

THE BROOKINGS PROJECT ON  
U.S. RELATIONS WITH THE ISLAMIC WORLD



ANALYSIS PAPER  
Number 15, May 2010

# CHANGING THE CHANNEL:

Egypt's Evolving Media  
Landscape and its Role in  
Domestic Politics



at BROOKINGS

Mirette F. Mabrouk

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Since the Revolution of 1952, Egypt's government has paid close and unwavering attention to its media. The last twenty years or so, however, have seen a change in the landscape, with the media testing the limits of state control.

These changes may be attributed to three main causes: first, the introduction of private satellite television in the early 1990s; second, the rise of independent newspapers; and finally, the emergence over the past five or six years of the internet and new media.

Private satellite television stations, beginning with Cable News Network (CNN) during the first Gulf War, brought Egyptian viewers their first glimpse of television news that had not been filtered by the Ministry of Information. The first Egyptian private satellite station emerged in 2000. Since it followed a private enterprise business model, the station had to keep consumers happy, which meant giving viewers what they wanted. What they wanted, it turned out, was information and the chance to be able to comment on it. Private stations vied with one another to provide viewers with programs that would keep them tuning in, and that often meant content of an aggressively political nature. In a country with a 71 percent literacy rate, satellite television had excellent penetration, much better than that of newspapers. It also offered, in its talk shows with viewer call-ins, the opportunity for

interactivity that had been absent from the landscape for almost fifty years.

Private newspapers took notice of the success of these shows and were soon emulating them. In Egypt private newspapers are distinct from opposition newspapers, which toe the opposition party line and cannot claim to be non-partisan. Over the past years, these independent papers have increasingly pushed the envelope in providing news to their readers, often covering matters that the state-run papers either gloss over or do not cover at all. The resulting differences in coverage, particularly on issues of politics, public accountability and civil rights, can be so pronounced that a casual observer might think the front pages of private papers and their state-run competition are covering different countries.

While private newspapers have led the way in relatively independent reporting, there are many opposition and other partisan papers that have become increasingly strident and bombastic in their criticism of the government. In much the same way as Fox News is more a commentary network than an actual news provider, these papers have few claims to objectivity, but there is no doubt they, like Fox, have a following.

As for new media, the technology's effect has been disproportionate to its physical presence. While internet penetration in Egypt is relatively limited, with



perhaps 25 percent of the population at best having internet access, new media has had a discernible influence. It has affected the information available, its usage and the nature of discussion and participation in political life. Although less than one-fifth of Egypt's blogs are political in nature, that fraction has become noisy in its demands for civil reform and accountability. They have become a source for breaking stories that television and print news organizations then report on and pass on to a larger public.

Just as importantly, internet users tend to be young and educated, the same tranche of society that has felt increasingly disenfranchised from the political process and which various opposition political parties had attempted, without any tangible success, to rope in. The medium has re-awakened a questioning of authority and political excitement that had been missing from the Egyptian political scene for many years.

Despite vigorous and determined suppression in the form of new legislation designed to curb the press, it has become increasingly difficult to stem the growing tide of free speech. The results have been a newly revitalized and surprisingly liberal political dialogue, fueled to a great extent by both access to information and the ability to disseminate it. The question remains what this means for U.S. foreign policy as far as Egypt is concerned.

An Egypt which is stable and progressing forward with efforts at democratic and civil reform is not only in the interests of the country, but in the interest of the region as a whole and of the United States. Traditionally, such progress has come not from political parties but from civil society and an independent press. Therefore, it is vital to support both in the interests of stability.

There is a fine line between support and interference. Consequently, financial and technical support for news organizations will always be welcome and should be encouraged. Prizes for investigative reporting, for example, will encourage professionalism while instilling pride and providing cash—in a notoriously cash-strapped industry—without foreign interference.

Technical support, like the provision of new equipment and professional training courses, provide internal help while cross-cultural reviews and committees open up a world of international cooperation. Material aid in the form of legal fees or advice to journalists is another possible means of aid without the specter of international bullying or interference. In all cases, the U.S. must be aware that an unshackled press is a vital strategic ally in the move towards democratization.

## THE AUTHOR

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She was formerly the publisher of *The Daily Star Egypt*, (now *The Daily New Egypt*) the country's only independent English-language daily newspaper. Mabrouk founded the paper in May of 2005

and it rapidly became the leading English newspaper in the country. She also wrote regularly, with her opinion columns generally being the paper's top-emailed article during the week of their publication. She continues to write, with her work appearing in both local and international publications, among them *The Huffington Post*.

Ms. Mabrouk graduated from the American University in Cairo in 1989 with a BA in Mass Communication. She obtained her Master's Degree in Broadcast Journalism from the same university.

# INTRODUCTION

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Today's diverse forms of media are following an ancient tradition. In ancient civilizations, governments and members of the ruling classes always utilized various forms of public broadcast to inform the general public of news that it deemed acceptable. In ancient Egypt, noblemen kept scribes to maintain records and to inform the uneducated masses of noblemen's successes and intentions. Ancient Roman public criers dispensed announcements (along with advertising) to the plebeians in public squares and forums. In an early effort to reach as large an audience as possible, announcements were also posted at the crossroads of three different roads (hence the origin of the word "*trivia*").

Announcements in this form have always given rise to dissenters. Graffiti was a traditional form of opposition (even when the public was illiterate), the likes of which have been left on walls and in caves for historians to interpret. Roman politicians, thought to have behaved dishonorably in office, were mercilessly lampooned on the walls of the city. Though the graffiti was considered a defacement of property and was often lacking in artistic value, it was undoubtedly read.

A millennia and a half later, every government-approved newspaper article or television report has an independent paper or website actively critiquing it. Dissent is not new. It is just now more efficiently disseminated.



## THE LAY OF THE LAND—A LOOK AT EGYPT’S CURRENT LANDSCAPE

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In Egypt, the media has been controlled by the government since the 1952 Revolution. The Free Officers were quick to realize the potential of mass media, particularly radio in a country where illiteracy was an estimated 75 percent.<sup>1</sup> At 7:30 a.m. on July 23, 1952, Fahmi Omar, a presenter (and later, head) of Egyptian Broadcasting, started his broadcast with “a statement from the General Command of the Armed Forces.” This was the first announcement of the government takeover of Egyptian Broadcasting. The Armed Forces took the matter of media control seriously. Officers camped in the Broadcast Building for a full 40 days afterwards to ensure full compliance with the government interference. When *Al-Masri* newspaper printed an editorial suggesting the Free Officers return to their barracks, the paper was promptly

closed down.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, the time for a free press in Egypt was over.

The press was too valuable a tool for the government to relinquish; in 1960, President Gamal Abdel Nasser effectively nationalized the Egyptian press. All media organizations had to surrender ownership to the country’s only legal political organization, the National Union (later renamed the Arab Socialist Union). The National Union, already owned by *Dar Al-Tahrir*,<sup>3</sup> took over the nation’s four largest private publishing houses: *Dar Al-Ahram*, *Dar Akhbar Al-Youm*, *Dar Al-Hilal* and *Dar Rose Al-Yousef*. The Egyptian government had effectively turned the media into their own public address system.

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<sup>1</sup> Egypt Country Data, Country Studies Series by Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress.

<sup>2</sup> Omayma Abdel Latif, “Announcing the Revolution,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, July 18-24, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Hussein Amin, Hanzada Fikry, *Media, Sex, Violence and Drugs, Egypt’s Experience*, 2001.

## HEAR NO EVIL: INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS

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Anwar Sadat, Abdel Nasser's successor, reinstated the political parties (which had been banned following the Revolution) and their right to publish newspapers. Since then, it has been something of a rollercoaster for the Egyptian press. The reintroduction of political pluralism had ups and downs since Sadat treated the press much like an angler does a fish: relaxing the line and reeling it back in as necessary. When Sadat was assassinated in 1981, Emergency Laws (which are still in effect) tightened the shackles on the press even further.

Starting a newspaper in Egypt can be a logistical nightmare due to government regulations. First, a newspaper needs security clearance and permission from several governmental bodies, including the Higher Journalism Council and the Council of Ministers. Daily newspapers are likely to cost LE 1 million, and a weekly LE 500,000, in terms of fees. Because of the complications of starting an Egyptian newspaper, many publications opt to print abroad, but continue to maintain distribution and staff in Egypt. However, such papers are then subject to treatment as a foreign publication and then vulnerable to confiscation prior to distribution. Confiscations always occur after a publication has been printed, so as to inflict an exorbitant cost on

the publisher. A series of confiscations can financially devastate a publication.

Local papers also face significant governmental constraints. Press freedom in Egypt is severely circumscribed by a web of media-related legislation. It is not just the vast number of laws in place, but also their sheer complexity that limit journalists' room for maneuver. Legal provisions relating to the press are found in the Publications Act, the Penal Code, the Press Regulation Law, the State Documents Law, the Civil Servants Law, the Political Parties Law, and the Intelligence Law. Any journalist who steps over the line, but whose actions cannot be punished under this almost all-encompassing legal blanket, is usually accused of violating the ban on reporting on military verdicts. The laws controlling the media contravene at least ten articles of the Constitution.<sup>4</sup>

Egypt has a notoriously draconian set of press laws. Although Article 48 of the Constitution guarantees press freedom, Egypt is one of only thirteen countries in the world that allows for imprisonment in the case of libel or defamation. Under a 1996 law, either crime was punishable by a fine of LE 1,000 to LE 5,000 and a maximum of one year in prison.

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<sup>4</sup> Atef Al-Saadawy, "Egypt, Where is the Press Headed?" *The Arab Press Network*, February 2008.

The punishment for the libel of a public official was even stricter, with a fine of LE 20,000 and a maximum of two years in prison. Not surprisingly, these laws tend to discourage journalists from pursuing any serious research into public accountability.

