

## Digitalism and Development of Arab Media in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### ABSTRACT

Modern Arab media, since its inception as of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, has been controlled by authorities, whether foreign and later local, adhering to a governmental one point of view. The four stages of Arab media development (*control, defiance, containment, flooding*) are analyzed in relation to the critical historical communication theory, which sees that communication impacts the development of societies towards liberalism. In this manner, a fifth stage, *a move towards quasi-liberalism*, brought about by modern digital communication technology as of the 1990s, has succeeded in breaking existing monopolies of the one view media, and in bringing about noticeable changes in the predominant Arab communication system. New attitudes and values began to form. This created a dilemma to the authoritarian Arab governments, which came with counter measures. But digitalism helped in bringing around the Arab spring.

**Keywords:** Digitalism, Arab Media, Development.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Until the late Eighties, Arab mass media system would have been characterized as mostly state-run with a governmental one point of view, authoritarian in nature and controlled by laws that require licensing and censorship. The Arab audience was described as passive, marred with high illiteracy rate, and in information-seeking relies heavily on the electronic media of TV and radio which its messages usually had been described as redundant<sup>(1)</sup>.

Although these theses might have been still true in general, but do not reflect the whole truth of the present. The fact of the matter is that, in the digital age, the media of transnational direct satellite broadcasting and the internet (TDSBI)- versus traditional national terrestrial media- are bringing about, by virtue of technological

determinism, serious effects, which are helping to create a ‘new environment’ (McLuhan: ix). Many communication scholars, who researched the new Arab media, agree that the changes brought about by this media are noticeable-or even revolutionary- (Rugh, Berenger, Alterman, Hamami), although others are skeptical that Arab governments will not give in their control over the media easily (Alterman, Amin). Therefore the main question that should be addressed is: How far the digital media can succeed in breaking authoritarian monopoly over the Arab communication system?

Historically, the introduction of controlled mass media into Arab countries, under the auspices of colonial rule (Ottoman first and then European by virtue of WW1 Sykes-Picot Agreement and Balfour Declaration), began as of the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and continued after these countries gained some sort of independence (mostly with ties to the colonial powers) after WW1. While Radio and TV were owned directly by the governments, the printed media was controlled indirectly through several punitive measures: “licensing, prepublication censorship, and prescribed punishments”

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Received on 18/3/2018 and Accepted for Publication on 25/4/2019.

(Ayalon: 112), among other things. Arab media has been used mostly as a domination force to maintain the status quo ante.

Therefore, it is hypothesized that the changes brought about by the digital media should reflect on the dominant communication system and lead to long-term future liberalizing changes in the whole social and political structures in the Arab society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The system theory and the historical critical communication theory may help understand how Arab media in the digital age can bring about this liberalizing effect.

*Media as a Subsystem:* Governments generally treated the media, since its inception in Arab countries, as a monopoly, either owned directly or regulated by punitive press laws. Theoretically, mass media as an influential subsystem usually reflects the characteristics of the main and complex communication system that it represents—i.e. the state. Rugh argues that there is “an intimate, organic relationship between the media institutions and the society” (1979: xvi) in Arab countries; but in reality, the relationship is between the media and the government—not the society. Arab media have been functioning to preserve the status quo of the complex micro system (i.e. the government) rather than being an agent bringing change into the society as a whole. In rare cases, when grand political issues warrant and when the need arises, media is manipulated to effect the desired change. Modern Arab media (since WW11) has been a mirror reflecting largely the authoritarian political system that ruled in Arab states.

However, before the introduction of the new digital media, media organizations in Arab countries were almost totally closed subsystems. But, with the introduction of the new media, they were forced to open up, due to pressures brought by communication technology.

Since the relationship between the subsystems and the

larger complex system is interdependency, then it is assumed that they should interact: “advanced systems must be able to change and re-order themselves on the basis of environmental pressure” (Littlejohn: 31, 34). Hence, it is proposed that the new media will bring in important changes in the Arab social system as a whole, by virtue of technological determinism, despite the fact that they will be resisted in subtle ways by governments and conservatives.

*The Historical Communication Theory:* If history is a guide, one learns that it took the West almost four centuries, following the invention of the printing press (1439), to move from an authoritarian system to a libertarian one. Of course, one may think that the social changes which the communication technology had brought into the West could happen again in neighboring Arab countries, and result with a move towards more liberalism and breaking down authoritarian monopolies. Therefore, it’s possible to assume that the digital media, which is capable of reaching any person anywhere, can bridge the gap and help to develop the Arab Communication system as a whole leading to a semi-liberal one in the near future.

Historically, the transition to a new communication system is possible. It takes place in accordance with the historical communication theory that was advocated by prominent communication thinkers, such as Innis, McLuhan, Bagdikian, Logan, Stephens, Eisenstein, among others.

