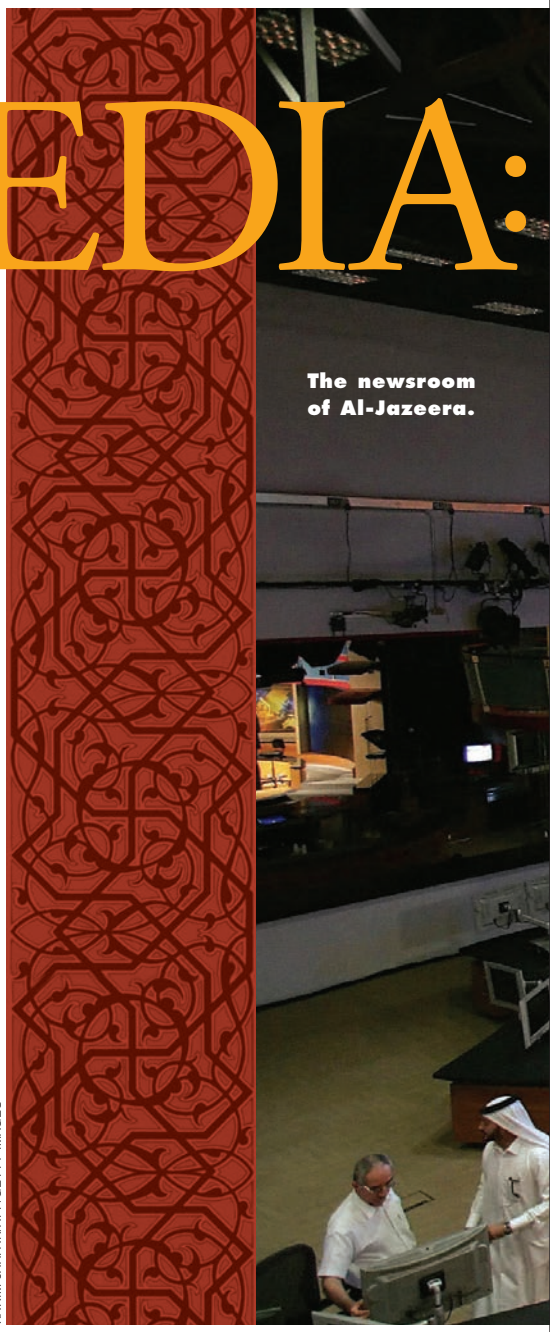
by
Anne Nelson

Arab Media:



The newsroom of Al-Jazeera.

KARIM JAAFAR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Egypt's Facebook Girl

Last April, hundreds of journalists crowded into an opulent hotel conference room for the annual Arab Media Forum in Dubai. Much of the subject matter would have been painfully familiar to journalists in the West: anxious talk about the hemorrhage of newspaper ads to the Internet, tense remarks by television executives on the challenges of convergence and broadband.

But one of the most highly charged sessions (I was among the speakers) had little to do with journalism as we know it. The final panel, "Freedom: The New Battlefront for Arab Cyber Media" opened with a video clip of Esra Abdel Fattah, otherwise known as Egypt's "Facebook Girl." The report described how the young Egyptian woman, who had no previous record of political activity, had been involved with a Facebook group in support of a national strike. The "6 April" strike was sparked by workers' protests against skyrocketing food prices, which had only begun to climb in the West but were already crippling working-class households in developing countries.

Digital technology is bringing rapid change to Arab nations, from protests to social interactions, and the effects will be felt far beyond regional borders.

No one could have predicted the Facebook group's appeal: over 70,000 users joined in the course of only a few weeks. Egyptian authorities, alarmed, arrested Esra and other young activists en route to a demonstration, and placed them in 15 days detention.

The journalists meeting in Dubai were visibly shaken by the video, which showed the young woman as she ran, sobbing, into the arms of her mother. She looked far younger than her 27 years, a round-faced woman in glasses with a light hijab covering her head. There had been rumors that Esra's release had been prompted by a medical crisis of an undisclosed nature, and she took care to repeat to her interviewer that she had "not been violated in any way, thanks be to God." Some members of the audience undoubtedly recalled that Egyptian blogger Mohammed Sharkawy, arrested on the same day as Esra, had been brutally beaten and sodomized during a previous detention in 2006.

The journalists at the Arab Media Forum reacted to Esra's case with distress. "The Internet is the only way for these young people to express themselves," one protested. An Egyptian reporter added, "There are lots of bloggers who are still in prison. They're making a big public example of her to scare off others."

The audience in Dubai considered the Facebook case to be a freedom of expression concern, but an Egyptian official would have presented the event in a very different light. Esra's arrest took place amid an ongoing national crisis. According to Joel Beinin, director

An extended version of this story is available online at www.carnegie.org/reporter/17/amedia2/index.html

The Web 2.0 Revolution

of Middle East Studies at the American University in Cairo, Egypt has been experiencing the "longest and strongest wave of worker protest since the end of World War II."

Worker protests are nothing new, but the catalyst of new media—particularly the advent of politically active bloggers—is altering the nature of dissent in Egypt and other Arab countries. The precise outcome is impossible to predict, but the impact will surely be profound.

