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NEW MEDIA AND THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION IN THE ARAB WORLD: AN ASSESSMENT

Edmund Ghareeb

The information revolution in the Arab world, while initially limited to the elites, has transformed political discourse in the region in the space of a few years. Beginning with the spread of pan-Arab newspapers published simultaneously in several cities, and continuing with the growth of satellite television networks (particularly the controversial Al-Jazeera based in Qatar), new technologies have created a new type of political debate that transcends national boundaries. The Internet, while just beginning to have an impact in the Arab world, also has great potential, though it too is likely to influence primarily the elites, because of high access costs and its largely English-language content. The article surveys the Arab world's experience so far with each of these technologies.

In 1834 mathematician Charles Babbage, the father of the computer invented an “analytical engine” which could perform calculations and store the results and several decades later Guglielmo Marconi invented the wireless telegraph. The revolutions launched by these two inventions traveled along different paths until about four decades ago, when they converged and computers and telecommunications joined. This merging of instant communications and rapid data processing is speedily changing the world

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economy, national and international politics, military strategy and tactics, as well as personal lives.¹

The technological information revolution is creating new opportunities and new realities. It is also offering access with little or no filter for the exchange of information and opinions. And it is contributing to the creation of increasingly interlocking international industries.

But this revolution is also an elitist one. It aims primarily at the well-to-do and the well educated, and is accessed mainly by these groups. Industries target the young English speaker, the computer literate, and those who can afford a computer and the high price of connections. We are, however, seeing dramatic change as competition declines, computer prices go down, and children learn much more rapidly to use the technology. Nevertheless, the poor and the uneducated worldwide are likely to be left by the wayside, as the gap widens between the haves and the have-nots. As Ismael Serageldin, Vice President of the World Bank has recently stated, "inequality is on the rise": those in the upper income bracket receive 83 percent of the world's income while those in the bottom 20 percent receive 1.4 percent of the world's income.² George Gage, director of Microsoft's Science Office says that one half of the world's population will never make a phone call.³

Over the coming decade, the continuing transformation of technology is likely to have continuing and profound political implications for the Middle East and the world. Governments and businesses will face choices and dilemmas, created by the increasing interconnectedness of world markets and the decreasing ability of the nation state to control the information flow within its borders, without affecting its ability to effectively compete in the global market.

Historically, new technologies have led to major political, social and or economic transformations: The printing press is widely believed to have contributed to the success of the Protestant Reformation. President Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir's skilled use of radio helped him to strengthen his popular base in Egypt and in the Arab world, and created a huge market for Japanese transistor radios throughout the region.

The new technologies offer communication capabilities to a much larger base of people. Many see this trend as contributing to increased political democratization. Countries which seek to block the pace of change are likely to face unprecedented challenges.

The so-called communications revolution embraces a variety of new and evolving technologies, many of which have political implications. The Iranian revolutionaries in the 1970s effectively used the cassette tape to spread their message, while the Chinese Tienanmen Square demonstrators and the opponents of the Russian coup of 1991 used the fax to mobilize support. The use of videocassettes in Poland and of television images from neighboring states in Romania contributed to the success of revolutionary movements in

1. Harlan Cleveland, "The Information Imperative Embraces Liberte, Egalite, and Access", *The World Paper*, Summer, 1997. p.1.

2. Cited in a summary of a conference organized by the US Institute of Peace, "Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution in the Information Age" *Peace Watch*, June 1997, p. 3.

3. US Institute of Peace, "Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution".

both countries. E-mail was effectively used by student and other opposition protesters in Indonesia to bring down the Suharto government. E-mail and fax contacts are believed to have been instrumental in organizing, in 22 different European cities, dramatic Kurdish demonstrations protesting the kidnapping of Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan, within hours of the news of the event. NGOs, including organizers working to ban land mines, have effectively used the Internet as well as traditional lobbying methods to get their message out

Modern technology is revolutionizing how people receive information. Satellite technology, to be discussed further below, is doing to television what the short-wave did to radio. The trans-national media is helping to shape public opinion and is influencing the decision-making of political, business, and military leaders in an unprecedented fashion. During the 1998–1999 American and British attacks against Iraq, President Saddam Husayn chose two relatively new but influential pan-Arab satellite television networks—the Qatar based al-Jazeera and the London based Arab News Network—to broadcast messages to the outside world. During Operation *Desert Fox*, American, Japanese, and other television networks transmitted some of al-Jazeera's feed from Baghdad to their audiences.

The information revolution is in part a product of the phenomenon of economic globalization, and is also the agent for its spread. Today we are witnessing the impact of the explosion of the new media: Internet and intranet services, voice mail, e-mail, fax machines, satellite television, cell phones, photos, audio, and video recording. Films and text have the capacity to move across borders through the use of telephone lines, overcoming time zone restraints.

The significance of these developments becomes apparent when one realizes how difficult it was only a few years ago to make an international call from or to the Middle East, or to transmit data in any form other than in a Western alphabet. Today one may send anything virtually via E-mail, including videos and documents.

The impact on the Arab world of this new phenomenon, which has been dubbed the third great revolution in world history after the agricultural and the industrial revolutions, has not yet received the attention it deserves. In the Arab world there has been a great deal of heated debate and discussion over the influence of globalization and the new information technologies and their by-products. Some have argued that the information revolution poses certain dangers of Western domination. This is believed to be a result of the preponderance of Western input, and of cultural homogenization. Local languages, culture, religious beliefs and values are threatened by the increased monopolization and conglomerization of the global media, and by the homogenizing nature of its instruments.⁴

4. Edmund Ghareeb and Khaled Mansour, "Al-I'lam al-'Arabi 'ala Masharif al-Qarn al-'Ishrin Bayn Mitraqat al-Dawla wa Sindan al-'Awlama" (The Arab Media at the End of the Twentieth Century: Between the Hammer of the State and the Anvil of Globalization), a forthcoming article to be published in *Bahithat*, Beirut, 2000. See also *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, (London) 6 March 2000. Dr. 'Awatif Abd al-Rahman, a media specialist at Cairo University, argues that satellites and the Internet are penetrating Arab culture and aiming at domesticating Arab minds. She states that the Internet is not, in itself, dangerous but there is a danger in how it is used, and since there is no neutral information every idea is influenced by its source of origin. She points out that the three major news wires are Western and that 88 percent of the Internet is in English and 9 percent is in German and

This situation requires the preservation of the diversity of communication sources, in substance as well as style, especially as Internet standardization increases. A recent article in the pan-Arab *al-Quds al-'Arabi* newspaper argued that the new international order requires its own intellectual informational institution to propagate and manipulate mass consciousness to justify its legal, behavioral, and ethical rules. The article goes on to say that if “monopolizing the right to use force, and to punish and deter (through unilateral or collective military attacks, economic sanctions, international boycotts, and long term starvation), are the characteristics of the New World Order, then monopolizing information and controlling its sources and the right to monopolize the truth is the basic visible characteristic of the dictatorial new information system.”⁵

Others, however, believe that this phenomenon is here to stay, and unless the Arabs master the new technologies and become full participants, not merely consumers, they are likely to be left by the wayside.

The new technologies, which are crucial for international business' ability to remain competitive in the international markets, are ideally suited for the spread of political and social ideas. They provide easy access to information and deliver it rapidly. Consequently they may also be changing the nature of the decision-making process in each country, weakening hierarchical systems, reducing the power of the state, and redistributing power downward.

In August, 1998, the questions of globalization, media, culture, and security facing the Middle East were discussed at a symposium organized by al-Moutamid ibn 'Abbad Summer University in Asilah, Morocco, attended by prominent journalists, academics, and officials from the Arab world, Europe, and the United States. One of the points raised in the seminar, by this writer and others, focused on the transforming impact of the information revolution, particularly the impact new pan-Arab radio, press and satellite television, is having on the region and how they are forming a new pan-Arab public opinion from the bottom up and not from the top down, as was the case in the past.