In February 2004, President Mubarak publicly stated that the media was in a sorry state of affairs when people could go to prison for simply doing their jobs. He promised to set things right by asking for an amendment to the law. Two years later, in 2006, the new, revamped Press Law was announced. It was hailed by National Democratic Party (NDP) officials (among them, the President's son, Gamal, and the head of the Shura House and former Minister of Information, Safwat Sherif) as a "positive step towards reform" and a "press victory."

The Journalists Syndicate (which had been ignored during the rewriting of the law) was not as enthusiastic about the new laws. Independent and opposition newspapers withheld publication for a day in protest of the new law, and hundreds of media workers demonstrated outside the Egyptian parliament, to no avail.

The new law still stipulated a maximum of two years imprisonment (with no definition of either libel or defamation) and increased the fine to LE 30,000. Furthermore, the government removed Article 302, a clause exempting from prosecution for libel those acting with an absence of malice—where a writer or paper are merely reporting facts and have no personal axe to grind. With the clause's removal, a court case could be brought based on the assumption of malicious intent. Now journalists could no longer be certain if something they printed would be deemed offensive by someone; their reporting could always be judged a personal attack—no longer reporting but defamation. The new law was useful for those wishing to threaten

journalists into remaining silent. Since 2006, several of Egypt's prominent businessmen have brought libel and defamation cases against newspapers; as a result of President Mubarak's measures, both the papers and their editors are now on trial.

One of Egypt's most prominent businessmen also appears to be one of the most litigious. Known as the Steel Tsar, Ahmed Ezz is the CEO of Ezz El-Dekheila Steel and a member of the People's Assembly. As a member of the NDP's powerful Policies Secretariat, Ezz is generally perceived to be part of the government's inner circle. Over the past year, he has battled almost all of the opposition papers and in late autumn of 2009 had four suits—all still pending—against four different opposition newspapers and their editors. Such cases are potentially disastrous for the papers because of crippling fines to the newspapers and editors facing possible jail time. Egypt has a remarkably independent judiciary and cases brought merely to stifle expression of opinion are often dropped. But even when lawsuits are thrown out of court, the newspaper still has to fight a protracted and financially damaging battle in the courts. The mere threat of a lawsuit is a powerful deterrent.

Journalists resort to self-censorship because of the threat of jail, or worse. According to Fulbright scholar Kenneth J. Cooper, "Editors of both Al-Masry [Al-Youm] and [The] Daily News [Egypt] admit to practicing self-censorship to avoid legal confrontations with the government."<sup>5</sup> The Committee to Protect Journalists recently declared Egypt one of the world's top 10 backsliders on press freedom.<sup>6</sup>

The biggest challenge to the status quo has come from the independent press. Independent media—both print and broadcast—are a relatively new development in Egypt. In the case of print media, there is

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<sup>5</sup> Kenneth J. Cooper, "Politics and Priorities: Inside the Egyptian Press," *Arab Media and Society*, Fall 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists, Special Annual Report 2007, Website: <<http://cpj.org/reports/2007/05/backsliders.php>>.

a distinction between opposition and independent press. The opposition press has traditionally represented the views of opposing parties since those papers were reintroduced to Egypt by Sadat in 1970. The views in opposition papers have always been treated with caution by readers—their strident tone and obviously partisan politics have undermined the public’s perception of them as impartial observers. The independent press, on the other hand, have gained a serious following, among them *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, the country’s most popular independent daily. *Al-Shorouk*, a new daily newspaper that began in February 2009, is competitive with *Al-Masry Al-Youm* in terms of circulation. *Al-Dostour*, run by the country’s most litigation-prone editor, Ibrahim Eissa, and *Al-Badeel*, went bankrupt in the spring of 2009.

The divide between the independent and opposition press and the state-controlled press has grown into a gaping chasm. Each covers stories differently: a quick glance at an independent or state paper might give the impression they are covering different countries.

The front page of Egyptian newspapers in mid-September 2009 ran different stories, depending on whether the paper was independently or state-owned. The government-run *Al-Ahram*’s online page had as its first story President Mubarak’s comments on Jerusalem capturing the hearts and minds of all Muslims, and, as a consequence, the importance of a regional solution. (The lead story in *Al-Ahram* is usually connected in some way to the President.) The other articles described how additional amounts of basic foodstuffs were being made available to citizens for the upcoming Eid, how Minister of Culture Farouk Hosny was the front-runner for the job of head of UNESCO, and what measures the government was taking to combat swine flu.

The front page contained none of the articles that were prominently covered in its independent counterparts, like *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, *Daily News Egypt*, and *Al-Dostour*. While the front pages of those papers contained versions of some of the same subjects covered by *Al-Ahram*, a number of others were less flattering to the government, such as: Cairo’s mounting garbage problem, which had deteriorated to the point where *Al-Masry Al-Youm* was running a campaign entitled “Serve Yourself—Forget the Government”; the rising prices of basic foodstuffs (just in time for the upcoming Eid); the sewage-contaminated drinking water of Shabramant in the Delta; and the problems of underage marriage. The independent newspapers also criticized *Al-Ahram* for the visit made by the Israeli Ambassador to Egypt to one of *Al-Ahram*’s editors, in the *Ahram* office. The Press Syndicate expressly forbids its members to meet with Israelis, which it says would constitute a “normalization of relations.”

Fulbright Scholar and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Kenneth J. Cooper’s *Politics and Priorities: Inside the Egyptian Press* provides a significantly more scientific assessment of the media. The paper analyzed the content of *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and *The Daily News Egypt*<sup>7</sup> (formerly, *The Daily Star Egypt*) from mid-2005 to 2007 to determine how politics and ideology drove content choice. Cooper found that:

... the three papers have different priorities in both overall coverage and front page story selection. These differences appear to reflect the relative weight editors give to various news values, the divergent composition of the papers’ readerships and disagreements about journalism’s mission and Egypt’s social realities. During the study period, readers got slightly more domestic news stories from *Almasry* than *al-Ahram*,

<sup>7</sup> The author of this analysis paper is the founding publisher of *The Daily News Egypt* (formerly *The Daily Star Egypt*) and was the Publisher until mid-March of 2007.

even though the state-run daily published more pages of news than *Almasry* every day of the week. In their coverage, *Almasry* and the *Daily News* emphasized domestic politics and human rights much more than *al-Ahram*. Sourcing in the private papers also leaned in a different direction. The privately-owned papers relied less on officials, who were by far the main sources of domestic news in *al-Ahram*.<sup>8</sup>

In *al-Ahram*, the most frequent subject on front pages was government, whereas *Almasry* gave more weight to domestic politics, and the *Daily News* concentrated on human rights. The English-language paper's focus on individual rights reached an astounding level: almost two-thirds of the stories the *Daily News* published about human rights ran on the front page.<sup>8</sup>

Increasingly, it is not just the coverage that is different; government and independent newspapers are being treated differently. Egypt's most famous case in recent years was a murder trial involving Hisham Talaat Mostafa, an Egyptian contractor and billionaire, who was found guilty of hiring a former police officer to murder a Lebanese singer, Suzanne Tamim, after she snubbed him. Mostafa is a former member of the People's Assembly and member of the NDP's influential Policies Secretariat, led by Gamal Mubarak. The trial of a member of the inner circle drew such intense interest that the presiding judge issued a press ban. Eight editors were subsequently charged with violating the ban—three from state and five from private newspapers. Charges against the three state editors were dropped almost immediately, but the private editors were sentenced to one-year imprisonment and fined LE 10,000. The prison sentence was dropped, but the fine was imposed in February of 2010.

The editors of independent papers have been in the headlines for the past two years. Ibrahim Eissa of the daily *Al-Dustour*, Wael al-Abrashy of the weekly *Sawt al-Umma*, Adel Hammouda of the weekly *Al-Fajr* and Abdel Halim Qandil, former editor of the weekly *Al-Karama*, were all tried by the Agouza First Instances Court on September 13, 2007. They received the maximum sentence—one year in prison and a fine of LE 20,000—in accordance with the Egyptian Penal Code for anyone who “malevolently publishes false news, statements or rumors that are likely to disturb public order.” The sentences were overturned in February of this year, although the fines were upheld.

Ibrahim Eissa had also been in the news for what became known as “the President's Health Case.” Eissa wrote a somewhat flippant column in which he wondered why people questioned the President's health whenever he disappeared out of sight for periods of time. Insulting the President is specifically outlawed in the Constitution; the definition of ‘insult’ is a generous one. Eissa was charged with threatening national security, negatively affecting the Egyptian stock market and therefore depriving the country of \$350 million worth of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and insulting the President. He was slapped with a fine and a six month prison sentence. However, he has yet to see the inside of a prison: he received a presidential pardon in October, 2008.

Journalists in Egypt jest that three things are needed to enter the profession: a good nose, a good pen and a good lawyer. Journalism has become so prone to litigation, that in the first quarter of 2009 alone, there were 28 lawsuits raised against newspapers or individual journalists in Egypt. The independent newspapers bore the brunt: eight independent papers had suits filed against them. Comparatively, the opposition newspapers were only battling three

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth J. Cooper, “Politics and Priorities: Inside the Egyptian Press,” *Arab Media and Society*, Fall 2008.

lawsuits; the national (state-run) newspapers only two. The intensely litigious atmosphere in Egypt's press has resulted in a legal feeding frenzy: 26 percent of suits were filed by other journalists, 26 percent by political parties and politicians, and 26 percent by public figures. The remaining 22 percent of suits filed, all by private citizens, were all dropped. Clearly, Egyptians are a forgiving lot when not shackled to a political party or a public image.<sup>9</sup>

Though the number of prison sentences actually served has dropped, the number of fines and the amounts involved increased during the first quarter of 2009. Journalism is not a lucrative profession in Egypt; the average journalist at an Arabic newspaper is likely to make LE 400 to LE 1,500 (72 - 300 US dollars per month). The fines are therefore an extremely effective deterrent. Even mild fines, though not as dramatic as prison sentences and often under the radar of human rights groups, can effectively cripple an individual or a paper.