The Implosions in Arab Society

The Arab new media revolution is unfolding in a region in which other forms of social and political evolution have long been stymied. In Egypt, as in many other Arab countries, wishful thinking on democratization clashes with the harsh reality on the ground. The second largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid after Israel, Egypt has been ruled by the dictatorship of President Hosni Mubarak for over twenty-five years. Public protests and demonstrations are illegal, and

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reformist parliamentarian Ayman Nour, the latest opposition candidate to openly challenge Mubarak in an election, was sentenced to five years in prison on trumped-up charges. A 1981 Emergency Law permits the government to imprison individuals at any time for virtually any reason, and to hold them indefinitely without trial. A 2008 State Department report charged that "torture occurred frequently in cases of detentions under the Emergency Law." Although the U.S. government has strongly criticized Egypt's human rights record, it also recognizes the country as a critical ally in the region and a lynchpin of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The traditional Egyptian news media has been both victim of and accessory to this state of affairs. Most of the national news outlets are state-dominated, with political coverage that is easily confused with government press releases.

Egypt has experienced considerable turmoil in recent years, and the political temperature began to rise again over the spring of 2008, when food prices tripled or quadrupled in many areas of the country. Textile workers joined forces with other traditional pockets of opposition, including student groups, leftist parties, and Islamist organizations, and called a national strike for April 6.

In the beginning, this cycle of upheaval and unrest resembled any number of other tense situations in the developing world. But the story took a dramatic new turn when Egypt's strikers were joined by a volunteer army of tens of thousands of tech-savvy young people. Esra and her counterparts created a new political space by deploying the interactive media of Facebook, cell phone text messaging, and YouTube.

In the U.S., Facebook is often regarded as a frivolous application for facilitating gossip and beer busts. But the Egyptian students and young professionals used Facebook to exchange anonymous critiques of the government and hone strategy. Meetings and protests were organized on Facebook pages and by cell phone. The young people alerted each other to police actions by posting the news via text messaging. Once the demonstrations were launched, attacking police were met by a forest of arms holding up cell phones, arising from the crowd to record their actions on video. The results were posted on YouTube within a matter of hours.

There was much for the bloggers to report. As the April strikes spread to additional cities, thousands of Egyptians took to the streets and hundreds were arrested. Other workers stayed home in silent protest by the hundreds of thousands. The young Egyptian bloggers filled the news vacuum left by national newspapers and local television stations, as authorities applied traditional methods of repression and censorship. Ibrahim Eissa, a leading independent newspaper editor, was taken out of the action by a six-month prison sentence. The Cairo News Company, which provided satellite services and equipment for Al-Jazeera, the BBC and CNN, was raided by police after it transmitted footage of the food riots. Its satellite equipment was confiscated, effectively shutting it down, and the owner was taken to court on manufactured charges.

In the past, such repressive measures offered the government a good chance of dominating the story through the state-controlled press. But new media applications were changing the rules. This was demonstrated by the arrest of a journalism student from Berkeley named James Karl Buck, who was detained along with his Egyptian interpreter as he photographed a street protest. Buck used the Twitter application on his cell phone to send a snapshot of himself and the text message "arrested" to a list serve of his contacts. The message prompted intervention from Berkeley and the U.S. consulate. Buck was soon able to Twitter the word "free," then mount an online campaign to release his interpreter.

The Egyptian government scrambled to block protest sites on the Internet, but their young adversaries often trumped their efforts. One online posting, organized on behalf of jailed blogger Abdel Kareem, illustrated the new reality:

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Esra Abdel Fattah, Egypt's "Facebook Girl."

Esra Abdel Fattah and her political space by deploying such as Facebook and

It appears to be that our Free Kareem campaign site is blocked in Egypt. We are now working on mirroring it. If the mirror site gets blocked; we'll mirror it again at another location, until they learn that they can't silence BOTH the victim AND his supporters!

Update: *The web site appears to be working now at its normal location.*

The government assault on the Facebook group backfired as well. It was gradually revealed that Egypt's "Facebook Girl" was a supporter of the strike group, but the actual organizer was a 28-year-old engineer named Ahmed Maher Ibrahim. Maher eluded arrest for a time, but police finally located him and tortured him for his Facebook password and the names of other members of the group (the vast majority of whom he didn't know). Upon release, Esra and Maher became rock stars of the Arab blogosphere—unrepentant and radiating new resolve. The Facebook factor helped to convert a regional textile workers' strike into a growing online universe of anti-Mubarak activism.

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It is easy to understand why Egyptian officials are alarmed by their new online adversaries. Egypt's Internet revolution is just the latest phase of a gradual loss of control. For the first decade of Mubarak's rule, it was relatively easy to stage-manage the news. Few citizens had access to information beyond state television, the state-dominated press, and the BBC World Service.

Now it is estimated that 6 million Egyptians have Internet access, a number that is growing rapidly. Some 70 percent of Egypt's 78 million people have access to satellite television through legally purchased dishes, pirated connections, or cafes. Cell phones, the dominant technology in Egypt, are ubiquitous, and new phones come equipped with Facebook as a menu option. A sizable percentage of Egypt's online community is young, restless, and incessantly active on social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and its Google parallel, Orkut.

Facebook activism is by no means unique to Egypt. As of August 2008, a U.S.-based group called "Support the Monks' Protest in Burma" had over 370,000 members. But American Facebook groups often swell, crest and dissipate without leaving a visible mark on the outside world, diverted into countless other outlets for political expression offered under the U.S. political system. As the Arab journalists in Dubai pointed out, few of these avenues are open to young people in Egypt, Syria, and other critical areas.

Western democracies are founded on the ancient Greek principle of participation in the agora, or public space. Arab societies have their own venues for debate, but many people face insurmountable obstacles to participation. Citizenship laws in some of the Gulf States prevent the majority of the population from voting. Social restrictions on women in Saudi Arabia bar them from participating in many aspects of public life. Political repression in Egypt and Syria close off avenues for peaceful activism among the youth.

