

Arab media: What has this to do with Europe?

By Noha Mellor*

In September 2005, Egypt witnessed its first presidential election (with the presidential poll open to more than one candidate) after 25 years of authoritarian rule. Despite the criticism that surrounded the voting process and which secured the 77-year-old President Mubarak a fifth term, it is vital to acknowledge the role assigned to state media both prior and during the election. The Egyptian cabinet had announced that the state media should play a new role in that historical election by allocating equal time to all the ten presidential candidates, including the President. The state television channels welcomed the initiative in the name of professional integrity and media independence and thus allocated 30 minutes for each candidate per coverage, a step that had been praised by various NGOs inside and outside Egypt. Also in Lebanon, following the rising tension with Syria in the wake of the assassination of the former Prime Minister, Rafik El Hariri, (Syria was accused of plotting the assassination), the Lebanese parliament amended their television regulations in order to allow MTV, a private anti-Syrian channel, to go on air again. Syria, in turn allowed Syrian private investors, for the first time, to open private satellite channels to compete with existing state outlets.

These examples prove that the media had been acknowledged as a useful political tool, and furthermore, that changes within the media field itself can have an impact on re-formulating the relationship between media and state. This development should be seen in light of the recent changes on the Arab media scene and which made it inevitable for statesmen to accommodate their political communication to the needs of the new media. This article briefly points out some of these changes as a point of departure for discussing the impact of these changes on the democratisation of the region, i.e. promoting freedom of speech, engagement in civil society, confronting social problems, etc.

The new trend

Chief among these changes is the emergence of TV journalism in Arabic television, which several scholars claim was an unknown professional concept amongst Arab journalists until MBC, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya entered the scene. Before then, news reporting depended upon reading material collected from international agencies and broadcasting the pre-recorded reading. The new satellite channels, however, adopted many of the professional practices known to European and American journalists, including live reporting, in-depth discussions with guests in the studio, etc. The number of satellite channels has been consistently growing since the mid-1990s, now reaching well over 100 channels, and a recent estimate by the Arab Advisors Group indicates that this figure may well double within the next decade.

In addition to Syria starting permitting the establishment of private media outlets, 2005 witnessed further changes on the Arab media scene, including proposals to establish specialized channels, such as; an Arabic Islamic

channel in Morocco; an English-language Islamic channel and another tourism channel in Saudi Arabia; Yemen announced its plan to open a youth channel; Al Jazeera announced the inauguration of a channel dedicated to the needs of children, not to mention its plan to launch an English speaking news channel this year; the BBC announced its plan to open an Arabic speaking television channel in 2007, which will be followed by another in Persian.

Interestingly, the entertainment sector, which is much larger than the news sector, has also witnessed several important developments: The genre of talk show has been introduced as a new format with daring discussion topics such as youth sexuality, informal marriages, etc.; reality TV consolidates its position as a popular youth genre and as a popular discussion topic for journalists and scholars alike. Seen against this backdrop, the communication between state and people has had to adapt to the new reality, despite some commentators' claim, such as Charles Levinson (Levinson, 2006), that the core message of the state television is still the same old story and that nothing fundamental has changed. The question then is whether the new development marks a real balance between changes of format as well as of content.

Style before substance?

This change - and whether it has been genuine or just cosmetic - was the main issue in my book *The Making of Arab News*, released in 2005 in the USA. In this book (Mellor, 2005a), I pointed to the homogenisation impact of globalisation on the Arab journalistic practices, e.g. live reporting, presenting two sides of the story, etc., while pointing to the lack of addressing immediate social issues, e.g. schooling, child labour, corruption, etc. As I argue, the intertwining of western (Anglo-American) and Arab traditional format has sometimes been seen as a progressive step in the development of the regional image *vis-à-vis* the West. In other words, by being able to produce western genre, Arab professionals mark their professional identity on a global basis. For instance, Al Jazeera prides itself of being a beacon of objectivity, which is a long-held American journalistic norm, in order to mark its presence not only regionally but also internationally; Barbie dolls, seen as an emblem of western infatuation with promiscuous lifestyle, have been challenged by an Arab version (called Fullah); films and music videos have become a competition arena for Arab media professionals to show their incorporation of the latest techniques and looks; the Internet has become an integral part of the national identity for several gulf countries such as Kuwait not to mention that several Gulf cities, such as Jeddah, have come to resemble American states rather than the traditional nomadic land.

But the change, I warned, may end up being a merely cosmetic change with little genuine impact upon the development and everyday life of the Arab peoples. Why, for example, should we hail an American style TV journalism if the news content does not address social issues and merely maintains the traditional political outlook? Or why should we hail the building of skyscrapers if issues such as the discrepancy between social classes are not subject to public debates? Or why should we hail the reality show *Big Brother* for teaching Arab audiences to vote for a winner, if the voting experience is not genuinely conducted and practised in real life?

Substantial knowledge

The problem, in my view, is the lack of deep understanding of the Arab social identities, both of audiences and professionals, as presented in the media. Indeed, the increasing number of publications and reports published recently about Arab media has mostly been descriptive in nature, pointing at the change in format in Arab media and speculating about the new mixture of modern images alongside traditional lives. Thus the result is a largely speculative bundle of concerns about the role of media in changing the political and social scene in the Middle East. But what we need now – perhaps more than ever - is to encourage and embrace an in-depth understanding about the mechanisms of this change and its contingency. We need to unravel the impact of these changes not only on the surface, i.e. journalistic forms and genre, but also upon journalism as a profession. Media, both news and entertainment, reflects the mediated representation of national as well as pan-Arab identities. We need to understand the rivalry and yet similarities, amongst the diverse social identities (re)presented in the new media. We need to conduct qualitative audience analyses to replace the traditional scheme of counting voices that favour Al Jazeera *versus* those who favour CNN. We need to understand the politics of the popular *versus* the political, and the mechanism of change as imposed by an elite class *versus* the consensus emerging from the classes below. In sum, we need qualitative data that goes deeper than the descriptive and speculative.

Post-EUROMED

The changes on the Arab media scene were raised in one of the main sessions during the EUROMED and the Media Seminar, held in November 2005 (see my article in *Afkar/idées* No. 8). The session resulted in a heated debate between some speakers (including myself), and other Arab journalists and attendants who preferred to hold the discussion to the 'Us *versus* Them' level characterized by focussing on different coverage of Arab affairs in western *versus* Arab media, or the censorship imposed by statesmen, etc. In my view, the 'Us *versus* Them'-debate represents a sort of denial to see the picture from within, i.e. how media professionals themselves – actively or passively – help consolidate certain images and avoid tackling the social issues that should be the part and parcel of their task. At the end of the session, a west European participant asked me, 'all what was said today was good, but what has this to do with Europe or the EUROMED?' This summarises the problem. We tend to look at the outer layers of the Arab problems in a search for a remedy rather than seeking a deeper understanding of these problems. For instance, western news about the Arab affairs revolves typically around security and politics, etc., rather than immediate social problems. Thus, the European audiences are likely to be familiar with the names of threatening fundamentalists, somewhat less familiar with the names of Arab leaders and rather ignorant about schooling, poverty, medical service, urbanization, etc. Thus the vast majority of journalistic accounts and even the majority of academic accounts, inflict a typified identity upon all Arabs, leading observers to eventually wonder why things have not changed much in the Arab societies, despite the media, political and economic attention that Europe is pouring into the region. It is time to update

the focus of our analysis, targeting the issues that really matter, rather than asking ourselves, 'what has this to do with Europe?'

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