The government itself does not have to implement such heavy-handed policies; there are plenty of other parties in Egypt who are perfectly willing and able to contribute to keeping the media under

state control. The political environment is currently plagued by 'Hesba' cases, third party cases that have origins in Sharia and oblige the faithful to "enjoin good and forbid evil" within their community. In essence, anyone can raise a lawsuit if he or she feels that God, religion, or public morals are being defamed. The most famous 'Hesba' case was brought against Al-Azhar professor Nasr Abu Zeid in 1993, accusing him of apostasy and demanding that he be divorced from his wife. Though the case was initially rejected, it passed through the Appeals Court two years later.

In 1996 the law was amended, making Hesba cases the sole prerogative of the Public Prosecutor's office. However, Hesba cases are still being used to quash freedom of expression. The case against Eissa was a Hesba case brought by NDP-affiliated lawyers, among them Nasr Sheshtawy and Saleh El-Derbashy. Magdy Al-Shafei and Mohamed Al-Sharqawi, the author and publisher of *Metro*, a graphic novel, are currently battling a suit also raised by El-Derbashy that claims the novel "harms public morals." More tellingly, El-Derbashy said that the novel "says the police don't respect people's rights. It just invites anarchy."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Forum for Development and Human Rights Dialogue, Messengers of Freedom, Quarterly Report, March 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Matt Bradley, The National 'Comic Book Trial A Test of Egyptian Courts' April 17, 2009. Website: <<http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=96316>>.



## SEE NO EVIL: SATELLITE TELEVISION

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Satellite television has been another change on the media landscape. Egyptians first got a taste of international satellite coverage in 1990. When the former President of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, invaded Kuwait after the Iran-Iraq War, international news organizations were on the scene soon after the Allied Liberation forces. Leading the pack of journalists was CNN, displaying enormous marketing savvy by airing its cable service free throughout the region during the war. The wisdom of this move was rewarded with an advertisement by Egyptian President Mubarak, who claimed during an interview that “all the time, I was watching the CNN.”

He wasn't the only one: Egyptians were glued to their screens. For the first time, the general public was watching news that hadn't been filtered by the Egyptian Ministry of Information. Over the next decade, Egyptians continued to watch satellite stations from other countries, which provided the country a different perspective on the news. Finally, in 2000, Egyptian independent television satellite stations entered, bringing another vital breath of freedom to the landscape.

The government established a new free zone for the media when it began the Media Production City in January of 2000, which helped attract over LE 250 million of private investment for the launch of Egypt's first private satellite channel, Al-Mehwar (the Axis). Among the initial investors was

businessman Ahmed Bahgat, who only a year later left to start his own channels, Dream 1 and Dream 2.

The Dream Channels, in particular, hit upon a winning mix of programming: a combination of politically edgy interviews and programs, and scintillating topics that covered everything from religious fatwas to masturbation. Journalists Mohamed Hassanein Heikal and Hamdi Kandil contributed to the political intrigue and the ‘scintillation’ was provided by talk show host Hala Sarhan, a journalist whose loud makeup and brash style belied an extremely shrewd and professional mind. Sarhan could interview guests about economic reform and the religious take on masturbation with equal skill. As a result, viewers tuned in faithfully.

The influx of open television in Egypt marked a significant change; half of the programming would never have made it past the media censors a few years earlier. Surprisingly enough, the masturbation episode didn't bother the government (the episode enjoyed several reruns). However, Heikal's speech, broadcast from the American University in Cairo, commenting on Egypt's political legacy and political succession, shook the establishment. It was the last time he appeared on Egyptian satellite television.

The genie, however, was completely out of the bottle by this point. Channels had to respond to public demand to stay in business; viewers wanted sex,

politics and most importantly, the chance to ask questions and have them answered on live television. Talk shows became the new political currency. Suddenly, a nation that had endured fifty years of keeping its collective head down could ask questions on live television without fear of retribution. Anchors asked government officials embarrassing

questions and viewers called in, using their real names, to enquire, protest, and demand.

Reading newspapers and watching television are both vital ways of acquiring knowledge. But for some, consuming information was not enough—it became vital to produce it.

## SPEAK NO EVIL: NEW MEDIA AND CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

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The development of new media has been rapid. In 1995, there were an estimated 10,000 internet users in Egypt; thirteen years later, the Ministry of Communication estimated that there were about 8.62 million users (in a country with a literacy rate of just over 70 percent). This rise was due partly to the Free Internet Initiative set up by the government in 2002 and the ability to purchase PCs on an installment basis.

This generosity begs the question: “Why would an apparently repressive regime encourage a technology that might be a danger to it?” Similarly, some wonder why the government does not simply reverse the freedoms and opportunities offered, and if Egypt might witness the kind of crackdown that occurred in China or Iran.

The deceptively simple answer is that Egypt is neither China nor Iran; Egypt is an eclectic mix of circumstances. Formerly a socialist country, Egypt has been trying for several decades to remold itself into a capitalist economy, with some success. However, much of the socialist mentality remains. The government invests heavily in social services and basic infrastructure, which the citizens still expect. The education and healthcare systems are rife with problems, but they are available free of charge—ostensibly—to

all citizens. Utilities and basic foodstuffs are heavily subsidized. The government might not appear to prioritize democracy but it does prioritize public services. Though the system is hampered terribly by corruption and a chronic lack of accountability, the system is in place. The government does not stint on basic infrastructure, health, or education. Civic rights, however, are another matter.

A mere four years ago, the government-run Cabinet Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) estimated that there were about 40 bloggers active online in Egypt. Its latest statistics cite a possible 160,000 bloggers; roughly one out of every four internet subscribers blogs.<sup>11</sup>

Blogging has become so popular as a means of self-expression that even those who do not have access to their own computers are determined to participate. Not all users are internet subscribers. Although subscriptions are cheap (about LE 45 or about \$8 monthly for a basic DSL line), many cannot afford the subscriptions and simply log on from internet cafes. Of those using internet cafes—one of every 20 blogs—the vast majority are written in Arabic—67.8 percent according to IDSC, with 20.8 percent using a mixture of Arabic and English, and a mere 9.5 percent using English, with the

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<sup>11</sup> Cabinet Information Decision and Support Center, *Egyptian Blogs: A New Social Space*, July 2008.

typical blogger being a male between the ages of 20 to 30.<sup>12</sup> According to a recent Harvard study, the largest percentage of Arab female bloggers was in Egypt.<sup>13</sup> This is precisely the demographic that political parties, both the government and opposition, have been trying to attract for three decades, with minimal success.

Education is also another factor that has affected the media environment, both in the ability of people to adapt to new innovations and the increased tendency to question the status quo. Egypt spends a very respectable 5.6 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on education. The level of education has risen steadily. By 2003, 87.1 percent of Egyptians

had at least a secondary education, as compared to 28.4 percent of the population in 1970; tertiary education (both vocational and university) similarly rose from 6.9 percent to 32.6 percent over the same time period.<sup>14</sup>

The increase in education did not often correspond to the actual needs of the economy, and a cultural preference for white collar degrees meant that vocational education was neglected, to the detriment of both the economy and the unemployed university graduates. If there is one thing the government dislikes more than an unemployed loafer is an educated, articulate, unemployed loafer with a sense of entitlement.

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<sup>12</sup> Cabinet Information Decision and Support Center, *Electronic Media in Egypt: Reality and Challenges*, April 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Internet and Democracy Project, Berkman Center, Harvard University, *Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere: Politics, Culture and Dissent*, June 2009.

<sup>14</sup> MENA Development Report, *The Road Not Travelled, Education Reform in the Middle East and North Africa*, World Bank, 2008.

## HOW HAVE THEY AFFECTED POLITICS?

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Taken together, all the above factors initially produced only subtle effects on the political environment. However, as the preceding pages suggest, their effect are increasingly being more broadly felt.

Of all the media forms, television has perhaps the greatest reach in terms of audience, probably for two reasons: Egypt's relatively low literacy rate and the immediate emotional feedback that satellite television provides. Talk shows have become a station's main currency. The success of a station depends on the ability of a talk-show program's anchors to provide a forum for discussion of relevant and popular topics. Increasingly, television talk shows have become virtual coffee houses, filling the traditional role of cafes in generating discussion. Egyptian satellite channels cover a plethora of topics that are most on people's minds and offer them the opportunity to provide their opinions about them. Often, satellite television talk shows air the nation's dirty laundry.

Two years ago, Malek Mostafa published a post on his blog, *malek-x.net*, entitled Downtown's Sexual Rabies. The post was an eye-witness account of how women had been harassed in downtown Cairo during the post-Ramadan Eid holiday; accompanying

the entry were disturbing photographs taken by fellow blogger Wael Abbas. The post elicited 750 comments, a staggering increase over his average of 30, and was read by about 60,000 people.<sup>15</sup> The abuse continued over the second day of the Eid, where bands of young men thronged around women and tried to tear the women's clothes off. The women were protected by taxi drivers, shop keepers, and security men, who drove them away or pulled them to safety in shops and buildings. No protection appeared to have been provided by the police. In fact, the police denied that anything occurred.

The blog post inspired talk, but Dream 2's talk show brought it to national attention by broadcasting it across the country. *Al Ashera Masaa'n* (at 10 pm) hosted by Mona Al-Shazli featured Nawara Negm, daughter of legendary poet Ahmed Fouad Negm, and Safinaz Kazem, an Islamist and journalist. Both had originally been invited for a routine discussion on the Ramadan television soap operas; however, Negm commented on the issue of the harassment which had been making the rounds of the internet. Al-Shazli upheld her reputation as one of the most watched and respected anchors on Egyptian television when she took her production team downtown and investigated the issue, filming interviews and confirmations with eyewitnesses. She contacted

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<sup>15</sup> Rania Al Malky, *Blogging for Reform: The Case of Egypt*, *Arab Media and Society*, February 2007.

the Ministry of the Interior, which, in a remarkable show of consistency, continued to deny that anything had ever happened and insisted that no formal complaints had ever been filed. From there, the story bounced from one editorial page to another, making appearances in *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, *Al-Dostour*, *Al-Karama*, *El-Fagr*, *The Daily News Egypt* and on rival talk show *Al-Qahira Al-Youm* on Orbit.

