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THE DEMOCRACY FUNCTION: HOW EGYPT'S CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE IS INFLUENCING DOMESTIC POLITICS

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. MABROUK: Okay. There are two things. I don't really think that it's any secret that U.S. foreign policy over the past eight years has been at probably an unprecedented low. Okay? It is not possible for public opinion of U.S. foreign policy to dip much further than it has. Okay?

But again, you want to bear something in mind. People like to make the cliché between U.S. foreign policy and the American people.

There is a distinction. There is a huge distinction. All right? Americans feel it is -- I mean, Egyptians are as (inaudible) anyone else.

Secondly, however, there is a limit as to how much you can lambaste the Americans on television, because the Americans are allies; okay? Egypt is a serious ally in the region. The Americans are allies. And if you value your time, you do not spend too much time slamming allies, because then the government becomes guilty by association.

So you can certainly dig a little more foreign policy than you can on domestic foreign policy, but not much more. It's not okay to

continually, you know, thump down on the Americans on television, because it reflects badly on us.

So I don't know. Does that answer your question?

SPEAKER: Yes.

MS. MABROUK: Okay. Thanks.

MR. DANZIGER: Rafi Danziger from AIPAC. First, until a couple of years ago, there were lots of complaints about a lot of anti-Semitism in cartoons and in articles in the Egyptian press. I've seen fewer such complaints recently.

Is it because the number has decreased or people simply got used to that and are no longer even bothering to complain.

Second question is, a few years ago, I read that once an Egyptian newspaper criticized the Saudi government, and that was not something that the Egyptian government accepted, so what happened was that the -- mysteriously, the paper supply to that newspaper disappeared. And then everybody got the message that nobody criticized the Saudi government.

I was wondering if this is still going on that the government uses simply not providing paper to

a newspaper that it doesn’t like -- what the newspaper rights, I don't know if they still exist.

Number three, in many Arab countries, Al Jazeera is like 60 or 70 percent of the (inaudible) watchers of that channel. I was wondering if in Egypt also it’s a huge percentage, like more than 50 percent of the population -- Al Jazeera whether it's something that most Egyptians watch and any other channel is watched much less. I know that's the case in many Arab countries. I was wondering if it’s true in Egypt, too.

MS. MABROUK: Thank you. Whether or not there are more anti-Semitic -- generally speaking, first of all, the word anti-Semitic it's not so much that it's anti-Semitic. It's very anti-Israeli. Those are two different things.

And you tend to find that newspapers, and well, not satellite television, because it doesn't do that, but newspapers will tend to reflect public feeling.

If Israel is bombing Lebanon, you're going to get more of those cartoons. If life is quieter, you're going to get less of them. It’s really that

simple. I mean, it’s almost never an anti-Semitic thing; it's a virulently anti-Israeli thing when things like that happen.

I mean, you might not remember back but in the early ‘80s, when life was quieter, when people felt there was real progress being made on the peace process, those cartoons practically disappeared. Cracks about Israel more or less disappeared. Life just got very quiet and peaceful, because, to a great extent, people had enough. You know, they don't consistently want to be, you know, at war and irritated all the time.

But depending on what's happening, that's going to be reflected in newspaper (sic.). At the moment, you may feel that we have other things that are going on. But generally speaking, anti-Semitic cartoons are not going to -- I mean, bear in mind that our Constitution forbidly -- sorry, forbidly -- expressly forbids defaming of any religion, and actually Egypt tends to recognize just three religions; okay?

So you're not likely to get an anti-Semitic cartoon; you’re likely to get an anti-Israeli cartoon

whereby the person in the cartoon may look like an anti-Semitic character, but it’s, you know, it’s the Israeli prime minister or minister or whatever it is.

And it’s almost always a reflection of the current politics. I don't know if that helps.

SPEAKER: (Off mike)

MS. MABROUK: Yes. I mean, that's what a -- but again, if you look at the cartoon, it doesn't say Jews are awful. It says look what the Israelis are doing.