Communication scholars acknowledge that the third communication revolution, i.e. the electronic which commenced with the invention of the telegraph in 1835, may “prove as powerful and ultimately as rewarding as its predecessors” in bringing about “changes that can be far-reaching and frightening” (Stephens: 9-13). For example, in the first communication revolution, which took place in the Middle East in 1500 BC, McLuhan concluded that the phonetic alphabet was a “unique technology”, and its introduction “meant power and authority and control of

military structures at a distance”. But “when combined with papyrus, the alphabet spelled the end of the stationary temple bureaucrats and the priestly monopolies of knowledge and power” (pp. 85-86). Mousa suggests that the development of the alphabet by the Canaanites of Syria became a shared cultural heritage taught the Europeans writing (Mousa, 2001). Innis, McLuhan’s mentor, theorized that the “impact of printing” in the second communication Revolution in Europe “was evident not only in the philosophy of the 17th century but also in the rise of the parliament”. As a result “a theory of might was substituted by a theory of law” (p. 152). In the present era, Bagdikian believes that media conglomerates “manufacture a social and political world”; the internet in particular “has introduced social and legal complications” and allowed for intrusion on privacy (2004: 9, 61, 62). Bagdikian suggests that the new technology, such as the internet and alternative media, have made “more young people... activists, mobilizing protests, petitions and votes” which reflect in the end “on the ballot box” (p. 265). Stephens contends that television is “attacked because moving images are already bringing with them new, unfamiliar, disconcerting ways of looking at the world”. Thus, according to him, it becomes associated with the television “jumpy, fast moving, ironic, surface oriented ways of thinking” (p. 12). Mosco contends that “the revolution is well entrenched in the richest countries and is only beginning in the poorest” (p. 18), which also may allow the richest countries to achieve domination and invasion of small/poor nations. McPhail suggests that the huge multinational media conglomerates of “a small core-zone nation-states” have the “real potential to displace or alter previous cultural values, habits, activities or family rituals” in the semi-peripheral and peripheral zones, allowing for what he terms “electronic colonialism” (pp. 19, 23). These remarks suggest that the digital communication technology would bring about social and political changes that should eventually lead to some form of participatory democracy, despite their fall out, which

might be looked at in a negative manner.

### **Discussion**

The Arab communication system has been generally authoritarian all through history. The ruling elite is a “bourgeois” who “has never had a coherent historical project” (Sabry: 44). This elite usually controls the mass media system to help preserve the status quo, and would naturally coordinate with other Arab governments to confront any serious attempt to allow the media to elevate to a fourth estate status.

No wonder then that an American scholar, Rugh, in his first book, *The Arab Press*, classified the Arab media of the late 1970’s as mostly authoritarian in nature, with some differences of degree between media systems in Arab states. He contends that in most “of the Arab countries the media operate under variations of the authoritarian theory” (p. 25). He classifies these variations into three sub-categories: the *Loyalist* (which exists mainly in kingdoms), the *Mobilization* (which exists mainly in Republics), and finally, the *Diversified* media - at the time existed in Morocco, Lebanon and Kuwait (1979: 28-29). But in his recent book, *Arab Mass Media*, he added a fourth category, *Transitional*, for countries in which the press “is undergoing change, the outcome of which is uncertain” (2004: 26). This is an acknowledgement that Arab media is not resistant to change. However, a re-evaluation to the historical development of Arab media can be helpful in understanding the forthcoming change which is brought about by the digital media.

### **Stages of Media Development**

A historical review to media development in Arab countries may show us stages in which modern Arab media had been influential and were able to bring in changes.

Modern Arab Mass media came into being around the mid nineteenth century- i.e. four hundred years after the

printing press was implemented in Europe. This represents a gap that exists today in Arab Culture, between traditionalism and modernism. The Ottoman Empire, which the Arab World was one segment of, had unfortunately banned the use of the press through a religious edict (fatwa) until 1726 (Mriweh: 139). But in reality, official newspapers did not publish in the Arab-Ottoman countries until the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (starting as of 1816 in Iraq. Hence, the press went through four stages of development between 1816 and 1989, when the Arab Spring began to shape, preceding the present digital stage that is the theme of the present paper:

1. The Control Stage: In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the press was used by the ruling authorities, which dominated the Arab World (whether Ottoman Turks or Europeans, such as the French in Algeria or the British in Egypt), as an official organ, a tool of control, presenting the one view of the ruling power. Even Arabic was not used in many early publications that appeared in early nineteenth century in Arab-Ottoman countries. But the press began to advocate change as of the mid-Nineteenth century, with the publishing of semi-independent newspapers, such as Khaleel Khoury's (Hadeeqat Al-Akhbar of 1858) in Beirut, considered as "the beginning of modern Arab popular Press" (Mriweh: 167). In Egypt, Al-Waqe' al-Misryeh, although an official organ, began to have an impact as of 1835, when influential thinkers like Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, were in charge as editors in chief.
2. The Challenge and Defiance Stage: in 1908 a political coup took place in the Ottoman Empire, which brought in a new Turk junta to rule the empire. A new somewhat lenient press law of 1909, compared with the 1864 law; allowed for freer press. The Arab press in Syria and Lebanon, making use of the new law, called for freedom, appraised the Arabs and hailed their past history; even some papers called for self-rule, others for reformation, and some went as far to ask for the punishment of Turkish officials who were

in power in the previous administration before 1908 coup (Elias: 80). In this, Arab journalists defied the authority, and the writings called for independence. However, after WW1 was declared, and on the eve of the Great Arab Revolt of 1916 against the Turk Ottomans, one Turk ruler of Syria at the time, Jemal Pasha (the executer, as known to Arabs) executed "many distinguished persons", (Allen: 233). Among those executed in Beirut and Damascus were 16 journalists (Mriweh: 171). They represent the first Arab journalists who were "exponents of an Arab identity" and "who became martyrs in the annals of Arab nationalism" (Ayalon: 71). This action by Jemal Pasha was one of many which paved the way to declare The Arab Revolt, a war of liberation, led By Sherif (later King) Hussein of Mecca in alliance with European Allies (Britain and France) against promises to gain unity and independence. The Revolt rid the Arabs of the Ottoman-Turks and allowed for a free press in Syria (Elias: *ibid*). After the war was over, the European Allies, now victorious, ignored completely their promises to the Arabs, and divided Arab countries among themselves in accordance with a Sykes-Picot secret agreement and Balfour Declaration. For the Arabs, the result was catastrophic: fragmentation of their dream of independence and unity into small helpless states, and the creation of Israel (Mousa, 1984: 12).

However, the year 1909 should not be viewed as the starting point for the call for Arab independence from Ottoman Turks. Many writers wrote in the press before, mostly metaphorically, making use of the rich Arab language and literature, a way to express their concerns to get their people liberated. For this, the Turk censor, the *muktubji*, was employed bringing along harsh punishments.

3. The Containment Stage: The media which appeared in newly independent Arab countries with ties to Western European powers in the 1920s until the end

of WW11 was authoritarian. The Press, operating under stringent laws, advocated the views of the “bourgeois” ruling elite with ties to colonial powers. No criticism to policies was permitted. Ottoman Press Law of 1909, or its amendments, remained in use in Jordan, for example, until 1953. Ownership, although in many cases was left in private hands, but licensing was imperative to achieve loyalty. The British established on the eve of WW11 a radio in Palestine, which broadcast in four languages, to counter Nazi and Fascist propaganda in the Middle East.

However, following WW11, most of Arab countries, were given nominal independence (under agreements, treaties and alliances). As a result, radio and TV were run and owned by the newly independent authorities; to help create a public opinion tied to its central government. The Press, in comparison, was retained and owned by the private sector, in some Arab countries partially or totally, operating under press laws. Freedom of expression existed in low tones in some Arab countries modulated by the governments. Hence, Rugh's three categories of Arab media, referred to above, are mostly true of the printed media, simply because the radio and TV were (and some still until the present) run by governments. During this period, in the 1960's the Arab governments, radicals (such as Syria and Egypt) or conservatives (such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia) created Ministries of Information, or Ministries of National Guidance, to help GUIDE or INFORM the people with what is right and wrong, and what to believe in and what not to. A Hypodermic Model of Communication made the media look very powerful then, and indeed it was like that for Arab governments and rulers. An Arab cold war between radical and conservative Arabs, highlighted by Egyptian propaganda dominated the Arab mind and led to 1967 defeat.

But an exception appeared in Lebanon: a liberal type of press, classified as diversified by Rugh and semi-liberal by Freedom House report of 2005, was able to

force a president to resign in 1952 (Rugh, 1979: 96). This may suggest the kind of impact that liberal press would bring into the Arab World. In comparison, a mobilization media in Egypt was able to re-install President Nasser in power after he submitted his resignation in the wake of 1967 failures.

These functions were strengthened by creating local news agencies, which disseminated favorable official news mostly. The press would publish the local official views as they come from these agencies. Hence the containment was absolute. Local information was totally governmental.

4. The Flooding Stage: After the fall of the Egyptian propaganda in the wake of 1967 defeat, the rich Arab Gulf states stepped in. These states discovered the importance of the electronic Media, and more specifically, the direct satellite broadcasting (DSB) in the 1980s. In the beginning there were very few channels, but with the new technology, the number of channels multiplied in hundreds. Terrestrial governmental TVs were monopolized by governments. As censorship began to wane because of that, emphasis eroded to entertainment mainly. Massmoudi, an ex-minister of Information in Tunisia and later a member of MacBride group (2), estimated that Arab televisions in early 1980's transmitted to Arab audience a total of 16395 hours of entertainment, 5078 hours of news, 3499 hours of educational material, and 2136 hours of religious programming yearly (p. 239).