These new media have transformed the way many Arabs receive their news as well as their entertainment programs and have, at least for now, reduced the ability of governments to control the flow of information.

What are these new media and how do they function? The new Arab mass media which reach across state boundaries include satellite television, pan-Arab newspapers, and magazines, most of which are published outside the Arab world, and the Internet. They are transforming the way many Arabs, in different countries and among different generations, know about and interact with each other. One of their main characteristics is that they are not limited to addressing only a local or regional audience, but are reaching out to a wider audience in the Arab world and among the Arab immigrant communities in Europe, the Americas, and Australia. The new media may be creating a new, Arab, public opinion, not

2 percent is in French. She calls for new satellite programming because 80 percent of it is entertainment oriented and 9 percent is sports.

5. Salam 'Abboud, “*Jihaz al-I'lam al-'Arabi al-Dawli Sagh wa 'ala Muridihi wa Taghalghal Fi Qana'at Khusumihi*”, (The International Information System Shaped The Consciousness of its Devotees and Penetrated Deeply into the Convictions of its Opponents) *Al-Quds al-'Arabi*, London, 27 March 1998.

necessarily based on ideology, but which has manifested itself, for example, in the opposition to sanctions and US strikes on Iraq. These new media are providing increasing numbers of average Arabs greater and greater amounts of information about each other, about their countries, and about the world.

Another feature of this new media, especially satellite TV, is the ease with which they are able to transcend geographical boundaries and time barriers. In the view of some critics, this phenomenon may also be opening the door for greater domination by Western media, as a result of the fierce competition over revenue dollars and of the increasing reliance on a small number of Western news agencies such as Reuters, The Associated Press, and *Agence France-Presse*. Some Arab scholars and politicians have warned that reliance only on these sources is driving the process of globalization, and leading to homogenization of news and of culture, with the increasing reliance on Western standards of newsworthiness such as speed, newness, crises sensationism, and seeing news primarily as a commodity. For others, however, the new media appear to be offering greater liberalization, more information, and a diversity of news sources.

As an example of this, a senior Yemeni official involved in leading his country's recent election campaign spoke of his surprise when he went to the countryside to hear local villagers speaking of issues such as privatization and globalization. And when he asked about their source of information, he was told it was from watching satellite TV, particularly al-Jazeera, Abu Dhabi, and The Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC).⁶

These satellite channels are also being used as a conduit for public diplomacy by various regional and international players, who are using their appearances on them to get their messages across to regional governments as well as to the Arab public. The effectiveness of the media is being recognized by regional experts and, significantly, by US officials who are seeking to grant interviews to these channels to present US views about regional and international affairs.

A recent study on the new Arab media by Jon Alterman of the US Institute of Peace goes beyond analyzing the media, drawing conclusions, and offering policy recommendations to US decision-makers on how better to deal with these ongoing changes and how to confront the re-emergence of an "Arabism", which Alterman believes "could pose significant challenges for US interests in the Middle East, especially if anti-Americanism becomes a central component of that movement".⁷ Alterman cites the role of the pan-Arab media in "stirring up anger against US sanctions on Iraq" The study's recommendations include:

- Engaging the emerging class of well-educated and well-traveled Arabs;
- Seeking to win support among the Arab middle classes;
- Increasing understanding of the nature of Arab public opinion in order to help shape it;

6. Conversation with a senior Yemeni official, March, 2000.

7. Jon Alterman, *New Media, New Politics: From Satellite Television to the Internet in the Arab World*, (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Paper No 48, 1998), pp. 77-79.

- Encouraging public diplomacy by providing greater access to the Arab media by US officials;
- Devising strategies that actively promote US policy and acknowledge the importance of television images.

Important as these points may be, however, the real problem facing US policy is that Arab public opinion is becoming increasingly disillusioned with, and dismayed by, US policies towards the region, particularly on issues related to Iraq, Libya, Islam, and the Palestinian question. No cosmetic or public relations strategies are likely to succeed as long as US policies are perceived to be hostile to Arab progress and interests and are wedded to a policy of double standards. In fact, the popularity of the new media, particularly al-Jazeera, the Arab News Network (ANN), and Abu Dhabi television is, in part, a reflection of Arab dissatisfaction with both Western and governmental media coverage of the region and its issues.

Prior to the satellite era, most of the media in the Arab world were considered mouthpieces for governments in power, and most of the daily news bulletins were devoted to the activities of the leaders. Consequently many Arabs turned to outside media outlets, such as the BBC, Radio Monte Carlo, and the Voice of America, among others. Many Arabs are thirsty for objective information and diverse analyses and viewpoints on the issues facing their societies, and if the new media outlets fail to deliver they are likely to be ignored. Their popularity, in fact, came about not only because they offered more authoritative news, largely free of governmental control, but more importantly because they were reflecting views and opinions held by many in the area and which are not reflected in the mainstream media.

The years 1998 and 1999 have clearly shown that governments which chose to challenge their US ally, by opposing strikes on Iraq and by not attending the Doha Middle East and North Africa economic summit conference, improved their popularity in the eyes of their own people. Some journalists have argued that the coverage of the Iraq crisis inflamed the public to such an extent that it may have pressured some Arab governments friendly to the US to allow anti-Coalition demonstrations and pressured them to distance themselves from their American ally.⁸

Today, international TV broadcasts which are received through cable or satellite are changing the way information and entertainment are being received in the Middle East. The success of CNN's all news format in attracting a wide regional audience, particularly during the Gulf War, contributed to the rise of the Arabic language networks, such as the Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC). Several of CNN's programs were aired live during the war by Saudi and Egyptian TV stations.

MBC was the first satellite network to offer professional news programs and entertainment to its audience. It was also the first to break the taboo on interviewing Israeli

8. David Hirst, "Qatari Station has Arab World Agog", *The Washington Times*, 19 April 2000. See also al-Kasim, Faisal (al-Qasim, Faysal), "Crossfire: The Arab Version" *Harvard International Journal of Press Politics*, 3 April 1999, pp 93-97.

guests. *Al-Hayat*, a pan-Arab daily newspaper, was the first newspaper to do so among the major pan-Arab newspapers.

One may also point to the reorganization of the French media in the late 1980s and the drive to ensure that French programming is available through France Telecom to North African countries. Some feel that these French channels coincided with, and contributed to, the early stages of building a civic society and political liberalization in Algeria.⁹ Satellite channel access was boosted by community cable networks, with Algerian citizens taking the initiative in gaining access to satellite programs through these community networks. And before that, Saudi officials had recognized the potential power of satellite TV when they used Arabsat (launched in 1985) to send satellite coverage of the Mecca pilgrimage to various audiences in the region. But Arabsat remained underused. In 1990, Egypt, which was previously excluded from Arabsat because of its treaty with Israel, resumed its membership, leased a transponder, and launched 24-hour TV programs in December 1990 to present its point of view to its soldiers stationed in the Gulf during the crisis.

But it was the Gulf War, and particularly the way it was covered by both the Western and Arab media—the Arab media on both sides of the conflict—which became an important catalyst for the rise and success of new satellite channels, especially Al-Jazeera. During the crisis, some Western media outlets, such as Radio Monte Carlo, the BBC, and the VOA along with CNN, made their presence felt. Western reporting was seen as having more impact and credibility than Iraqi or other Arab accounts.