It’s like -- I mean, if we -- cartoons, by their nature, deal in stereotypes. When you draw -- I mean, if you draw an Englishman and you hate his tubby (inaudible) big teeth, I mean in Egypt. If you draw a Nubian, they look the same way. If you draw a government minister in Egypt, there are no skinny government ministers. They're all short, pot bellied men with short legs.

That is going to be the stereotype with, you know, like balding hair swept over to the side. They all look the same. The cartoonists deal in an easily grabbable image. It’s -- I mean, trust me. I know it's a comfortable thing to say, but it's not so much

an anti -- it's really not an anti-Semitic thing. It's an anti-Israeli thing. And it always reflects current politics more than anything else.

And the Saudi paper --

MR. DANZIGER: I'm sorry. It was the newspaper.

MS. MABROUK: Yeah. I'm sorry. The -- accept my apologies. Most newspapers tend to print at Al Ahram. I used to print at Al Ahram; okay? And they're actually a great printer.

But I remember a while ago, el-Badeel, for example, ran something I didn't like, and they missed their printing schedule. It's very easy to do.

If you miss your printing schedule, I mean, that's it. You're going to miss your next edition. It's a great deal of money, and it's accomplished with little or no fuss, no bother, but you wind up losing money and newspapers don't have that much money to do.

Depending on this Arab charter that I referred that was passed in February 2008, it was initiated by the Egyptians and the Saudis. And part of it specifically deals with not defaming the sovereignty of other Arab nations.

So, yeah, if you step on too many toes, there will be consequences; yes. I mean, it's -- there is a charter in place. It's the law. You don't actually have to be that subtle about it; you know.

And I'm sorry your last question. The Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera is very, very popular, but I wouldn't say that it's watched more than -- I don't have the figures in front of me. I'm sorry.

But generally speaking, I wouldn't say that it's watched more -- also, there's a -- I mean, you need to look at content. There's straight news stories of the type that you have -- what everyone in the business calls the CNN type, which is a three-minute news story. And then, there's talk shows.

Egyptians satellite talk shows are more popular, generally speaking. We like our people. You know, no matter how large the world is, people like domestic affairs. They're more relevant to them, and we tend to watch our own more.

But for news, we very well might go to Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera is very, very popular. It's a good channel. It's a very good channel. And we watch it. We watch a lot of it.

But I wouldn't say it's watched by more than -- watched more than any other channel. I don't have the figures in front of me, but that would be my feeling about it.

MR. GRAND: Ted?

MR. BERCONE: Thank you, Mirette. Ted Piccone from Brookings.

I want to go back to your image of the government minister being criticized on TV.

To what extent is that happening anonymously by the critic who is identified or not identified, particularly in the blogging world, of course, these are usually screen names that are fictional; and whether that then makes it easier for citizens to take voice and they're protected to some extent. It doesn't mean that the Secret Service can't go trace them back in some way, if they have the resources to do that.

But whether that's helpful, and whether that is providing a safety valve for dissent, so people are feeling that at least they are expressing themselves in ways maybe they couldn't before through media channels. But it doesn't go any further than that in

terms of organized political opposition.

And I also wonder how the government is responding. Are they still putting the government ministers on the shows and facing up to that criticism or are they just not going on those shows and negotiating and say I will not go on that show if you put that in front of me, again?

And then how does your general story relayed, looking a little bit further down the road, to a post-Mubarak situation? Will be trend be toward greater demand for public debate over political issues and how will that affect the media environment?

MS. MABROUK: Okay. That particular government minister there was nothing anonymous about it. It was -- and I say it (inaudible). No, they were not anonymous. They -- and this was one of the things that was so interesting. I mean, these people were giving their names on live television.

Blogging is another matter. A lot of people choose to blog anonymously. They do so because it does give a little protection, if you like.

Now, yes, if the government wants to track them down, it can. I mean, this is not -- all ISPs

are watched. I mean, there is no privacy where that is concerned.

But it does -- it does afford a certain amount of anonymity and a little protective blanket, if you like, especially for women.

