MODERNIZATION AND MEDIA IN THE ARAB WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

When "The Four Theories of the Press" appeared in 1956 it was hailed as an instant classic. Detailing the various axes upon which media systems are formed, the book described the authoritarian, libertarian, Soviet/totalitarian, and social responsibility models prevalent at the time and became a source document for macro-sociological analyses of media and their impact on society (Siebert et al,1956).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition of China from a state-run media to one increasingly open to private ownership and capitalist investment, both the authoritarian and Soviet/totalitarian models have faded from the scene. The social responsibility theory, whose ethos of media stewardship of the social whole offered great theoretical promise at the time, has dissipated somewhat, as the bottom line of profit has come to dominate the Western media who once contemplated such a responsibility. The libertarian model is the only one of the four which remains somewhat in play, though it too has had to subordinate its goals of individual citizen input and maintenance of media to the monolithic dominance of the dollar. World media today increasingly operate as businesses, and considerations of theoretical and moral components to that business remain workable mainly in theory alone.

Today, what can be termed the market imperative theory has become the overarching and elemental press model for the 21st century. The various politically and morally based theories of the past have been collapsed into one unifying theme, as the spread of globalization plus satellite and Internet technology are quickly establishing the Global Village of news that Marshall McLuhan presciently wrote about in the 1960s (McLuhan, 1964). That a libertarian-style marketplace of ideas through media news flow has evolved makes sense, given that capitalism has become the dominant American ideology. This development illustrates the efficacy of theoretical work by several media scholars, including John C. Nerone, who stated that "in structure, behavior, and policy a communication system reflects the society in which it operates" (Nerone, 1995).

This model, an offshoot of technological determinism, means that there is nowhere to hide, and that previously closed media systems in the Arab world are destined to be increasingly penetrated by 24-hour news channels such as al-Jazeera. No longer will there be nations that roughly approximate the old Soviet/totalitarian system's complete control of information. For example, the death of 20,000 Hama citizens at the hands of the Syrian government in the early 1980s, which went unreported by the world's media, would not be overlooked in today's wired and instantaneous global media environment. The late 1970s Saudi Arabian cover-up of a bloody suppression of an attempted takeover of a Riyadh mosque, which again was largely unknown to the rest of the world, would be huge international news today the moment it happened.

The implementation of such a market imperative model - an inexorable process that continues to evolve, albeit haltingly, in the Arab world - may in turn expedite the modernization process that has eluded the area in question while much of the rest of the world's nations have ridden the global information wave to a new tomorrow. A recent United Nations study noted that the Arab world has remained almost entirely stagnant in the past 30 years in terms of most major markers of social and cultural progress (UN

Development Program, 2003). As the new press model unfolds, chances exist that the countries of the Middle East will begin to see the sort of progress that other nations now take for granted.

Press freedom is one of the key elements driving such modernization, along with human rights, women's rights, free elections, and economic growth. Recent examples of elections in Morocco, the garnering of a Nobel Peace Prize by an Iranian female, the liberation of Iraq, and the return to the international fold by the Libyans are phenomena which suggest that the wheels to carry the area to progress are becoming greased.

These events, with a strong populist undertone heretofore unknown in the Arab world beyond vague and ineffective nationalist movements, signal the beginnings of a radical, all-encompassing change. This grass-roots revolution could in time stem the brain drain, a flow of the best Arab minds to the world of the West, where opportunity has beckoned for generations. It will also help mitigate the frustration of a burgeoning population of youth in the area, who have increasingly turned to terrorism out of desperation due to high unemployment, stagnant growth, and cultural embarrassment vis a vis the rest of the world.

The transition will be fitful, due to the recalcitrance of despotic leaders who, resentful of the Western idea of modernization, refuse to relinquish their longstanding stranglehold on Arab countries and their livelihoods. Another drag on the progress toward the various freedoms facilitated by the market imperative model is the lack of resources in the Arab world. Outside of oil, these nations lack the raw materials that would enable them to compete on a global scale with other, more naturally endowed lands. The combined resources of these nations when oil is excluded are equal to that of Finland.