CNN's coverage of the Gulf War strengthened the idea of 24 hour news coverage and helped the network to cement its role as a global actor. For many Arabs, however, including media people, the war accentuated the frustration at the state of affairs in which most of the reporting was done by reporters from a small number of Western countries, themselves a party to the conflict. Many were turned off by the gloating about the superiority of Western technology and weaponry and the lack of interest in Iraqi civilian casualties. Some were disappointed by the unquestioning or cheerleading attitude of many Western journalists during the war. Some saw the Western media playing the role of the lap-dog instead of that of the watch-dog. Some reporters took advantage of the situation and began to call for the strengthening of the local and pan-Arab media.¹⁰ One of the consequences of the war was that it seemed to de-mystify Western media and to give some Arab journalists more self-confidence. They discovered that Western journalists are not free of bias nor of the need to make compromises with the powers that be. A powerful column written by Jamal al-Din Karmawi in the Tunisian *al-Hurriya* declared: "There was a time when we avoided looking Western reporters in the eye. They created many a complex in us, made us feel like dwarfs and convinced us that we are incompetent. . . . But we saw them in action and we could not believe it. We saw them committing perjury. We

9. Naomi Sakr, "Satellite Broadcasting in the Middle East and North Africa: Regulations, Access and Impact", an unpublished paper delivered at the Article 19 International Seminar, Cairo, February 1998, p.3.

10. Oussama Romdhani, "The American Image in Tunisia: The viewpoint of a Tunisian Reporter," Washington, 12 March 1991, a talk given as part of a panel analyzing the media performance during the Gulf War.

saw them displaying hypocrisy and animosity. We saw them shaping public opinion in their hands like clay. . . We saw them romanticizing smart bombs and the so-called bloodless surgical technology. We have seen them weep for an oil-soaked bird and describe the torn limbs of Iraqi victims as pro-Saddam propaganda. There was a time when we thought they were from another planet where regimes, peoples, plants, and trees breathe democracy. And we almost believed that. The recent events have opened our eyes".¹¹

It was such sentiments, as well as the loss of faith in the governmental news agencies and other media outlets, which helped to pave the way for the rise and, more importantly, the popularity of al-Jazeera and other pan-Arab media outlets which operated in accordance with Western standards of journalism and which were relatively free.

THE EMERGENCE OF SATELLITE NETWORKS

Satellites began to have their major impact for the first time in the Arab media world when they were used to transmit satellite-printed daily papers such as the Saudi-owned *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and later *al-Hayat*, both edited in London but printed in Arab cities such as Casablanca, Riyadh and Cairo.

A number of new satellite television channels emerged in the early 1990s. The Saudi-owned MBC, the leader in news programs until the emergence of al-Jazeera, was launched in 1991, with an estimated 3 billion pounds in capital from London by Shaykh Salih Kamil and Shaykh Walid bin Ibrahim al-Ibrahin, who had close ties to the Saudi Royal Family. It was part of the effort by Saudi Arabia to present its views to the Arab world, which had begun with the launching of *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* in 1978, and other newspapers and magazines in the 1980s. MBC carried credible news and current affairs programs with Western-style reporting, and became one of the leaders in news and entertainment programs. It dealt with some topics which were previously considered taboo. But it avoided sensitive issues, especially those dealing with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. It also offered sports, fashion programs, and movies. MBC, which saw itself as "a pioneering news provider . . . and as number 1" when it comes to providing popular programming for all the family "whether they are nine or 90".¹² The channel also enjoyed considerable advertising and was a leader in advertising revenues. MBC, however, despite the private nature of its ownership, was unable to make a profit and was forced to let hundreds of its employees go. It is currently considering moving to Dubai.¹³ It has also begun to make dramatic changes in its programming and style to meet the challenges of its competitors. A new current affairs program hosted by veteran Egyptian journalist 'Abbas Mutawalli has been launched from the US.

Shaykh Salih Kamil pulled out of MBC in 1993 and launched his own Arab Radio and Television network (ART). It operates out of Rome, as well as other locales, and is

11. Jamal al-Din Karmawi, *al Hurriya*, (Tunis), 26 January 1991.

12. "Welcome to MBC", <http://www.mbctvsat.co/english/abot-frm/intr-bdy.html>.

13. *Al-Hayat*, (London) 8 March 2000. p. 8. see also Khaled Hroub, "Repatriating the Offshore Arab Media", *Middle East International*, 7 April 2000, pp.22-23.

jointly owned by Kamil and Prince al-Walid bin Talal. It is mainly an entertainment channel, but has some political discussion and interview programs which broke some taboos. ART is one of the largest of these networks in terms of reach. It has pioneered specialized broadcasting and has a number of channels offering movies, children's programs, and the Islamic cultural channel *Iqra'*. Jordan followed by launching its satellite channel in 1993. The Moroccan TV channel RTM began broadcasting by satellite in 1994.

Orbit, another Saudi channel, owned by the Al-Mawarid Group, began operating a pay-TV service out of Italy in 1994. It later went into an unsuccessful joint all-news and documentary TV venture with the BBC to launch an Arabic news channel in 1994. The BBC Arabic TV's decision to air a voice-over BBC Panorama program, with Saudi opposition guests denigrating Saudi Arabia's judicial system and accusing it of violating human rights, led Orbit to withdraw its support. Orbit, as a result of its special arrangements with Rupert Murdoch's Star TV, now offers customers a number of channels, including MSNBC and Sky News. It is mainly an entertainment and variety channel. But Orbit, along with the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), may be credited with launching political discussion programs with call-in lines. In 1996, Orbit started a lively political discussion and debate show hosted by a prominent Egyptian journalist, 'Imad al-Din Adib, which aired political debates and calls by the audience. Like most TV satellite channels, Orbit has suffered financial losses and has reportedly announced plans to move to Bahrain, where it would enjoy cheaper costs and a more beneficial tax environment.¹⁴

LBC was initially launched on 23 August 1985 as a terrestrial channel by the Lebanese Forces militia during the Lebanese civil war, at a time when the country was going through political turmoil. It faced numerous difficulties during its early years, and staying on the air was a constant struggle. There were times when its offices in the city of Junieh were bombed; its employees and technicians would move the equipment to shelters. When it was forced to move its offices to the town of Adma in one day, it continued to broadcast its news bulletins from its mobile studio on the road and quickly drew a large audience.¹⁵ With the end of the war, LBC began to broadcast via satellite. In 1997 LBC International, which unlike LBC is partly owned by Saudi Shaykh Sabih Kamil, and which was well known for its entertainment (comedy, drama, sports, children's music, and cultural programs), began a number of lively and distinctive political and cultural discussions and news programs. It also pioneered the first dubbed Mexican soap operas which quickly became overnight successes. The station also broadcasts hundreds of hours of American comedy and drama. It employs about 450 people, including a large professional news staff. In 1996, the station faced a threat to its news programs when the government warned that its programs were negatively affecting

14. Khaled Hroub, "Repatriating the Offshore Arab Media".

15. *Al-Majalla*, (London) 21–27 December 1997, p. 64.

Lebanon's relations with its neighbors.¹⁶ LBC challenged the government in the courts and continued to broadcast its satellite news program. In 1996, the government decided to censor all news programs, as well as direct and indirect political programs, and establish a censorship board. LBC went to court and won. Nevertheless, LBC news programs are not now its strongest area, although Lebanese and regional news are dealt with in a professional and comprehensive way. Some believe LBC, like other Lebanese and non-Lebanese satellite channels, exercises self-censorship. It quickly acquired a wide audience and came to play a dominant role on the satellite scene, in terms of audience (60 percent), and gained a large share of the advertising market revenues in Lebanon and in the Gulf, because of its popular entertainment and cultural programs.¹⁷ It also has lively programs and interviews. One of these programs, *Hawar al-'Umr* (Dialogue of Life) features interviews with prominent cultural and political luminaries from Lebanon as well as the Arab world. Earlier this year, LBCI carried a wide-ranging interview with Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq 'Aziz. Among previous guests were Ahmad Sa'id of *Sawt al-'Arab* (Voice of the Arabs) fame and prominent Egyptian writer and confidant of President Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir, Muhammad Hassanayn Haykal, among many others. *Kalam al-Nas* (People's Talk) hosted by Marcel Ghamem was the first Arab political talk show but it focused mainly on Lebanese politics.