With the coming of TV Satellite as of the 1980's, people began to acquire powerful dishes to receive the signal of foreign TVs. Foreign audio transmission in Arabic began in late 1930s. Late comers during the Cold War- such as the Voice of America (VOA) (1951), Radio Russia, Radio Israel's (1948) and TV (1990's), the French Monte Carlo (1971), CNN (1980)- were listened to or watched, but with caution; they were all associated in Arab mind with Western dominance. But seeking

information from foreign channels balanced the emphasis on entertainment, information, and religion functions of Arab media at the time.

In 1985 Arab Sat became operative which allowed for private Arab companies' TV transmission from abroad. Further, newspapers, with strong financial backing, such as *Al-Sharaq Al-Awsat (The Middle East)*, owned by the Saudis, to publish simultaneously in several Arab Capitals, besides London which is its head base. The flooding of information made Arab audience overwhelmed. This was a transitional stage. The fall of the Soviet Union brought in drastic changes also. In 1989, disturbances in southern Jordan, forced the government to abolish of martial rule. New elections brought in a new and aggressive parliament. The parliament promulgated two important laws: A factions' law of 1992 allowed for creating parties, and a press law in 1993 allowed for freer press. In retrospect, these events repeated themselves ten years later in the Arab Spring countries, starting with Tunis in 2010, Egypt in January 2011, then Libya, Yemen and Syria. Jordan's freeing of its press as of 1989 made this country avoid the turmoil of the Arab Spring.

##### 5. The Quasi-Liberal Stage

In the early 1990's, the impact of media convergence began to influence the Arab nation in general. Technological Determinism had its impact in full by the end of the century, particularly around 1998, when the digital TV was introduced. During this period, a new wave of Direct Arab TV Satellite transmission began, governmental and privately owned, such as *LBC*, *MBC* (1991), *Nile TV* (1993), *Art* (1993), *Orbit* (1994) and *Aljazeera* (1996). Some of these stations characterized themselves significantly with broadcasting *Real TV* shows (such as *LBC*) or heated discussion shows (such as *Aljazeera's* Opposite Views talk show). One of its immediate results was to abolish direct censorship. The digital technology helped to seed a new communication system into the Arab World.

Media Convergence, like a shock wave, made many

Arab governments announce their intentions to cancel censorship and liberalize their media. Even some media outlets were permitted to criticize others - regardless of the known saying: do not throw stones on others if your own house is made of glass.

After satellites were introduced in the 1980s, three kinds of DSB were directed to the Arab audience: some owned by Arab governments, some by private Arab companies (with tacit links to Arab authorities), and some by Foreign countries. The Arab governments usually would keep their traditional terrestrial transmission and create an additional DSB carrying almost the same message as the terrestrial. Newly created private media companies, mainly supported by Arab Gulf states, transmitted at first from abroad (generally from Europe), but later they began to move to Arab countries which created media zones (such as Egypt or Jordan). Foreign DSB provided outlets to almost every major Western power or multinational corporations. Affordable dishes allowed DSB signals' to be received in the whole Arab World. Some countries banned the dishes at first and the internet.

The increase in channels allowed for the first time in history varied views, a new outlook and interpretations, of events to be broadcast into Arab homes, and watched by every member of the family. While the Arab DSB represented the interests of wealthy owners or the interests of governments, in comparison, foreign DSB represented mainly the interests of the Western governments or multi-national corporations. The flooding of information brought about by the new technology, made people ask hard questions. The governments had to slacken the grip on information flow. Censorship was abolished in some countries even.

But as of mid 1990s, after the initial shock was absorbed, government control has become subtle and indirect. A short lived democratic climate, and somewhat free press law, existed in Jordan when the Peace Treaty was signed with Israel in 1993. As the Parliament was

increasingly faced by harsher criticism, it abolished the 1993 liberal press law and passed a harsher one in 1997. But the court abolished it, allowing for the coming of the present freer law of 1998.

With satellite TV, the Arab World witnessed an explosion of information brought about by nearly 700 channels<sup>(3)</sup>. Access to a multitude of satellite TVs, whether Arab or non-Arab, most of them interactive, permitted the receiving audience a new orientation. The interactive technology allowed the Arab audience to discuss freely taboo issues. Listening to varied views and watching people in live shows discuss hot issues and respond on the spot to viewers, made an important difference. In fact, interacting with the media and the internet itself became a learning process.

Another communication technology, which helped in breaking the authoritarian grip, was the internet. Interactive media opened doors that were a taboo before, forcing some Arab governments to censor the medium and close certain web sites.

The internet had been also extremely useful in opening dialogue with other groups. It allowed for Arab speakers' new free forums, blogs in certain cases, to voice their views.