The impact of talk shows has not always been positive or as expected. Wael Al-Ibrachi, the Editor-in-Chief of *Al-Karama* (and one of the four editors who were tried for insulting the president and ‘harming the country’), hosts a highly successful and aggressive television program called *Al-Haqiqa* (The Truth). Last March, after the Bahai festival of Newruz, he hosted two Bahais, a Muslim journalist, and syndicate member Gamal Abdel Rehim. The discussion culminated with Abdel Rehim screaming at Basma Moussa, one of the Bahais, that she was an apostate and should be killed. When Ibrachi jumped in and told him that the program would not be used as a vehicle to threaten people, Abdel Rehim responded that the show shouldn’t be used to promulgate bad ideas, either. Three days later, three Bahai homes were burned to the ground in the village of Shoraniya in Upper Egypt. Abdel Rehim was questioned over the phone on several talk shows, none of which were particularly sympathetic to him; he denied that he ever threatened Moussa. Although questioned by the police, he was not charged with any crime and has yet to apologize for his actions.

Political parties and figures use talk shows to reach mass audiences that would ordinarily be inaccessible, especially through traditional party means. For example, the Ghad party’s leadership (the party of formerly imprisoned lawyer Ayman Nour) was featured on Al-Shazli’s show after a physical confrontation at the party’s downtown headquarters.

Talk shows have no equal as a means of reaching an audience and allowing for interaction. Each show

is a business focused primarily on making money, while still being acutely aware of the country’s political parameters. The desire to maximize profits motivates each show to cater to the general public’s wish for a platform. The shows provide a vital outlet for expression. Hardly any topics are off-limits and few people enjoy immunity. In April 2009, lines for government-subsidized bread snaked down the country’s longest streets and Egyptians were terrified that they would be unable to feed their families. Viewers called a talk show, hosted by Lamis Al-Hadidi, to scream at Aly Mosselhy, Minister for Social Solidarity, whose portfolio includes grain provision.

Citizens demanding accountability of their political officials is a recent development in Egypt. However, doing so in front of the nation, on air, and without the cover of anonymity is an astonishing development for Egypt. They have led the government to push for new legislation.

In February 2008, the Arab League adopted ‘The Charter of Principles for Regulating Satellite Broadcasting in the Arab Region.’ The charter was initiated by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and was generally thought of as a reaction to unfavorable coverage of both regimes by Qatar’s Al-Jazeera channel. The most controversial articles of the charter state that “satellite channels must defend national interests, preserve Arab solidarity, protect the values of Islam, and refrain from defaming Arab leaders.” Arab journalists did not respond well to this provision, which would seem to limit their ability to write about Arab leaders. Journalists repeatedly criticized the article in numerous interviews, newspapers, and talk shows, asserting that it was not their job to glorify Arab leaders (there does not appear to be any particular dearth of glorification in the region), but to hold them accountable. The article left ambiguous whether ‘national’ interests referred to the interests of the citizens or of the governments, because in the Arab world, the citizens and government are not necessarily mutually inclusive. The legally binding



charter threatened severe consequences for its violation: channels operating contrary to its provisions would have their license revoked.

Secretary General of the Egyptian Journalists Syndicate Salah Al-Din Hafez lashed out in an editorial in the Qatari daily *Al-Watan*:

The past decade, which has been characterized by a revolution of information, technology and free press throughout the world, was marked by the advent of a new [kind of] journalism and open media, mostly in the form of private newspapers and satellite channels, that pushed back the boundaries of freedom. They raised issues that used to be taboo, brought [previously] sacred topics into debate, and crossed boundaries that used to be inviolable. This was the main [development] that frightened the Arab governments, which hastened to [end] this media chaos and to regain control [over the media] before it could generate developments that [they considered] even more dangerous...

The Arab governments' hold over the satellite channels has weakened, and [will weaken further] in the future; they can no longer directly control and influence the channels. The same has happened with the private press, which has greatly expanded in recent years [at the expense of] the official or national press—because the [private press], like the satellite channels, provides the public with a media service that the official press and TV do not...

Where will journalists find refuge when they are trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea?

I express my thoughts and fears, [remembering] our previous bitter experience [with anti-media measures, such as] laws restricting press freedom; severe punishments, including imprisonment, for [those] who publish their opinion; persecution that in some countries includes [not only] arrest [but also] kidnapping and assassination; and [other] violations of freedom of opinion and expression which unfortunately give all the Arab countries the world's worst record [in media freedom].<sup>16</sup>

The editorial summarized everything that most journalists would have liked to say. It was especially poignant that the Secretary General of the Arab world's most important journalists syndicate expressed these sentiments in a Qatari newspaper. Meanwhile in Egypt, Al-Jazeera Cairo bureau chief Hussein Abd Al-Ghani wrote in an editorial in *Al-Masry Al-Youm*: "The charter is a grave collective Arab assault on media freedom and on freedom of speech in general. It is the most blatant evidence of the Arab regimes' general tendency to close off, one by one, the areas of freedom, after the brief 'Prague Spring' experienced by the Arab world in 2004-2005."<sup>17</sup> Abd Al-Ghani was especially disturbed by Article 5 of the charter, which mandates that satellite channels respect the sovereignty of Arab countries. He called it "carte blanche to invent draconian laws restricting the freedom of the press, especially since the charter does not constrain its restrictions by stating that they must comply with international charters of human rights, freedom of the press, and freedom of expression, or with internationally accepted free press standards."

The charter kicked into effect quickly. On April 1, 2008, Nilesat, the Egyptian communications satellite, stopped carrying the signal of *Al-Hiwar*, a

<sup>16</sup> Salah Al-Din Hafez, *Al-Watan*, February 20, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Hussein Abd Al-Ghani, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, March 6, 2008 <<http://www.theafricanistables.com/2008/07/28/memris-report-on-arab-league-stifling-of-press-freedom/>>.

London-based Arabic television station. No reason was given. *Al-Hiwar*'s schedule included two controversial programs: "Peoples' Rights," a program which allowed human rights activists and victims of abuses to discuss violations by Arab governments; and "Egyptian Papers," where Ibrahim Issa and other vocal critics of the government appeared. Nilesat had earlier dropped the signal of *Al-Baraka*, a television channel owned by a Saudi holding company that described itself as "the first Arab business channel based on Islamic values." According to media reports, *Al-Baraka*'s "paperwork was out of order."<sup>18</sup> Nilesat also dropped *Al-Hikma*, another Islamic-oriented television station, without explanation, according to Reporters Without Borders.

The Arab Charter was merely a dry run. In July 2008, Egypt's government introduced a new draft law, tentatively titled "The Draft Law for the National Agency for Audio and Visual Broadcast Regulation." It was generally perceived to be the logical, evolutionary descendant of the charter adopted by the Arab League. In short, the draft law calls for a government regulatory body to dispense licenses to any channel broadcasting in Egypt and ensure that such channels do not, among other things, 'negatively affect social peace, national unity, public order, the principles of citizenship and public morals.' The law was also generous in encompassing every possible form of information dissemination. Any medium where the sender could pick and choose their audience, as well as when and how the information would be received, was included in the law, making all online groups and even cell phone text messages potentially subject to its jurisdiction. This government regulatory authority would fall under the Minister of Information. Al-Masry Al-Youm quoted Egyptian human rights organizations as describing it as the "last nail in the Egyptian Media's coffin."<sup>19</sup>

The draft law may call for the protection of public morals, but it's clearly understood that the real interest is in 'protecting national security,' a nebulous but extremely useful phrase that the general public knows well. Though Egyptians are never certain before the fact if they are endangering 'national security,' offenders are quite certain afterwards. Newspapers and television channels often 'endanger national security' when they air topics that aren't popular with the state. Bloggers both endanger public security and offend religious values when they ask questions and create a forum for discussion and public debate. All of these forums will be covered by the new law.

There is a general misconception, both in Egypt and abroad, that new legislation is often considered without cause or effect and passed with little or no thought to public mood or possible response. While it is certainly plausible that the government disregards public opinion (the new traffic laws and their subsequent enforcement being an excellent example), often this is not the case. Both the Arab League Charter and the new draft Broadcast Law in Egypt were very carefully considered. *Al-Masry Al-Youm* first broke the story of the new draft law on July 9, just before Egypt's Upper House of Parliament and its main legislative body, the People's Assembly (PA), had a break for their annual summer recess. The law would only surface again when the PA was about to pass it (in the past fifty years, almost every government-supported law has been passed by the PA). The law was quietly slipped into the parliamentary session but has still not been presented by the government for final consideration.

While the law may be considered necessary by the government to protect Egypt and the public from various attacks on national security and public

<sup>18</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Egypt: Satellite Company Punished for Protest Footage*, May 24, 2008 <<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/483a75831a.html>>.

<sup>19</sup> *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, "Journalists' Syndicate Calls for New Satellite Broadcast Law and Honours Al-Masry Al-Youm for Finding the Draft," July 24, 2008 <<http://www.almasry-alyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=114502>>.

morality, it is not essential for justice to be served. Existing media licensing laws are more than adequate to ensure order.

On April 8, 2008, the state-run Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), which oversees the regulation of public and private broadcasts and transmissions, brought a complaint against the Cairo News Company (CNC). CNC provides satellite transmission services and equipment to television networks operating in Egypt, including Al Jazeera, BBC, and CNN. Al Jazeera had broadcast coverage of protestors in Mahalla Al Kubra, the epicenter of the April 6 worker strikes, the most significant labor unrest in years. On April 17, 35 plainclothes police officers showed up at CNC's Cairo offices and promptly confiscated its satellite transmission equipment. Nader Gohar, CNC's owner, was charged with importing and owning television equipment and transmitting television broadcasts without permission. Apparently, Al Jazeera's April 7 coverage included footage of protesters tearing down and defacing a large poster of President Hosni Mubarak. The following day, ERTU's chairman filed a complaint with Egypt's prosecutor general, alleging that Gohar's company had been operating without required permits. Gohar was charged under Law 10 of 2002 with importing, owning, and operating satellite transmission equipment without the required licenses from the National Communications Council.