Yet another complication is the notion that modernization, and the capitalistic endeavors which drive it, are interpreted by many in the Arab world as "westernized" ideas which will corrupt traditional mindsets and value systems, as they imagine has happened in the United States, to name the most prominent example.

But the process is in motion due to the unceasing growth of global technology and open media systems which act as agents of change across the map. As a previously neutralized area of over 300 million people begins to glimpse the promise, both negative and positive, of such a complete reorganization of society, stewardship of the transition becomes of the utmost importance. How the Arab world reacts to and continues the restructuring of its situation will determine how quickly and how thoroughly the people of this region will eventually be able to improve their living conditions and ease the burden of stagnation that has choked a once-proud civilization.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES, STALLED PROGRESS

In today's Middle East, there is a frustrating game of one step forward, one step back, as the history and traditions of the region conspire as a controlling shadow, dogging every halting advance toward modernization. That history belies the haunting tale of a time when the Arab world chose to draw in its horns and refuse to ride the wave of modernization that has changed the world over the past 500 years.

When the Age of Exploration exploded in the 16th century with the Portuguese and Spanish leading the way, powerful Arab nations hardly noticed. When they did, it was to copy the military technologies of the expanding powers instead of other

modernizing innovations of a civilian nature, according to historian Bernard Lewis (Lewis, 2002). A group of empires once coterminous with civilization heaped disdain on anything "Western," with a fierce ethnocentrism presaging the "Orientalist" charges a wounded and fading East would level against the West in the 20th century (Said, 1979). While most of the rest of the world freed its slaves, granted some rights to women, and developed a civil society and state bureaucracy, the Middle East stood pat, and the cost for such a decision was dear in the long run.

As other nations opened up, the Arab countries continued to control education and what communication there was, and as autocracies melted away under the magic spell of the Enlightenment, the same process did not take place in Cairo, Baghdad, and other Middle Eastern cities. Science, literacy, and new political philosophies celebrating the individual blossomed in the West, but failed to take root in the Middle East. Social historian Stephen Humphreys notes that the inability to outdistance memories of an unrecoverable golden past and move on put the Arab nations at a deficit vis a vis the modern world (Humphreys, 1999). Despite occasional attempts at modernization, including in Turkey in the 1830s, 1860s and 1910s, and aborted tries at constitutional government such as the one in Iraq (1905-06), the majority of the countries remained totalitarian autocracies with little or no freedom in any area of society.

Today, population explosions and the lack of resources/markets/bureaucracy, combined with a serious colonial hangover, makes the region still ripe for absolute ideologies such as Islamism. There is little public discourse or debate, and the notion of the individual, so important to the growth of civil, society and rights movements, is virtually nonexistent. Another debit dragging the area down is the lack of patience with ameliorative, rather than, transformative ideologies. The stagnation, passivity, fatalism, and lethargy Humphreys describes are a result of a region behind the times and one not interested in taking small, incremental steps toward modernization (Humphreys, 1999). The leaders of the Middle East await another Arab nationalism, or perhaps Islamism, to rescue their world, choosing to heap blame on the West, when in reality they made the decision long ago to forego the innovation and risk-taking that characterized the rise of the Western nations. The old Arab maxim "Better 60 years of tyranny than a night of anarchy" has held true for these frustrated nations. In an area where the average age is 16 and two-thirds of the population is under 25, there are few jobs or access to free media, and a feeling of humiliation from a colonial past which they see as having hamstrung efforts toward betterment.

The longstanding slogan of "*al-Islam hyua al-holl*," or 'Islam is the solution," has frozen the area's dependence on religion in place, while a secular world has charged ahead in modernization. Ideally, Islam is supposed to challenge the corruption of the Western world, but most governments have co-opted faith in a coercion game against the people, and although the demand for free media and popular participation has increased in the past 10 years, there are still only fleeting signs of a major breakthrough here.

An open mass media system has been one of the core prerequisites for freedom in a society, as it traditionally undermined closed societies with the spread of information and the fostering of opinions, debate, disagreement, and new political models. Experts suppose that the explosion of electronic media, including the Internet, will eventually enable the people of the Middle East to oust their tyrannical, shortsighted leaders and begin to make up some ground. But the spectacle of recent elections in Iran, where the

opposition party was basically eliminated from contention by the religious autocracy, shows that mass media may have filtered into the area, but have not reflected or affected much meaningful change to date.

