Arabic-Speaking Worlds and Media

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This English translation has not been published in printed form/Cette traduction anglaise n'a pas été publiée sous forme imprimée.

1   Interest in Arabic media is nothing new, but the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States heightened and broadened publicly stated interest in relation to public opinion in Arabic and, more generally, Islamic countries, including in numerous recent academic publications and collections (Ayish, 2003; Hafez, 2001; Hafez, 2002; Schlesinger, Mowlana, 1993 ; Middle East Report, 1993; Middle East Journal, 2000; Sakr, 2001). These have addressed, for example, Arabic media systems, representations of the Arabic world in Western media (Hafez, 2000; see also Samaras, 2005; Dufour, 2005 in the "Research Notes" section of this issue), or how the Western world is represented in Arabic media. During the Anglo-American intervention in Iraq, in 2003, this question became critically important inasmuch as interpretations in the Arabic media could influence the level of support of Middle-Eastern populations for Anglo-American policy or the capacity of their governments to control information, or broaden their sources. The English-language media thus consulted, and kept in mind, information published in the Arabic media (Tumber, Palmer, 2004). The question has lost none of importance today, as illustrated by the fact that, at the time of writing this paper, the Qatari satellite channel, Al-Jazeera, broadcast a video made by Al-Qaeda members that showed one of the suicide bombers responsible for the 7 July 2005 terrorist attacks in London – a British citizen of Pakistani origin – encouraging suicide attacks and justifying assassinations of Western civilians (Burke, 2005).

2   Although this paper refers to some of the ideas developed during the symposium on "Islam, media and war" organised at Sussex University in 2002, its intention is not to address conceptions of communication in Islamic societies (Schlesinger, Mowlana,

1993). Rather, it sets out to analyse the recent development of Arabic media, especially in the Middle East, and their relationship with public opinion in these countries. This choice results from the authors' observations – which we reiterate on several occasions in this paper – that the Arabic mediascape (Appadurai, 1990) has changed profoundly in the last ten years, and that these changes have had an influence on Arab public opinion (Ayish, 2003, 2004; Fandy, Brown, 2005).

3 This topic obviously raises conceptual problems. First, how far is it legitimate to refer to "Arabic" media, since the term implies that these media form a unified whole? Until very recently, these media – like others elsewhere in the world – were rooted in the concept of the Nation-State, insofar as this was the frame of reference for the language used, the regulatory system, the target readership or the editorial line. But the lack of political unity in the Arabic world implies a corresponding lack of unity in the media. Although the idea of a unified media landscape here may be just as unlikely as in the English-speaking world, the existence of a common language does endow the latter with a sense of unity that, however minimal, is nevertheless crucial. And the very presence of the new transnational Arabic media is largely the result of the transnational status of Arabic itself – which leads to a second topic: the role of Islam. To address this, two points have to be taken into consideration. First, the Arabic nations have populations that are largely Muslim. Secondly, the transnational status of Arabic is the result of the development of Islam through history.

4 Despite this, neither the Arabic world, or even the Islamic world, forms a unified whole. The vision of a universal Islamic community – the *ummah* – is far from becoming a reality and has no political equivalent at present: political divisions between the States concerned – not to mention the non-Arabic States with partly or entirely Islamic populations, such as Indonesia, Pakistan or Iran – prevent this from being achieved. Any kind of unity over topics of discussion is therefore partial and ambiguous. Thus - as shown by Gregory Kent – we have to accept that there is both unity and heterogeneity: a degree of unity based on a common language and religion that, probably, have given rise to a partly shared culture but, *a contrario*, differences in religious interpretations, diverging political traditions and different experiences of colonialism and struggles for independence have produced the diversity we see today. It goes without saying that the authors of this paper reject – explicitly or implicitly depending on cases – the idea of a "clash of civilisations" as propounded by Samuel Huntington (1998).