The Internet offers a new online agora for each of these groups: immigrants are debating, women are publishing, and students are organizing, all as never before. The power of the new media is illustrated in Egypt, even after a second strike called for May 2008 fizzled out. As of August 5, 2008, Facebook listed 484,137 members in the Egypt Network. The 6 April group was alive and well with 72,274 members, six of them new.

In assessing the political impact of the Internet in Arab countries, it is important to consider some characteristics of the online experience. For example, knowledge creation through print publishing usually involves some kind of editorial scrutiny and review before an idea is propelled from private impulse to public distribution. By contrast, the mechanics of the online environment encourage instant, reflexive responses. So the Internet as we know it in the West has two powerful functions: first, as a conveyor of its own immediate data, and second, through links, as an extraordinary portal to traditional repositories of knowledge: published books, reports, journalism, legal briefs and scholarly articles. Many materials that are billed as "web originals" are generated by individuals and institutions that are anchored in print culture.

Consider how different the Internet experience is for the Arabic-speaking user. The Arab world has had a fundamentally different relationship to print culture, and modern published resources are sorely lacking. Drill down into a blog or a wiki in Arabic and—on a sheer percentage basis—you're more likely to find more blogs and wikis. There are few deep and diverse archival resources to provide ballast for the excitable surface of videos and chat. For these reasons, the Internet is every bit as powerful in the Arab world as it is in the West, and far more unsettling.

The Mixed Legacy of Arab Media

Arab media experienced an initial earthquake in the mid-1990s, when the old state-dominated broadcasting systems were challenged by the creation of regional satellite television. Now both state and satellite broadcasters are confronting the wild card of the World Wide Web. These forces are making a drastic impact on Arab society, and the reasons go deep into Arab history, culture, and demographics.

KHALED DESOUKI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Ibrahim Eissa, editor of the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Dustur*.

Arab history is an enormously complex subject about which most Westerners know little. Americans are finally realizing that "Arab" and "Muslim" are not equivalents, but few recognize how elusive the concept of "Arab" can be. One glance around the Arab Media Forum that I attended confirmed this point. The room was dominated by Gulf Arab male media professionals in white dishdashahs, and their female counterparts—reporters, editors and professors—in long black abayas. But the meeting also included Sudanese women journalists glancing shyly from the folds of their pastel robes, and Egyptian newspapermen working the room in rumpled suits and ties. In the meantime, Lebanese anchor "babes" held court in spike heels and designer minis, jeweled crosses dangling from their necks. All of them, Muslim, Christian, and otherwise, were proudly present as Arabs.

Just as "Arab" can represent a range of ethnicities, the "Arabic" language comprises scores of mutually unintelligible dialects. Defining the region is just as difficult. English speakers often use the term the "Arab world" to describe the twenty-four countries and territories where Arabic dialects predominate. But Arabs refer to the "Umma-Arabiya," which is often translated as the "Arab community" but carries the emotional weight of the Arabic word "umm," or "mother." This phrase encompasses not just the Arabic-speaking countries, but also the Arab minorities who make up 20 percent of the population of Israel, the million Baggara Arabs of Nigeria, 1.8 million Arab-Americans in the U.S. and 3.5 million Arabs in Argentina.

There is little practical solidarity across the region, which presents shocking disparities in income and social indicators. Yemen, with a per capita GDP of only $1,000 a year, shares borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman, which generate fourteen times as much per capita income. Millions of stateless Palestinians live in wretched conditions in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, with no prospects for citizenship or advancement. The vast historical gulfs between Arabic-speaking peoples have generated profound differences.

Historical Foundations

Americans find it hard to imagine democracy without literacy and public education, and in the Arab world these subjects are rife with irony. For many years Islamic societies were in the vanguard of higher education, establishing universities in the ninth century that led the way for later European institutions. But the Renaissance brought a new fork in the road. In the West, the printing press helped to secularize society by breaking the Church's control over legal norms and education. Independent newspapers began to emerge in Europe over the early 1600s, spurring the quest for individual rights and political freedoms. In the Arab world, education and the printed word took a very different path. In the early 1500s, as the Renaissance spread across Europe, the Ottoman Empire began to absorb large expanses of Arab territory, and soon dominated North Africa, the Levant, and most of what is now Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The Ottomans maintained a hold on many Arab regions until the 1920s.

Just as "Arab" the "Arabic" mutually

Ottoman rule was not friendly to public education, independent news

media, and the printed word. Ottoman culture favored the oral tradition and integrated the revered calligraphy of the Koran into every possible visual art form, from painting and ceramics to architecture and metalwork. But literacy languished, particularly among Muslim Arab populations. General Muslim literacy rates were only 2-to-3 percent in the early nineteenth century and perhaps 15 percent at its end. Prior to 1840, an average of only eleven books a year were published in the imperial capital of Istanbul.

The first Arab newspapers made their appearances in the early 1800s, but they were government-issued, publishing official news for a largely official readership. The first independent Arab newspapers emerged between 1860 and 1880, but they were often produced under British and French influence, leading many Arabs to associate the notion of an independent press with European colonialism.

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As the British and French influence grew in some regions, their cultural norms clashed with a powerful counter-movement with roots going back to the early 18th century, and founded on the teachings of Arabian fundamentalist scholar ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Wahhab condemned the spiritually lax rule of the Ottomans, and his followers extended his critique to the liberal influences of the West. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire following World War I accelerated the polarization of the Arab media culture we see today.