In 1958, Daniel Lerner's "The Passing of Traditional Society" laid out the framework for how information and media help fashion behavioral systems that transform lifeways, noting that an aspect of secularization accompanies the influence of media, and as a result what he called "pre-literate" people obtain new wants, desires, and expressions. But such "secular enlightenment" does not easily replace sacred revelation in guiding human affairs, he continued, and the requirement of a moderation of vanity is a necessity (Lerner, 1958). For years the countries of the Middle East referred to the radio as the "voice of the devil from the effeminate cities," yet another instance where the drive of innovation was blocked.

No modern society functions efficiently without healthy mass media, which is part of an interlocking system of modernity where info flows interact with the distribution of power, wealth, and status (Lerner, 1958). Public information in the Middle East, with the exception of the new satellite cable stations that are making a stir, emanates from sources authorized by a political and social hierarchy, not by technological skills or democratic election. This means that news is less salient than are rules that specify correct behavior, usually with a religious undertone. Studies suggest that media literacy correlates with urbanization and industry in the transition to a participatory society (Lerner, 1958). This has not happened in the Middle East to any great degree.

LIGHT ON THE HORIZON

The birth of al-Jezeera in 1996 marked a milestone in the media history of the Middle East. The Qatar-based satellite network, though largely privately funded, quickly became both a source of pride and consternation in the region. The progressive emir of Qatar provided $140 million through 2001, at which time the network was supposed to have become self-sufficient through advertising revenue. This has not happened yet, and Mohammed El-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar report that the emir has shelled out $100 million a year since to keep the satellite beaming (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003).

The phrase means "island" or peninsula" in Arabic, and its namesake has become an oasis of independent reporting in the Arab world, featuring exclusive interviews with Osama bin Laden, singular journalistic coverage of the Taliban from Afghanistan, and connections with the American network, CNN.

As the BBC Arabic TV network collapsed in the 1990s, al-Jezeera filled the gap, offering news but also a previously seldom-seen venue for discourse and debate in the Arab world. Al-Sharq (The East) noted in 2000 that 64 percent of viewers preferred talk shows like Opposite Direction and More Than One Opinion. Observers surmise that citizens who had been debating in private for years now had a public sphere-type arena for discussion (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003).

The network made enemies early on when it aired interviews with a number of Israeli politicians and military personnel, worrying leaders in Arab nations that they had a "collaborator" to deal with. Instead of strictly state-run news, al-Jezeera from the outset mixed decidedly pro-Arab material with occasional balance in coverage, something the people of the region had never been exposed to save for rare trips to the West. Satellite

dishes appeared in greater numbers than ever before, despite the overwhelming poverty in the region, showing a hunger for information that Lerner predicted in 1958 would gradually ease the developing nations into the modern world (Lerner, 1958).

But as quickly as it made a splash, the network ran into the same logjams against freedom that have existed for centuries. In a recent edition of "The Forward," a veteran Arab journalist, who wished to remain anonymous, stressed that the only way for news networks in the region to become credible is to distinguish themselves by "bravely exposing the corrupt and repressive nature of Arab regimes." But he noted that in 2003 al-Jezeera made such an attempt on a number of fronts – particularly in terms of government fraud and corruption – and had six of its bureaus shut down without discussion or appeal (Forward, 2004).

Broadcast power was cut on numerous occasions in Algeria in direct government censorship in the past three years, while Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have intermittently denied visas to al-Jezeera reporters to try and stop coverage of government activities. Morocco and Libya even went as far as recalling ambassadors from Qatar in protest of al-Jezeera's open reporting and tendency toward "Jerry Springer-style" debate on its talk shows (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003).

Still, Qatar media scholars have insisted that the network promises the best way to reinvigorate a sense of freedom, democracy, and liberty, to foster a vibrant civil society (Al-Hail, 2000). The emir of Qatar called the network a building block for a democratic state in an interview with media outlet Al-Watan (The Nation), and he instituted various censorship reforms to demonstrate his devotion to freedom of the press (Al-Watan, 2000).

