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TWENTY YEARS
OF
DEVELOPMENT
IN EGYPT
1977-1997

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE NEWS: TWENTY YEARS OF THE EGYPTIAN MEDIA

JAMES J. NAPOLI and HUSSEIN Y. AMIN

Change, we have been continually informed by philosophers and gurus from Heraclitus to Bill Gates, is the one thing in life you can count on. They may be right in the long run, but Bill Gates and Heraclitus haven't been watching the news on Egyptian TV over the past 20 years. It might give them pause. A score of years has changed nothing on the news set. A script is still read by somber and formal presenters, following the same protocol format as was followed when there was a different president. Egyptian national television news remains elitist, often biased and inaccurate and, because it is not driven by ratings, indifferent to the interests of the average viewer. The TV news programs on local stations are, if anything, even more oblivious to what their viewers might want to see or know, and utterly dependent for content on national television (Goueli, 1993).

The typical news broadcast leads off with a seemingly endless and substance-free account of all the doings of the head of state. This includes his shaking hands and sitting on couches, perhaps framed by the same lamps, with an assortment of visiting dignitaries who are indistinguishable from one decade to the next. After the president and his top ministers have had their protracted time in the limelight, there might be a few moments left over to reaffirm Egypt's fraternal and bilateral relations with other Arab countries, and perhaps even to sneak in a story from somewhere in the world where people are experiencing wars or earthquakes. This usually involves presenting soundless footage produced by a foreign news agency and run with a clumsy or—not unusually—a mismatched lead-in by the presenter, who spends his or her time off camera shuffling paper in front of the microphone.

We're being only slightly arch in describing this scenario because, as any regular viewer would confirm, the description is only slightly removed from the literal truth. Further, the seeming immutability of the television news format makes a serious point about the Egyptian media system as a whole: The mainstream media--and the government that controls it--have

steadfastly tried to maintain the appearance of continuity, clutching to past, tried-and-untrue formulas, even after 20 years of momentous change that have catapulted the rest of the world into the information age. Egypt has been largely insensible to the implications of this change, but it has not been immune to all its manifestations.

What's New?

Let's recount a few of things that have happened to the Egyptian broadcast and electronic media environment since 1977:

- * An increase in the number of terrestrial television outlets from two national networks in the Sadat era to two national networks and six local channels today (Amin, 1997b).

- * The proliferation of satellite dishes that can draw in everything from French quiz shows to Turkish soft pornography. One estimate is that almost a million satellite dishes are perforating the skyline around the country. Egyptians can subscribe to Saudi-owned services geared toward the Arab market, including ART and Orbit, which provide mainly entertainment packages, and the London-based Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), which aspires to be the CNN of the Arab world (Amin, 1996).

- * The creation of a joint public-private enterprise, Cable News Egypt (CNE), which provides a package that includes CNN, Music Television, a movie channel, a sports channel and others. CNE captures the channels from satellite and distributes them through direct broadcasting to household decoders (Foote and Amin, 1993).

- * The creation of an Egyptian satellite channel during the Gulf war (Amin, 1992), which is carried by Arabsat and distributed worldwide, followed by two other services, namely, Egyptian satellite Channel 2 and Nile Drama.

- * The inauguration of a foreign-language network, Nile TV, distributed internationally, but primarily directed toward Europe.

- * The planned launching of Egypt's first satellite--NileSat--in spring 1998. Preliminary studies for launching NileSat were undertaken and intensified over the 1990s, when Egypt began hiring space on satellite transponders. The NileSat project is estimated to cost \$160-200 million. It will carry 12 transponders, each capable of carrying up to 10 channels. Nile

Group, a package of new satellite television channels, is being prepared and will be distributed by NileSat (Amin, 1997a).

* The construction of a vast media production complex at Sixth of October City. Construction was completed and the facility opened in 1997. The facility was being used to turn out a steady stream of TV programs well in time for the Ramadan television season at year's end.

