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# PUTTING THE GENIE BACK IN THE BOTTLE: RULING REGIMES AND THE NEW MEDIA IN THE ARAB WORLD

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The rapid growth of satellite television and the internet has shaken Arab governments' traditional control over the media. This development has given unprecedented power to voices of dissent, both secular and religious. It has enabled popular participation in public debate and has given citizens the ability to mobilise mass protests. In the face of this threat to their authority, regimes have typically responded with heightened repression and censorship, in the name of stability. In some cases they have also attempted to co-opt the new media to their own advantage. However, Arab regimes are faced with competing demands: one the one hand they must ensure the take-up of communication technologies so as to keep pace with global change, but on the other hand they must limit the use of these technologies as a means of undermining regime control. In the long term, resolving this tension will only become more difficult; the genie is well and truly out of the bottle.*

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# PUTTING THE GENIE BACK IN THE BOTTLE: RULING REGIMES AND THE NEW MEDIA IN THE ARAB WORLD

The rise of the so-called 'new media' – chiefly satellite TV and the internet – has placed additional strains on Arab societies and brought new tensions to Arab politics. It has given unprecedented power to voices of dissent and, unsurprisingly, ruling regimes are fighting back. In 2008, Arab governments backed a proposed region-wide law to remove the licence of satellite TV operators if they defamed national leaders. Internet bloggers have been harassed, beaten up and gaoled by state security for publishing material offensive to the state. Recent years have seen some governments go on the front foot, launching their own satellite networks aimed at challenging the editorial line advanced by networks such as al-Jazeera.

This paper analyses the impact on Arab politics and society of the new media. In particular it brings to light some of the ways in which the internet and satellite television are increasingly working in combination to magnify each other's power. It also examines the way that Arab regimes are attempting to resist the new media's assault on their power and authority, while at the same time harnessing its power to develop their national economy.

## Satellite TV: relative freedom

From Damascus to Dubai, from Giza to Gaza, wherever you tread in the Middle East there's one thing you can't miss: the satellite dish. They have transformed the landscape, whether sprouting from crowded apartment blocks or perhaps standing singly in impoverished villages. If a home can't afford a dish, certainly the local coffee shop will. With millions of viewers and hundreds of channels, satellite television represents a vast potential for influence.

Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was the unlikely trigger for the proliferation of satellite television. For three days Saudi rulers kept the population in the dark about the potential threat to the Saudi state and the entry of American military forces into the country. Accustomed to absolute control over information, the ruling regime got a rude shock, however, when it discovered most people had already switched away from state-run television to CNN and knew perfectly well what was going on. An outside force, which recognised no border, had broken down the control of information and set the stage for an information (and entertainment) revolution.

Drawing on their massive oil wealth, the Saudi royal family and its friends sought to harness the power of this new medium. Saudis close to the royal family launched the Middle East Broadcasting Centre from London in 1991. Then, in 1993, came the Arab Radio and Television network (ART), founded by Saudi mogul, Saleh Abdallah Kamel. This was followed by another Saudi venture, Orbit TV.

By and large, the arrival of these new Saudi satellite networks did not dramatically change the nature of news coverage in the Arab world, though it did provide a welter of new entertainment and religious programming. It was not until 1996 that the most dramatic change in Arab media took place. The modernising Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani, used his deep pockets to launch the now iconic satellite TV station, Al Jazeera.

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For Arab audiences it was a groundbreaking development. Al Jazeera was a news-driven channel and its style of reporting marked a departure from state-controlled television's steady diet of protocol news, whereby the leaders' daily meetings and even important phone calls were reported in careful detail. By contrast, al-Jazeera covered stories considered too controversial for state-run television. It developed the format of live on-air discussion which brought unprecedented criticism of Arab rulers. It covered key topics in the Arab world in a new and more pluralist fashion, giving, for example, Islamists the chance to debate their secular critics on live television. It became compulsory viewing during seismic events such as the second Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) in 2000, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In 2003 Saudi Arabia – an occasional target of some of al-Jazeera's more provocative programs – launched its own answer to the Qatari network, al-Arabiya (albeit privately owned by the MBC network). Like Al Jazeera, it was a slick operation with a large network of news correspondents, but its news agenda has never been as provocative as its Qatari rival.