In the Arab countries, perhaps more than any other region, the brute force of 20th century economic globalization has derailed political evolution time after time, as Arab reformists have been sacrificed to Western business interests and Arab oil producers. After World War I, the British and the French carved their areas of influence into proto-nation-states, showing little regard for tribal sensibilities, and great concern for future oil concessions. Over the same period, the fundamentalist Wahhabis joined Arabia's Saudi dynasty to lay claim to the sacred Muslim cities of Mecca and Medina. When the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1932, it created a power base for the puritanical principles of Abd El-Wahhab. Six years later, vast oil reserves were discovered on Saudi lands and assigned to U.S. oil concessions. The possession of both Islam's holy cities and the new oil reserves converted the Saudis from local sheikhs to regional masters, and wielders of global power.

By the late 20th century, the two Arab cultural extremes were well-entrenched: at one end, the worldly former European colonies of Lebanon and Egypt, which produce the lion's share of Arabic cultural output, including books, magazines, movies, and popular music. At the other end lie the Saudi Wahhabis, who have banned the domestic production of many forms of news and entertainment.

These two poles have greatly influenced media development. Lebanese media, the most unfettered and dynamic in the Arab world, are popular throughout the region, but they carry the taint of Lebanon's bloody religious conflicts and civil dysfunction. Saudi media operates under strict government control, so absolute that international press freedom organizations were long barred from even monitoring it. But in a tense, uncertain region, Saudi Arabia projects an image of political stability, economic might, and an unshakable alliance with the U.S.

The Information Vacuum

When Westerners discuss Arab media, much of the debate focuses on the scarcity of independent newspapers and broadcasters. But I have been frequently struck by the concern Arabs express for books. One veiled Saudi woman told me that she was an avid reader of Dickens, but never had the chance to read Edith Wharton. In Dubai, a working mother and journalist lamented, "It's practically impossible to find good children's books in Arabic."

These were not isolated complaints. The 2002 United Nations Arab Development Report, compiled by leading Arab scholars and intellectuals, reported that fewer than 350 books were translated into Arabic every year, less than one-fifth the number translated into Greek. The 2003 report added that the 10,000 books translated into Spanish every year exceeded those translated into Arabic—over the entire millennium.

Another concern lies in the narrowness of content. In many countries, around 5 percent of the books published are religious titles, but in the Arab world the figure is 17 percent, and in Saudi Arabia it is even higher. This situation is reflected in the online environment. As of early August, Facebook posted the nine top book choices from its Egypt Network, which suggested a strong preoccupation with religious and mystical themes. They were: *Harry Potter*, *The Alchemist*, *The DaVinci Code*, *The Quran*, *The Holy Quran*, *Angels and*

Demons, *the Qu2an*, *I Hate Reading*, and *the Quraan*. Censorship and the banning of books are rife in the region, affecting both foreign and local authors.

In Saudi Arabia, the scarcity of books is accompanied by the struggle to modernize basic educational institutions. Author Mark Weston in his new book, *Prophets and Princes*, points out that Saudi Arabia did not have a high school until after 1930, and its first girls' school was established after 1950. The Saudis have only 250 public libraries to serve a population of 26 million and there were no hours for female readers until 2006. The Saudis spend millions of dollars translating and publishing the Quran into other languages, without devoting similar efforts to make foreign books available in Arabic.

Needless to say, the shortage of published content directly translates into a lack of content online. At the Arab Media Forum, Hamad bin Ibrahim Al Oman, a Saudi computer science professor with a PhD from the University of North Carolina, contended that 69 percent of the content on the Internet is in English and only one percent is in Arabic. How can Arab societies make the necessary strides, he demanded, if educators could not offer their students access to texts and scholarly journals in their own language?

Arab polarization extends to popular culture as well. One striking indication of this can be found on the Internet Movie Data Base. Of the 55 countries that have produced more than 500 feature films in distribution, Egypt, with some 80 million people, is the only country represented from the 22 Arab nations. Lebanon accounts for 135 films, but Saudi Arabia's listing includes only nine, and most of these are student-made short subjects. The most poignant title is the 2006 documentary *Cinema 500 km*, about a young Saudi film buff who is so desperate for the experience of watching a movie in a theater that he borrows some money and goes to Bahrain.

In some respects, Saudi Arabia has moved backwards. A few decades ago it was possible to attend movies and performances with mixed audiences, including unveiled women. But the 1975 assassination of reformist King Faisal prompted a cultural backlash, and ultraconservative clerics banned any public performances that involved mixing of the sexes, whether as performers or audiences.

Saudi journalism, on the other hand, has experienced some recent advances, especially regarding the foreign press. It

Toward a Deeper Understanding of Islam & Muslim Societies *Carnegie Corporation Grantmaking*

In April 2008, Carnegie Corporation of New York announced an initial $10 million investment to enrich the quality of America's public dialogue on Islam and Muslim societies. Many of the foundation's long-term programmatic priorities—from international security and immigrant integration to journalism and support for individual scholars—have integrated a focus on Islam into their grantmaking. The Corporation's comprehensive strategy focuses on increasing public knowledge about the diversity of thought, cultures and history of Islam and Muslim communities, including those in the U.S. These grants and allocations, along with previous investments, constitute the largest commitment by a U.S. foundation toward the development of a more complex understanding among Americans about Muslim communities here and throughout the world—revealing Islam's rich diversity. Priorities include support for the Carnegie Scholars program, which has provided fellowships to scholars, analysts and writers to pursue original projects oriented toward catalyzing intellectual discourse as well as guiding more focused and pragmatic policy discussions on Islam and Muslim societies. To date, 91 Carnegie Scholars have been funded since the program began in 2000.