5 Although the Arabic media operate in the context of the Nation-State (language, editorial line, readership, regulatory framework), the relationship is ambiguous, especially in the case of transnational media. Two characteristics stand out here: the existence of a transnational language and the fact that, until very recently, the media in Arab countries were under very strict state control. As shown by Kai Hafez (2001), in an overview of Arabic media systems, these have been directly dominated either by the state or by power politics within the political elite and their owners may be agents of the State, although the printed press is sometimes less controlled than elsewhere or more autonomous than audiovisual media (Hafez, 2001; Sakr, 2001). One of the main instruments of media control were the national press agencies, which served to centralise the collection and dissemination of information concerning the country, both within and outside its borders (Ayar, 2001; Austria Press Agentur, 2002). A study of the media in Iraq has shown that, before the 2003 invasion, most press information originated – with one exception, a newspaper owned by Saddam Hussein's son Uday

(Huguenin-Benjamin, 2004) – from press releases from the official press agency. Another study, which covered an earlier period, showed that information directed to the Middle East was incomplete due to State control (Middle East Report, 1993). Nothing was said, for example, about the Halabja poison gas attacks or about the *Anfal*, the genocidal campaign against the Kurds.

6   According to Hisham Milhem (Middle East Report, 1993), the Halabja attack was covered by the media in Kuwait and other Gulf States, but only after Kuwait was invaded by Iraq. Events of major importance were used quite shamelessly for strategic purposes by those in power, as were the media. The articles in this feature, which focus on an analysis of continuity and change in Arabic countries, are therefore of relevance to broader studies of democratic and parliamentary discourse (Stanyer, Wring, 2004; Plattner, Diamond, 2002; Brumberg, 2002).

7   The subject of relationships between transnational media and control exercised by Nation-States appears several times in this special feature. According to Noureddine Miladi, for example, the recent and well-known impact of the Al-Jazeera satellite channel, broadcast from Kuwait, is due to the fact that politics in Kuwait have allowed more freedom of expression that anywhere else in the Middle East. As a result, the media and politicians in other Arabic countries have come under pressure from demands in public opinion for the expression and dissemination of different ideas and information, for example about political, military and other events. In her analysis of recent reforms implemented in the Gulf States to regulate the media, Naomi Sakr is more pessimistic: the Arabic States are still exercising strict control over the material released. Control is not always formal, and may for example operate through the absence of a clear definition of freedom of expression and its limits. These blurred boundaries leave a margin for initiative from the authorities, since editorial choices are often controlled by media owners who are themselves linked to political circles. As Monroe Price comments (2003), insofar as the regulatory framework for the media is always, in part and among other things, a means for keeping a particular social group in power, the rhetoric used to justify the reform of regulatory frameworks – especially under the pressure of globalisation – is rarely reflected in practice in the reforms themselves. Naomi Sakr points to the same dissonance in the case of the Gulf States.

8   Nevertheless, the situation has changed profoundly over the last ten years, as the creation of new transnational media and, especially, satellite television channels, has lessened possibilities for States to control information and opinions (Amin, 2003; Fandy, Brown, 2005). This change, which results from new editorial choices that stem in turn from political choices (by a State or political party), is the core issue addressed in the analyses contributed by Victoria Fontan and Noureddine Miladi.

9   Furthermore – to turn to a so far little known and rarely addressed topic – the growth of the transnational Arabic media raises the question of their impact on the Arabic and/or Islamic diasporas, particularly in Western countries. If, as argued by Arjun Appadurai (1990), immigration and the media are dominant forces in globalisation, then the use of these media by these populations is of particular importance. As indicated above, terrorist networks use videos made by suicide bombers and broadcast them on transnational media to influence populations (Burke, 2005). Investigating their influence on French populations with a migrant background, Kamel Hamidou shows that their use of Arabic transnational media is inversely proportional to their subjective degree of integration in the host society.