Among its more famous programs is *'Al-Layla Laylatak* (The Night is Yours). This program offers interviews with prominent political or social personalities. The interviews are conducted by young women interviewers who "roast" the guest. This, and some of the other LBC programs, have led to accusations that its female presenters wear revealing clothes and that the programs have sexual overtones. The clothes of presenters are, however, no more revealing than those of their Western counterparts. The only program which might deserve the accusation, at least in a Middle Eastern context, is the *Ma ilak illa Hayfa* (No One for You but Hayfa) which is similar to exercise programs offered on American TV, with attractive women wearing leotards and dancing to Western music.

LBCI has wide appeal, particularly to youth, to women, and to the Lebanese expatriate community all over the world, including the Gulf and other parts of the Arab world, Europe, the Americas and Australia. Last year, LBCI had over 40,000 subscribers in the US alone, and is widely believed to be the only satellite channel not losing money.¹⁸

Another major channel popular among Lebanese and Arab expatriates and in the Gulf and other areas is Future TV, which was given a license to broadcast in 1996 with lively entertainment programs, interviews, and professional news, and current affairs programs. It is owned by Lebanese billionaire and former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. Future and LBCI, as well as some of the other entertainment oriented satellite channels, provide soap operas, local and foreign news programs, talk, fashion, nature, and children's shows (mostly American), interviews, concerts, and game shows where prizes are donated to winners by the advertisers. The Egyptian Satellite Channel (ESC) is the second or third

16. Nabil Dajani, "Lebanese Broadcasting Scene and Regulation", an unpublished paper delivered on 25 April 2000 at Georgetown University, pp. 17-18.

17. Al-Majalla 21-27 December 1997.

18. Interview with an LBC staffer, April 1999.

most popular satellite channel. It offers news and entertainment programs. Its repertoire of old movies and entertainment shows are its main attractions. It is popular among Egyptian expatriates for news and its Egyptian programs and is popular on the Arab scene for its movies.

AL-JAZEERA

But while LBC may be the queen of entertainment satellite channels, it is the Qatari-owned and based Al-Jazeera, the first specialized Arab news channel, which has been making waves in the region in the area of news and debate programs.

Al-Jazeera, which started on 1 November 1996, has become the most widely viewed news network in the Arab world because of its independence and willingness to break taboos imposed by governments. It also offers daring news programs and political debates between guests with widely divergent views. In addition, it offers some viewer call-in programs. Al-Jazeera hired many of the staff of the Arabic news channel jointly launched by the BBC and the Saudi-owned Orbit when disagreements between the two media corporations over financing and agenda led to that venture's failure.

In 1995, a new and youthful Amir with untraditional views, Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa, came to power by deposing his father. He has sought to liberalize and open up Qatari politics by increasing political transparency and public participation. Women have been given the right to vote, a first in the Gulf, and he has told visitors that he plans to have a constituent assembly, to draw up a Constitution providing for an elected Majlis (Parliament), and support a free press.

Among his government's initiatives was the launching of Al-Jazeera's satellite news channel. The decree to establish it was issued in February 1996, and it began operations in November of the same year. Initially, the idea was to modernize Qatari TV and broadcast it via satellite. However, it was later decided to launch an all-news channel which would compete with the Arabic BBC TV. A Committee of three members was appointed to explore the idea. It was composed of 'Adnan al-Sharif, a prominent journalist, Mahmud al-Sahlawi, a financial advisor from the Foreign Ministry who has close ties to Qatari Foreign Minister Shaykh Hamad bin Jasim al-Thani, and Shaykh Hamad bin Thamir al-Thani, Qatar's Undersecretary of the Ministry of Information, with close ties to the Amir. They went to London, and prepared a six hour pilot program which was later shown to the Amir, who liked it. The Amir initially wanted an entertainment and news channel but was convinced to go ahead with the all-news format. Contacts were also made with some Arabic BBC personnel to join the new channel, including prominent BBC journalists Sami Haddad and Jamil Azar. The collapse of the BBC Arabic TV program was a boon to Al-Jazeera, which then hired several of its staffers. A suggestion was made to bring a British media specialist to become its director, but the idea was rejected because the committee and the Amir wanted an Arab station with Arab talent and expertise. Hamad bin Thamir became the Chairman of the Board, and Muhammad Jasim al-'Ali was chosen

director general and was appointed as a delegate member to the Board. Financial responsibility ultimately rests with the accounting section of the Amiri Diwan.¹⁹

In its first year, Al-Jazeera went on ku-band on Arabsat, which limited its audience in the region. In 1997, it began to broadcast on a C-band transponder following the ouster of a French channel which aired a pornographic film to the Arab world and increased its programming from six to eight, then to 17 hours a day. On 1 February 1998, the channel began to broadcast 24 hours a day.

Al-Jazeera has revolutionized coverage in the Middle East by providing professional and credible news coverage of regional and international issues and by offering heated and sometimes sensationalized debates in the manner of the US program *Crossfire*, on its discussion and call-in programs, such as the famed *al-Ittijah al-Mu'akis* (The Opposite Direction) hosted by Faysal al-Qasim, *al-Rayy al-Akhar* (The Other Opinion) hosted by Sami Haddad and the popular *al-Shari'a wa al-Hayat* (The Shari'a and Life) a popular religious program with prominent scholar and Mufti of Qatar Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. By doing so it has raised the level of debate and opened the door for freer and more accurate news in the Arab world, and does so from Qatar, a small and traditionally conservative Gulf state, with an Arab staff. These programs, breaking political taboos, at times have succeeded in reaching large numbers of viewers in the Middle East and in the US and Europe, with planned expansion to other parts of the world.

Al-Jazeera has helped satisfy a hunger in the Arab world. Its debate and discussion programs are tumultuous even by Western standards. They cover Arab issues in depth and with passion, by offering guests who include government and opposition figures, and who debate taboo issues such as secularism and religion. Feminists and traditionalists, Arab nationalists and local or regional nationalists, Kurdish nationalists and their opponents, and human rights issues have been among the many guests and topics. The channel even raised some eyebrows when the sensitive question of sex was discussed, although it was done from an Islamic perspective during one of Shaykh al-Qaradawi's shows. One *al-Ittijah al-Mu'akis* program between Egyptian Islamist and former Marxist Safinaz Kazim and Toujan Faysal, a former member of the Jordanian Parliament and a committed secularist and feminist, ended with Kazim walking off the set. Another heated encounter, between prominent religious scholar Yusuf al-Badri and Egyptian feminist and writer Nawal al-Sa'dawi made waves in the region. A tape of the debate between Shaykh al-Qaradawi and Professor Sadiq Al-'Azm, an avowed secularist who had been declared an apostate for his 1969 book *Critique of Religious Thought*, sold for \$100 or more in Saudi Arabia.²⁰

According to Shaykh Hamad bin Thamir al-Thani, Al-Jazeera has had problems in certain countries, because of the nature of some of its programs. It has run into difficulty in opening up a bureau or maintaining a full-time correspondent able to transmit live, because its programs had angered these governments. He pointed out, however that the channel's position is gradually becoming accepted as time passes. Recent governmental

19. Interview with a member of Al-Jazeera's Board of Directors, April, 2000.

20. See Hirst "Qatari Station" and al-Kasim "Crossfire".

criticisms however show that Al-Jazeera still has a way to go before this becomes the case. Major expansions into new areas is planned and new bureaus will open in Kuwait, Kabul, Paris, Rabat, and Beirut. Recently the channel established a major presence by opening a large office in Cairo's Information City, with a large production center. Al-Jazeera is expanding its London Office, where it plans to produce programs. More than 25 journalists and technicians work in the office, which produces four daily economic bulletins, has a satellite line open 24 hours a day, and hosts some discussion and debate programs, including *Sirri li al-ghaya* (Top Secret).²¹ The government of Qatar gave \$150 million (others believe the true figure is about \$175 million to subsidize the channel for five years in the hope that it would begin to pay for itself during subsequent years, but only about \$24 million remain of the initial loan offered by the government for this year and Al-Jazeera will require about \$6 million in loans from the government.²² A member of Al-Jazeera's Board has also told this author that the network has begun to pay some of its expenses. This year it has earned about 15 percent of its expenses from advertising, the sale of news programs, documentaries and exclusive pictures, as well as hiring out equipment to other networks. Shaikh Hamad bin Thamir Al-Thani told this writer that he hopes Al-Jazeera will be able to recover 40–60 percent of its costs next year, and that the hope is to go ahead with plans to privatise the channel.²³ An initial feasibility study predicted that Al-Jazeera would be able to begin to cover its cost after five years. But opposition from some Arab governments and their pressure on some advertisers has left its impact.