* The growing accessibility of computers, which began a boom in the 1980s that intensified in the 1990s. There are now at least 350 companies dealing with computer products and services. The value of the Egyptian market for computers was estimated to increase from \$3.3 million in 1985 to \$54.7 million in 1988. In 1992, it reached \$161.8 million and was estimated to be growing by 16 percent annually. In 1994, the information technology market reached an estimated value of \$196.4 million (Omar, June 1995, p. 18).

Concomitant with the growth of the computer industry, government information centers and Internet providers have been established. One of the most important state information centers is the Cabinet's Information Decision Support Center (IDSC). Also, IDSC created an organization to deal with software technology, as well as to act as an Internet government provider, called the Regional Information Technology and Software Engineering Center (RITSEC). Private Internet providers are also gaining a foothold on the market, although they must get access through government providers (Aref, 1995).

The print media environment also has been greatly enriched since the end of the Sadat era, which was marked, particularly towards its end, by blatant repression and relative sterility.

* The opposition newspapers, which Sadat had closed down in 1981 because freedom to publish had made them a bit too obstreperous for his liking, are chugging away healthily and in greater numbers. Opposition papers like the Islamist-oriented *al-Shaab*, as well as some government-owned publications, such as *Rose El-Youssef*, have been hammering away at government corruption and even against government officials as high as the interior minister. Though unsettled, there is an atmosphere of greater freedom.

* The Egyptian magazine market, partly in response to the proliferation of well-produced Saudi-owned publications, has erupted with a host of

special interest magazines covering crime, sports, celebrities and women's issues. At the same time, a rash of new English-language magazines focusing on business, sports, and fashion and lifestyle has appeared on the scene (Napoli and Amin, 5 February 1994).

* The newspaper market, once almost entirely centralized in Cairo, now includes several dozen new local newspapers covering every major city, including Alexandria, Beni Suef, al-Minya and Suez City. These include an extremely localized breed of neighborhood newspapers.

* A number of privately owned Egyptian newspapers presenting a titillating mix of sex, scandal, religion, and politics, including *al-Dustur* and *al-USboa*, has appeared. And Egypt even has its own edition of a business daily newspaper that is trying to build a reputation as the *Wall Street Journal* of the Arab world, *al-Alam al-Yom*.

* Newspaper technology has been greatly improved, as is testified by the installation of state-of-the-art presses and the introduction of computers for journalists at the main government papers, *al-Ahram* and *al-Akhbar*. *Al-Ahram* is now the biggest printing house in the region, and prints many other Egyptian newspapers. The government news agency, Middle East News Agency (MENA), also is fully computerized and uses satellites for news transmission.

So, with all these developments apparent in the Egyptian media environment, why is there such a sense of stagnation? Why does the Egyptian national TV news format seem impervious to change? Of course, we are arguing a much larger issue here. The inflexibility of the news format reflects a more serious problem of intractability that has characterized the government's attitude, law, and policy regarding the mass media in Egypt not just for the past 20 years, but since Nasser came to power in 1952 and nationalized the press in 1960.

Egypt's Media in the Global Context

Over the past two decades, the global information revolution, represented by satellites, Internet, computers and inexpensive printing technology, has tended to broaden the range of available information and entertainment. It puts people in closer touch with economic, political and social trends occurring elsewhere in the world, and sometimes within their own country.

It has the capacity to magnify awareness and, at least potentially, to involve the public in more informed debate on public issues. It can be viewed as an element in, or perhaps a precursor to, democratization and economic liberalization. Its very diffuseness discourages centralization; its ubiquity discourages control. In short, its implications are everything that any government marked by rigidity and hierarchy is poorly disposed to incorporate.

Though the media in Egypt have seemingly adapted to and even thrived in the changing global communications environment, the country's political and legal structure has not changed significantly to accommodate it. In fact, efforts have been directed toward maintaining long-standing policies of centralization and control incongruous with economic and technological developments.