It hasn't just been wealthy Gulf states getting into the satellite television act. In 2000 the Lebanese Shi'ite movement, Hizballah, launched its Al Manar (The Beacon) satellite station. From 1991 Al Manar was a terrestrial station operating for five hours a day to an audience primarily in Beirut. The move to a satellite platform, with Iranian funding, brought Al Manar a global viewing audience estimated in 2004 to be over 10 million people. In Iraq, sectarian groups launched their own shoestring operations following the US-led invasion of 2003. Sunni militants set up the Al Zawra station which broadcast a steady diet of US air strikes, all set to recitations of the Qur'an.

Foreign-backed satellite networks have also moved into the market. The United States administration funded the establishment of Al-Iraqiyya (The Iraqi) satellite channel in 2003 as part of its battle to win hearts and minds in Iraq. In 2004 the US State Department-backed Al Hurra (the Free One) was launched to expose Arabs to the virtues of democracy as part of the so-called 'War on Terror'. In 2008 the BBC launched its own Arabic satellite channel, capitalising on a 70-year presence in the region through its radio service. The BBC's Head of Arabic services, Hosam Al Sokkari, says the move was a recognition that satellite television was now the 'platform of choice' for the region.[1]

Fifteen years on the Middle East satellite television scene is bursting at the seams. Its potential viewing audience of around 300 million can choose from hundreds of Arabic and foreign language channels, carrying everything from movies to sport to religion to pornography.

Viewer numbers are difficult to tie down. However one authoritative source, the 2008 Arab Public Opinion Survey, conducted jointly by the University of Maryland and Zogby International, has estimated that across the Arab world, a clear majority (53%) of viewers turn to Al Jazeera for news.[2] Next come the big Egyptian networks (aggregated total of 17%), followed by Saudi Arabia's Al Arabiya (9%) and another Saudi channel, MBC (7%). The same survey reveals marked local

variations. In Lebanon, Al Manar channel has a viewing audience of 38% with Al Jazeera dropping to 13%. In Jordan, Al Arabiya has higher than average influence with 31% of the audience, compared to Al Jazeera's 46%.

Al Jazeera, more so than the rest, has had a profound social and political impact. It has challenged restrictions and self censorship that prevented open criticism of leaders and it has permitted lively debate of many contentious issues. It has also had important ripple effects on journalism in the Arab world. It has forced state-run media to move, albeit very slowly, into areas which were once taboo.

Jordan's Princess Rym Ali, a former CNN correspondent who is establishing an academy to train Arab journalists, suggests the impact of Al Jazeera and others has placed pressure on State-owned television stations to compete with the new style of reporting. [3] At the same time, she says, they resist drastic change. 'This is mainly due to the fact that their management and staff are reluctant, and sometimes inept, to adapt to the required professional standards and believe that information can still be controlled nowadays', she told the writer.

Nevertheless, even Al Jazeera, with its apparently fearsome independence, has its limits and no-go areas, principally anything which would reflect badly on Qatar and its rulers. It has, for example, contributed little to the reporting of one of the most contentious domestic issues in many of the Gulf States – the rights of often poorly treated and poorly paid guest workers that live in these countries in their tens of thousands. Another prominent example is the way that al-Jazeera has toned down its criticism of the Saudi monarchy following a thaw in Saudi-Qatari relations in 2007. There is also a danger in overestimating the impact of satellite television alone in changing the political map of the Middle East. As one veteran Egyptian journalist put it to the writer: 'The regimes don't change because of Al Jazeera or CNN'.[4]

## The internet and the rise of the blogger

While satellite television dominates the new media scene in terms of audience reach, the internet is the medium which has the greatest potential capacity to undermine the authority of Arab regimes. The countries of the Middle East have only limited to moderate access to the internet (see Table 1), yet internet activists in the areas of human rights, democracy and religion have already become a potent force.[5]

While the small gulf state of Qatar has dominated the satellite television story, it is Egypt where the most important regional developments have taken place as far as the internet is concerned. Although Egypt lies near the bottom of the regional rankings in terms of *percentage* of internet penetration, its huge population of close to 80 million means that *in absolute terms* it has the highest number of internet users in the Arab world.[6] Its figure of 8.5 million internet users is double the entire population of Lebanon. It is also three times the number of internet users than in the United Arab Emirates, which is at the top of the list of Arab countries in terms of the proportion of population using the net.