Gohar told Human Rights Watch that CNC's operating license had expired in July 2007, after the

company had been operating legally for one year. He alleged that when he tried to renew the license, authorities at the Ministry of Information told him he would have to wait until new regulations were issued, but that he could continue operations in the meantime. Gamal Eid, a lawyer representing Gohar and executive director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, told Human Rights Watch the charges against Gohar failed to include any specific examples of unauthorized operation.<sup>20</sup> According to Gohar, Ministry of Information officials told him that the Radio and Television Union was waiting for regulations to be issued in compliance with the Arab League charter. "But they had said I could keep [operating] in the meantime," he told Human Rights Watch.

In reality, Gohar had not covered the shoot in question or even provided the equipment out of concern that it be damaged. His lawyers said that the authorities might have presumed that it was his footage because Gohar had worked closely with Al-Jazeera before. The closure meant that CNC could not broadcast for any channels. Furthermore, CNC's closure steered other satellite transmission companies away from broadcasting for Al-Jazeera.

It is a testament to the independence of Egypt's judicial system that on April 19, 2009, Gohar was exonerated by the North Cairo Appeals Court. Both the three-year prison sentence and the LE 150,000 (\$27,000) fine were dropped.

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<sup>20</sup> Human Rights Watch International Freedom of Expression Exchange, May 28, 2008 <[http://www.ifex.org/egypt/2008/05/28/government\\_shuttered\\_company\\_its/](http://www.ifex.org/egypt/2008/05/28/government_shuttered_company_its/)>.

## THE INTERNET IRRITANT

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The carefully-drafted new broadcast law includes the use of new media for political purposes. The government clearly regards new media as the latest thorn in its side.

This does not mean the Egyptian government is afraid of every blogger. The number of political blogs in Egypt is not substantial: of the estimated 162, 200 total blogs, only 18.9 percent are political in nature.<sup>21</sup> But though political blogs may represent a small minority of Egyptian blogs, they are well-read by politically-attuned people using the internet for this kind of information.

In a country of 80 million, where at best only 25 percent of the population is going to have any access to a computer, how significant of an issue is Internet activism? Certainly the power of the Internet cannot be ignored. As described earlier, the average blogger is the demographic that political parties—both from the government and opposition—have been trying to attract for three decades with miniscule success.

Activist blogging in Egypt is closely linked to the Kifaya National Movement for Change, “a loose, grassroots, all-encompassing movement that has

been agitating for human and civil rights and political reform since December 2004,” according to Rania Al-Malky, the Chief Editor of *The Daily News Egypt*.<sup>22</sup> She maintains that the emergence of bloggers was inextricably intertwined with a movement that thrived on plurality, providing a forum for a variety of voices to be heard without bias. The bloggers provided a means of mobilization for the movement, posting news about events and informing their readers of times and locations of demonstrations.

Egyptian youth, after decades of political apathy and stagnation, found a new means to express themselves. Blogs were free, easy to use, and guaranteed an audience. Initially, blogging could be conducted from the safety of your own home, university, or café without having to take to the streets in demonstration. The bloggers found much to take a stand on: the local elections in 2005, mired in corruption and violence, the second Intifada in the Occupied Lands, and the invasion of Iraq. The resulting demonstrations brought together students, laborers, peasants, residents of the sprawling unplanned urban developments and human rights activists.

Initially, the role of the online community in Egypt was merely for organizational and publicity purposes.

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<sup>21</sup> Egyptian Blogs, *A New Social Space*, The Cabinet Information and Decision Support Center, May 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Rania Al-Malky, *Blogging for Reform: The Case of Egypt*, *Arab Media and Society*, Spring 2007.

However, political participation and the hunger for reform provided them with a momentum of their own. Before long, blogs were utilized to spread the (sometimes) unattractive truth in ways that were impossible to ignore. In January 2006, blogger Wael Abbas uploaded a video he had received onto his website Misrdigital.com. The video had been shot with a mobile phone camera and showed a microbus driver, Emad Kebir, being tortured and sodomized with an iron stick by two police officers, Captain Islam Nabih and Corporal Reda Fathi. In a rare victory for human rights, the two officers involved were convicted and sentenced to three years in prison almost three years later. Throughout this ordeal, there were periodic attempts to slander Abbas in an effort to discredit him; the governor of Minya province even asserted that Abbas had a criminal record.

Such intimidation has gently, but steadily increased throughout Egypt. Abbas escaped serious intimidation until just recently; in early April, a dispute with a neighbor heightened when the neighbor called in his brother, a police officer. It is possible that this was only a domestic dispute; however, the police in Egypt have vast powers and officers regularly abuse their position. News of Abbas' troubles spread instantly across the internet, almost immediately on Twitter and soon after on Facebook. (The instantaneous spread of information is one of the most obvious advantages of new media.) With Abbas, as with Palestinian blogger Leila El-Haddad who was detained in Cairo Airport for over a day in early April 2008, technology (in this case, Twitter) meant that the outside world knew almost immediately what was going on.

Generally speaking, new media allows for the protective blanket of anonymity. One of the major effects of the spread of online media has been the increase in the number of female participants in the

political process. Women have traditionally been reluctant to participate, not so much out of any cultural bias but out of actual fear of arrest, torture and sexual assault. The virtual world seemed a safer place to exercise civil and political rights. However, female bloggers were taken aback by the arrest and two-week detention of Israa Abdel Fattah, a young blogger who was an administrator in a Facebook group that called for people to stay at home during the April 6, 2008 strike by activist groups and labor unions.

April 6, 2008 was a huge success for democracy activists because of the cooperation between several groups that previously had minimal communication. The result was an extraordinarily successful series of coordinated strikes throughout the country that reverberated nationally.

Abdel Fattah was released, sobbing, into her mother's arms after two weeks' detention. She said that she had not been harmed in any way, but that she repented her actions. Local newspapers commented dryly that it was doubtful she would dare to touch a keyboard again.

She was significantly luckier than many of her colleagues. Kareem Amer is the only blogger who has actually been imprisoned for his writings. He was found guilty of 'having defamed Islam and President Hosny Mubarak' and is serving the third year of a four-year sentence. It is important to note, however, that even other bloggers have noted that his writings have been controversial, if not irresponsible. Blogger Sandmonkey noted that Amer's writings "were essentially hate mail."<sup>23</sup>

Other bloggers have been arrested. The current law allows for arrest and detention for 30 days without charge, after which the term may be renewed, and this has been employed in a number of

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<sup>23</sup> Lawrence Pintak, Yosri Foda and Mirette F. Mabrouk, *The New Threat to Arab Journalism: Made in the USA*, 2009.

instances. Intimidation is also not limited to just the authorities: At the end of last year, the Egyptian Administrative Court dismissed a case brought by a judge, Abdel Fattah Murad, who called for the banning of 51 local websites, most of them relating to politics and human rights. These third-party suits

are becoming a popular way of harassing bloggers, journalists and human rights activists without overt government participation. Despite the dangers, bloggers continue to provide an invaluable service: disseminating information with remarkable speed and determination.



## PARTY POLITICAL BROADCAST

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New media has become increasingly important in terms of political development. Younger members of the country's major political opposition party have used blogs to examine their own movement under a microscope, in much the same way they have allowed secular activists to question the government's role and attempt to hold it accountable.

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is Egypt's only real opposition bloc. In 2005, just prior to the parliamentary elections, the MB started to raise its online profile. When MB's official website was shut down by the government in 2004, the MB reacted promptly: it set up 18 different websites promoting individuals whom the MB supported in the election (since MB is not officially a party, its members run as independents). The multiple websites were consolidated with an internet radio station promoting both the individual candidates and the party platform. As Pete Ajemian explains, the Muslim Brotherhood's efforts were meant to counteract the government chokehold on the public television broadcasts, effectively depriving MB candidates from exposure to the average public.<sup>24</sup> It's uncertain how effective these measures were, but they were certainly not detrimental to the MB. In the parliamentary

elections of 2005, the MB won 88 seats, an astonishing 20 percent of the 454 seats in the lower house.

Though new media usage was especially interesting to a very traditional, borderline-Luddite party, blogging was particularly intriguing. The blogging signaled a new era of MB development, one of self-criticism and examination.

Khalil Al-Anani describes the phenomenon of Muslim Brotherhood blogging as having passed through three distinct stages: exploration, civil resistance and self-criticism.<sup>25</sup> The first stage, exploration, was more an attempt to counterbalance and challenge the domination of existing bloggers, who were either leftist or nationalist, and almost overwhelmingly secular. According to Al-Anani, the MB attempted to translate the success from the secular movements into a strategy for the Brotherhood. However, there was one significant difference. The leftist and nationalist blogs generally had no real organizational structure; the blogs merely criticized the government and any attacks on human and civil rights. The MB's blogs, for the most part, were started to discuss their own organization in both ideological and organizational

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<sup>24</sup> Pete Ajemian, "The Islamist Opposition Online in Egypt and Jordan," *Arab Media and Society*, Winter 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Khalil Al-Anani, "Brotherhood Bloggers, A New Generation of Voices Dissent," *Arab Insight*, Vol 2, No 1, Winter 2008.

terms. Chief among the MB bloggers were Abdel Moneim Mahmoud with his blog “I Am Brotherhood” and Magdy Saad, whose blog was known by the flip, surprisingly irreverent, name, “Whatever, It Doesn’t Matter.” Both of them began blogging after they were swept up in the March 2006 arrest known as “the Students’ Case.” Their blog helped attract and focus media attention on the arrests after their release.

One year later, over 40 MB leaders, including then-Deputy Supreme Guide Khayrat Al-Shater, had their case transferred to a military tribunal, a creation of the Emergency Laws. Those cases sent to the tribunal are not eligible for appeal. Immediately, family members and supporters started blogs to focus attention on the tribunals; their efforts humanized all of the detainees in the process. Many blogs were particularly poignant because they were started by the daughters of the detainees. Al-Anani refers to this period as the civil resistance stage.