Compared to Nasser, Anwar Sadat expressed an open attitude toward the press, as he did toward the economy and toward political opposition. However, his affirmation of press freedom always came with caveats about press responsibility and other reflections of his own ambivalence about the extent of permissible press freedom. Although he removed formal press censorship in 1974, he retained state control over the media. Though he authorized opposition parties to issue newspapers, he continually pulled them in and out of business. He liked and rewarded some journalists, but uncooperative and overly tendentious journalists exasperated him to the point that, in September 1981, he threw hundreds of them into jail and closed the opposition papers (Dabbous, 1985:8; Nasser, 1990:10-19; Ochs, 1986:131). Before Sadat was assassinated in October 1981, his free press policy had relapsed into Nasserism, under which the media were viewed solely as an instrument for state management of public opinion (Rugh, 1979:33). The emergency law of 1981, passed after Sadat's death, also provides the president with sweeping powers to control the press. And, although it provides a chronic source for criticism by both the government and opposition press, the emergency law remains in effect.

Government policy did, however, shift toward liberalization again under President Mubarak, who released imprisoned opposition party leaders and lifted the ban on opposition papers. "I admire the Egyptian press," Mubarak said in a speech before the People's Assembly on June 6, 1983. "I respect its writers. I am merely requesting that we appeal to reason and

logic. Thank God, there is no censorship and no restrictions" (State Information Service, March 1985:19). Certainly the press under Mubarak operates more freely than it did under Sadat, and, in fact, more freely than it does in most other Arab and African countries. Newspapers and magazines publish a wide range of information and views, including matter critical of public officials and occasionally touching on the president himself.

Even so, the impulse to maintain control continues to reassert itself--most obviously in the government's continual rewriting of laws governing the press, usually with repressive consequences. The press operates under the Egyptian Constitution, which prohibits censorship, and the revised Law 148 of 1980, which states that the press is "an independent popular authority performing its mission freely in the service of the community." In theory, there is no press censorship but, in fact censorship permeates every aspect of expression in Egypt--not just newspapers, but broadcasting, theater, movies, magazines and books. The principal censoring organization is the Office of Censorship in the Ministry of Culture but other organizations that exercise censoring authority include the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Information, al-Azhar University, the State Information Service, the Office of the President and even the Egyptian Post Office (Ammar, 1990). Indirect censorship of the national press is inherent in its organizational structure. The national press, even though it has its own resources, is government-owned and controlled through the Shura Council and its agency, the Higher Press Council, which appoints the chief editors and heads of the newspapers' boards of directors. Other means of censorship include personal threats against, deportation and even torture of journalists--all of which have a long history in Egypt.

The implied contradiction between government protestations that there is no censorship and the fact of its implementation by government officials cannot be lost on the Egyptian public. And, while every technological innovation might urge toward a more open information system, government updates of press law have tended to alternately tighten and loosen and then again tighten the screws. In May 1995, for example, amendments to the penal code, the code of criminal procedure, and Law 76/70 establishing the Press Syndicate were peremptorily passed by Parliament and imposed what were arguably the most repressive controls on the press in its 200 years of history. The law, which was immediately signed by the president, imposed

heavy fines and prison sentences from five to 15 years on journalists for a range of vaguely worded crimes. These included publishing false or malicious information, inflammatory propaganda or anything that disturbs the public peace. It became immediately apparent in the debate over the law that its primary objective was to squelch character assassination by the press, including the defamation of parliamentary delegates (Teel et al., 1997).

In June of 1996, the regulation of the press was again altered. A new press law was ratified by the Shura Council reaffirming earlier bills proscribing criticism of public officials, especially the head of state. It outlawed, for example, news stories that "abuse public officials," "insult the parliament, army, courts, authorities, or public agencies," "vilify foreign heads of state," "damage the nation's reputation," or "insult the president." The bill also allowed for journalists to be tried in military courts and for newspapers and magazines to be banned without any form of due process. After vehement protests from the Journalists' Syndicate and even the usually compliant government press, President Mubarak rescinded some onerous provisions and transferred some enforcement responsibility to the Syndicate, a victory of sorts for the press (Teel et al., 1997). Nevertheless, the new press code retained generous openings for state intervention and some dubious provisions, including criminal penalties for insulting the president, his family and foreign heads of state.