Politically, Egypt has been described, in somewhat contradictory terms, as a liberal autocracy.[7] On the one hand, the ruling regime

has maintained a state of emergency for close to a quarter of a century. This has been justified largely on the basis of the political challenge posed by Islamists to the regime, yet the powers associated with the State of Emergency have also been used to suppress secular and liberal oppositionists. On the other hand, the regime has allowed some space for limited political activity (including for mainstream Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood). Thus, when it comes to censoring the internet, either by design or by default, it has not been as fiercely oppressive as other states such as Syria which has banned a number of uses of the internet altogether.

The result has been the emergence of a vibrant and influential community of bloggers in Egypt, who have embraced the internet as a way of expressing themselves on everything from politics, religion and society to the more mundane topics one would find on blogs in the West. A 2008 Egyptian government study estimates there are 80,000 active blogs in the country.[8] The same report estimates that 10% of these blogs are read by 50,000 people or more. This is roughly the same number who read one of Egypt's national daily newspapers, Al Masry al Youm.

**2004: the year of blogging dangerously**

If the rise of satellite television can be dated to 1996, with the launch of Al Jazeera, the rise of the internet as a vehicle for challenging the established political and social order can be dated to 2004. This was the start of the so-called Arab Spring, the year of gathering discontent which manifested itself in street demonstrations in Cairo.

The internet assumed a powerful role as a medium for citizen-initiated political action, led by young Egyptian bloggers like Wael Abbas, who chose the year of protest to reveal his identity after a decade of blogging anonymously.[9] He says the move to 'come out' gave him more credibility and more power. Ironically, it was the Al Jazeera satellite network – and Abbas' dissatisfaction with its coverage of events in Cairo – which he says pushed him to be more strident and to start blogging under his own name.

Abbas uses the internet to campaign for human rights and what he calls 'Egyptian democracy'. He has called his blog 'Egyptian Awareness' because, he says, he wants people to be able to make their own choices based on an awareness of the truth. This, he says, must occur before any move to democratic change.

Another prominent Egyptian blogger, 26 year old Alaa Abd al Fattah, is also driven by a desire to bring a form of democracy to Egypt. He too was active during campaigns run by the so-called Kefaya (in Arabic 'enough') movement in the run-up to Egypt's first multi-candidate Presidential elections in 2005. Abd al Fattah is a software specialist and sees his primary role as giving other people the tools to express themselves through their own blogs.[10]

Beyond the 2004/05 protests, blogging campaigns have contributed to other major protests such as the 2006 judiciary demonstrations in Cairo, (as a result of which abd al Fattah was gaoled for 45 days) and a 2007 textile workers strike in the city of Mahalla, which erupted into violence between strikers and Egyptian security forces.

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Bloggers like Wael Abbas and Alaa abd al Fattah have focused on revealing injustices perpetrated by the state. They have also used their blogs to expose everyday actions against citizens, such as police torture, sexual harassment of women in the streets or official corruption. Their coverage of these issues has been nimble and hard-hitting. In Australia a blogger might more likely than not be blowing off a bit of steam about the world. In Egypt, bloggers are at the frontline of journalism, using their ability to move around and to rapidly post information as it comes to hand.

Indeed, as self-styled 'citizen journalists' they have had greater impact than their professional journalist peers. This is partly because they are free of the shackles of the traditional media which will in most cases have business or political party links to the ruling regime. As well, as Jordan's Princess Rym Ali pointed out to this author, journalism has traditionally been a low-prestige job in the Arab world.[11] The best and brightest go on to engineering or medicine.

Compared to satellite television journalists, bloggers are harder to stop. Satellite television stations are subject to a range of restrictions at the hands of the State. Bloggers on the other hand can continue to work in numbers and to remain elusive. 'Traditional TV and newspapers didn't think about how to tell the story to ordinary people', Abd al Fattah says.[12] 'Blogs have shown them how, for example by making judges (targeted by the Mubarak regime in 2006) heroic people.'

Abd al Fattah argues that, despite the relatively low level of penetration of the internet in Egyptian society, the internet – often combined with mobile phone text messaging – has helped generate civil action and broadened the audience for small, elite movements like Kefaya as well as larger movements like labour unions. 'There are now factory workers who blog and use mobile phones to mobilise protests', he says. Al Fattah also believes bloggers have changed the boundaries for traditional journalists, by making them hungrier to chase a story, and that they've given traditional journalists the leverage to cover stories which were once off limits, 'because everyone is talking about it'.

Integral to the impact of the bloggers has been the power of the picture, either photographs or video. Blogs have arguably been most effective when they post pictures taken on mobile phones, pictures which in earlier days would never have been taken, let alone seen the light of day. In the blogosphere, these pictures have indeed been worth a thousand words. They represent undeniable evidence. Importantly, they are fodder for the mass medium of television.