The latest and most interesting stage, from the perspective of political development, is the self-criticism stage, when younger members of the movement have begun to question and criticize its ideology and organizational structure. One of the

most notable “rebel blogs,” as Al-Anani refers to them, may be Mustafa Naggari’s “Waves in a Sea of Change.” He has attacked the promotion procedures within the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), in particular the trend to prioritize loyalty and obedience at the expense of competence, and the bureaucratic middle-tier of the MB for its lack of openness to criticism or alternative viewpoints. This dissension is a serious development for an organization whose basic precepts over the past 80 years have rested on loyalty and obedience. The group’s leadership has been split on how to approach this rising problem; the bloggers have highlighted flaws within the organization, but their very youthfulness presents enormous opportunity for the MB group. The movement could possibly be the country’s largest opposition bloc, but instead has become increasingly ossified. The MB has maintained a careful secrecy that may have helped discourage new followers. The blogs, on the other hand, have introduced MB ideas to many youth who had previously only been aware of the movement as a large but shadowy organization. These young voices might contribute to the emergence of an opposition bloc that is leaner, more grassroots-oriented and better equipped to handle current challenges.

## NET WORTH: HOW EFFECTIVE IS NEW MEDIA IN DRIVING DEMOCRATIC REFORM?

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Seen from the three angles discussed above, it would appear that internet activists hold the keys to Egypt's democratic liberation. This would be a hasty and over-enthusiastic assumption for many reasons. The first is a matter of simple demographics; at best, 25 percent of the country's population has access to the internet. Because of this, blog audiences are limited. Though Wael Abbas posted the video of police abuse on his blog, it was only when the story was picked up by a journalist from *Al-Fagr*, Kamal Murad, and was printed in the newspaper, that it became a story widely known by the general public. It is Murad who has suffered the most because of the story. He has been arrested several times since; the last when he was covering a story in the Delta where policemen were alleged to be coercing peasants into signing land deeds for a local landowner. When arrested, the officers referred to him as the "journalist who put away the officer for three years." In Egypt, the strength of new media from sources such as blogs appears to be more as a catalyst, rather than as a means of mass dissemination.

There is another reason why a blogger's reach can be limited. A blog is found by typing in a specific internet address. As with any address, it is possible to come across it accidentally; however, most

readers will access it because they have heard about it before. Blogs build audiences according to a principle that Columbia professor Duncan Watts calls "preferential attachment." While most blogs have a limited number of readers, the better-known ones have many times more and will continue to accumulate more simply because they are well known. Eventually, specific blogs wind up dominating the market. As David Faris noted, "The prominence of certain bloggers has been incredibly important for the human rights scene, at the time as properties of the system interfere with the ability of new voices to be heard."<sup>26</sup>

Another problem is the plurality that made blogging so attractive to many. Blogs can quickly become a liability if harnessed to an opposition movement by a political organization. Attempting to institutionalize the power of a blog or blogger is like trying to herd cats. This was one of the reasons the April 6, 2008 strike was organized through social network websites, like Facebook, and not merely through blogs which would have limited the amount of exposure severely.

Another weakness of blogs is their lack of democratic function. Though blogs allow others to post comments, they do not provide a larger forum for

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<sup>26</sup> David Faris, "Revolutions without Revolutionaries? Network Theory, Facebook and the Egyptian Blogosphere," *Arab Media and Society*, Fall 2008.

discussion, nor do they easily enable the formation of larger groups. There are several important reasons why Abdel Fattah chose Facebook to mobilize people for the April 2008 strike. Apart from the two mentioned above (preferential attachment and plurality), Facebook is free, technically simple, and offers endless potential for readers, and therefore potential fellow-strikers. Most importantly, Facebook in this case allowed someone to identify with an increasingly larger “set of individuals who wanted to make a statement about the political situation in Egypt... After all, strong as the Egyptian state might be, it cannot go around arresting 70,000 people, many of them wealthy and connected elites, especially if all they have done is stay at home.”<sup>27</sup>

If one were to consider the efficacy of media as an organizational tool, then, one question must be considered: why, didn’t the 2009 April general strike mobilize as many people as the 2008 strike? The answer is a combination of the reasons listed above. The 2008 strike occurred under a different set of circumstances. It had been carefully coordi-

nated with a general strike being held that day by the Mahalla textiles workers. Mahalla is the textile center of Egypt and its workers represent one of the country’s most powerful unions by Egyptian standards. The result was several well-coordinated strikes that reverberated around the country. In 2009, the strike lacked the same kind of coordination as well as follow-through. In addition, the government was much more prepared in 2009. Demonstrations were quickly stopped and activists found that they were outnumbered by security forces.

However, the 2009 strike gained extensive media coverage. There was not one blogger who did not write about the strike, not one newspaper that did not have it splashed across its front page, nor one television station that did not pick apart the day’s happenings. Though the reports ranged between faint hope and serious disappointment, it is important that there was discussion. This, then, may be the most important contribution of new media: Egyptians are asking questions and demanding answers.

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<sup>27</sup> David Faris et al, 2008.

## BLURRING THE LINES

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The problem, as with all budding efforts, is teething pains. These pains are not limited to the trials of the individuals who pay dearly for their commitment to freedom of expression. The rise of new media has undermined the quality of conventional journalism. The blogging phenomenon has led to the rise of what is being termed ‘the citizen journalist’ class. Bloggers, because they are writing and being read, are calling themselves journalists, but they neither perform as, nor are trained to be, journalists. Abbas, among others, are only journalists at their convenience. International organizations that are supposed to be dealing with journalism issues, though, are including them in the fold. No matter how well-intentioned, these Western organizations are undermining Arab journalism by doing so.

Journalism is a profession with ethics, rules, standards and guidelines. It requires an investment of time in both study and practice. In 2007, Lawrence Pintak and Jeremy Ginges polled 601 Arab Journalists in North Africa, the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula. The respondents listed government control, ethics, corruption, and media ownership in the top six of what they saw as the most signifi-

cant challenges to Arab journalism. However, the number one challenge—listed by an astonishing 71 percent of all journalists polled—was professionalism,<sup>28</sup> a quality perceived to be lacking among professionals. Applying any sort of professional criteria to people who write down their opinions and call themselves journalists is a waste of time and an insult to those willing to go to prison for their craft.

“Bloggers take pride in shock value; societies long locked in fear need to be jolted awake. The explicative-laced personal attacks on, and unproven allegations about, politicians, journalists and other figures in “official” circles—what Americans in another era would have called “the man”—by many bloggers are a reminder that Western-style news values do not necessarily apply in the blogosphere. “Yes, I’m biased. And I like it this way,” says Mahmoud Saber, another prominent Egyptian blogger. For bloggers, that’s fine. Not so for journalists.”<sup>29</sup>

Bloggers provide an essential service as activists, but they are not journalists. While they deserve constant international attention and protection, it should come from organizations like Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch and not from

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<sup>28</sup> Lawrence Pintak and Jeremy Ginges, “The Mission of Arab Journalism: Creating Change in a Time of Turmoil,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, June 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence Pintak, Yosri Foda and Mirette F. Mabrouk, *The New Threat to Arab Journalism: Made in the USA*, 2009.

the Committee to Protect Journalists. When CPJ published an open letter to President Mubarak last March, it lamented the “overall decline of press freedom in Egypt,” however, every single violation of press freedom mentioned in the letter is best described as that of an activist and not of a journalist.

Even organizations like Knight have followed this trend: it awarded Wael Abbas the 2007 Knight International Journalism Award. Abbas himself has made a point of saying that he is not a journalist (although in his Twitter bio he identifies himself as a ‘journalist and blogger’). Awarding bloggers journalism prizes is roughly the equivalent of a fitness expert being given the prize at an annual conference of cardio-vascular surgeons.

The problem also occurs in reverse. The attention bloggers get can backfire on them, since the negative attention is usually vastly out of proportion to any protection that such attention offers. Whenever a well-meaning Western organization or journalist singles out a blogger for attention, the blogger is put underneath a large spotlight. This leads many bloggers to blog anonymously, because anonymity is seen to offer a protective blanket. However, media attention often leads to the identity of such bloggers being made public, leaving them without access to professional protection. Journalism syndicates in the Arab world might have limited power, but the small amount of aid they offer is preferable to none at all.

Journalists keep blogs themselves, which can further confuse the issue. However, the problem is more one of misguided deontology by bloggers than of anything else.

The greater danger is Arab governments using the confusion between journalists and bloggers to further cripple the media. The Arab League Charter was introduced in part to protect the national good

and to protect its people from the gross irresponsibility of some. Under these conditions, blurring the line between professional journalists and activists is enormously counter-productive because everyone is put at risk.

This is an Arab as well as an Egyptian problem. The region pays very close attention to what Egypt does, on both the government and citizen front. Egyptian legislation, whether positive or negative, is often used as a template in other countries. Jordan, for example, paid very close attention to new legislation in Egypt concerning family, civil, and press laws. Following the Egyptian lead was beneficial to Jordan in respect to family and civil laws, but it is doubtful that Jordanian journalists will be thrilled with press laws that resemble Egyptian legislation.

Due to regional similarities on many fronts, other countries have a vested interest in Egypt’s current affairs. Egypt has always been a regional leader and its progressive policies have allowed other countries to view their effectiveness before adopting them. Activists throughout the region are struggling with many of the same restrictions and difficulties as Egyptian activists. Many regional governments share the Egyptian government’s interest in maintaining the status quo. New technology, however, has made physical borders increasingly irrelevant. Bloggers in Saudi Arabia, for example, share experiences and advice with Egyptians, Moroccans, Lebanese and Syrians. Internet activists, in particular, are a tightly knit group with knowledge being rapidly disseminated among them. In a rare, egalitarian stroke, however, the cooperation is not limited to the activists: Egypt and Saudi Arabia managed to convince other countries of the Arab League (with the exception of Lebanon and Qatar, which has a vested interest in doing away with such controls because of Al-Jazeera) to join the Arab League Charter. This suggests that most Arab countries recognize that media issues are now regional in scope, not just national.

## THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN EGYPT

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Democratic reform also has a regional dimension. The desire for reform binds together the peoples of the region against their governments.

But why is a democratic Egypt so important and, specifically, why is it so important to the United States? Because it is the largest country and one of the most populous in the Middle East, Egypt is closely watched by other countries in the region. What happens there impacts both the Middle East as well as the Muslim world. An Egypt gripped by economic hardship and political deprivation is not a country that will be able to support the United States in its quest for a more stable, terrorism-free world.

Egypt is currently undergoing the kind of teething pains that affect populations in need of change. Egyptians have been pushing for greater accountability in their government and greater civil and political freedoms; in other words, the country's citizens are demanding democratic reform. Though it

is unlikely that any type of democratic reform will go smoothly, it is imperative that reform move forward if Egypt is to achieve much-needed peace and stability. It is also important the United States realize that a stable Egypt is very much in its interests. To achieve this end, the U.S. administration might want to keep two things in mind. First, the United States will benefit from a stable, peaceful democratization process in Egypt. Second, the United States must be viewed not merely as an international power that chooses to use its influence for its own ends, but rather as a fair international arbiter that is truly interested in backing up its rhetoric on the importance of peace, democracy and justice with concrete actions.

An independent Egyptian media could be an indispensable ally in achieving both of these goals, largely because image is a matter of public perception and there is no greater influence in shaping public perceptions than the media.



## NOW WHAT? WHERE THE U.S. SHOULD STEP IN AND WHERE IT SHOULD STEP BACK

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In 2006, U.S. President George W. Bush's staff did not think to warn the President against sweeping generalizations. The President went off on a tirade against "Arabic TV." "It doesn't do our country justice," he said. He claimed that it did not "give people the impression of what we're [the United States] about." In the midst of trying to imbue the Arab world with democracy, the United States was only tarnishing its own reputation by once more employing a double standard.

These counterproductive comments by the U.S. President ensured the perception of U.S. public diplomacy in the region sank to previously unplumbed depths. Contrary to President Bush's sentiments, the Arab world, and certainly not the Arab media, was not interested in attacking the United States. The results of the Pintak/Ginges research must have been startling for the former U.S. Administration and should be very closely considered by the present one. In a *New York Times* piece, they encapsulated their findings as follows:

Rather than being the enemy, most Arab journalists are potential allies whose agenda broadly tracks the stated goals of United States Middle East policy and who can be a valuable conduit for explaining American

policy to their audiences. Many see themselves as agents of political and social change who believe it is their mission to reform the antidemocratic regimes they live under. When asked to name the top 10 missions of Arab journalism, they cited political reform, human rights, poverty and education as the most important issues facing the region, trumping Palestinian statehood and the war in Iraq. Overwhelmingly, they wanted the clergy to stay out of politics. And, aside from the ever-present issue of Israel, they ranked "lack of political change" alongside American policy as the greatest threats to the Arab world. Though many Arab journalists dislike the United States government, more than 60 percent say they have a favorable view of the American people. They just don't believe the United States is sincere when it calls for Arab democratic reform or a Palestinian state.<sup>30</sup>

When asked to state what the job of a journalist is, a resounding 71 percent named 'encouraging political reform' as the top priority. A U.S. administration interested in advancing regional political reform should seek to capitalize on the media to achieve their top priority.

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<sup>30</sup> Lawrence Pintak and Jeremy Ginges "Misreading the Arab Media," *The New York Times*, May 25, 2008.

The current U.S. administration of President Obama has stated that it has many of the same goals as the previous one with regard to democratic reform in the region. To achieve results, the current U.S. administration should change its strategy to one which finesses both governments and the people. The U.S. administration should keep in mind two things. First, attempting to strong-arm the government—whether through strident State Department demands or vulgar displays of carrot and stick tactics like conditional aid—will not work. The Egyptian government is unlikely to be swayed. Withholding aid is unlikely to affect policy makers. It is the bulk of the population, the estimated 40 percent living below the poverty line, who will suffer.

Egypt's government, like most regional ones, does not have to worry about voter dissatisfaction since there is no democratic process. In fact, international pressure actually helps increase a government's standing with its people. When the government appears to be attempting to maintain its integrity against foreign pressure, citizens will rally behind it. Egyptians, like many Arabs, might have issues with their country's government, but they are fiercely patriotic. The public reaction to the arrests of a Hezbollah cell in Egypt last April is a demonstration of this patriotism. Hassan Nasrallah's admission that members of the cell were indeed working for Hezbollah in Egypt turned public opinion against the group. Even former supporters are angry—Wael Abbas called Nasrallah a “pimp” on his blog, Misrdigital, and told him to “keep his hands off Egypt.” Like many formerly colonized peoples, Egyptians are extremely wary of even the slightest hint of foreign influence.

The former U.S. administration had placed great emphasis on the legitimacy of elections. This is well-intentioned, but it misses the point. Elections are a by-product of a democracy, not an initial building block. Changes need to begin first at a more fundamental level. Internally, the emphasis

needs to be placed on the drive for political reform. The question then becomes what are the best drivers of reform.

In Egypt, political parties are not the best catalyst for reform. For many Egyptians, the prospect of choosing between the ruling National Democratic Party and the various opposition parties is less than inspiring. Many feel that the opposition parties have lost their legitimacy and are struggling to regain it. Currently, one of the most serious obstacles to reform is the overwhelming lack of pluralism, due to the absence of a strong opposition bloc. Decades of political suppression, party infighting, and political apathy on the part of voters have contributed to the lack of opposition parties. However, the desire for reform is overwhelmingly present. Political parties and movements want to stop political apathy and have leapt at the opportunities provided by online activism. For this reason, foreign policy efforts should not be directed at political parties, nor at attempting to strong arm the government.

Instead, a new foreign policy approach should begin by considering whose interests democratic reform serves. It is unlikely that it would serve the interests of any of the regional governments, so the United States should examine which sectors of society are likely to be the strongest proponents of reform. In Egypt, the strongest, most insistent voices for reform have come not from political parties but from the media, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other activists. The impetus for reform is likely to continue to come from these groups. The independent press has continuously lobbied for political change, on its front pages and in its opinion columns over the past five years. If the United States is interested in uncovering the recipe for democratic reform in Egypt, then it must recognize that an independent media is a key ingredient.

And the United States must be smarter about how it approaches the challenge of reform. In May 2009,

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with a group of young Egyptian activists from Freedom House's 'New Generation' program. During that meeting, she made an inexplicable comment about billions of dollars that the United States has contributed to "promoting NGOs, promoting democracy, good governance, rule of law." She went on to "to stress that with economic opportunity comes confidence, comes a recognition that people can chart their own future."

This kind of argument is guaranteed to seriously distress anyone who has ever assumed—foolishly, perhaps—that the State Department ought to have some inkling of how other countries function. First, the United States has not spent billions on promoting democracy, NGOs or rule of governance; it has given most of this money in the form of military assistance to the government, thereby continuing to prop up the regime. In fact, from 2004 to 2009, the U.S. spent under \$250 million on such NGO and democracy-promotion programs, as opposed to around \$7.8 billion on military assistance.<sup>31</sup>

An independent press is indispensable in the push for democracy. During the 2005 Egyptian presidential elections and the parliamentary elections that followed, the press kept readers updated regarding the latest developments. The presidential elections were covered in full while the mayhem that accompanied the parliamentary elections was splashed across the front page of every newspaper in the country. Aid to Egypt is increasingly important to movements and groups that will further the country's reform agenda locally. Furthering the reform agenda is simply not possible without cultivating and nurturing an independent press.

Here are some brief recommendations as to how this should be done:

- 1. It is vital that the United States continues financial support to pro-democracy actors.**

Funding is essential to pro-democracy movements in more ways than one. Egyptian organizations are no different from those in other countries: they have expenses and overhead to cover. Media organizations, in particular, tend to be cash-intensive businesses and it takes significant cash flow to keep them afloat.

Second, Washington needs to signal to Egyptians through its aid allocations that it is serious in its interest in aiding democratic reform. Financial packages are understood and appreciated in economic terms—in terms of who gets what.

There is significant potential in terms of practical aid to media organizations. One option that should be explored is awarding journalism prizes or awards to newspapers exhibiting journalistic excellence, bravery or skill in investigative reporting. Such recognition can become both a source of pride for the newspaper and a much-appreciated source of income.

Aid should be tailored to the needs of local journalists rather than simply handing out ad-hoc advice or assistance. Egyptian universities tend to teach Mass Communication Theory rather than journalism courses. (The American University in Cairo is an exception and has trained many Arabic university graduates in journalism). This has contributed to the lack of professionalism in the region. Therefore, the United States might consider funding workshops to train both practicing journalists and students on matters ranging from reporting to ethics. A solid foundation and training in the basics of journalism are essential if professional standards are to be

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<sup>31</sup> Andrew Albertson, Stephen McNery, "Don't Give Up on Egypt," *Foreign Policy*, June 2009.

elevated. These workshops can include both local journalists and U.S. journalists to encourage a comparison of values, styles and methods.

There are also many potential outlets for funding through existing U.S. organizations such as the Ford Foundation or Amideast, both of which have excellent roots in Egyptian society.

## **2. Technical support for journalists is as vital as financial support.**

Alternatively, aid can be offered in the form of grants for equipment, such as computers, printers, photography or studio equipment. These items are expensive and the quality of reporting and presentation at many media organizations has suffered as a result of their absence.

In Egypt, the majority of newspapers print at the Ahram Printing Presses, part of the state-owned Ahram Institution, which runs the Arab world's foremost newspaper, *Al-Ahram*. While generally accommodating to private publications and extremely proficient technically, the printing presses have been used as a political weapon to place pressure on newspapers because of Ahram Printing Presses' monopoly position and close relationship with the state. Print runs are subject to one's place in the queue and delays can mean disaster for the day's sales. U.S. funding for a new press, perhaps through the Journalism Syndicate, might help alleviate these pressures.