10   More generally, the international character of the networks responsible for attacks in the West and elsewhere (Bali, Casablanca, Madrid and London, to name but a few), and the inevitably international scope of counter-terrorist campaigns, raise the question of how far Western societies are able to influence public opinion within Arabic and/or Islamic countries. It is easy to show that variations in these opinions are closely dependent on current events and therefore on the way these events are understood. A recent Pew opinion poll (2005) among Muslim populations in seventeen countries shows converging and diverging opinions on the subject of terrorism. The trends that emerge from the polls regularly conducted by this organisation show that Muslim public opinion varies with the course of events, in the Arabic world and elsewhere. It has recently become clear that the level of support for terrorist acts dedicated to defending Islam has dropped. In Indonesia for example, it dropped from 27 % to 15 % in the space of two years, from May 2003 to July 2005; in Morocco, it dropped significantly from 40 % to 13 % over the same period, and from 70 % to 40 % in Lebanon. But, reversing this trend, more Jordanians (57 %) said that attacks against civilians are often justified, an increase from 43% in 2002. In a recent British poll, 6% of British Muslims thought that the 7 July 2005 suicide attacks in London were justified, and a majority (56%) said that whether or not they sympathised with the suicide bombers, they could understand why they were capable of such attacks (YouGov, 2005).

11   This raises several questions. What are the respective roles of Western foreign policy and Muslim theology in the support expressed for terrorists by Muslim public opinion? According to the Pew survey (2005), it is "slightly more in favour of bomb attacks when these are directed against Americans or other foreigners in Iraq". Furthermore, what has been the role of the media in the development of these opinions in recent years? Why is there majority support only in Morocco? Why has confidence is Osama bin Laden increased significantly in Jordan (from 5 % in 2003 to 60 % in 2005) and Pakistan (from 6 % in 2003 to 51 % in 2005), but dropped by 23 % in Indonesia and 26 % in Morocco? It is impossible to answer these questions, which demonstrate, moreover, the difficulties we are faced with – compounded by the fact that, in the topic area we are concerned with here, it has to be recognised that any attempt to influence Arabic and/or Islamic public opinion is necessarily dependent, at least in part, on the Arabic media. On this subject, US foreign policy has invested significantly in the creation of Arabic media as well as in public diplomacy projects[1] (see the contribution from Noureddine Miladi). It is likely that the receptiveness of Arabic media to messages from the West will take on a great deal of importance in the future, making the "mediascape" a significant variable (Fandy, Brown, 2005).

12   The first theme in this special feature concerns the transformation of the media sphere in the Arabic world and/or in the Muslim world. The contributions on this theme focus mainly on transnational media based in Middle Eastern countries (Kamel Hamidou, Victoria Fontan, Naomi Sakr, Noureddine Miladi). The second theme concerns public opinion in these countries or among their diasporas (Victoria Fontan, Noureddine Miladi, Gregory Kent). Sub-themes include analyses of changes in the light of various determinants, such as technological developments (especially in satellite technology), regulatory frameworks and the means used to bypass them, as well as responses from States and target audiences, not to mention the economic decisions underlying the new media offerings. Finally, these articles investigate the changes taking place in countries where the media were strictly controlled by the State in the past, through control of

broadcasting and publishing licences or editorial content (censorship and other less formal means of control) (Sakr, 2001 : 103-109). The change stems first from the inability of regimes to control the transnational services offered, at least on the receiving end. The fact that editorial choices are made on the basis of decisions by states (or political parties), and not independently, is often discussed by the contributors (most directly by Victoria Fontan and Noureddine Miladi). Victoria Fontan argues that the editorial policy of the Al-Manar channel – which, with certain recent changes, has become at least superficially comparable to that of Western audiovisual media services – is the fruit of a process that echoes the political choices of the Lebanese Hezbollah party in a specific political context. And this means that even when a media institution comes close to Western standards, it can still be instrumentalised by a local political agency that may or may not be open to Western influence. Noureddine Miladi makes a similar analysis: the cultural and informational innovations characterising Al-Jazeera's offerings, and which appear to be the result of editorial independence, are actually the fruit of a political decision. The author argues that Al-Jazeera's impact on the Arabic world stems from the fact that its content is distinct from broadcasting services in other countries in the Arabic world that are still dominated by the journalistic output of information ministries and their press agencies. Al-Jazeera's arrival on the scene helped to create an Arabic public sphere, a pan-Arab forum for discussion and debate among people that had never had a voice before.