"There is a disconnection between many of our public conversations about Islam and our knowledge of it," said Carnegie Corporation President Vartan Gregorian. "Carnegie Corporation has worked to help remedy this disconnect by contributing to a more fundamental comprehension about a religion of diverse expressions and cultures with 1.3 billion practitioners worldwide. We hope that our work will better equip Americans to make informed decisions about, and engage with, various Muslim communities in our midst as well as those abroad."

Selected Corporation grants include $2 million to the Social Science Research Council in support of outreach to connect the wealth of university-based knowledge on the history and culture of Islam to students, media, the business community and the broader public; $1 million to the Educational Broadcasting Corporation to produce, promote and distribute a series of 12 one-hour episodes with the working title of "Charlie Rose: Conversations in Islam," presenting an array of viewpoints on contemporary Islam from political and religious leaders, scholars and cultural figures; $800,000 to the Aspen Institute to produce a series of seminars on contemporary Islam for members of the United States Congress; and $500,000 to TheNewshour on PBS to expand the activities of the program's Overseas Reporting Unit to address the complexity and diversity of Islam in the context of global peace and security.

is now possible for Western journalists to travel in the country and Saudi Arabia's publications carry some outside perspectives, including occasional editorials by foreign columnists such as Tom Friedman. But even in the privately owned media, self-censorship is the rule, and it is a serious offense to criticize the king.

Saudi Arabia's state-owned broadcasting typifies the country's cultural isolation. The channels include Saudi 1 (in Arabic), Saudi 2 (in English), a sports channel, and a 24-hour news channel launched in 2004. Broadcasts include lengthy programs consisting of the script for Muslim prayers rolling over an image of blazing clouds at sunset, accompanied by sung recitation. News programs feature long sequences of Saudi sheikhs paying homage to other sheikhs, bowing and offering their respects one by one, as an announcer solemnly intones each name, rank and tribe.

Such programming suggests not just different entertainment values, it speaks of a concept of public media that defies the very concept of entertainment, attempting to convert real-time rituals into a broadcast television experience. Not surprisingly, when satellite technology made it possible for Saudi citizens to receive media from outside sources, they formed a ready audience. The Saudi government could not control the broadcast laws of other countries—but they still held considerable control over the purse strings.

Over the 1970s and 1980s, as Saudi clerics were turning back the clock for domestic audiences, Saudi Arabia was undertaking a bold regional strategy. In the words of scholar Marc Lynch,

> *Saudi Arabia used its dramatically increased oil wealth to establish a dominant position over much of the Arab press and electronic media. It did so partly to exercise power, partly to defend against what it saw as a threat from external media, and partly to prevent reporting of sensitive internal developments...Saudi control led to what Abd al-Wahhab al-Affendi described as "an eclipse of reason" in the Arab world.*

This damper still functions. One regional magazine editor described a life of restrictions: "Directly or indirectly, the Saudis have a controlling interest in every pan-Arab publication. I look at articles in Western publications and would love to have similar features about women in the workplace and their professional challenges. But my owners tell me, 'Women are about fashion and beauty. You must stick to that.'"

Satellite Broadcasting Makes Its Mark

For many decades, the enterprise of broadcasting was subject to licensing and prohibitively expensive equipment, making it easy for Arab governments to monopolize. Arabs who sought an alternative to the restricted Arab media often turned to the BBC, which laid much of the historical groundwork for the satellite broadcasting environment of today. The BBC Arabic-language radio service was founded in 1938, as an attempt to woo Arabs away from German and Italian fascist propaganda. Over the years, the BBC won a loyal regional audience, established a strong measure of credibility, and built up a corps of accomplished Arabic reporters.

In 1996, a group of experienced Arab journalists left the BBC to join Al-Jazeera, the region's first Arabic satellite broadcast service, launched from the Gulf state of Qatar. This innovation would revolutionize both the Arab media and the political sphere. The new company's formats borrowed heavily from both CNN and the BBC, including raucous "Crossfire"-style debates and jarring real-time reports of crises and disasters.

For the first time, Arabs could experience televised debates between individuals from different Arab countries, unmediated by their governments' ministries of information. Viewers watched news reported by BBC-trained staff, covering events in their own countries as they unfolded, without official filters. Al-Jazeera was the first Arab broadcaster to transmit a broad range of opinions from the United States, as well as the first to showcase Israeli commentators. The breadth and independence of its coverage broke open the closed circle of Arab state-run television. The region's governments were annoyed to find that they were now subject to public criticism, and pointed out that Al-Jazeera's no-holds-barred coverage extended to every government in the world—with the exception of its owners in Qatar.

Al-Jazeera also succeeded in cracking the Saudis' monopoly on pan-Arab media, thereby creating a new space for critical discourse about Arab politics. Detractors of the service deplored the strident tone of its debates, and labeled some of its programming anti-American. But Al-Jazeera ruffled a variety of feathers, and regional critics have described it as everything from a mouthpiece for the CIA to an instrument of Al-Qaeda. Al-Jazeera's unwillingness or inability to criticize Qatar compromises its reputation as a news organization (even though few would portray Qatar as a hotbed of regional news, as the relatively quiet home to 1.3 million of the Arab world's 325 million people).

The phenomenon of Al-Jazeera spawned a host of imitators, starting with Al-Arabiya, launched in 2003 by MBC, a Saudi-owned satellite company based in Dubai. Al-Arabiya portrays the U.S. and Saudi Arabia in a more favorable light, and quickly claimed a place as Al-Jazeera's primary rival. The company followed Qatar's lead in hiring many media professionals from the BBC's Arabic stable.