Since passage of the 1996 press code, the Egyptian public has been entertained by the spectacle of running battles between the press, particularly the Islamist-oriented *al-Shaab*, and top officials and personages, including the President's two sons. The confrontations have sometimes taken bizarre turns. To take just one example, in October 1997, when *al-Shaab* was barred for publishing for two weeks, it went ahead and published anyway--on the inside pages of a sympathetic rival. Attacks on prominent, once-sacrosanct figures and such blatant circumventions of authority by the press would have been less likely two decades ago.

If, however, the prevailing print media environment seems to be more open, there have been countervailing, simultaneous pressures to close it down. Censorship has been a chronic affliction for news outlets ranging from MENA (Hafez, 1993), to foreign publications in Egypt. During 1997, for example, the publisher of the English-language weekly *Middle East*

Times was expelled and a ban was imposed on an issue of the London-based Arabic-language daily, *al-Hayat*. For a period, the Ministry of Interior even banned any reporting on details of the investigation into the September 18 massacre of German tourists in central Cairo.

The unpredictability of government policy was again dramatized in early 1998, when the People's Assembly abruptly passed a measure stipulating that applications for establishing joint stock companies for publications, satellite broadcasting, and remote sensing needed to be approved by the Cabinet. The measure, which was signed by the president in January 1998, is an amendment to a law intended to encourage private investment. It drew vehement opposition from the Press Syndicate, which was not consulted about the proposal, as a direct assault on press freedom. The government maintains it was intended only to bring order to the burgeoning newspaper market and to protect national security. Sameh Ashour of the Nasserist Party astutely observed of the measure that it reflected the government's misguided policy of liberalizing the economy while tightening up on the political system (El-Din, 1998:2). In fact, even as Egypt has embarked on a program of economic restructuring, including privatization of state-owned industries, its attitude toward the media has been ambivalent. While it has, on one hand, encouraged, through specific decisions, the privatization of aspects of the print media and the telecommunications industry, it has on the other hand constantly and publicly restated a policy that it would never privatize the media (Napoli et al., 1995).

In sum, even as the number of newspapers and magazines grows, as access to foreign media becomes more common, as the availability of alternative sources of communication and information, such as Internet, becomes more widespread, the government's instinct continues to be to find ways to stop the flow of information. In so doing, it is not only running against the tide of media globalization, economic liberalization and even democratization, but risking damage, in a very public way, to its credibility with the Egyptian public. Even during the Nasser and Sadat eras, government was never able to entirely prevent the intrusion of foreign media, particularly radio. Today, such efforts are even more influential. The government may still be able to inhibit the dissemination of some information within the country--but not for long, and not without making a

public display of censorship that it claims does not exist (Napoli and Amin, 1997).

Further, government does not seem to be acting in a way consistent with any ideological position, not even Nasserism. Instead, it is reacting reflexively to the political pressures of the moment, such as the perceived need to protect the high, the mighty and their relatives, or to protect something as nebulous as Egypt's international image. "There is no clear-cut policy anywhere," one Egyptian journalist observed. "There is no such thing as a worked-out plan. There are only a lot of contradictions and inconsistencies" (Hassan Ragab, interview, Oct. 20, 1997).

Contradictions and inconsistencies also mark government broadcasting policy, currently a responsibility of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU). Although that policy is committed to centralized state ownership and control of broadcasting because of the presumed power of radio and television to unify and mobilize the public, the private sector has been allowed to intrude into the broadcasting system. Although the state retains the controlling share of CNE, it of course provides private competitors to the Egyptian media themselves. Among those competitors is CNN, whose powerful impact during the 1991 Gulf War stunned officials at Egyptian TV and forced them, for a brief period, to improve its own news presentation. In addition, both TV and radio networks now allow for privately sponsored programs, as do the satellite broadcasting networks. These and other early indications of privatization across the media suggest at least that the state system is beginning to take cognizance of the competition and perhaps that there is even the beginning of a change in the media ownership pattern. That would be consistent with the global trend toward privatized media systems.

When there is some obvious and permanent alteration in the static tradition of the news format on Egyptian television, that may be the signal that media officials have finally taken to heart the challenge emerging from the private sector. If Egyptian television cannot compete successfully against outside private media, particularly well-financed Saudi broadcast enterprises, it could find itself playing to an empty house, increasingly marginalized and isolated. Its market share will slowly but inevitably erode as more interesting sources of television become more widely accessible to the Egyptian public.