A contract was signed by Al-Jazeera with the Saudi Tihama advertising agency, but within a year Tihama told them it wanted to break the contract. A suit for \$3 million dollars in damages has been brought against Tihama in a Qatari court.²⁴ A new advertising agency, International Space, has been hired and the revenues have recently begun to increase. But it remains doubtful that Al-Jazeera will be able to cover fully its costs from revenues in the immediate future and it is likely to remain dependent on Qatari government largesse.

Nevertheless it is highly unlikely that the Amir, Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa will let it close for financial reasons. The channel has helped put Qatar on the map and greatly increased its influence on the Gulf, Arab, and regional stages, although it has also brought headaches for his government due to complaints from angry Arab governments. But the Amir believes that it is in his, and his family's and country's interest, to liberalize and open up the system.

After the launching of attacks on Iraq by US and British forces on 16 December 1998 (Operation Desert Fox), Al-Jazeera broadcast interviews with, and/or speeches by, senior Iraqi officials, including President Saddam Husayn, Taha Yasin Ramadan, and Tariq

21. Al-Sharq al-Awsat, London, 31 March 2000.

22. Personal interview with a member of Al-Jazeera's Board of Directors, April 2000. Another source who has worked for Al-Jazeera believes the actual amount provided by the government to be about \$35 million annually for about \$175 million total.

23. Personal interview March 2000.

24. Personal interview with a member of the Board of Al-Jazeera..

'Aziz. On 5 January 1999, it broadcast a speech by the Iraqi President, in which he called for the overthrow of Arab leaders if they remain allied to the US. According to Shaykh Hamad bin Thamer, CNN and the BBC were considered but Al-Jazeera was chosen because of its credibility and wide audience. It may be also that it got these scoops because it has already made its reputation for independence. The Kuwaitis were furious and accused the channel of trying to rehabilitate the Iraqi regime. Articles in the *Al-Jazeera* newspaper in Saudi Arabia denounced its namesake channel as being more dangerous than its Western counterparts, because poisonous ideas through Western channels are easy to handle because their aim is known in advance, but spreading poisonous thoughts and a "different kind of porn" on an Arab channel, concealing itself behind Arab culture and claiming to speak for the overall Arab interest, is characterized as far more dangerous.²⁵

Director General al-'Ali sees the channel as expressing the views of the Arab public, and feels that it has good, highly qualified staff, and that though it may dissatisfy some Arab governments, it satisfies the Arab viewer and saves him from having to go to Western channels, which controlled the Arab mind for a long time.²⁶ He argues that the Arab citizen has a need to watch a daring channel, a channel whose information he can trust. However, the pressure on Al-Jazeera remains high. *Al-Ittijah al-Mu'akis* and *al-Rayy al-Akhar* programs airing in April and May 2000 managed to anger Libya and Tunis respectively, and Iraq criticized Al-Jazeera for its coverage of President Saddam Husayn's birthday celebrations.²⁷ Two Syrian lawyers criticized a program in which Syrian policies came under fire by an Egyptian proponent of normalization with Israel. On 24 April 2000 it was reported that Libya had withdrawn its Ambassador for consultation, and that the Tunisian Ambassador had also left over comments made during an al-Ray al-Akhar program in which mainly opposition members appeared and which Tunisian officials considered to be unfair and unbalanced. Until now, Libyan leader Colonel Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi had been an admirer of the channel and called in on one of its programs to give his point of view. *Al-Quds al-'Arabi* has recently reported that Al-Jazeera was holding an internal conference in early May 2000, to assess its performance over the past four years in light of the tensions its coverage is continuing to generate, but its officials continue to insist that there will be no basic changes in the open and free policies followed by the channel.²⁸ One of the participants who attended this conference told this author that *al-Ittijah al-Mu'akis* received the most attention and garnered mixed reviews. Some participants called on the managers of Al-Jazeera to lower the temperature on some of their programs and make them run more smoothly. Others were fearful that the pressure on Al-Jazeera may infringe on its margin of freedom. Still others called for raising the standards by which guests are selected and suggested inviting guests who are generally at the same level of expertise to present differing points of view.

25. Sulayman al-Shammari, *Barnamij al-Ittijah al-Mu'akis*, ("The Opposite Direction Program") *Dar al-Sharq*, Qatar, pp.138–144.

26. Mohammed Jasim al-Ali, "Al-Jazirah Director Describes Plans", *al-Dustur*, (Amman) 24 April 1999, p. 36.

27. *Al-Hayat*, (London), 2 May 2000 and *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, (London), 4 April and 2 May, 2000.

28. *Al-Quds al-'Arabi*, 4 April and 2 May 2000.

In addition, Al-Jazeera is now telling Arab governments that they are welcome to send representatives to respond to charges from the opposition, and to present their views, and that Al-Jazeera does not take part in disputes. A member of the Board has denied critics' charges that Qatar has used Al-Jazeera for its own purposes, and denied any governmental involvement in programming decisions. "We have not used our weapons against anyone, even though we have been harshly and bitterly criticized. One critic who appeared on Al-Jazeera said we were launched because of the country's [Qatar's] disputes with Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and the channel had an illegitimate birth (because of its BBC links) and will fold once these disputes have been resolved. But we covered topics related to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia with objectivity and balance. We have our credibility to maintain. The Qatar government has not up to now used Al-Jazeera in its battles, although it could have done so, and the authorities have nothing to do with the content."²⁹

Still, several Arab governments view Al-Jazeera with suspicion. Some have accused it of being Islamist-oriented, pro-Iraqi, pro-American, and an agent for normalization with Israel, or have raised questions about its relationship with the BBC since it employs about 25 former BBC staffers. Governments which have criticized Al-Jazeera or protested to the Qatari government once or more include Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Tunisia, Iraq, and Jordan among others. Even the US Embassy protested when a participant urged retaliatory attacks on US targets in the Middle East after a US attack on Iraq.³⁰ It has also been reported that US pressure helped to delay the broadcasting of an interview with Usama bin Ladin, but Al-Jazeera's Director denied that a US protest was made to Al-Jazeera and insisted that the program was delayed because of poor technical quality, and was later aired without any significant changes. Another interview which was not aired when scheduled was an interview on 19 July 1999 with Iranian opposition People's Mujahidin leader Mas'ud Rajavi. The Mujahidin claimed that it was because of Iranian pressure, but officials at Al-Jazeera said that the quality of the tape was not good and that the program would re-air at a later date.³¹

Another criticism against Al-Jazeera is that it is selective in its criticisms of certain Arab countries while not delving deeply into sensitive issues affecting Iran, the Gulf countries, and Qatar itself. It is often pointed out that Al-Jazeera does not interview opposition members from these countries. Shaykh Hamad and the Board member denied this and said that during the trial of accused plotters against the Qatar government, one defendant accused the police of torturing him, and Qatar's hosting of the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) economic summit was criticized in a special program on the channel, as was Qatari Foreign Minister Shaykh Hamad bin Jasim, who was criticized by name on another program.

