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2-23-2007

Public Media in the Arab World: Exploring the Gap Between Reality and Ideals

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Abstract

The Center for Social Media collaborated with the Arab Media and Public Life (AMPLE) project at American University for a year-long conference series on public media in the Arab world and focused on changes in the media environment, the role of the state, and what "public media" means in the Arab world. Themes that emerged in the series included the tension between political and business interests, and the public interest. Additionally, the series explored the effects of interaction of local audiences with transnational media, the role of traditional versus non-traditional media, changes in the media despite political stagnation, globalization and popular culture, and the difference between "public" and "audience." In this context, can we speak of a "public" or is it more rigorous to refer to plural "publics" when discussing transnational satellite television? If there are several publics, then how is the "public interest" defined? The project proceeded over three convenings, which featured presentations by leaders in the field and the development of an agenda for research and practice to expand the scope of public media geographically, conceptually and topically

Keywords
Arab world, media

Disciplines
Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Comments
A report for the Center for Social Media, American University. Washington, D.C.

Public Media in the Arab World
Exploring the Gap between Reality and Ideals

February 23, 2007
American University, Washington, DC

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A Joint Project of:
Center for Social Media, School of Communication
International Communication Program, School of International Service

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Center for Social Media collaborated with the Arab Media and Public Life (AMPLE) project at American University for a year-long conference series on public media in the Arab world and focused on changes in the media environment, the role of the state, and what "public media" means in the Arab world. Themes that emerged in the series included the tension between political and business interests, and the public interest. Additionally, the series explored the effects of interaction of local audiences with transnational media, the role of traditional versus non-traditional media, changes in the media despite political stagnation, globalization and popular culture, and the difference between "public" and "audience." In this context, can we speak of a "public" or is it more rigorous to refer to plural "publics" when discussing transnational satellite television? If there are several publics, then how is *the* "public interest" defined?

The project proceeded over three convenings, which featured presentations by leaders in the field and the development of an agenda for research and practice to expand the scope of public media geographically, conceptually and topically.

CONVENING OBJECTIVES:

The full-day, invitation-only convenings were held on the campus of American University. Top scholars, researchers, diplomats and professionals with expertise on Arab media issues came together to explore the gap between reality and ideals when it comes to public media in the Arab world. Our objectives were:

- **To internationalize the scope of the public media model**. The future of public media is transnational and global, making it important to address the imperatives of looking at public media beyond the context of the United States and Western Europe. The Arab world is a very interesting case study of a transnational public sphere, whose media and public discourse are currently the subject of heated debates from Washington to Beirut.

- **To expand the boundaries of the notion of public media**. The globalization of the notion of public media involves definitional challenges. The Arab world provides a concrete context where variations on the notion of public media can be explored. Since there are no media institutions devoted to the public interest, can mainstream, commercial or government-owned channels fulfill the role of public media? Under what circumstances?

- **To explore the overlaps between public media and alternative forms of speech**. To what extent can alternative channels of communication—cartoons, songs, sermons, youth-produced videos, activist blogs—serve the public interest? How do these small and alternative media relate to major media institutions? Does the relation between "big" and "small" media suggest an alternative notion of public media?

DISCUSSION:

Political Cartoons as Public Media

The first presentation and discussion focused on Egyptian political cartoons and their role in Arab public media. Political cartoons in Egypt often focus on topics such as legitimacy, the distribution of power, and power relationships and serve as an expressive form of public media to the extent that they subvert established channels of authority, necessitate relatively minor formal education but require local cultural knowledge.

These political cartoons serve the public interest in Egypt because they focus attention on local issues, both political (i.e. lack of freedom of speech, status of women in the public sphere) and practical (i.e. local government corruption and how it impacts garbage collection, for example). Examples highlighted during the discussion suggest that the impact of such cartoons, which usually appear on the editorial page, results from their engagement with contentious issues in the public sphere and their focus on how Egyptians view themselves and others.

Though political cartoons regularly break out of private interests, they remain part of mainstream Arab media controlled by an alliance of political and economic interests.

Impact of Youth Media

In contrast, youth generated media like wartime blogging in Lebanon and racing videos in Saudi Arabia constitute a radical alternative to mainstream media. These youth-generated media showcase the symbiotic relationship between creativity and activism. For example, the Lebanese blogger FinkPloyd started a network of bloggers who write about cities in a format similar to that of his own blogginbeirut.com blog.

The information and opinion provided by these citizen-journalists has become a platform for activists and grew to include online televised reports that enabled a sequence linking media and action to emerge. Although the effort started after former Lebanese President Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005, the blogging network that emerged during the Israel-Hizbollah war in 2006 focused on telling stories that were not told in the news about youth going out, having fun and living their daily lives rather than overtly political messages. Similarly, youth-produced videos in Saudi Arabia provide a grassroots, non-commercial and publicly available expression of youth rebellion that contrasts sharply with the commoditized and commercialized youth identities and behaviors offered by mainstream media.

The tension between self-expression and the potential institutionalization of youth-generated videos and other alternative media is an important issue for the future of public media in the Arab world. Developing Arab public media must entail taking into consideration the notion of alterity, which has to be self-attributed by the audience and public, as participatory and non-hierarchical. Public media must reflect multiple self-representations and representations by others.