**Facebook: a community of activists**

If blogs have been the domain of the lone wolf, then social networking internet sites have allowed activists to hunt in packs. In particular, sites like Facebook have enabled widespread citizen participation in the political process. Importantly they have given dissenters the ability to gather their forces secretly and to do this on a very large scale. In combination with the mobile phone, this has permitted protestors to alert each other quickly on changes in tactics or the moves of security forces. As a result internet protestors have

gained a significant tactical edge over old-style protest movements which have had to run the gauntlet of state security services as they organise public gatherings.

The most dramatic use of Facebook came in 2007 when a young Egyptian woman, Israa abd al Fattah, gathered 70,000 members on her site to plan a strike in the Nile Delta city of Mahalla Al Kubra. It was the largest public protest ever organised in Egypt. The action caught Egypt's security apparatus unawares and it rocked a government accustomed to total control over dissenters. The security forces responded ferociously, arresting Israa abd al Fattah and 500 protesters. Her actions made her famous as 'The Facebook Girl', but she was an accidental hero. The young Cairo office worker had never before ventured into the world of political protest and it seems her extraordinary success surprised even her. Having been arrested and briefly gaoled she has reportedly decided against any more actions.

Not so Ahmad Maher, a 27 year old civil engineer whose use of Facebook has seen him arrested and beaten by Egypt's security forces. In contrast to Israa abd al Fattah, he is determined to keep going. Ahmad Maher has described in an interview how he was picked up by Egyptian Interior Ministry officials while walking along a Cairo street, blindfolded and taken to a local police station where he was beaten.[13] According to Maher, the officers wanted him to surrender the password to the so-called May 4 Facebook group which media reports said he had started in order to support a general strike timed for the birthday of Egypt's President, Hosni Mubarak.

When the writer spoke to him he had just been released after spending seven days in gaol after being seized again, this time from the streets of Alexandria along with other 'opposition' bloggers. Despite this random arrest and though he still bears the scars of torture at the hands of the security services, Maher says he and others would continue. For Ahmed Maher Facebook has one decisive advantage over blogging: thousands of people can be together at the same moment. 'It is impossible otherwise', he says.[14]

## A snowballing effect: blogs and satellite TV

The two major strands of the new media, satellite television and the internet, may have developed separately, but increasingly they are working together in ways which add enormously to their power. Each acts to the benefit of the other. The internet has high impact, but low penetration. Satellite television, on the other hand, has high penetration, but a relatively low impact as a medium of social protest. Together, though, the two media multiply each other's impact. Add to that enhanced mobile phone capabilities, and the new media represents a potentially powerful combined force.

This technological force has led to the forging of new, informal alliances on the ground between professional journalists and blogger journalists who know that collaboration can bring results they could not hope to achieve working separately.

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Blogger Alaa abd al Fattah has told the writer that it is common for Arab satellite television reporters and bloggers to have each others' mobile phone numbers.[15] He also cites a backdoor tactic used by state-employed journalists to get a delicate story into the public domain: the journalist will leak a story to a blogger so that he/she can then report on it for his/her newspaper after it has become public.

At the same time, the internet can change the character of television, turning it from a passive to an interactive medium. A case in point is the prolonged textile workers' strike in Mahalla in 2007. While security forces restricted Al Jazeera's cameras from moving into certain conflict areas, bloggers with their mobile phone cameras were busy capturing the behind the scenes mayhem and posting the pictures onto YouTube. They were then able to refer to these postings in their live interviews with satellite TV networks, giving viewers the ability to log on and see the pictures for themselves.

**The Emad Al Kabir case: the new media join forces**

One of the best examples of how the different strands of the new media work together to produce a powerful outcome is the case of a young Cairo man, Emad al Kabir. Blogger, Wael Abbas, led the effort to expose the case when he posted horrifying video of al Kabir being tortured in police custody. His move led to the rare conviction and gaoling of Egyptian security officials.

The video, which was captured on a mobile phone, showed the 21 year old minibus driver lying on the floor of a police station screaming in agony as officers sodomised him with a wooden pole. Al Kabir is heard crying for mercy on the video. 'Forgive me', he screams. The black boots of policemen are seen around him, kicking his bound hands to prevent him from protecting his naked buttocks. It emerged that the police themselves had made the video and sent it to the mobile phones of Kabir's friends and colleagues to humiliate him.

