

Although in four years *Almasry’s* circulation has grown rapidly, from a few thousand to 100,000 to 150,000, its direct impact on public opinion remains less than *al-Ahram’s*.<sup>xxiv</sup> The influence of the *Daily News* is even less, with a circulation of about 5,000 and no more than 10,000.<sup>xxv</sup>

But the presence of privately-owned, politically-independent papers, particularly *Almasry*, has had the indirect impact of broadening and balancing the coverage in the country’s and the government’s biggest newspaper.

“The emergence of the private and independent press in the last four to five years has raised the limits of the press freedom which we are practicing in the Egyptian press,” Abdel Rahman said. He described the state-imposed limits on *al-Ahram*, specifically, as “much higher.”

The managing editor cited a generic example of an article on police torture displayed prominently in *Almasry*. “You can’t ignore it,” he said. He characterized the country’s largest private paper as “a good newspaper” and serious competitor for news.

“The whole issue of human rights is new in our country,” Abdel Rahman said, more broadly. “I think we [at *al-Ahram*] are progressing with the issue of human rights. Whenever there is something concerning it, we publish it, either inside or the front pages.”

*Al-Ahram* has also gained more freedom to criticize the government than before, he said. “The last three or four years we have had greater freedom in practicing this criticism.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

Still, domestic coverage in *al-Ahram* is not nearly as free-wheeling as it is in *Almasry* and the *Daily News*. By western standards, the private papers are not all that free either, given the constraints of Egyptian laws and the self-censorship practiced to avoid violating them or “red lines” around the military, the president and his family.

Samir, who has been an editor at *Almasry* since it started publishing, said the paper had never heard from the government’s unofficial censors before publication, but has received “reactions” afterwards. “But we are our own censors,” he said, to uphold high journalistic standards and avoid breaking laws or taboos.<sup>xxvii</sup>

On a few occasions, the *Daily News* has heard from government censors, who once compelled editors to alter a front-page photograph to erase an insult to President Mubarak on a banner that a protestor was holding, according to Al Malky and Mabrouk. “I think it called him something like, ‘mass murderer,’” Al Malky recalled.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The paper does quote sources criticizing the government, regime or system, she said, but when it comes to President Mubarak: “We don’t talk about him personally. I don’t know if you want to call that self-censorship.”<sup>xxix</sup>

After an absence of 50 years, the reemergence of a private, independent press in Egypt has expanded the variety and volume of news its citizens can read, bringing along for some distance the biggest state-run newspaper. But without the repeal of repressive media laws and lifting of taboos around important but forbidden subjects, the country’s newspapers will not—and can not—be a truly free press that speaks uncomfortable truths to authoritarian power and holds it accountable before the Egyptian public.

**Kenneth J. Cooper** is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who worked for nearly 30 years as a reporter and editor for American newspapers, including the *Washington Post* and *Boston Globe*. During the Spring 2008 semester, he was a Fulbright Scholar at Cairo University, Faculty of Mass Communication. Currently, he is an independent journalist based in Boston.

<sup>i</sup> In transliterating the Arabic language papers mentioned here, I have used the most common English spellings, i.e. *al-Ahram* and *Almasry Alyoum*.

<sup>ii</sup> Author interview, January 2008.

<sup>iii</sup> Author interview, January 2008.



<sup>iv</sup> Dr. Inas Abouyoussef, Professor of Mass Communication, served as my faculty adviser. Research assistance was provided by Soheir Usman of Cairo University and Emad Shalaby and Islam Farag of the Women's Media Watch Center, National Council of Women. Benjamin Parisi, who was a Fulbright Student in the Center for Arabic Study Abroad at American University, Cairo, provided translation assistance.

<sup>v</sup> See Daniel Riffe, Stephen Lacy and Frederick G. Fico, *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research*. Mahwah, N.J. and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers. 2006. Pgs. 113-4 describes more than a half century of research that validates this sample size as representative of a daily newspaper's content.

<sup>vi</sup> A 1977 survey asked top editors at American newspapers what they considered standards of quality. They ranked "high ratio of staff-written copy to wire service and feature service copy" near the top of 23 attributes. See Bogart, Leo. "Reflections on Content Quality in Newspapers." *Newspaper Research Journal*. 25:1, Winter 2004.

<sup>vii</sup> United Nations Human Development Report, 2008.

<sup>viii</sup> Author interview, January 2008.

<sup>ix</sup> Author interviews Hazen Abdel Rahman, June 2008; Hani Shukrullah, former of the English-language *Al-Ahram Weekly*, February 2008; and Mohammed Samir, a managing editor of *Almasry Alyoum*, February 2008. Newspaper circulation figures in Egypt are not audited. "Expect a little exaggeration. All editors exaggerate their distribution," Shukrullah said.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Radsch, Courtney C. "Conceiving the Public Sphere: The Case of Lebanon and Egypt." Unpublished paper of doctoral candidate in international relations in the School of International Service at American University in Washington, D.C., September 2007. Pgs. 9-11 describe provisions of Egypt's constitution pertaining to journalists and of the Code of Ethics of the Supreme Press Council, a government body. Paper is cited with the author's permission.

<sup>xii</sup> Author interview, June 2008.

<sup>xiii</sup> Author interview, January 2008.

<sup>xiv</sup> Author interview, February 2008.

<sup>xv</sup> Author interview, June 2008.

<sup>xvi</sup> Author interview, June 2008.

<sup>xvii</sup> Author interview, June 2008.

<sup>xviii</sup> Author interview, June 2008.

<sup>xix</sup> Author interview, June 2008.

<sup>xx</sup> Author interview, June 2008.

<sup>xxi</sup> Author interview, June 2008.

<sup>xxii</sup> Author interview, June 2008.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Author interview, June 2008.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Author interviews with Mohammed Samir, February 2008; Hani Shukrullah, February 2008; and Hazem Abdel Rahman, June 2008.

<sup>xxv</sup> Author interviews with Mirette Mabrouk, January 2008, and Rania Al Malky, February 2008.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Author interview, June 2008.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Author interview, June 2008.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Author interviews with Mabrouk, January 2008, and with Al Malky, February 2008.

<sup>xxix</sup> Author interview, February 2008.