And this is actually new media has led to more women in the political debate participation or questioning, if you like, because traditionally speaking, women didn't often want to take part in street demonstrations, because it can get very unpleasant, which is why it's always distressing when well-meaning Western journalists and commentators come along and say, and, here in Egypt, we have this wonderful blogger, and then they out them.

If someone is doing this anonymously, there is a reason why they are doing this anonymously. And it is not a good idea for you to splatter their names out. It’s one of these well-meaning, but enormously ill advised, Western tactics that's quite distressing.

So the other thing is, is there going to be an increased demand for public debate. I think there is.

Now you may get ebbs and flows. I may be --

I mean, for example, 2009 is not turning out to be as politically vibrant a year, if you like, as 2008 was.

But these things will go in ebb and flow. You probably don't want to look at any particular milestones. You want to look at the general direction. And, yes, I think that there is definitely an increased need for public debate.

Again, that doesn't mean that all of a sudden, you know, it’s probably going to look more like that than just -- things don't work that way. Real life doesn't work that way.

People don’t work that way, because people are people. They have lives. They have children they’re educating. They have families they worry about. They need to put bread on the table.

Countries are made up of people. But you do want to look at the general trend, and the general trend is, yes; I think we're moving more to public debate.

MR. GRAND: It’s a little unusual at a Brookings policy luncheon that we would have a rockstar participate. But our next question comes from Pakistani rockstar Salmon Ahmed , who’s become a

friend, who's a member of our Arts and Culture Initiative, and who's been looking at the possibility of using the media and culture broadly to promote better understanding, but also to promote social change, and has just come back from Pakistan.

MR. AHMED: Thank you, Mirette. My question is, how can musicians, writers, poets, filmmakers -- are they shaping public opinion in Egypt? And can they play a leadership role in the rest of the Middle East? And specifically intra-faith dialogue, inter-faith dialogue, education, health?

MS. MABROUK: All right. The short answer is yes.

I don't know if you're familiar with the work of someone like Ahmed Fouad Negm, for example. You -- I'll give you the information afterwards.

Ahmed Fouad Negm is a poet. He writes in colloquial Arabic. His work is vastly read and appreciated, and there's another woman -- I actually may have her stuff upstairs, if you want to write. She's also a poet.

Colloquial Arabic lends itself well to poetry merely because it's easier to deal with

contemporary issues. They have -- I tend to think artists, especially poets, have been at the forefront of a call for political change -- a lot of actors, a lot of -- well, mostly actors, poets, musicians very much so.

And as for their affecting the region, Egypt -- you say culture in the Arab world, you say Egypt, because I think mostly due to what used to be a hegemony over our own culture -- it's not so anymore what with the spread of satellite television -- I mean the Syrians are making great television -- but there are no Arabs, to the best of my knowledge, you won't find an Arab that doesn't understand the Egyptian colloquial dialect.

Now Egyptians tend to be more insular. I mean, now, of course, we're more comfortable with the Lebanese dialect and Syrian dialect. But, again, that's directly due to satellite television. We didn't used to be.

But, for example, no one else is going to understand the North African dialects. It's very, very difficult speaking Berber. No one else is going to get it.

But the Egyptian dialect, yes. Everyone understands it.

And we export more television and films than anyone else to the rest of the media. So, yes, people watch us. People are very aware. And if it happens in Egypt, the rest of the Arab world is going to pick up on it.

So, yeah, absolutely. In fact, after this, if you like, I'll try and give you the information.

MR. AHMED: (Off mike.) So just to follow up, so examples of artists, actors, musicians, poets affecting intra-faith and inter-faith dialogues and political (inaudible).

MS. MABROUK: Inter-faith, intra-faith more difficult. It hasn't really been done yet. It's almost all been political so far, I think because that's where people have felt the greatest need or the greatest strife.

Generally speaking, I mean, you're not going to find an artist that doesn't open -- that opens his mouth that doesn’t sort of call for inter-faith and intra-faith dialogue. But there has been less solid work on it. Mostly, it's been political -- mostly,

for the political.

MR. GRAND: Mohammed?