More recently Al-Jazeera has been widely criticized as favoring normalization with Israel, by inviting Israeli politicians and experts as guests, including former intelligence and security officers. Al-Jazeera officials have insisted that it is essential for Arab

29. Interview with a Board member.

30. Sakr, "Satellite Broadcasting" p 5.

31. *Jordan Times*, (Amman), 28 July 1999.

audiences to know what the Israelis are saying and thinking and that credibility requires hearing what the other side has to say even if one does not agree with it. They also denied charges that they are being used as mouthpieces for Iraq, saying that the Iraqi regime was criticized more than any other on Al-Jazeera's programs. Shaykh Hamad told this writer, "We do not have reservations on anyone, including Islamists and oppositionists. Let them express themselves and let the Arab viewers make up their mind". When asked if there were any "red lines" at Al-Jazeera, he responded that while policies and practices are not above criticism, attacking governments, heads of state, and religious dogmas was not acceptable. Salacious materials will not be shown as well.

Another type of criticism of Al-Jazeera is that it is divisive, uses Western news agency standards and priorities in preparing its news bulletins without taking Arab priorities into account, and is offering fashion and other programs which are not part of Arab culture. Al-Jazeera considers itself an international channel but its success is based on its pan-Arab character. The sensationalist nature of some of its programs, such as *al-Itijah al-Mu'akis*, and particularly the shouting on some programs have angered many viewers. But at the same time, this show and other similar shows and news programs have become the talk of the Arab world for their provocative content and freedom. According to members of its board, Al-Jazeera is considering launching a second channel specializing in cultural and documentary programming. Its ultimate success will depend on its ability to provide news and analysis free of governmental control and which reflects popular sentiments and attitudes.

Another major channel is Arab News Network (ANN) owned by Sumer al-Asad, the nephew of Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad (and son of his exiled brother Rif'at), launched in 1997. ANN has acquired a wide audience and is seeking to broaden it by appealing to pan-Arab public opinion. On 6 January, 1999, during the crisis between Iraq and the US, ANN aired a speech by the Iraqi President calling on countries which share common interests to enter a new social, economic, and defense alliance to promote peace and to oppose hegemony. Colonel Mu'ammad al-Qadhdhafi also gave an interview on 11 December 1998 to ANN, in which he offered to surrender the two Libyans accused of the 1988 Pan Am bombing to be tried in the Netherlands, but only if they were not extradited to Britain or to the US.

Sumer al-Asad and his partners were said to have invested \$100 million for five years and the idea, according to former manager Paul Hitti, was "to put private money together with media power", rather than dealing with companies linked to states.³² He added that the driving ideology was "the values of democracy, freedom of speech, free market and a revival of Arab cultural heritage". ANN initially had 10 regular advertisers. It offered news programs, talk shows, open debates, and in-depth news bulletins. It also had a staff of 75, including journalists and technicians, and for a while it was airing 24 hours a day.

ANN's programming consists of news bulletins, political, economic, and social analysis. Material is gathered from a network of international correspondents to provide

32. Mark Tungate, "Can Arab News Network Become the CNN of the Arab World?", *Reed Business Information Ltd: Media International*, Sept. 1998, p 33.

a global news service; interviews are used to present a variety of viewpoints, and opposing views on contemporary topics are tested through programs such as Current Affairs, Reportage, the talk show *Qanadil fi al-Zalam*, (Lights in the Darkness) and *Muwajahat* (confrontation).

ANN, however, like other channels, has been facing serious economic problems and has been forced to reduce its staff by more than a third. Its officials have also complained about difficulties getting advertising revenues because of the sensitivity of advertisers to government pressures over the content of their programs.³³ ANN has eliminated its five talk shows, and has only recently revived one talk show *Qamadil fi al-Zalan al-Nadi al-Siyasi* (The Political Club) and added a new one.

Other channels which have also emerged, and are currently undergoing dramatic changes that are likely to put them among the top ranks of satellite channels, are the Abu Dhabi and Dubai channels from the United Arab Emirates, which are not simply voices for the host government, and offer excellent news and analysis programs. Since its re-launch on 31 January 2000, the Abu Dhabi channel has emerged as a leader in news and entertainment. Equipped with five studios—including a virtual reality studio—and state-of-the-art equipment, it is reaching a wide audience in the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and North America. It conducted its own survey in the Arab world, and the initial results suggest that the Abu Dhabi channel enjoys a large audience, and some of its programs are considered among the most popular in the Middle East. *Al-Madar*, (Orbit), a news hour considered the principal news program of the channel, appears to have had a very high rating, so efforts were made to increase the number of such news shows, and now, in addition, there are three major news programs a day with analysts and reporters from all over the world.

The Abu Dhabi channel, with about 650 employees, produces about 90 percent of its programs. This feat is unparalleled in the region, as the channel generates 37 programs and 49 newscasts per week—some 300 hours of live or pre-recorded programs and 42 hours of news. (There are seven game and quiz shows, five youth programs, including one interactive-Internet program, four children's shows, six family and women's programs, including one women-only talk show, five entertainment shows, and 10 news programs.) and most programs are carried live and several of them receive viewers' calls.³⁴

The channel enjoys a reputable network of correspondents, covering events from Afghanistan to the UK. Many seasoned correspondents have joined it. From its London studio, twice a day, the channel broadcasts live segments covering European news.

In less than four months, the Abu Dhabi satellite television service appears to be making a niche for itself in the overcrowded space of the Middle East news. It has received awards for the best interactive program for Click; best investigative reporting for *'Ala al-Ard* (On the Ground); and best innovative program idea for Censor's Scissors, a

33. Interview with a senior ANN director, March 1999. He also said that ANN may have launched too early and that he sees no light at the end of the tunnel and the plan is simply to survive until circumstances change.

34. Interview with a senior official, April 2000. Abu Dhabi's costs are said to be around \$50 million annually.

popular program featuring journalists, writers, and movie producers whose work has been censored in the Arab world.

Abu Dhabi has the potential to emerge as a leader in the field of news. It has the necessary foundation for improvement and enjoys several unique and distinct advantages over other regional networks:

- 1) Strong financial support;
- 2) State-of-the-art technology;
- 3) A sufficient degree of journalistic freedom.

Its ultimate success, however, will depend on its management's ability to provide professional news with a sufficient degree of freedom, diverse opinions, and an ability to focus on issues of interest to the larger Arab audience. The UAE's Minister of Information, Shaykh 'Abdallah bin Zayid, has recently called for the elimination of censorship on all Arab news.³⁵

THE PAN-ARAB NEWSPAPERS

The idea of cross-border media is not new. Arab newspapers and magazines, such as *Al-Jawa'ib*, *Al-Huda*, *Al-Hilal* and *Al-Muqtataf*, had regional audiences long before Arab independence. The pro-Nasir Egyptian *Sawt al-'Arab* (Voice of the Arabs) radio was, until 1967, extremely influential and was widely listened to by Arabs from Morocco to the Gulf and beyond. Lebanese newspapers such as *al-Nahar*, *al-Hayat*, and *al-Anwar* were widely read by officials, intellectuals and activists outside Lebanon's borders. But the phenomenon of the cross-border pan-Arab newspapers and magazines really belongs to the 1970s and 1980s. The Lebanese civil war was the turning point for establishing transnational Arab media outside the Arab World. The Lebanese press, which had been the freest in the Arab world and one of the freest and most diverse in the world, paid a heavy price during the war. Some of the Lebanese papers, with an audience outside Lebanon, moved to London or Paris. Lebanon's leading newspaper, *al-Nahar*, began to publish *al-Nahar al-'Arabi wa al-Dawali* (Arab and International *al-Nahar*) out of Paris; the weekly Lebanese magazine *al-Hawadith* began to publish out of London. Others followed. Some of these publications were not financially independent and relied on Arab governments for support. It was during this period that we began to see the emergence of Saudi-owned or financed media empires, launched out of Europe, newspapers (and later, satellite channels), intended in part to promote the Saudi perspective in the Arab world.