### **Interactive Culture**

The effect deepened overtime. A new culture, of give and take, semi-authoritarian, which accepts questioning and reasoning, began to emerge. Even the ordinary citizen began to ask: what is the other view for this or that matter? Such a citizen, who was trained to adhere to the one view of the authority, would search now for another source to check his/her views, and surely would discuss the varied views with others. This same person became more willing to accept new views, which might totally contradict with the official views he/she would have had accepted in past days, or had taken for granted without questioning. The old authoritarian communication system that dominated Arab life has been challenged.

### **Breaking Taboos**

Some of these networks, in order to win wider audiences, applied professionalism in news coverage. The new media broke taboos: Israeli speakers were introduced to explain their views for the first time in history. The effect deepened further with watching Western-like talk programs that would discuss matters of interest to citizens' rights or the right for self-determination. *CNN* broadcast on women's circumcision, although in English, caused Egypt to introduce new rulings (Zalta: 139).

### **Breaking Monopolies**

One extra major outcome which proved the power of the digital technology was breaking Western monopoly of news dissemination. Some Arab channels, *Aljazeera* in particular, were able to present the other side of the story during the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. This enraged many Western politicians, accusing such channels with biased reporting, at a time when the US itself used "embedded journalism" to convey the "truth" to its people at home. Such techniques were implemented in defiance of the free expression doctrine, which many Western systems prided themselves on as something unique to the Western culture. Research recently unfolded a "bias" in that coverage in the sense "...that embedded coverage of 'Iraqi freedom' was more favorable in overall tone toward the military and in depiction of individual troops"; such reporting is thus "professionally treacherous" for it would sacrifice "the idealized standard of reporter objectivity" (Pfau, et. al, pp. 83-4). *Aljazeera International*, can in the present forward to Western viewers, in Europe and the US, an Arab view that was not readily available before (McDermott: 43).

In certain cases, live Arab TVs coverage goes out of limits, which may embarrass the governments, such as the daily carnages in Iraq, Palestine, and more recently countries of Arab Spring, as shown on TV. These scenes enrage people's hearts and minds against their helpless governments of the ruling elites.

Poinewozik writes in *Time* magazine during the 2003 war that “straight news on the Arab networks in many ways offer viewers a more complete and inside look at the war than US TV does”. The report tells stories about how the *BBC* and *Fox TV* reported stories that were proved wrong by Arab networks, which forced Arab viewers “to trust” Arab networks (April 7, 2003, p. 3). For this matter, many Arab journalists who would present the other side of the story might have been targeted, and some were shot dead on the spot or put on trial in Western countries, and in some cases their offices were destroyed. Heroism of Arab journalists becomes another testimony for their willingness to elevate journalism to a higher status, repeating what their ancestors did in 1916, when they were hanged in Beirut and Damascus on the hands of Jemal Pasha the executer.

### **Some changes already there!**

Scholars agree that the new Arab media have already caused some drastic changes in Arab communication system. Berenger observes that “ripples of change... spreading through the region” which has become “one of the fastest growing places for adopting the mechanisms of international communication”(192-193). Rugh, a scholar who wrote extensively on Arab media, suggests that the 1990s became a watershed in Arab media development with the coming of the “offshore” newspapers and broadcasting stations directed to a pan-Arab audience (2004: 167). He asserts that “a revolution has taken place in Arab television since 1990”, which “brought to the Arab World a new style in news coverage and in political discussion programs”. As a result, news reporting became “more aggressive and thorough”, and talk shows “explored topics new to Arab TV” (2004: 202). Alterman argues that the Arab World had seen a new “information revolution” around the end of last century, made possible by the new communication technology (p: 45). To him, it allowed for establishing “transnational” (new) media, such as Direct Satellite Broadcasting or Arab newspapers

published abroad, particularly in London (away from Arab governments’ direct censorship) which encouraged dialogue and challenged the predominantly (traditional) government-controlled type of media existed before. Alterman observes that channels, like the Qatari *Aljazeera*, with its famous debates on sensitive issues and its controversial coverage, has strongly influenced the societies and peoples of the region: its “programs undermine censorship in individual [Arab] states and expand the boundaries of freedom throughout the region” (24). In particular, he sees that the new media have prepared the ground for many changes, in relation to: Arab consensus, diversification of the marketplace of ideas (versus government’s one view before), increase of religious programming, reinforcing of Arab identity, and reintegration of Arab Diasporas.

On the other hand, one Arab communication scholar believes the new media has succeeded in bringing about a “change in the social values” (Al-Hamami: 62), but another is skeptical that the governments will not permit a smooth sailing. Amin rightly argues that “Arab authorities will not move quickly to offer freedom of expression to journalists”. The impediments lie in what he terms a “censorial culture”, which includes regulatory censorship, self-censorship, and a tradition of ill-journalism education (125-135). Alterman suggests that the “increasing amounts of data flow” into Arab countries hard-press the governments to “act in the ‘gatekeeper’ role to which they have become accustomed” (69).