MR. El-MENSHAWY: Mohammed Elmenshawy, editor in chief of Al-Taqrir Washington and the Arab Insight.

I have one question and comment. My question is the role of money and the business community in Egypt in the media. Why do these businessmen invest a lot of money in the newspaper and TV channels and they don't pursue any political role so far?

And I talked to many of them and they said, we have no really political ambitions. And they're losing money. And it doesn't make any sense.

And I have comment to the gentleman from (inaudible). I'm an Egyptian-American journalist, and I worked between here and Cairo. And Al Jazeera has more viewership during the regional crisis, which Egyptian TV can't afford to cover -- like Lebanon or Iraq or somewhere in Yemen. Yet, the Egyptian media has the upper hand in local and domestic issues, which are very much important for Egyptian audience now and (inaudible) the new concept all media are local.

The four TV shows Mirette mentions, the hosts are really more pork than any political party in Egypt -- Mona El-Shazly or Amr Adib are more important than al-(inaudible) or al-Ghad party nowadays. And this may be unfortunate news, but it's the reality.

And Saudi has figured great influence in Egypt. It’s all over. Nobody can dare to write about Prince Bandar bribe in the (inaudible). But it’s there. And nobody can deny it. And money play a role, and Saudi banish the Egyptian journalists who attacked them. They can go to (inaudible) or their family can go.

So it’s a balance of power here which we can’t have with Israel or with U.S.

About the cartoon, as Egyptian journalists following carefully -- saw the Israeli newspaper, it’s the same level of cartoon. I look at Israeli news cartoon about Arab and Muslims. It's really similar -- make funny of -- fun of Muslim and the same we do in Egypt -- make fun of Israelis. But anti-Semitic, it’s really not reality anymore. It’s just similar to the cartoonists in Israeli newspapers and American newspapers. It's just equal journalism.

MS. MABROUK: Okay. Why businessmen pour lots of money -- okay, I mean, you show me a businessman who pays an average of $50,000 a month just in production costs, and says “no, I don't have political ambitions,” and I'll show you a liar. It just is not so. It’s not so.

They are interested in political power. But the thing is this: it may be -- and this may be part of the change -- it may be that they’re realizing that political power does not necessarily have to mean I am a member of his party, and I'm going to be a member of parliament.

You don’t need to be that anymore. More people read the newspaper then pay attention to members of parliament. This is it, it’s not possible to underestimate the power of a newspaper, and they’re using it.

But at the end of the day, we benefit. So I'm happy. But I think you are absolutely correct that they -- when they say I don't want political power, that’s -- it’s not so. I think you're completely correct. They want the political power. They just don't need to be a member of parliament to

do it anymore. But we benefit.

MR. DANZIGER: Yeah, just as a follow up to both of you. I think there's a very big difference between showing ministers with pot bellies or Britishers with big teeth, and between showing characters which really bring up not ridicule, but hatred -- the hooked noses, the beards, the shields of David in the form of swastikas, Ariel Sharon eating children, Palestinian children.

Those kind of things -- true, it has to do with Israeli policies, but I think those kinds of things bring hatred, and I see as fomenting incitement, which is very different. You don't see that in Israeli papers; also great ridicule perhaps sometimes of this or that Arab country or Yasser Arafat at that time, there was a lot of cartoons against him.

But I can't recall ever seeing this kind of cartoon which really brings about this kind of hatred I think those kinds of images bring out in Egyptian and other Arab press. That's my feeling.

MS. MABROUK: I understand what you're saying and I don't -- I'm not going to argue with

that. Mostly because it's an internalized thing.

I mean, what I am saying is, if I get you correctly, you're referring to an anti-Semitic feeling in Egypt. All I'm trying to say is, honestly, it's not an anti-Semitic thing. It is an anti-Israeli thing.

And, I'm not going to tell you well, you know, Egyptians are not that, you know, worried about Israel at the moment. It is an anti-Israeli thing, and it will always reflect the current political situation. It's very much an anti-Israel thing.