## **3. Support cross-cultural cooperation on substantive issues, such as ethics boards or professional committees.**

Arab journalism has several problem areas. The Pintak/Ginges study mentioned earlier found

that the overwhelming majority of the journalists polled felt that professionalism was the most significant challenge to Arab journalism, more serious than government control, which came in second.<sup>32</sup>

Professional standards can best be ensured through proper training for journalists, as previously mentioned, and best upheld by non-partisan ethics committees. Ethics committees are not a particularly common feature of American journalism but the concept is a familiar one in Egypt. These boards or committees can help promote democratic reform but must be delicately handled. It is vital that the United States give the impression of cooperation rather than leadership. Funding could be provided for a professional board comprised of international members (both regional and U.S.) which would have local chapters.

The inclusion of international members has two advantages. First, it may help assure Egyptians that the United States is willing to do more than simply talk about the importance of freedom of expression. Second, international inclusion ensures that greater attention will be paid to the board's decisions or findings. As with any other country, Egypt's various parties and lobbying groups have varying interests. Depending on who may benefit from what, it is too easy for distressing or embarrassing results to be hidden. One party's embarrassing result may be another's political triumph. It does not help that the culture encourages self-censorship. However, if the rest of the world is watching, newspapers will be forced to report upon negative events. At the same time, the inclusion of local members would provide the expertise and the thorough understanding of the local cultural context to avoid any pitfalls.

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<sup>32</sup> Lawrence Pintak and Jeremy Ginges, "The Mission of Arab Journalism: Creating Change in a Time of Turmoil," *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, June 2008.

A professional board would provide another platform to continue the push for reform, especially since the platform will be shared by those who are not intimidated by the state. It is vital that journalists at the forefront of democratic reform be represented in the board, as well as those who have a more intimate understanding of the state's position. Too many organizations have ceased to exist because of over-enthusiasm and impractical fervor. Reform will not be achieved overnight and it is important to move forward with care.

**4. Where possible, provide practical support for journalists, in the form of legal advice or aid.**

The problems that plague independent media also need to be addressed with pragmatic solutions. Given existing legislation, lawsuits are an unpleasant and largely unavoidable facet of the media business. The number of suits and the amounts of fines levied upon various media outlets are rising, with

devastating effects on independent newspapers and journalists. The desire of journalists to avoid further exorbitant fines could lead to further self-censorship. A legal aid fund, administered through the Syndicate or an existing human rights organizations, could provide emotional and financial security for journalists and newspapers. The use of the Syndicate for such purposes has its drawbacks, but there is no question that it would be seen as a legitimate and credible organization from a domestic perspective.

Such support is not only vital from a practical viewpoint, but also would convey much needed goodwill. Many Egyptians blame the United States for supporting an undemocratic regime out of its own self-interest, and despite U.S. claims to the contrary, it is not seen to have any real interest in aiding democratic reform in Egypt. Practical aid would help prevent another generation from placing the blame for its ills on the U.S.'s doorstep.

## CONCLUSION

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There is little doubt that Egypt's media, in all of its forms, is making serious inroads into changing the domestic political climate. Not all media organizations will push for reform with similar methods; each of them has an individual agenda—"reform" may be a highly subjective affair. Even the most idealistic journalist will admit to the universal lack of a completely objective story: at best, one strives for a story that presents all the information as accurately and fairly as possible.

Egyptian journalists, like the rest of their colleagues throughout the Arab world, are acutely aware of the need for greater professionalism in their field. A failure to adhere to professional and ethical standards has often led television stations and newspapers to be used to air personal or party grievances, sometimes without much concern for truth or accuracy. This problem can be addressed in a number of ways. First, a strong sense of ethics and professionalism needs to be instilled early by teaching practical journalism at universities. Second, the Syndicate should consistently and impartially hold its members to high professional standards, rather than bending to political pressures.

That the advent of new media has made new sources of information more available for public consumption and discussion is a new and highly desirable state of affairs. Satellite television has had the most success in reaching the broader public, for several

reasons. First, television is generally free (although there are some subscription channels). The abundance of television channels also ensures competition between them, resulting in the production of programs tailored to the tastes of the marketplace. Television channels have responded to Egyptians' desire for greater information and news and a forum for airing their opinions. In so doing, they have provided citizens with an invaluable service.

Newspapers have responded in kind and now provide some of the same services to Egyptians. However, publishing companies are bearing the brunt of onerous press legislation. Despite paying a heavy price, journalists continue to hold the government accountable and to keep their readers abreast of political situations by providing both news and analysis.

The impact of new media is more complicated. The technology itself has been an enormous boon to all media formats. Television, newspaper, and radio have all rapidly utilized new media, capitalizing on its ability to reach people and permit a level of interactivity that had not been previously possible. Most concerns about new media relate to citizen journalists, also known as online activists or bloggers. Bloggers are often viewed as either the new messiahs of democratic reform or benighted tech-geeks who will ultimately have little use beyond speeding the dissemination of information.

Both views are erroneous. It would be a mistake to expect too much of bloggers: their reach, after all, can be limited. They are by nature individualistic and it is difficult to harness or mobilize that power into anything like a coherent opposition. But those who discount them or their contribution to the reform process are also making a mistake. Perhaps bloggers' strongest contribution has been the reintroduction of questioning and rebellion that had long been missing in Egypt. Regardless of the opinions citizen journalists express, one must respect that their voices are being heard, no matter how limited the audience.

Those who view bloggers as demigods are also naïve and mistaken. Often they are given too much credit for their work. Shining too bright a light on what they do could have negative ramifications for them.

Western organizations and bloggers should follow this general rule: If a blogger is posting anonymously, there is generally a good reason and their identity should be protected. Dissent can have real consequences in Egypt; bloggers have been held for up to three months in prison (despite signed release orders).

New media is a new technology, but it has enabled the incredibly swift dissemination of information and given rise to a new, positive spirit of political curiosity and questioning—a refusal to merely accept facts as presented. These developments are admirable in and of themselves, but they also represent something even more exciting: a point at which it is not possible to turn back, only to move forward.



## PROJECT ON U.S. RELATIONS WITH THE ISLAMIC WORLD

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THE PROJECT ON U.S. RELATIONS WITH THE ISLAMIC WORLD is a major research program housed within the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The project conducts high-quality public policy research, and convenes policy makers and opinion leaders on the major issues surrounding the relationship between the United States and the Muslim world. The Project seeks to engage and inform policymakers, practitioners, and the broader public on developments in Muslim countries and communities, and the nature of their relationship with the United States. Together with the affiliated Brookings Doha Center in Qatar, it sponsors a range of events, initiatives, research projects, and publications designed to educate, encourage frank dialogue, and build positive partnerships between the United States and the Muslim world. The Project has several interlocking components:

- The U.S.-Islamic World Forum, which brings together key leaders in the fields of politics, business, media, academia, and civil society from across the Muslim world and the United States, for much needed discussion and dialogue;
- A Visiting Fellows program, for scholars and journalists from the Muslim world to spend time researching and writing at Brookings in order to inform U.S. policy makers on key issues facing Muslim states and communities;
- A series of Brookings Analysis Papers and Monographs that provide needed analysis of the vital issues of joint concern between the U.S. and the Muslim world;

- An Arts and Culture Initiative, which seeks to develop a better understanding of how arts and cultural leaders and organizations can increase understanding between the United States and the global Muslim community;
- A Science and Technology Initiative, which examines the role cooperative science and technology programs involving the U.S. and Muslim world can play in responding to regional development and education needs, as well as fostering positive relations;
- A Faith Leaders Initiative which brings together representatives of the major Abrahamic faiths from the United States and the Muslim world to discuss actionable programs for bridging the religious divide;
- A Brookings Institution Press Book Series, which aims to synthesize the project's findings for public dissemination.

The underlying goal of the Project is to continue the Brookings Institution's original mandate to serve as a bridge between scholarship and public policy. It seeks to bring new knowledge to the attention of decision-makers and opinion-leaders, as well as afford scholars, analysts, and the public a better insight into policy issues. The Project is supported through the generosity of a range of sponsors including the Government of the State of Qatar, The Ford Foundation, The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation.

## THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

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THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY was established on May 13, 2002 with an inaugural address by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The creation of the Saban Center reflects the Brookings Institution's commitment to expand dramatically its research and analysis of Middle East policy issues at a time when the region has come to dominate the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

The Saban Center provides Washington policymakers with balanced, objective, in-depth and timely research and policy analysis from experienced and knowledgeable scholars who can bring fresh perspectives to bear on the critical problems of the Middle East. The center upholds the Brookings tradition of being open to a broad range of views. The Saban Center's central objective is to advance understanding of developments in the Middle East through policy-relevant scholarship and debate.

The center's foundation was made possible by a generous grant from Haim and Cheryl Saban of Los Angeles. Ambassador Martin S. Indyk, Vice President of Foreign Policy at Brookings was the founding Director of the Saban Center. Kenneth M. Pollack is the center's Director. Within the Saban Center is a core group of Middle East experts who conduct original research and develop innovative programs to promote a better understanding of

the policy choices facing American decision makers. They include Bruce Riedel, a specialist on counter-terrorism, who served as a senior advisor to four presidents on the Middle East and South Asia at the National Security Council and during a twenty-nine year career in the CIA; Suzanne Maloney, a former senior State Department official who focuses on Iran and economic development; Stephen R. Grand, Fellow and Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World; Hady Amr, Fellow and Director of the Brookings Doha Center; Shibley Telhami, who holds the Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland; and Daniel Byman, a Middle East terrorism expert from Georgetown University. The center is located in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at Brookings.

The Saban Center is undertaking path breaking research in five areas: the implications of regime change in Iraq, including post-war nation-building and Gulf security; the dynamics of Iranian domestic politics and the threat of nuclear proliferation; mechanisms and requirements for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; policy for the war against terrorism, including the continuing challenge of state sponsorship of terrorism; and political and economic change in the Arab world, and the methods required to promote democratization.



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