13   The analyses from the other authors mainly address political and journalistic aspects, rather than economic aspects, because, as explained by Jihad Fakhreddine[2] (2004), media owners in the Arab world tend to consider the media as a source of political influence rather than a commercial investment. However, this does not mean that changes in the media have been homogeneous. While a service like Al-Jazeera seems open to different opinions, this is not the case for all broadcasting services, since, as we have just seen, such openness can cater for the political needs of a group in power. As Naomi Sakr suggests, changes to a regulatory regime can be more ambiguous than initially thought. Thus, the increasing interest in Arab public opinion is most certainly a consequence of the "war on terror". While public interest in Al-Jazeera's development has grown, in this context, its impact was already being felt in the Arabic world before the 11 September 2001 attacks. Although Al-Jazeera has broadcast video tapes obtained from Al Qaeda, it decided not to broadcast an interview with Osama bin Laden from its own correspondent in Kabul, Tayssir Alouni, on the grounds that the content was overly propagandist and had no real news value (CBS, 2002). Since then, Al-Jazeera has never broadcast terrorist representatives live without a commentary or other editorial accompaniment, to avoid being accused of promoting terrorist propaganda directed at Arabic populations (Eedle[3], 2005). But the question of Arabic public opinion and its relationships with the development of Arabic media can be considered from several angles. Kamel Hamidou compares trends among French populations with a migrant background with the influence of Arabic satellite channels, while Noureddine Miladi considers that – as we have already underlined – the indirect impact of Al-Jazeera has been to increase the pressure of demands for freedom of expression in the Arab world, a pressure that seems to stem from the open discussions where the voicing of different opinions has become a hallmark of the Al-Jazeera service. In the last decade, in other words with the increasing politicisation of Islam, the development of the Arabic media has been closely monitored by a Western elite (see Gregory Kent's contribution to this

feature). Victoria Fontan, on this subject, analyses how far the development of Al-Manar's editorial policy may be linked to Hezbollah's interpretation of events that are external to the party. She suggests that these have caused the party to develop a more "open" or "westernised" editorial policy, although the Iraq war changed opinions among the Shia Muslims who made up a significant percentage of the service's target audience.

14   This issue of *Questions de communication* also includes two other contributions on a related topic: how events in the Arabic world are presented in the European press, specifically in Greece (Athanassios N. Samaras) and in the French national daily *Le Monde* (Lucas Dufour). A comparison of these two articles with those in the special feature brings out an interesting contrast as regards the "explanatory" role of Islam. To analysts of media institutions in Arabic countries and/or with an Islamic culture, Islam is a cultural and political force that can help to analyse the organisational patterns of these media, whether it is seen as a policy heavily influenced by Muslim values and capable of attracting popular support in Arab countries (Victoria Fontan), or as a set of cultural values underlying the discursive norms of the Islamic world (Gregory Kent). According to the latter, communication structures in the Islamic world are linked as much to the cultural values of Islam as to its religious and political structures, even if current developments in the Arab world are tending to blur these relationships and introduce ambiguities. On the other hand, to those analysing representations of the Arabic and Islamic worlds in the European media, Islam is more an alibi, or an explanatory detour – at least asserted as such - but ultimately has no explanatory value, whether the frame of thought is openly Marxist (Lucas Dufour) or calls on empirical explanatory schemes of Anglo-Saxon origin (Athanassios N. Samaras). In both cases, the existence of Islam is a pivotal aspect in the examples from the European press analysed by these authors. In Greece, the way the press presents terrorist attacks against the US can be accounted for by the deep-rooted anti-Americanism of contemporary Greek culture on the one hand, and traditional Greek hatred of Islam (since the Ottoman occupation) on the other. In *Le Monde,* the opposition between Muslims on the one hand and Christians or Animists on the other explains the "forgotten" war in Sudan, although the reality is different. In both examples, the nature of European representations of Islam stems from something which is external to the Arabic world itself, in other words from ideological tenets that are specific to the two European countries in question.

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NOTES

1. In 2004, 685 million dollars were allocated to these projects (Harkin, 2005).
2. J. Fakhreddine is the media research director for the Gallup agency in Dubai.
3. P. Eedle is the chief editor of Outthere News, a British press agency specialising in the Arab world.

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