Alternative media, from Al Jazeera to blogs, challenge the underlying relationship between the state and the public yet nonetheless operate within the structure of the nation-state. Nonetheless, these media contribute to the emergence of new identities, to the indigenization and localization of media content, and to the emergence of multiple publics (rather than the assumption of one singular Arab public, often described as the "Arab street").

Challenges of Arab public media

Even as content is localized, it is also globalized and delocalized. The case of Egyptian blogs illustrate a three-step flow in which Egyptian journalistic bloggers report on local events, which were then used as sources for articles by Western journalists in the mainstream press, at which point these stories could either be re-localized and regionalized by being picked up in the Arab media. Local stories of abuse and imprisonment of activists, for example, are re-localized only after being globalized. The prevalence of English-language blogging in Egypt further raises questions about the "public" in public media, as creators of media relinquish their native language, whether it is to escape censorship or to communicate with Western journalists. It also compels reflection about whether alternative media become significant only after being relayed by mainstream media.

Questions about the intended audience—how to define the public, and hence public media – in a globalized and interconnected world, and whether the traditional distinction between media producers and consumers still makes sense, challenge assumptions about Arab media and the constitution of the public sphere. Citizen journalism and alternative media underscore the availability of personal reflections and individual interpretations of local, regional and global events that provide alternative perspectives to those promoted by the mainstream media in the Arab world and the West. These increasingly popular and significant media speak to diverse audiences and challenge the notion of a public confined within the nation-state. They suggest that the future of Arab public media is truly transnational.

Understandability across cultural and political borders emerged as a particularly salient issue as the scope of public media broadens in the future. Primarily visual media like political cartoons and youth generated media lack narrative or explanation with which to put the images into context. In such visually dominant media, therefore, the few words that may be included are thus especially important yet often do little to add context that would enable understanding along the lines intended by the producer of the media. For example, the word "Erhabe", which means "terrorist," appeared in the English-transliteration of the video of Saudi "drifting", raising questions about what the word meant and symbolized as well as to whom it was directed. The incongruity of images and words in these alternative media, from political cartoons to videos, is significant and highlights the need to explore the self-identification of these producers of public media.

Although much of our discussion revolved around optimistic outlooks on the power of alternative media in the public sphere, there were also warnings about ascribing too much power to technology and the need to examine whether a true public media can exist without a regulatory and juridical framework that protects freedom of association and cultural expression. The record of government institutions in the Arab world is not encouraging, and public media initiative can only develop in tandem with other grassroots civil society groups focused on reforming the

judiciary and media governance processes. Assuming a causal relationship between media and the political system in the Arab world obscures various ways that regimes have found to coopt non-mainstream media and other forms of speech.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are nontraditional ways in which speech and social criticism can be performed, from cartoons to videos to other non-traditional or authorized streams of communication. The notion of public media needs to be flexible to accommodate emergent forms of social and alternative communication. The importance of self-representation as opposed to representation by others is at the heart of the debate on Arab media's role in public life and is an area where citizen generated media like blogs become so important.

The trend toward citizen media has also perhaps been aided by the increasing commercialization of Arab media, which is leading to greater specialization and challenging the state/private dichotomy. In spite of the dynamism of mediated forms of expression, the Arab world remains politically stagnant. Structures of credibility and accountability have to be established. These must be indigenous because if they are imported or imposed from the outside under the rubric of reforming the Middle East, they will play in the hand of information control and censorship.

We also identified future avenues for exploration, including focusing on the creation of media by a more diverse group of people; focusing on popular culture and mediated entertainment as an avenue for public discourse; expanding the analysis to radio and documentary in the Arab world, which have so far received little interest if any at all; exploring what kinds of media enable the expression of various marginalized narratives related to social agency and various publics; re-conceptualizing the notion of public interest and public media to make them more inclusive; and examining Arabic-language media activism.

In summary, issues that need further research and action are:

- **Localism vs. regionalism**. Localism has traditionally been an important dimension of public media in North America and Western Europe. In contrast, Arab media that come nearest to being public media focus on regional (i.e. pan-Arab) issues, at the expense of localism, in what has been called "anywhere but here" media.

- **Media dynamism vs. political stagnation**. There is a huge gap between the dynamism and profound transformation of media in the Arab world and the impact that this dynamism has had on political processes and institutions.

- **Self-representation vs. representation by others**. An exploration of the kinds of media that enables self-expression at the individual and social level is overdue. We believe this key to understanding the future of public media.

- **News & public affairs vs. entertainment**. This distinction is untenable, since in authoritarian environments entertainment can perform as public media by broaching issues of public interest and attracting sustained attention from various publics.

- **Traditional vs. non-traditional media.** How do television, radio, and the press interact with sermons, music videos and blogs? How do inter-media configurations contribute to our re-thinking of the notion of public media?

- **Structures and institutions of monitoring and evaluation**. Are these best understood as state-sponsored institutions? Or would they be more effective and/or accountable were they to hail from civil society groups?

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