But stereotypes are cheap; okay? They are always cheap. That is the nature of stereotypes. There is no such thing as a good stereotype, never. All stereotypes are cheap and unpleasant; okay?

And when you say there's a difference between, you know, drawing a minister with a pot belly and short legs, let me assure you in Egypt if someone looks at the kind of cartoon that you're referring to, someone who cannot feed their children is going to take a look at -- the picture of a man with a huge pot belly and short legs that he knows has money, I promise you they get significantly more worked up

about this cartoon than the one of the supposedly anti-Semitic images that you're referring to.

It depends what is most relevant to me. And the kind of cartoons that you're referring to is more likely caused more pain and irritation to you than they would be reflected I think elsewhere.

We don't pay that much attention, but I promise you the pot-bellied guy when you can’t feed your children resounds a great deal more, just to let you know. All right?

MR. HISHMI: George Hishmi . Mirette, it was very interesting, indeed. And thank you very much.

I have one question is about the financing of newspapers, TV stations, radio. Do Arab listeners listen to -- pay attention more to radio, to TV, or to newspapers?

If you want to have the crowds to come out in the street and demonstrate, where does the first idea come from?

But I want to know more about financing. Really, this is the issue. How much does an Egyptian newspaper man is paid? What’s the salary range? How

much -- do any of the papers, the independent papers you talked about, make money or are they losing? Who finances them?

As I've told you earlier in a private conversation, I was the newspaper editor in Beirut, and it was really very difficult to make ends meet.

And I am -- I just want to mention that Western industry, Western financial institutions, oil companies, things there -- how they advertise in the local media, which I find really shocking -- at least industrial advertising.

I mean, it's to their interests, to Western interests, to people who want to spread democracy in the area to make these people stand on their own feet and not to be dependent on very wealthy Arabs or governments, and then you are limited in what you can do and say and behave in the region.

Maybe you can develop this idea further and further in the last five minutes you have here? Thank you.

MS. MABROUK: I think I'll answer your easiest question first, which is about reach. I would think that it's television, just because, I mean, as I

said, Egypt has a 71 percent there is a rate. So if you can't read, you do watch television.

And a lot of people do watch it, and it's easy for you to miss the newspaper that morning. I often did, and I would catch it in the evening. But you can see it on television or you can watch the rerun or the other rerun ore the rerun after that.

So I think television has greater reach, but I think if you want the most reach, you use all three. You use television. You use newspapers. You use radio. You use new media. And they all feed off each other. All right?

They're all -- because, I mean, one of our most interesting stories, for example, on television was a case of sort of mass harassment downtown, and it was after Eid two years ago, and the story was posted by bloggers.

It was brought up during a talk show, and then the talk show host went and did the story. She did investigative journalism on it, had it on her program, and then every newspaper in the country was carrying editorials and very, very accusatory stories, but because they felt the government hadn't acted.

And, as a matter of fact, a year and a half later, Egypt handed down its first case -- handed down its first sentence in a sexual harassment case, where the guy got three years, first time. I think that that is a direct result of the attention that was paid there at the time before. So that's maybe the first question.

The finances. Newspapers are horribly cash intensive, which is why so many of them are going out of business.

If you are printing on average, if you're printing 12 pages, a daily, six times a week, with only two color pages, you know, you're looking at about $40,000 just in production costs, and that doesn't include rent or the staff or subscriptions or any of that.

It's a horribly cash intensive business. And, therefore, if you're in it --

MR. GRAND: You said $40,000?

MS. MABROUK: -- a month.

MR. GRAND: It's a month.

MS. MABROUK: A month. I'm so sorry. A month for a six-day run.

And that’s only in production costs; all right? And just about everybody prints at Al-Ahram. Everybody. Okay?

And they’re actually great printers. But here's the thing: so when you go into this, you go into this with your eyes open, and, for me, if you're running a newspaper, then you're interested in one of two things. You're either interested in doing good or you're interested in political influence. Hopefully, it's a mixture of the two.