While the populist appeal and promise which accompany mass media may have stirred some Arab intellectuals and observers in the West, al-Jezeera has found that breaking through the wall of silence is going to be a gargantuan task. Government resistance to the concept of free media has been consistent.

But Nahaway and Iskandar note that al-Jezeera's use of what they call "contextual objectivity" has mitigated this resistance to an extent. There is an inherent contradiction between attaining objectivity in coverage and appealing to specific audiences, they argue, and American media studies have echoed this assessment (Gans, 1979). For a network to survive on ad revenue, there must be a certain public resonance, known as an audience identification factor. To report news in a way that contravenes basic, widely held social and political assumptions is to commit professional suicide, and every media system finds eventually that it must provide news in frames that viewers both understand and find palatable. This would explain why al-Jezeera, much to the consternation of the United States and Israel, refers to Palestinian suicide bombers as "*shuhadas*," or martyrs. Since the unifying nature of the Palestinian conflict is an Arab world staple, the coverage of the situation in the Holy Land has taken a decidedly pro-Arab frame, just as American coverage of the intifada has been criticized for its pro-Israeli assumptions and frames.

Editors for al-Jezeera thus make coverage decisions based on Arab policy and public concerns, just as American media do. Managing director Al-Ali suggested an American jealousy over al-Jezeera's access and scoops in the Middle East is at the root of U.S. complaints that the network offers a platform for fundamentalist views and anti-American sentiments (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003). If the Arab world did not offer these opinions, they would not be recast in media frames.

Still, a media system must depend on business-generated revenue to be truly free of government control. As noted, al-Jezeera receives the majority of its money from government and private funds. Though there is a $500 million yearly ad revenue number, most of it is made by multinational investors, repeating the process seen in the oil industry, where locals have little or no truck with economic endeavors and foreign interests control the business (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003).

If the Arab media system is to eventually transition to a market-style philosophy, the dearth of raw materials and resources must be overcome. The brain drain of educated Arabs to Western lands must also be dealt with, as these people represent the material for the bureaucratic management infrastructure that makes a market-driven system run smoothly. These are serious problems, illustrating that even though al-Jezeera has made a dent in the autocracy of the region, there are mountains of obstacles to climb if it is going to be more than a highly publicized lark.

One law of media economics working to its advantage was chronicled by Daniel Waterman, who posited that low marginal cost of distribution battles against the relatively high cost of production, making satellite cable, not to mention Internet news, promising venues in which to win the battle (Waterman, 1993). The Arab networks are not dependent on advertising like their Western counterparts, who rely on it for 80 percent of their annual revenue. It is too early to tell whether the privately funded networks in the region can stay afloat, though one thing is certain: with little production of goods and services, there is way less advertising in the Middle East than in developed countries. Without a steady steam of such revenue, al-Jezeera is at the mercy of financiers, and one wonders if the wealthy benefactors are going to have the inclination or the ability to counter the oppressive tendencies of the leaders in power.

PHILOSOPHICAL IRONIES

For now, media in the area are still proficient in propagating the hegemony of the ruling class, as well as its ideas, creating the naturalization and coercion that Gramsci warned against in the 1920s (Gramsci, 1971). Ironically, many of the nations in the region have or had socialist underpinnings, and yet the Marxism they proscribed to counter the potential power of Western capitalism and media is keeping them from making up any lost ground on the West in terms of modernization and standard of living.

According to basic Marxist media theory, media produce reality, just as Marx insisted that control of the means of production creates socio-economic reality. The false consciousness that causes duped citizens to emulate the dominant ideology acts unwittingly in tandem with power structures and the institutional state apparatuses Althusser described, to perpetuate a case where media/ruling ideas constitute people as subjects (Althusser, 1971; Hall 1980). In this manner, the text, or media content, has a pre-existing structure fashioned by the ideology of the producers, making what is broadcast by media – in this case, hatred for the West and its ideas, plus kudos for the leaders of the region – seem obvious, natural, and beyond question.