In November 2006, Al-Jazeera launched Al-Jazeera International (AJI),

its English-language service, hoping to expand its influence beyond the region. The public reception far exceeded expectations, and the service now reaches 100 million households. The service conspicuously employs local correspondents in its regional bureaus and has quickly become the market leader in sub-Saharan Africa. (AJI calls itself "the channel of the developing world reporting back to the developing world.") Al-Jazeera also has significant audiences in Israel, in both Arabic and English. Last October, Israel's biggest cable provider dropped CNN as too costly, substituting Al-Jazeera International. (AJI has been trying to break into the U.S. market but has made few inroads with American cable operators and satellite services. Some of its programs are available on YouTube, where it is getting over 600,000 downloads a week, 30 percent of them from the U.S.)

In 2004, the U.S. government launched its contestant in the fray, a new satellite channel called Al-Hurra, which translates as "the free one." Al-Hurra has been described as the biggest and most expensive U.S. effort to influence international public opinion over the airwaves since the Voice of America was founded in 1942. Some 500 million taxpayer dollars later, the project is fraught with controversy.

A June 2008 report published by independent journalism project Pro Publica noted that Al-Hurra's Virginia newsroom was heavily staffed with Lebanese Christians, while a State Department monitor described its broadcasts as "very pro-Lebanese, pro-Hezbollah."

Journalists attending the Arab Media Forum in Dubai tended to be dismissive of Al-Hurra. One Arab journalists called it "the Pentagon channel," while another described it as "a joke—an expensive joke." Al-Hurra has a loyal following in Iraq, where pro-American Iraqis welcome it as a respite from the sharply polarized local broadcasters. Overall, Al-Hurra accounts for a mere 2 percent of regional viewers.

In March 2008, the BBC reasserted its traditional role in the Arabic satellite television sweepstakes. Its new product, BBC Arabic News, is distinguished from other BBC television enterprises by its Foreign Office funding. This led some Arabs to label it "propaganda," in the same category as U.S. government's Al-Hurra, though the BBC claims it will maintain its tradition of editorial independence.

The political influence of satellite still growing in the its long-range prospects are

In Dubai, Nigel Chapman, the head of BBC World, reflected that the BBC's image in the Middle East had been "the wise old uncle who always comes to the wedding." Its current goal is to transform itself into something young Arabs would see as a "friend and companion our own age." Chapman describes his vision of the future as "news at the time of your choosing, on the device of your choice," offering text messaging for sports scores and stock market quotes, television for news and entertainment, and computer-based services for research and education—all delivered in the BBC's thirty-three languages and dialects.

The Americans and the British have been joined by other would-be players in the region. In 2007, the Russian government launched a 20-hour-a-day Arabic-language information channel, *Rusiya al Yaum* ("Russia Today") to "promote the creation of an information bridge between Russia and the Arab people." On July 12, 2008, the European Union became the newest broadcaster in Arabic, funding the Lyon-based EuroNews to present Arabic news "from a European perspective."

The political influence of satellite television is still growing in the Middle East, but its long-range prospects are uncertain. Satellite news, like other forms of hard-news journalism, tends to be a money-losing proposition, making the Western ideal of an independent news culture a near impossibility, particularly in the Arab market. It is estimated that the television advertising budget for all of the Arab countries combined is less than that of Israel. Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya lose tens of millions of dollars a year, underwritten by their owners' vast oil wealth.

Entertainment satellite channels have been proliferating in the region. They are making their own social impact, and enjoy a more robust advertising market. Some of the most intriguing programming on Arabic television today is hosted by Zaven Kouyoumdjian, who broadcasts on Lebanon's Future Television satellite service. Zaven, the descendant of Armenian Christians who fled the Turkish genocide, started out as a broadcast journalist and evolved into a self-described "Oprah of the Middle East." (Oprah herself, dubbed into Arabic, is also wildly popular in Saudi Arabia.)

Zaven's talk show has exposed Arab audiences to a broad spectrum of previously unmentionable topics. He presented the region's first television interviews with homosexuals, HIV/

AIDS patients, transsexuals, cancer survivors and drug addicts from Lebanon and other Arab countries. "They love the feeling of free speech and expression in the Gulf," he reports. "That's where the advertising market is. It's fine for them to watch unconventional TV on satellite, but once it comes to local TV, the audience becomes offended and the authorities become less tolerant."

In many Arab countries, the tight restrictions on information can result in a backlash. Saudi audiences, barred from theaters, are addicted to home video, and there is an active market in hard-core porn videos and slasher movies. One of Zaven's most popular shows was called "How to Do Sex and Not Make God Angry!" which simply described some middle ground between puritanical Islamic prescriptions and pornographic techniques.