Most of the major Arab dailies which are published outside the Arab world, such as *Al-Hayat*, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, *al-Zaman*, and *al-'Arab*, are published out of London, although the first three are published simultaneously by satellite in a number of Arab countries or in the US. Most of these publications continue to be subsidized by their owners or backers. High cost appears to be leading some to return to the Arab world and find new headquarters. Some editors and journalists believe that there is no longer any justification for the newspapers to remain outside the Arab world.

35. *Al-Itihad* (Abu Dhabi), 19 April 2000.

Furthermore, the factors which led them to open in offices in London—such as modern technology, access to information, and greater freedom—are no longer as important. Today, physical location is not as important as it once was, and modern technology has made it easy to receive and publish or broadcast information from anywhere. And furthermore, many of these publications have not made full use of the freedom offered to them abroad.³⁶

Al-Hayat, literally Life, was originally launched by the famous Lebanese editor and journalist Kamil Mrowe, who was assassinated in the 1960s. His family suspended publication of the paper and its sister, *The Daily Star*, during Lebanon's civil war. It resumed publishing in 1990 with joint Mrowe family and Saudi financing. It was later bought completely by Prince Khalid bin Sultan, who led Saudi and other coalition forces during Desert Storm; he is a son of Saudi Defense Minister Prince Sultan.

Al-Hayat is the newspaper of the Arab elite and of Arab expatriates. The paper deals with Arab and world issues with greater objectivity and comprehensiveness than is normally the case in most Arab newspapers. But this critical approach does not apply when it comes to dealing with sensitive Saudi or Gulf issues. Its former editor, a prominent Lebanese editor and columnist, Jihad al-Khazen, said that at times he felt he “was not so much covering the news as covering it up” when editors brought him certain stories in order to avoid being banned the next day in various countries; he pointed out that editors know the dos and the don'ts of the trade.³⁷ But despite this knowledge the paper was banned 60 times in 1994, 35 times in 1995, and 20 times in 1997. An editor can also afford to anger authorities in areas where the advertising revenues are small but not so when it might affect a larger market. Nevertheless, a newspaper such as *Al-Hayat*, which is not necessarily a strictly-for-profit operation, has a much wider margin of freedom. The paper also publishes a weekly news magazine, *Al-Wasat*.

Al-Hayat comes closer than most such papers to Western standards of journalism. It is technically sophisticated and was the first to print color photos. Its staff, though a large percentage are Lebanese, also include a wide range of other countries of origin and diversity of opinion. It has, to a large extent, maintained the tradition of Lebanon's free press. *Al-Hayat* has given a voice to Islamist, pan-Arabist, and Marxist voices as well as to current and former US officials. The paper has also seen fierce debates over normalization with Israel and the Arab-Israeli peace process, although the fierceness of the debate does not reach the intensity of that on the satellite television channels.

Al-Sharq al-Awsat, literally “The Middle East”, was the first of the Saudi-owned, European-based papers to begin publishing, and to offer a pan-Arab and Islamic perspective. It was started by the Saudi publishers Hisham and Muhammad ‘Ali Hafiz, but is owned by Prince Ahmad bin Salman bin ‘Abd al-Aziz. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* has the largest circulation of the pan-Arab dailies, and carries a large number of advertisements. The publishers, known as Saudi Research and Marketing, also publish a number of other

36. Khaled Hroub, “Repatriating the Offshore Arab Media”.

37. Jihad al-Khazen, “Censorship and State Control of the Press in the Arab World”, *Harvard International Journal of Press Politics*, v.4 no.3 (1999), pp. 87–92.

specialized magazines, such as the weekly newsmagazine *Al-Majalla*, *Sayyidati* for women, *al-Rajul* for men, and *Basim* for children.

Al-Sharq al-Awsat publishes in several Arab capitals and the US simultaneously. Yet, because it sells two-thirds of its publications in the Saudi market it has to respect Saudi sensitivities. Like *Al-Hayat* it is technologically sophisticated and looks like a Western newspaper.

The third major pan-Arab daily is *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, perhaps the only major pan-Arab paper which does not have Saudi financial backing, although it is rumored that it has some other Gulf support as well as some private Palestinian support. It was believed to have been launched by Palestinians with close ties to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and although the paper defends the Palestinian cause it has at times been critical of the Palestinian Authority's policies. The paper also publishes criticisms of Saudi and some Gulf states' domestic and foreign policies which do not appear in the Saudi-backed papers. It is probably one of the most daring in this area, and it gives greater attention to Arab issues particularly those of Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, and the Maghreb countries. Its op-ed page reflects considerable diversity, including Islamist, Arab nationalist, and secularist views. Its news pages rely extensively on wire services and it has few correspondents. The December 1999/January 2000 incidents between Copts and Islamists in al-Kushih, Egypt, received a thorough discussion from varying perspectives. It has a much smaller circulation than *al-Hayat* and *al-Sharq al-Awsat*.

Al-Zaman, a new, slickly produced paper edited by Iraqi opposition figure Sa'd al-Bazzaz, is published in London, focusing on Iraqi and Kurdish issues as well as general Arab and North African affairs. Another paper, *al-'Arab*, is owned by former Libyan Minister Ahmad al-Huni.

A number of Egyptian, Kuwaiti, and Jordanian newspapers also produce international satellite editions, but because of their clear national or regional identity they are mostly read by expatriates of that nationality. However, the international edition of Egypt's *al-Ahram*, initially a voice aimed at reaching the Egyptian community abroad, is beginning to reach a wider Arab audience, particularly among Arab expatriates in Europe and the US. Several newspapers such as *al-Hayat*, *al Quds al-Arabi* as well as many of those printed in the Arab world have put full text on-line. This has been used to get around censorship. The Egyptian Islamist opposition newspaper *al-Sha'b* was recently banned after its articles provoked violent demonstrations against a novel by Syrian writer Haydar Haydar. They are now considering the legality of continuing to publish on-line.

The pan-Arab newspapers remain limited in circulation and influence. Governments continue to ban them at the borders when they challenge the official version of events. It is also important to emphasize that while some of the transnational newspapers seek to reach a large Arab audience, they have their limitations. Some suffer from the constraints placed upon them by the agendas of their owners or backers. Some Arab governments also block the distribution of one or more of the newspapers and magazines on occasion and may ban them for a day or more when they publish controversial reports about the government.

THE INTERNET

As for the Internet, the Arab world is gaining greater connectivity, but has experienced one of the lowest rates of Internet growth in the world. Accurate numbers are hard to come by but recent survey indicates that the number of Arab Internet users is 1.9 million, or 0.7 percent of total world users, and will rise to 12 million by the end of 2002.³⁸ Industry analysts however, expressed concern that growth will then be hampered because of the inadequate technological infrastructure. The highest percentage of users in the Gulf is 15 percent, in the UAE, 6.1 percent in Qatar, six percent in Bahrain and 5.7 percent in Lebanon.

The region shows quite diverse responses to the Internet. Prior to 1990, there were only a small number of research institutions, mainly universities, in the Arab Middle East which had some connection to the Internet. The connections were limited to tele-medical and research networks, due to cost and lack of investment. The picture began to change as the Gulf countries began to invest in telecommunications, and as Egypt and some other governments began to stress technological development. Business also played an important role in its expansion.