But any businessman, I mean, if you tell any businessman, well, you know, I'm going to give you this business plan, and you're looking at about three and a half years before you start making any money, and you’re going to be spending about 50 -- $50K, I mean, dollars a month.

This is someone who is seriously interested in what they're doing, whether it's for political purposes or whether it's, you know, for more altruistic reasons.

And a lot of people have gone on -- el-Badeel, which was a very, very decent newspaper, recently went belly up.

They’re moving from a daily to a weekly, and I don't know if they're going to be able to do that. It's a very, very decent newspaper. Very decent newspaper.

And it’s a good independent. And they just -- I mean, and they went under; all right?

Now Al-Masry Al-Youm, which is the largest independent, is doing well, but, you know, it takes a lot of money, so very, very, very dodgy in many ways.

That’s why television and new media is easy. And actually, the traditional media have been very quick to take advantages of all the -- has started to take advantage of all the opportunities that news -- that new media offers.

I mean, el-Badeel, for example, are now running online.

As for why American companies don't advertise. I think it's an excellent question. I don't understand why Americans -- or and I say Americans, because you're right, because, I mean, when I was running a newspaper, other countries do pay money for advertising on national days or their local businesses. The French companies, for example. They

do pay.

The Americans don’t. And I always found it odd because I don't know why -- even though, I mean, if you’re here, if you’re in the states, then advertising is an important way to reach your people and to make them think particular things about you -- that you’re a good company, that you're environmentally aware, that -- whatever.

So I don't know why they would think that those business policies would not be a good idea elsewhere. And American advertising would have been a good thing to see over the past eight years, when American foreign policy was held in such low regard.

I think it really, you know, people looking up and saying, you know, hi, we are this organization. We employ people in your country. They always leave that to their franchises, which, in my opinion, is not a great idea.

I mean, if I am Mc -- I mean, McDonald’s are franchises, but it would have done people well to -- I think to see American companies. I think it's an excellent point, and I think they should have done it.

MR. HISHMI: Thank you.

MS. MABROUK: Okay.

SPEAKER: In the old days, journalists working under government supervision. They followed the guidelines that (inaudible). Now we have an independent private media emerging. Journalists have more leeway. They have to please the publishers. But what about standards and ethics of journalism, which struck me?

And I wonder what is emerging there? Something that I've noticed -- sensationalism, in particular on sensitive issues, essay, on covering the Arab / Muslim issue -- ordinary news items that can be covered about an incident that is really just a local incident. And I've noticed the language in a few newspapers. They deliberately refer to the people concerned either being Arab or Muslim, which is quite dangerous and sensational.

And I'm just wondering this -- who is going to oversee the standard, the ethics of journalism, and the responsibility of journalists and the way they cover things? Is there something emerging amongst those independent journalists other than the Niqaba, that is, the syndicates?

MS. MABROUK: Okay. Yeah, it’s a very good point.

As I said, the poll that I mentioned earlier, again, over 70 percent of the journalists polled felt that professional standards needed to be raised; okay?

The problems in the industry are wide spread, and they are not all the fault of the government. That's not so. There are many industry problems, and there does need to be more attention paid to professional standards.

I think there needs to be more training. There needs to be more ethical boards, because the syndicate can very often get wrapped up in political issues.

But professional standards are just as important, if not more important. In fact, you can't have one without the other.

And more attention needs to be paid for them; yes.

Most respectable newspapers don't do it, but it's very easy to start slipping into a tabloid style because I don't think anyone ever, you know, lost

money underestimating the lowest common denominator. You know, it's unfortunate, but it's true.

But you are absolutely correct. Professional standards need to be raised. I think there needs to be more training, and I think there needs to be more awareness. And I think there are many people in the industry who are aware of it.

In fact, the majority of the industry is aware of it, and something does have to be done about it. You're absolutely correct.

MR. GRAND: Let me just conclude by thanking you, Mirette; thanking you for your contributions today, but also thanking you for being with us as a colleague and a fellow at the -- within the Saban Center.

And thank you to all of you for joining us for what I thought was a very stimulating and interesting conversation.

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