The police torture happened in January 2006 but only saw the light of day ten months later, in November 2006, when Wael Abbas posted it on YouTube, linked to his blog site. The video on Wael Abbas' site was followed up by the independent weekly newspaper, Al Fajr, which found the young Egyptian man who was tortured in the video. Emad al Kabir agreed to be interviewed: a brave step given the stigma which surrounds sodomy in Egypt's masculine culture.

The widespread publicity caused an uproar in Egypt where police torture is common, but officially denied. However, the video on Wael Abbas' website was incontrovertible proof. The two police involved in the torture were charged and, twelve months after Wael Abbas posted the video, they were convicted and sentenced to three years in prison.

The Emad al Kabir torture episode illustrates both the power and the limitations of the internet as medium for political change. Without Wael Abbas' blog and the existence of YouTube on the internet, the story would never have seen the light of day. But without the enormous reach of the traditional print and satellite broadcast media, the story might not have gathered momentum across Egypt and the Arab world.

Wael Abbas points to the uneven and at times unjust relationship between bloggers and the mainstream media. 'The video first has to go on the internet. If it is controversial that will force the newspapers and the television stations to act. They are looking for a juicy story. But the traditional and professional newspapers and TV will never put that to air first.'[16]

Wael Abbas says he was told that those who gave him the police torture video tried to give the material to newspapers, but they wouldn't take it. 'Newspapers and traditional television want someone else to take the cannon fire first. Their attitude is if someone is going to go to gaol let it be the blogger', he says.

The Al Kabir case was not the first time Wael Abbas had posted video of police torture on the internet but on this occasion there was a unique combination of factors which forced the state to act. Timing was one issue: the video came after the Arab world had seen photographs of US guards torturing Iraqis in Abu Ghraib prison. Wael Abbas believes people were shocked to see Egyptian police doing the same thing to another Egyptian. This brought into play another factor vital to the success of Wael Abbas' posting: on this occasion he was supported, rather than attacked, by the mass consumption newspapers and television which are run by or are closely linked to the government.

Wael Abbas recalls another instance when he posted video of a young woman being slapped by an Egyptian police officer. 'The traditional media attacked the authenticity of the video and attacked my credibility', he says. 'They are always under pressure from Egyptian security. They say there is a member of the police force in every family, and that they are good people.'

## A new power for religion

While Western observers focus on the democratising possibilities of the new media, for the Arab world an equal or greater issue is the power of the new media to spread religious messages. Frequently, as in the case of the case of the popular internet site, Islamonline, the new media act simply as a vehicle for typically young Muslims to seek Islamic guidance on matters of everyday life. Yet it has also provided Islamists with a very effective medium to spread their more politically-minded message.

The Muslim Brotherhood has a sophisticated web presence, in English and in Arabic, with sites which bring together text, pictures and audiovisual material. And like their secular dissident counterparts, Muslim Brotherhood bloggers have used video and the power of first person stories to great effect, especially to campaign for the release of imprisoned members. At times the Egyptian government has blocked access to the Muslim Brotherhood's main website – and in response the Muslim Brotherhood has decentralised its internet presence with members setting up individual sites and blogs.

Yet, almost as it is for the regime that they oppose, the internet is both an opportunity and challenge for the Brotherhood's leadership. As Brotherhood expert, Khalil al-Anani, has noted, the internet has also had an impact on the internal dynamics of the organisation.[17] For the first time it has given younger members a

platform to publicly question the direction of the organisation, a major break with tradition for a strictly hierarchical organisation.

**Amre Khaled : new media superstar**

While the new media have given Islamist groups a new outlet for their message, nothing parallels the power which satellite television and the internet have delivered to Egyptian-born Islamic preacher, Amre Khaled. A virtual unknown in the West, Khaled is the original new media superstar of the Arab world. His extraordinary rise could not have happened without the new media, which enabled him to defeat a government ban and spread his message across national borders to his millions of predominantly young followers.

Khaled rose to prominence in his native Egypt where followers would line the streets to hear his talks. By 2003, Khaled's immense popularity saw him run foul of the Egyptian regime which felt threatened by his enormous following. The Egyptian government was concerned that Khaled was a wolf in sheep's clothing: that he was, despite his denials, merely another manifestation of the banned Muslim Brotherhood. As a result, the government barred Khaled from holding public meetings in Egypt.