### **Authoritarian Counter Measures**

It is obvious that around the turn of the 20th century, digital technological determinism became a major catalyst in bringing about a new type of message to the Arab mind: a semi liberal one. In the light of the fact that the long-entrenched official Arab authoritarian system is tacitly resisting liberalization of the communication sub-system, which has been looked at as a major force for preserving the status quo, an important question may be

posed at this point: what are the tactics used by these governments to resist developing media into a liberal fourth estate?

No doubt that the digital media enforced new media functions (mainly debating issues and bringing new ideas in a spirit of openness) on the agenda, which allowed for installing in new values that would effect a change in the dominant social communication system. In so doing, Arab governments have to counter-attack.

### **Governments Reaction**

The authoritarian one-way communication system, the Arab government's monopoly over the media, has been challenged. Governments felt they were losing control over the media. This led to tacit counter-measures taken by Arab governments over the past decade to deal with this shock wave. One study dubbed these moves as "soft containment"<sup>(5)</sup>.

Thus, to balance the force of the powerful digital interactive communication technology, some measures then had to be taken, prominent among these one may observe the following tactics:

First, Providing a bigger dose of entertainment and religion: some channels broadcast 24 hrs movies, free of subscription, such as *MBC2*, *MBC MAX*, *FOX movies*, *Melody movies*, and *Rotana Cinema* or sexy clip-songs, etc, or religious (such as *Iqra'*) with an obvious objective of narcotizing the audience. Atwan, the editor in chief of London-based *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, which is a leading off-shore pan-Arab daily newspaper, sums the present scene. He contends that there are only 10 political news channels, and the rest fall in three categorizes: "the first is musical, immoral, and based on nudity and seductive dance. The second is full of football games... The third is honor-stripped Islamic channels, which focus on what" is regarded "as moderate Islam". Although Atwan, finds it "surprising that those who launch the unethical, immoral channels are the same who are financing those so called Islamic channels", but in fact he is referring to one tactic

used by the governments to keep Arab citizens distracted. This tactic tries to make the mostly illiterate Arab people delve deeper in the oral age. Thus, Atwan sees the environment as terribly void:

Reading is regressing, and the sales of papers are declining. The distribution of books has reached its lowest level, replaced by nudity, video clips, singers, dancers, and gossip magazines with long celebrity interviews, talking about everything that is outside normal tastes and social and ethical codes. (Quoted by *TBS* from *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* May 6, 2006).

The entertainment dose had to be increased to revert to a climate similar to what was predominant in the flooding stage. Many new programs were created such as talk shows, 24 hours stations broadcast free films (Arab and American), clip songs, quiz shows, soap operas, contests, and generous prizes were offered through the screen, etc. Telephone companies participated in the game through *SMS*.

Second, Passing more stringent media laws, which are normally approved by the (elected) legislative bodies. In Jordan, for example, a total of 23 laws, including the press law itself, were found to have items dealing with red lines which the press can not cross. The red lines cover topics viewed as threatening to national security and interests, which are:

dissemination of information that could damage national unity, incitement to criminal acts, instilling hatred and division among citizens, encouraging religious or racial intolerance, undermining the dignity, reputation and personal freedoms of individuals, disturbing the social order, promoting immorality, disseminating false information or rumors, inciting disturbances or strikes, encouraging holding public meetings in a manner that violates the law, or carrying out any other actions that threaten the state's reputation.

*The Jordan Times*, May 4, 2005

Third, Bribing the journalists: this would take several forms, such as, providing lots of lands or housing free of

charge; give allowances or raises in salaries; provide opportunities to accompanying dignitaries in official trips in return for high stipends; hire journalists to work for semi-governmental organizations as PR officers, or media consultants, with high rewards; or use any other possible means that would help keep journalists shut up.

Fourth, Applying harsh measures, such as detaining journalists, or forcing them to close their papers, when they break the press laws, or even when they just criticize Arab heads of states or their policies.

Fifth, Changing laws: some governments keep changing laws creating an atmosphere of uncertainty for the journalist. To give example: recently, the Jordanian Minister of State and Political Development, Mr. Mohamad Dawoodieh, an ex-journalist himself, summed it all. He described the Jordanian media as “hesitant, scared, and not professional” adding that it is controlled by the government; and that “it does not function right and lacks people’s confidence”. He promised that the new “package” of press laws<sup>(6)</sup> which will be passed in the autumn [prepared by the Higher Media Council] will bring about “a change in the role of media which will allow it to become daringly liberal, watchdog the government and reflect the popular feeling” (*Al-Rai Daily*, Amman, August 25, 2004: 46).