Despite its inroads toward balanced coverage al-Jezeera has participated in this charade as much as it has remonstrated against it. Its Internet news report of 28 April is a good example of the "contextual objectivity" discussed by El-Nawawy and Iskandar.

Coverage led with a 20-picture photo essay of the recent developments in the war, called "Fallujah Besieged." The tenor of the essay was emotional, and fervently pro-Iraqi. There were three photos of a dead two-year old boy killed by American shelling, and three shots of elderly citizens being frisked by American troops. Three photos showed destitute refugees either fleeing in horror from the fray or sadly being led away from their homes by armed U.S. soldiers. Damaged homes were shown three times, and refugees living in a tent city appeared in another frame. American soldiers were shown inside a mosque, and tanks were shown in another, with fleeing Iraqis in the lead.

The top news feature was a glowing recital of the growth of the insurgency in al-Sadr City, and the interactive feature that the Internet is known for consisted of several man-on-the-street interviews with citizens from around the Middle East weighing in against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and in favor of the cause of the Palestinians.

The accompanying series of updates on the war in Iraq covered the same major events as media channels in the West that day, although its sourcing was entirely different. Most of the quotes in the stories came from refugees or those fighting against the Americans, and the rhetoric employed was strongly anti-American and religiously tinged. While American media referred to those opposing the U.S. forces as "insurgents" or "rebels," al-Jezeera noted that "the resistance" was fighting "against invasion, in an act of solidarity."

These reports are not surprising, given the fact that in spite of internecine warfare among the Arab nations for centuries, the various countries have shown themselves able to come together in the face of a common enemy, usually the United States and/or Israel. And different phraseology and sourcing do not in themselves imply any negative moral value judgment against Arab media or news consumers. Any nation's focus is logically going to be slanted toward the home team. But when the same critique is leveled against American media, that of one-sided coverage, the comparison breaks down. Though a small contingent of political radicals might disagree, the coverage of Iraq by American media has been a major source of controversy in the States. Instead of toeing the party line as media have done in the past during warfare, American channels such as CNN - along with the three big networks, some would argue – gave the anti-war movement in the country healthy doses of attention before the war, and have continually battered the current presidential administration for its every move in the conflict.

Conservatives might complain, as writers for the periodical National Review have done, that the American media are undermining the war effort with cynical reportage, continual second-guessing, and anti-institutional bias, as was the case in Vietnam. But it is closer to the truth to suggest that American media have provided what democratic engines run on, which is the right to dissent against the policies of the government and to have these dissenting views given wide circulation in the marketplace of ideas. When leading intellectuals in Egypt or Iran voice opinions against their governments, they are often thrown in jail. In America they become highly paid commentators on cable television news shows. That is the major difference between free media and a system that is still controlled by and large by a small number of authoritarian and despotic leaders who are not interested in dissent in the least, or in balanced reporting.

When al-Jezeera is successful in building credibility through distinguishing itself in "bravely exposing the corrupt and repressive nature of Arab regimes," - if reporters for that network do indeed feel that this is even an issue - then one can say that the media in

the Middle East are on the way to the pluralism required for constructing a modern world. For the formula that might become operative in this regard, it is worth revisiting the "Four Theories of the Press" that were mentioned in the introduction of this work. Analyzing how the American media system evolved into its current market-driven configuration – and still managed to provide for healthy dissent in the main – will enable a look at what lies ahead for the future of al-Jezeera and a Middle East population that is in dire need of some breakthroughs regarding media and freedom.

CONCLUSION

Clearly there has been a gradual evolution in much of the world from the previously germane four press theories to a dominant market-driven model. In the past 100 years, the market imperative has become a given on the American scene (Hallin, 1992; Giles, 1993).

There are critics who argue that a press driven by capitalism cannot be expected to provide a thorough critique of the very economic system it operates under (Nerone 1995). But this charge is easily refuted by reference to the growing number of outlets of media criticism – both in the academic and business world – and to the steady self-referential critique of media by media themselves. Consistent editorials remonstrating against media mergers and corporate scandals, plus burgeoning reform movements such as public journalism, illustrate that American market-driven media is constantly buffeted by useful dialectical critique.