In response Khaled left Egypt and today lives between Lebanon and the United Kingdom. Nevertheless his program on the Saudi-backed religious satellite television network Iqraa has enabled him to speak to his followers with impunity, not only in Egypt but across the Arab world.

Linked to his satellite programme, Khaled established what has become arguably the Arab world's most powerful website, www.amrekhaled.net, a multimedia, interactive site which publishes his thoughts and speeches in 18 different languages. This has been augmented by an Amre Khaled mobile phone news alert service and an Amre Khaled Facebook site. The new media have given him a channel directly to his key demographic: 15 to 30 year old, educated, middle class Muslims. They are not only computer literate but are also precisely the group that Khaled believes will one day have the power to change Arab societies.

In other respects, too, the new media is the perfect vehicle for Khaled's message. It fits his image as a modern, forward-thinking preacher. The internet's interactive features enable his young followers to be participants in teachings, rather than mere recipients as demanded in the traditional mosque setting. Online 'chats' are conducted in the informal language of the streets, rather than the stilted language of the mosque.

When the writer met and interviewed Khaled in Cairo in 2006, he was a man well aware of his power. To demonstrate his success, he produced a tastefully designed Amr Khaled Annual Report which included a series of corporate graphs and pie charts illustrating his growing influence. His proudest boast was a graph showing the number of hits on the www.amrekhaled.net website soaring far and beyond the hits for the website of US talkshow queen, Oprah Winfrey.

In partnership with the new media, Amre Khaled has carved a distinctive niche for

himself in the Muslim Arab world. Like many Islamic leaders Khaled has tapped into the widespread disaffection of Arab youth who feel left behind by globalisation. He has warned them they must not fall prey to self-pity and has encouraged them to follow the path of Islam to rejuvenate their lives.

The clear subtext to his message is that secular Arab regimes which have been propped up by the West have been complicit in a degradation of life for Muslims. The power he has to spread that message across borders and into the living rooms of Arab homes has made Khaled a force that cannot be ignored. Some Arab governments have coped with the new media power of Amre Khaled by co-opting him to their own causes, typically seeking the Khaled stamp of approval for social improvement programs. The Dubai Police Department, for example, has included Khaled in its efforts to educate young Muslims about the dangers of drugs.

The Amre Khaled case is an example of the new reality which is confronting Arab regimes because of the advent of the new media. Egypt's decision to ban Khaled from preaching in person has only created a larger, regional phenomenon and arguably only increased Khaled's power and standing among young Egyptians. However, Egypt's actions have succeeded, at least in the short term: Khaled is not attracting tens of thousands of young followers to rallies in Egypt and to this extent is not a visible threat to the regime.

## Regime responses to the new media

Arab regimes have responded to the new media with a variety of predominantly punitive actions as they have sought to protect their position of power. Saudi Arabia, for example, has responded to the unpredictability of live phone-ins to television shows by simply banning the practice.

Satellite television operators are vulnerable to the whims of Arab governments and their security forces and so are forced to tread a careful path. Governments and their security forces have a number of direct methods at their disposal to simply halt activities they don't like. These include arresting a reporter, banning cameras from sensitive areas, closing down a bureau and revoking an operator's licence.

All these have happened across the Arab world. Al Jazeera's bureaus have been closed in 18 countries, including Sudan, Somalia, Iraq, Kuwait and Jordan (the last, after a Syrian commentator criticised the Hashemite Kingdom over its peace deal with Israel, calling Jordan 'an artificial entity populated by a bunch of Bedouins'). In June Egypt shut down the Cairo office of Iranian state-owned Arabic television channel, Al Alam, weeks after Egypt officially complained to Iran about an Iranian documentary highly critical of former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

Governments can also act more indirectly (but just as effectively) by punishing a third party linked to a broadcaster. This occurred in Cairo in 2008 when the owner of Egypt's largest independent satellite broadcasting firm, Cairo News Co (CNC), was charged with violating an anachronistic law. CNC's owner, Nader

Gohar, has little doubt he was being punished because of the activities of Al Jazeera which uses CNC's facilities to beam its signals back to Doha.[18]

## No dish, no program

Potentially the most serious problem for broadcasters is that Arab governments have the ability to simply pull the plug on a network. The biggest satellite carrier in the region, Arabsat, which is host to hundreds of satellite channels, including Al Jazeera, is under the effective control of Saudi Arabia. Another major satellite company, Nilesat, is majority owned by the Egyptian government. It, too, carries the signals of hundreds of satellite TV stations.