Sixth, Making pan-Arab agreements, concluded by Arab ministries of information in their regular meetings under the Arab League auspices. Such agreements would not allow for criticism of each other regimes, which eventually would be written into Press Laws.

Seventh, Threatening journalists. AFP reported that a law-suit was raised against a well known woman journalist, Hala Serhan, who runs a popular *Hala Sarhan Show* on *Rotana TV*. The suit called for cutting off her hand and foot for an allegation that she showed fake prostitutes on her show which tarnishes Egypt’s image abroad. (*Al-Rai daily*, Feb.13: 2007: 74).

Eighth, Presenting negative images of the elected parliamentarians on the government-owned media, or by

journalists loyal to the government, (such as focusing TV cameras on them yawning or fighting or shouting), or write negative commentaries criticizing them, in an attempt to portray the legislative body, the only one elected by popular vote in the country, as inefficient or pathetic. In comparison, the executive authority, the ruling elite, is presented as dynamic and very hard-working.

Ninth, Re-educating journalists: Government media-centers, whether owned by the ministries of information or their affiliates, present regular courses to train the journalists in tailored courses designed to enhance the authoritarian one way model.

Tenth, Wooing journalists associations: The Government co-ordinates regularly with journalists’ associations even encourage them to issue their own laws and media ethics; and to create their own disciplinary councils to punish outlaws. Such moves contradict the basic concepts of liberalism, i.e. to have codes of ethics work side by side with the press laws.

Such measures show that governments are not willing to give in their media monopoly easily. On the contrary, they show how nervous they have become. To them, a press as a Fourth Estate should be tailored in accordance with governmental press laws. But what the decision-maker can not see is that the revolution brought about by the digital media, has been sown in the citizen’s mind, and cannot be taken back. The governments are working hard to contain the fallout of technological determinism, but how are they going to take away what the citizen has gained himself?

However, the digital media is criticized by conservative thinkers, whose objectives meet generally with the objectives of governments. They believe that the digital media is bringing in values that encourage new trends. Other thinkers warn of electronic colonization, cultural domination and the like. Such positions call for laws to regulate the media content.

### Other Influences

Naturally, it is presumptuous to assume that social and political changes into the Arab World would have come solely as a result of the digital media only. There are other factors, manifested mainly in education, internal popular pressure, and most importantly the external pressure to politically reform. "We can not consider the many events that took place in more than one Arab country as natural and would have happened without external pressure to reform"(Bdoor: 2005). To mention some political and social changes, that have helped in shaping the Arab environment in the last few years, one might refer to the elections in Palestine and Iraq, popular mobilization in Lebanon, constitutional changes in Egypt, municipal elections in Saudi Arabia, legal amendments granting Kuwaiti women the right to vote, the Sudanese authority reconciliation with the South, and Jordan's draft law on the right to get information.

Education also has played a significant role in bringing about this change. Numbers of university educated Arabs are growing every day. Many of those are educated in the West, and they have adopted Western norms (Alterman: 16-17).

Thus, media and education would make an old prophecy of Daniel Lerner come true (p. 46). The Arab audience is moving away from being passive to a somewhat "stubborn audience"- to borrow the term from Raymond Bauer (p. 333)- and not resistant to change any more for the majority- except in few strata where religious DSB still enforcing the laws for daily agenda.

Naturally, there is a need to develop Arab mass culture, in particular to improve the quality of programming presented on many channels. The change brought by digital technological determinism will not be fulfilled completely in separation from the message. Therefore, to bring about real change into the Arab World, the message should be Arab in spirit, directed to Arab audience, to effect the desired change, especially when we find out that 40-70% of the message content

that broadcast to the Arabs was originated in the West (Sabry: 44). This indicates that the development of mass media system needs hard work.

### Arab in spirit

Another important change followed in programming content was debate and discussion, a tradition opposite to what Arabs have been used to in their authoritarian life in general (Mousa, 2017). Instantaneous lively debates carried on these channels by highly professional broadcasters who gained instant popularity, greatly helped break the dominant one-view authoritarian paradigm and the governments monopoly over traditional Arab media functions. Such programs propagated strongly the other opinion, a new phenomenon that was introduced earlier by foreign media, mainly the Arabic *BBC* <sup>(4)</sup>. While foreign broadcasts and debates brought by the *BBC*, Russia Radio or *VOA*, for example, were looked at as propaganda, the debates carried on Arab channels now have a new demise: these are Arab in spirit executed by Arab speakers and intellectuals. Some of such information carried critical anti-authoritarian messages, such as calls for citizens rights, free speech, free elections, women rights, and raised questions of why and what?? A new seed of liberal thinking and life has been sown into every Arab mind.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, modern digital communication technology has succeeded in breaking existing monopolies of the one view media initiated by local governments, and bringing about revolutionary changes in the predominant communication patterns of the Arab population. The Arab audience itself is moving from a passive situation to a more participatory one; which is a sign for liberalism. Digital media, perforce of technological determinism and their ability to reach every one directly, became conscious opener. New attitudes began to form. The totality of networks, Arab and foreign,

advocated a two-way communication system, which the Arab mind was not used to it. A new era in Arab communication system is evolving, carrying with it seeds of liberalism. The Arab Spring called on, and the ground was ready.