Arab emigres, mostly living in the US and Europe, were the first to bring their cultural, political, and Islamic interests and content to cyberspace and helped to define it. They were among the creators and first users of Internet technology. They shared with their counterparts from other countries the interests, values and world-view associated with the Internet, including open and rapid communication. They used it to project their ties to Arab culture and community on-line. They created mailing lists, news groups, and Web sites dealing with topics ranging from Arabic music to searching for cheap tickets to the Middle East, from looking for wives to finding *halal* grocers and the nearest mosque or church. But, as Jon Anderson rightly points out, “the Diaspora Arabs provide only a partial bridge to their homelands.”⁴⁰

More importantly, the Internet is now being spread in the Arab world by business people, both through commercial enterprises and private individuals; an estimated 72 percent of users in the region access the Internet from home while 22 percent use it at work, four percent at educational institutions, and two percent in Internet cafes.⁴¹ Local providers see “chat” as a great attraction. Governments continue to exercise controls, because of the presence of “objectionable” material ranging from pornography, to libelous and other legally objectionable material; this also allows the authorities to restrict access to political dissidents’ messages.

Obviously, the Internet is in some ways far more powerful than any of the other technologies so far discussed. While satellite TV can transcend borders, it requires major

38. “Internet Use Skyrocketing in the Middle East”. NUA Internet Surveys Ltd, 9 March 2000 <http://www.nua.net/surveys/?f=VS&art-id=905355646&rel=true>.

39. “Internet Use Skyrocketing in the Middle East”.

40. Jon Anderson, *Arabizing the Internet*, (Abu Dhabi) 1998 p. 31.

41. “Report Profiles usage patterns in Middle East”, NUA Internet Surveys Ltd, 9 August 1999. The report shows that 44 percent are college graduates, 18 percent have post-graduate degrees, and 3.5 percent with Ph.Ds, and 69.6 percent of the users were between 21 and 35 years old.

capital investments, a TV studio, and a satellite link to broadcast, while anyone with Internet access can maintain a web page, based in the US or Europe, which is accessible to anyone. Governments may be able to block certain sites, but bureaucrats are not always as versatile or as creative as computer users and those maintaining the sites, who can change addresses frequently or create multiple “mirror” pages. Web pages thus appeal to some opposition groups seeking to get their messages across. Nevertheless, cost, language, and literacy are problems.

LIMITATIONS AND PROSPECTS

World Wide Web access has the capability to shape and influence the Arab region in an unprecedented way. One, however, must be careful not to exaggerate the impact of this new media phenomenon. Today, technical infrastructure problems constrain the ability of the Internet (and even satellite TV) to reach the majority of the Arabs. The number of phone lines is limited and consequently the number of Internet postings is also limited. Though satellite television is more widely accessible, it has only a small audience in poorer Arab countries, and most viewers watch entertainment rather than news and public affairs programs. And only the well-to-do can afford the high price of the pan-Arab daily newspapers or satellite connections. The number of those who can afford to buy computers, know English, and access the Internet is still quite minuscule.

But, even in countries where Internet access is still sharply limited, the technology represents an open door to the outside world. Even before the growth of the World Wide Web, opposition groups would sometimes fax their documents randomly in the assumption that some employee might then spread the document. Similarly, even when Internet access is restricted to a small elite, some may be willing to spread a message they come across.

The technology of the information revolution has advanced so rapidly over the past few years that government regulators cannot easily keep up with it. This is true in the West and in the Middle East. The information revolution has given virtually everyone who can read and write, and particularly wealthy elites, access to much of the world. The political implications are still being pondered, and just as it is almost impossible to predict the precise course of the information revolution, it is equally difficult to predict the long-term political impact.

The growth of these media and networks has broadened the cross-border discourse. Their programs have given Arabs all over the Arab world the opportunity not only to receive more authoritative news and analysis programs but more importantly to learn more about each others’ traditions, music, arts, and even dialect. The new media are encouraging increasing cultural unity among the Arabs by acknowledging their diversity, by helping to reflect and mobilize public opinion on issues of common concern, and by overcoming some narrow regional loyalties.

The proliferation of the satellite channels, of the pan-Arab press, and of the Internet provides a forum of free expression at a time when restrictions on such freedoms are prevalent. In several Arab countries, their impact has led to a reduction in the audience of

the official media, which has, in turn, led to pressures on this official media to open up to absorb the shock created by the broad access to satellites. Human rights activists and non-governmental organizations have been using the Internet more effectively to overcome their limited resources and limited access to government media. And newspapers are beginning to publish online as a means of getting around censorship. Nevertheless, the Arab media continue to face pressures from governments and their legal institutions, pressures from conservative states and religious status quo forces, from civic organizations and from new market forces which seek to minimize or avoid serious coverage or criticisms of vital issues in countries seeking to join market forces or which face alliances between businessmen and politicians. The media in the Arab world continue to suffer from governmental censors (opposed to anything which may be politically challenging) and from religious groups and organizations which seek to censor writings or art works which challenge religious dogma or public morality.

Satellite channels have become competitive. Those who proved to offer genuine debate and a clash of ideas appear to be leading the pack. This in part explains the popularity of Al-Jazeera. Al-Jazeera, at times, becomes so excessive that it provides opportunities for its competitors to offer more positive exchanges. "Satellite culture" has provided a stimulus to other channels, including government-owned local media, by its breach of acceptable constraints, thus helping to broaden the limitations on debate and to enhance the level of authentic democratic exchange. Satellite channels have also provided Arab audiences professional newsmaking organizations, addressing their issues and in their language. But they appear to be taking advertising revenues from print publications.⁴²

The imperviousness of satellites to censorship has led to an emboldening of popular expression of opinion. It has rendered political elites somewhat vulnerable, and made their behavior subject to scrutiny more than ever before. It has helped to pave the ground for change in the political culture throughout the Arab world.

But the Arab world currently lacks the ability to deal with the consequences of this ferment in a consistent and organized way. This breakthrough to freedom has also been an invitation to confused responses, in the absence of well organized civic political institutions and organizations on the overall, pan-Arab level. This period is likely to be a transitional one, of ferment and dynamism but without an equally corresponding clarity of direction and purpose. But the expansion and advance of satellites and the speed with which this has been accomplished, along with the signs of enthusiasm with which they have been received, portends a definite change away from coercion. But it will require continuity and a measure of institutional discipline for this ferment to be transformed into a sustained democratic experience.

The other positive element of satellites is that they have broken, to a limited extent, the monopoly of Western control over sources of information, which led to an unhealthy

42. The competition from satellite TV is reducing the amount of money which used to be spent on print publications. In 1998, the GCC states spent \$1.9 billion on advertising, a 21 percent increase over 1997, but 46 percent went to pan-Arab satellite TV with 24 percent going to Egyptian media and 30 percent to media in other countries. Xinhua News Agency, 22 February 1999.

polarization between those influenced by the Western systems of culture and those afraid of being co-opted by them.

Some of the main players in the new media, such as Shaykh Pierre al-Dhahir of LBC, argue that foreign channels are already beginning to invade the Arab market and are buying the right to air certain Arab sports events, such as the games of the Arab Football Clubs, and entertainment programs and are seeking rights to Arab talent (singers, actors, broadcasters) in order to then sell them back to the Arab audiences.⁴³

al-Dhahir argues that Arabs cannot retreat from globalization or allow others to dominate the process, but must be full partners. The future, he states, lies in contributing to the process of globalization by Arabizing the sources of information and producing their own entertainment and public affairs programs, instead of importing them from abroad. Now only 3000 hours of programming are produced by Arabs annually, a small fraction of total programming.

The creation of greater Arab cultural unity through the broadening of cross-border discourse, the accessibility to more authoritative news and analysis, the exposure to other Arab cultural traditions, may all combine to help create a common Arab agenda, and perhaps more important, may plant the seeds for the growth of a more active and involved citizenry, which is better informed and is interested in participating in the decision-making process.



43. See Ghareeb and Mansour, *Al-I'lam al-'Arabi*. See also the speech given by Abd al-Hafiz al-Hargham, the director general of the Union of Arab Broadcasters, to the Emergency Session for Coordination Among Satellite Channels, Beirut 14–16 May 1999.