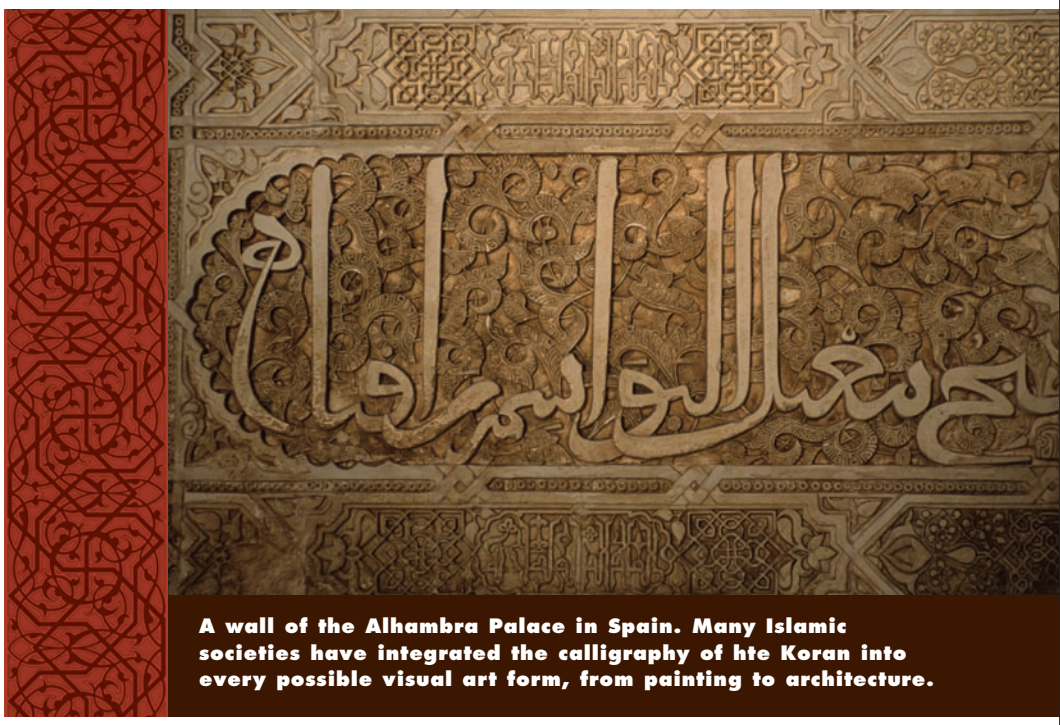
television is Middle East, but uncertain.

The current tensions around satellite broadcasting apply less to social questions than to political issues. Many Arab officials, accustomed to a high degree of control, are outraged by the critical content spilling into their countries from satellite news services based abroad. In February 2008, the regional ministers of information adopted a sweeping charter seeking to control regional satellite broadcasts into their countries. (The only minister to express reservations was from Qatar, home base for Al-Jazeera, the primary target of the initiative). The charter banned material that was perceived to undermine "social peace, national unity, public order and general propriety." Broadcasters were forbidden to criticize religions or defame political, national and religious leaders.

"Freedom [of expression] is to be exercised with awareness and responsibility to protect the supreme interests of the Arab states and the Arab nation," one clause stated. Violating the charter could lead to the host government's suspension or revocation of the offending broadcaster's license. The charter was announced the same week that Saudi Arabia banned live local call-in programs after one call criticized an increase in civil service salaries (interpreted as criticism of the Saudi royal family).

By late June, it appeared that the charter was running out of steam. The ministers failed to reach an agreement on implementing the charter, despite the strenuous efforts of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. But both countries stepped up domestic efforts to expand their censorship capacity. In July, the Egyptian independent newspaper Al-Masry al-Youm reported that Mubarak's ruling party had drafted proposed legislation designed to create a new national agency to control the media. The agency would issue all broadcast licenses and regulate and censor the broadcast media, broadly defined to include the Internet and all other forms of communicating text, video or audio. Prohibited content would include anything detrimental to social peace, national unity, the principle of citizenship, public order or public ethics.

But such threats are more indicative of the government's desperation than its technological capacity. The Chinese government employs tens of thousands of specialized "cyber-cops" to track and punish dissent on the Internet, but they cannot keep pace with the volume. Arab governments have even less possibility of closing down the new Arab "agora" taking shape online.



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A wall of the Alhambra Palace in Spain. Many Islamic societies have integrated the calligraphy of hte Koran into every possible visual art form, from painting to architecture.

New Media and Democratic Disturbances

So far, much of the U.S. government response to the phenomenon of the Internet in the Arab world has focused on its implications for terrorism and counter-insurgency. In June, Daniel Kimmage, a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty analyst, created a stir with his op-ed in *The New York Times*, arguing

that Web 2.0 places Al-Qaeda at a disadvantage. The extremists' online experience suffers from feedback mechanisms, which can subject their YouTube efforts to public criticism and ridicule. Identity tracking on Facebook and its clones creates additional difficulties. "Unfettered access to a free Internet is not merely a goal to which we should aspire on principle," Kimmage wrote, "but also a very practical means of countering Al Qaeda. As users increasingly make themselves heard, the ensuing chaos will not be to everyone's liking, but it may shake the online edifice of Al Qaeda's totalitarian ideology."

Cell phones have become the dominant technology in Egypt.

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In the meantime, the "ensuing chaos" of online communications is rattling every imaginable realm of Arab political life. Once the economic thresholds of cell phones, computers and Internet connectivity have been crossed, anyone can have a say. In the United Arab Emirates, for example, some 80 percent of the population are "guest workers" with no possibility of citizenship or electoral participation. (Emiratis correctly respond that the demand for workers was generated by the international oil industry, and that they have become an endangered linguistic and cultural minority in their own country.) The Internet offers these and other noncitizens of the Gulf States a virtual sphere of political discourse, even if it conveys no rights of citizenship.

In Saudi Arabia, the legally and culturally constrained female population has taken to the Internet in great numbers, and has generated a new wave of novels, memoirs and poetry published online. In Jordan, where print and broadcast media operate under tight government control, respected journalist Basil Okoor has launched www.ammonnews.net, an online publication that has become the country's first comprehensive national news outlet—only eighty-odd years after the launch of the country's first newspaper.