### Notes

- (1) A report published by Amman's Center for Studies on Human Rights concluded that the majority of Arab countries control media and impede their independence, preventing them from becoming a Fourth Estate to watch over governments and fight corruption. The report, which covers for 15 Arab states, refers to the dangerous environment for journalists, especially in Iraq and Palestine (i.e. the Palestinian Authority), which resulted by murdering 42 and kidnapping 11. The report mentions other impediments, such as: imprisonment of journalists, payment of fines, closure, censorship, and prevention of journalists from writing (*Al-Rai*- Jordanian daily, June 12, 2006, p. 5).
- (2) This group produced the following valuable work: MacBride, Sean et. al. *Many Voices, One World*. UNESCO: Paris, 1980.
- (3) Arab Broadcasting Union (ASBO) announced in its yearly report that there are 696 Arab channels, compared with 5 or 6 in the early 1990s. The report said that there are 599 DSB (40% increase over 2007 and 2008); these channels are classified as following: musicals 23.4%, drama 13.8 %, sports 11.4%, and news 7%. (*Al-Ghad* daily, Amman, 29 January 2010, p. 23 i). This figure does not include non Arabic

channels, such as the BBC or the CNN.

- (4) "The One View and the Other View" is the logo of *Aljazeera* TV Channel. Historically, this logo most probably was developed from a name of an influential program, called "the Other Opinion" broadcast on the Arabic BBC radio, presented as of 1991 by the well known broadcaster, Dr. Madeeha Madfai, now a veteran. The objective, according to Madfai was "to present a true picture' of important events that were taking place in the Arab World (such as those relating to the Second Gulf War, the occupation of Kuwait by Iraq, Madrid Peace Conference) to the Arab audience who "lacked such knowledge through national media". "The Other Opinion" thus would present two or more views discussed by qualified Arab persons, and usually each with a view that could be challenged by another. Another influential program created by Arabic BBC veteran broadcaster, Nadeem Nasser, entitled "The World at Noon", had a similar effect. (Madeeha al-Madfai, personal correspondence, 2005).
- (5) Al-Quds Center For Political Studies "The Impact of 'Soft Containment' on the Freedom and Independence of Media in Jordan". February, 2009.
- (6) It should be mentioned that the Ministry of Information was replaced in 2003 with a Higher Council of Information, which has been working on the new laws, which Mr. Dawoodieh has referred to. No wonder then that surveys show Arabs generally do not attend to local media except, may be, for local news, preferring other Arab channels, which provide more professional news.

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## الرقمنة وتطور الإعلام والاتصال العربي في القرن الحادي والعشرين

عصام سليمان الموسى\*

### ملخص

لقد خضعت وسائل الإعلام العربية، منذ أن دخلت البلاد العربية في مطلع القرن التاسع عشر، للسلطة، سواء كانت أجنبية غير عربية (كالسلطة العثمانية أو القوى الغربية المستعمرة)، أو محلية بعد تحقيق الاستقلال، وعملت فقط على تقديم وجهة النظر الواحدة: هي وجهة نظر السلطة/ الحكومة. ويعد البحث مراحل تطور الصحافة والإعلام (هي: السيطرة، النهوض، الاحتواء، الإغراق) تم تطويرها والتوصل إليها عبر توظيف النظرية النقدية التاريخية للاتصال (طورها هارولد انيس ومارشال ماكلوهان) التي تنص باختصار على أن الاتصال يؤثر على المجتمعات ويوجهها باتجاه مزيد من الليبرالية. وعلى هذا الأساس بدأت تلوح في الأفق منذ التسعينيات من القرن الماضي بشائر مرحلة خامسة، هي الشبه ليبرالية، التي جاءت مع الرقمنة: فعمل الإنترنت والرسائل التي حملتها على كسر احتكار وجهة النظر الواحدة الرسمية محدثة تغييرات ملموسة في نظام الإعلام والاتصال العربي. ونتيجة ذلك بدأت تتشكل قيم وتوجهات جديدة، الأمر الذي سبب إرباكات للحكومات، التي سرعان ما ردت باتخاذ إجراءات مضادة. لكن الرقمنة نجحت في المحصلة النهائية بقدم الربيع العربي.

الكلمات الدالة: الإعلام العربي، الرقمنة، تطور.

\* أستاذ، قسم الصحافة، جامعة اليرموك، الأردن.

تاريخ استلام البحث 2018/3/18، وتاريخ قبوله 2019/4/25.