In theory, this gives Egypt and Saudi Arabia enormous power as the owners of the means of transmission, though in practice they have so far backed away from using this power. An exception was early in 2008 when the Egyptian state-owned Nilesat dropped a London-based satellite station, Al Hiwar, which was seen as sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood, the main opposition to the Mubarak regime.

The rumblings of regime discontent surrounding satellite television came to a head in early 2008. Led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia (the two principal owners of the satellite platforms), nearly all of the Arab League's 22 member countries backed a new charter which would give states the power to close down satellite stations whose broadcasts contravened the new rules. Qatar and Lebanon were the only two states not to back the move.

The new charter was the first official region-wide attempt to bring to heel the unruly airwaves, but it was immediately denounced by human rights and democracy activists as a means of muzzling criticism of Arab leaders. The Charter included a clause requiring satellite TV broadcasters not to offend the leaders of the Arab world or national and religious symbols. It also made it mandatory for satellite channels to conform to the religious and ethical values of Arab society and take account of its family structure.

The document contained provisions for Arab governments to withdraw the work permits of media which break the regulations.

So what does the move mean? Egyptian-born democracy and human rights advocate, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, has acidly asked why the Arab Information ministers felt the need to convene an emergency meeting over the regulations. 'So what's the emergency?' he asked. 'The truth of the matter is that the Arab public space is getting out of the control of Egyptian and Arab regimes."[19]

The obvious reading of the charter is that it is almost entirely aimed at Al Jazeera. The satellite station, in turn, has rejected the Charter outright on the grounds that it is a risk to freedom of expression in the Arab world. It has warned that parts of the document are ambiguous and could be interpreted to 'actively hinder independent reporting.'[20] Ibrahim Helal, Deputy Managing Director for Al Jazeera's English channel and formerly of Al Jazeera Arabic, has also suggested that the United States had influenced its Middle Eastern friends, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to move against Al Jazeera.[21] The Bush Administration

has long been critical of the Al Jazeera network, particularly over its preparedness to broadcast messages by groups such as Al Qaeda.

The man in the eye of the storm has been the head of Journalism and Communications at the American University in Cairo (AUC), Professor Hussein Amin, who was a lead writer of the Charter. Dr Amin is the head of the most powerful and progressive journalism department in the Arab world, a place which is home to lively academic debate on freedom of expression questions. At the same time he is also a member of the Egyptian government body which oversees radio and television broadcasting, the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU).

In the face of attack from various sources, including AUC colleagues, Hussein Amin[22] insists the Charter has been misunderstood. He maintains the Arab world's burgeoning satellite television sphere was badly in need of regulation and that any regulations affecting the Middle East must recognise that the region has different concerns to the West and must be 'tougher' because of that. His key concerns were that satellite television, unregulated, might continue to promote violence, terrorism and religious hatred, especially between Christians and Muslims.

'There is a law for the press and it has only has about 5 million readers a day tops, while satellite TV has no regulation and you see the hate coming out', Professor Amin told the writer.[23] He said it was important to ensure that as Egypt and the rest of the Arab world moved into the digital age, the multi-channel platforms don't fall into the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Charter's critics concede the need for regulation, but they question the means and the real aims. The BBC's Head of Arabic Services, Hosam Al Sokkari, agrees it is necessary to address issues such as the boundary between advertising and content, as well as a classification system of programs to protect children.[24] However he describes the Charter as a 'nervous reaction' to some aspects of expression that governments aren't used to. 'It was a mish-mash of ideas', he says. 'I spoke to several information ministers and they all understood it differently. The religious content issue is interesting and needs to be in the context of legislation. There needs to be a legal argument to define what it "incitement to hatred". I'm not sure that the Charter addresses that clearly.'

Jordan's Princess Rym Ali describes the Charter as an unfortunate step backwards.[25] 'It also seems to me to be quite a desperate move and not fully in sync with today's technology, when you realise how impossible it will be very soon to prevent any information from coming up anywhere'," she said. In Princess Rym's view, a charter is the wrong place to address questions of incitement to violence and the spread religious hatred. In her view these issues needed to be addressed at a broader social level and in the education system.

Even the relatively freewheeling Al Jazeera network concedes the need for some form of regulation, in the face of the ability of some satellite broadcasters to fan hatred across borders or to become a mouthpiece for violence on behalf of different sects, especially in Iraq.

However, it believes the industry should regulate itself, rather then be subject to an edict from Arab information ministers.