That wasn't a concern 20 years ago. But now it is.

Toward 2017

A question that ought to be asked is what Egypt's media policy should be over the next 20 years.

It is, of course, dangerous or impossible to predict precisely what technological innovations will present themselves in the coming decades. But it is fairly safe to say that whatever comes down the road from now on will likely expand opportunities to acquire a greater range of information and entertainment for those who can plug in. Censorship will almost certainly become more difficult and efforts to impose it will create new sets of problems. Further, competition for audiences will become increasingly intense, putting at a distinct disadvantage anyone who clings to old, flat, dead ways of doing things. And that includes the way of doing TV news.

The last 20 years have exposed a serious and growing disjuncture between the economics and the technological development of the media and the political and legal environment in which they operate. While the former are proceeding apace, partly under pressure from global forces, the latter has been changing slowly, erratically, and inconsistently. There is no coherent government policy that would help the Egyptian media respond more effectively to the looming technological and economic realities of the next millenium.

In 1995, a study--in which the two authors participated--identified a series of issues facing the Egyptian print and broadcast media (Napoli et al., May 31, 1995). Those issues, which were developed from the published literature and from interviews with journalists and others in the media, were dominant concerns 20 years ago and they persist today. They include, among others, overregulation, excessive centralization, a repressive and hierarchical organizational structure within media institutions, inadequate training among professionals in the media, and a closed attitude among government officials about the release of information. The pace of technological and economic change over the past two decades has exacerbated these problems, and the pace is not going to slacken.

There are several general policy changes that government could make to enable it to respond more effectively.

First, Egypt can move away more deliberately from its centralized, government-owned and controlled media system. This needn't mean an outright sell-off of all its print and broadcast media. However, it can open the door more widely to private investment in existing media in order to introduce a more competitive, creative edge. It can also clear the way for private ownership, not only of new newspapers and magazines but of new radio and television outlets. It is obvious, for example, that the FM radio spectrum is grossly underutilized in Egypt. Only a handful of stations are available to provide programming for some 62 million people. By contrast, much smaller cities than Cairo in the United States can boast 30 or more stations providing a wide range of news, music, talk and public affairs programming. There's every likelihood that Cairo could support a substantial number of new stations, which could provide a greater variety of listening options to Egyptians and a source of tax revenue for the government.

The job of assigning licenses and regulating broadcast content could be done most easily by first creating a successor to ERTU, perhaps on the model of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, staffed and directed by people with some expertise in the new technologies. More technical specialists, as well as people familiar with the implications of the increasing globalization of media, will certainly be required to deal with the myriad issues being raised by Internet and other developments in electronic and broadcast communication.

Second, all the media would benefit from the establishment of a clear and coherent policy toward the press. Censorship, which has resulted in low credibility among the public for both the government and opposition press, becomes increasingly futile as the globalized media become more commonplace and irresistible. As in most other societies, measures for controlling libel, protecting national security, guarding against pornography, and so forth can be developed without retaining for government sweeping powers to censor or to severely limit access to information. A common complaint among journalists interviewed in the 1995 study was that government frequently makes it difficult or impossible to get access to state documents, a problem that often makes reportage more a matter of opinion than fact. Government can ensure implementation of freedom of information laws to make government reports and data more available.

Clearly, to improve the efficacy of the news media in delivering information about public policy, government itself must be more forthcoming with information, a precondition to any meaningful democratic process. Government can also rewrite the press law yet again, but this time in the same direction the Egyptian, as well as the global, media system is already pressing: towards greater freedom.

Numerous other, more modest measures can be taken to enhance the competitiveness of the Egyptian media. These include: the reorganization of media institutions to better reward merit, higher pay for media professionals, better training for journalists both in the latest technological developments and in international standards of performance and behavior, and a reorientation of journalists toward their audiences, rather than toward the government or to each other.

Reorientation of journalists would suggest, among other things, that they and their bosses really cared about what might interest the general public--their readers, viewers and listeners.

Then, no doubt, you would see some changes on the news set at Egyptian TV.

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