The question remains then: Can the rest of the world's media follow suit? Middle East scholars agree that steady technological advances make this evolution toward the market model an inevitability (Amin, 2004). The 24-hour news format and spread of networks such as al-Jezeera militate against the authoritarian system that hard-line Muslim clerics and sympathetic governments have sought to perpetuate.

But the process is exceedingly slow and given to maddening fits and starts, as previously discussed. The dearth of advertising revenue is a major stumbling block, as lack of resources and locally produced goods they beget translate into a media dependence on private investors and benevolent monarchs. These monarchs are aware that in the West, one troubling outcome of a free, market-driven media system has been a "tyranny of public opinion" which renders the dissent-free actions of any government a relic of the non-communicative past.

The brain drain of Arab talent to the West is another obstacle to modernization of the area via media impact. Without managers for the bureaucracy that is a hallmark of free market-drive media, building an infrastructure is nearly impossible. The managerial class is bereft of talent in many Middle Eastern countries. In the West, journalism schools at hundreds of universities crank out able young professionals by the thousands every year.

In a competitive marketplace under the libertarian model, people buy into the idea of discourse and dissent, coming to expect debate, and al-Jezeera has offered some promise with its steady diet of talk shows. But the market model runs on consumers being sold to advertisers, keeping a flow of ad revenue going and leading to re-investment in network technology and production research. American media depends on such monies for 80 percent of its yearly take.

The Internet's efficacy in fostering such a Middle Eastern modernization is moderate at best, given high illiteracy rates. The technology is relatively inexpensive, but the medium is not necessarily the message here. The real message is twofold; one is the nature of the content. When al-Jezeera and other outlets are able to make the transition from occasional critic to consistent watchdog against authoritarian regimes, they can be said to be operating under the hybrid market-driven social responsibility/libertarian model. Two, when this media model can show tangible effects on society at large, its efficacy can be then defended. Until then, web technology in the Arab world enables an updated version of the *samizdat* phenomenon seen in the former Soviet Union, where messages of dissent and watchdog activity sneaked out to the West through various clandestine and contested avenues, in an attempt to fight against censorship and totalitarian subversion of communication and expression. This largely symbolic role does little in the short term to ameliorate problems on the ground.

There are simply scant prospects of this model being able to take root in the region. If it ever does, then the tipping point might be reached where a Pandora's Box of dissent and tolerance is opened to the degree where coercive governments will disappear and free expression is seen as a given and not a possibility. According to the model of Daniel Lerner, changes in the society will be reflected in the media system, and not vice versa. Until political transformation is a fact on the ground, would-be reformers like al-Jezeera and other copycats will remain tantalizing voices in the wilderness.

The truth is that most Arab nations wasted the 1960s and 1970s in combat against Israel, when they could have been investing money in modernization instead of military hardware. This echoes the fateful decision of over 500 years ago to eschew the modern ways of the "infidel West," which ensured that the region stayed mired in neutral while much of the world enjoyed the benefits of a new approach to civilization.

Still, recent developments in satellite/Internet technology and Arab news networks must be judged as a promising beginning to a long-term uphill climb. To wit, recently the Arab League met in Tunisia to announce a new reform initiative, in which a key point was increasing public participation. The pledge for reform centered on respect for human rights, freedom of expression, women's rights, and tolerance. The news reports of this proclamation noted that the pledge was "short on specifics," leading some critics to suggest that it represented mere lip service and not a true commitment to these ideals (MacFarquhar, 2004). For a region that has suffered under faulty leadership for too long, the collective hope must be that this time the leaders recognize the inevitable nature of the situation, and are willing to take steps toward an authentic renaissance. Free media will be one of the lynchpins in facilitating such a sanguine scenario.

Although the market model of communication has its contradictions, its benefits appear to outweigh the negatives. If a gradual evolution toward such a model is to become a reality in the Middle East, historical memory and its distressingly durable hold on the region's sensibility and possibilities must continue to evolve as well. Only through such a dialectical changing of the guard can the questionable decisions of the past be countered and real-time change achieved.

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