Chaos is not a condition that should be evoked lightly, and social networking will not constitute a happy dash to democracy. The Egyptian experience suggests that authoritarian societies risk creating a grim cycle of web-driven protests met by official repression. The Internet may serve as a new outlet for expression to disenfranchised populations in Arab countries, but it offers few practical avenues for effecting change. And for all of the American talk about Arab democratization, the disenfranchised populations of the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia are usually left out of the conversation as the U.S. pursues its strategic alliances with their governments.

The immediate forecasts for Arab media from Dubai suggest there is more vertiginous change to come. One notable voice belonged to Ayman Abdul Nour, a reformist blogger from Syria, whose web site, syria4syria, has been repeatedly closed down by the government. Nour predicted that by the year 2010, ninety percent of Arab villages and libraries will have Internet access. Najat Rochdi, a Moroccan communications expert working for the United Nations, pointed to the recent rapid growth in Internet ad sales and added that Arab youth blog more than any other in the world. The implications were inescapable: the vast Arab population under the age of 20 will pursue its future online.

As increasing numbers of people across the globe turn to the web for news, entertainment, and social interaction, there is a pressing need to fashion new filters and frameworks to meet the pressures of the online environment. In many societies, this role is assigned to institutions corresponding to education and civil society. But many Arab countries have few institutions that can mediate between the free-for-all of the Internet and the harsh, self-serving hand of the government censor. As the Lebanese elder statesman of Arab journalism, Jihad Al Khazen, lamented at the forum, "We don't have the fourth estate here—we don't even have the three estates."

Arab countries have at least one additional characteristic that is accelerating the online revolution: the lack

of "legacy infrastructure." In the U.S. and Western Europe, existing legal and physical infrastructure has slowed the pace of innovations such as cell phones and high-speed Internet. Many of the wealthy Arab countries are starting from scratch, which makes them high-tech playgrounds for innovation. Flat-screen television screens abound, and Al-Jazeera International was launched as the world's first broadcaster with all HDTV infrastructure.

Many young Arabs are eager to proceed full speed ahead, and there are reasons for optimism. Vivian Salama, a journalist who has worked extensively in Cairo, applauds the impact of social media on Egyptian society. "The Internet is the only option for political movements to thrive at this point in time. Never have ideas been so freely exchanged in modern Egyptian history as they are now, thanks to the web. It gives people the power to speak their mind—albeit anonymously at times—and openly voice opinions that citizens once feared to even whisper."

But if these political changes are to occur peacefully, they will need to be attended by development in other realms. One body that shows a sophisticated grasp of these challenges is the United Nations' Alliance of Civilizations. Its media analysts have suggested a menu of sensible approaches, reinforcing the Internet through journalism, culture, and education to promote real dialogue over propaganda, and looking for ways to reduce violence through building social infrastructure instead of scoring cheap political shots. Many Arabs yearn to build out their institutions of civil society and education, and to reassert their cultural riches. Supporting them will not be cheap or easy—but neither are the mistakes that have been made thus far.

It is clear that whatever the outcome of last April's events in Egypt, the Internet and Facebook are neither the cause of nor the solution to Egypt's problems. Modernization is undoubtedly advancing in the Arab world, but many Arabs regard it as a double-edged sword. Friction will be inevitable, and some of it is bound to affect the West. But we are not powerless in this situation. New media technology is going to be an influential factor in the process, and it is inexcusable to adopt it in a spirit of ignorance and passivity.

In surveying this difficult landscape, one can see a few ways to soften the landing for societies in rapid transition. So far, much of the media assistance from the West has been focused on exporting hardware, as in the One Laptop Per Child Initiative. Other programs promote such American cultural values as investigative reporting and popular music. But these programs should tread with care. Computers cannot solve all the problems of classrooms that lack pencils and a living wage for teachers. New investigative journalism skills have landed many Arab journalists in jail or worse. The U.S. government's Radio Sawa broadcasts the belligerent rap artist Eminem as an American cultural ambassador, to the dismay of many Arab elders.

We should take a second look at the media bridges we are building, and seek to promote paths to information that is significant, accurate, and builds on a relationship to works of the past. We should invest in media and institutions that will ease the Arabs' approach to the West by promoting critical thinking, discernment, and high standards of utility. Partnerships between Arab and Western high schools and universities are vital—not only in the traditional technological spheres, but also in the social sciences, arts and humanities. We should integrate technological assistance into traditional educational approaches, and increase the number of student and faculty exchange programs, especially those that directly address the constructive use of technology in society. We have a long way to go in our own critical research into the optimum use of computers in modern life, work that should be expanded and actively disseminated.

The United States and its partners will win more consideration when we demonstrate that cultural exchange is a two-way street. This can be done by strengthening our support for programs that can make important content available in Arabic in print and online, such as the Kalima Program (which has set out to translate a thousand Western classics into Arabic), and making good use of the Project of Translation from Arabic (PROTA), which renders Arab classic literature into English.)

No one should regard the evolution of media as a question of superiority, as in "computers or print." The two worlds will continue to be complementary for a very long time to come, each offering different strengths. As technology advances, their roles will also shift as more of the traditional virtues of print become replicable online.

For the time being, online communications are all about access. The censors of the world are learning that the Internet and social media can't be turned on and off with a switch; they are here to stay. But neither can they be expected to replace all other forms of human interaction. Each culture has its splendid traditions and its particular ways of forging social bonds. The people of the Arab world have pressing needs for education, employment, and enhanced political and civil rights. Judiciously used, new media can help them shape their own definition of a peaceful and prosperous future, while preserving the grace notes of their cultural legacy. ■