The Charter is non-binding on member states, but the amount of backing it has received does appear to represent a threat to free expression. At the very least, the Charter's sanctions are likely to create a pressure for Arab journalists to censor themselves lest they be gaoled and/or lose their livelihood on the whim of a government. And though the charter is designed for satellite television, already there is the possibility, flagged in Egypt's Al Massri Al Youm newspaper, that its provisions will be applied to all electronic platforms, including the internet and the mobile phone.[26]

## Regime responses to the internet: a pattern of repression

Most of the Middle East and Gulf governments impose a form of censorship on the internet, for religious, political or 'social good' reasons. Arab governments are regularly rated by human rights and democracy organisations as being among the worst offenders in terms of censorship of the net, with Syria routinely near the top of the list of repressive regimes.

In a 2008 report, the international media freedom organisation, Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF) notes the dual track policy of Syria's Assad government: it has encouraged use of the internet with pricing and competition policies, leading to a 40-fold increase in internet users from 2004; but at the same time, Syria has imposed draconian restrictions.[27] RSF notes that the state uses an internet filtering system called Thundercache to monitor content and to prevent downloading of video files. Hugely popular social networking and communication websites, such as Skype, Facebook, YouTube and Amazon are banned. Setting up a blog is also made difficult with an official ban on Blogspot, a blog platform which is owned by Google.

Along with Syria, RSF has included Saudi Arabia and Egypt in its list of 'Internet enemies'. In Saudi, the government has established an official internet filtering agency, operated by the King Abdulazziz City for Science and Technology, to fight 'terrorism, fraud, pornography, defamation' and 'violation of Islamic tradition'. Elsewhere in the region, RSF lists Bahrain, Jordan and the UAE as 'countries under surveillance' because they have either thrown bloggers into prison or imposed censorship on sites.

## Crime and punishment

Apart from censorship, Arab governments have resorted to traditional approaches such as arrest, beatings, harassment and prison to halt internet dissent. In Saudi Arabia, where political parties and public gatherings are banned, 32 year old blogger Fouad al Farhan was arrested and detained for four months without charge at the beginning of 2008. His crime was to criticise government corruption and advocate political reform. There have been similar cases in Bahrain, Syria, Morocco and Tunisia.

A large number of Egyptian bloggers, both secular and religious, have been arrested by security services and detained for days or months at a time. Of those who have been

charged and convicted, the toughest sentence was handed out to Abdel Karim Suleiman, who was given four years in prison in early 2007 – three years for blog posts that insulted Islam and one year for writings that defamed President Hosni Mubarak. Egypt has employed other tactics to target individuals:

*Character assassination*: Blogger Wael Abbas found himself publicly accused of being a homosexual, a Christian, a man with a criminal record and an agent of US/Israeli influence, when none of the above were true.

*Surveillance of internet users:* There are plenty of internet cafes where access to the net is cheap, only one Egyptian pound (about 25 Australian cents) for one hour. However, the Ministry of Interior monitors who uses internet cafes, with all visitors required to produce identification, which is recorded by the cafe owner. Those wanting a wi-fi connection must buy a scratch card and give their name and mobile phone number.

As noted earlier, the Egyptian government is contemplating a set of apparently draconian laws, modeled on the Arab Charter for Satellite Television, which would give authorities sweeping powers. The laws would require people to have a licence to transmit any words or pictures on the internet or by mobile phone. Technically this would include even a text message. Failure to obtain a licence would be punishable by up to two years in prison and/or a fine of more than AUD$10,000.[28]

Bloggers are scornful of the new law and see it as unworkable. However, they concede that it may make life more difficult for them, even if it is only part implemented. The likely result is a game of cat and mouse as bloggers find ways around any new laws. They could be forced to be anonymous, use encryption, use proxies outside Egypt or resort to fake names.

American University of Cairo Professor, Hussein Amin, who had a lead role in drafting the laws, insists they are not designed to stop political blogging.[29] Nor, he says, are the laws aimed at censoring the internet. He defends the laws he's helped draft on the grounds that while Egypt has a Press Law, it has no regulation at all of the internet. 'You can look at what England has. Australia has to police the internet. In Egypt we have nothing and we need some regulations. This is a measure of security', he said.

The question, though, is: security at what cost? It's a critical question which Arab governments are increasingly forced to face.

As Table 1 shows, there has been a huge rate of growth in internet connectedness. In some Arab countries the number of those having access to the internet has trebled between 2002 and 2007.[30] At one level, this high rate of growth, albeit from a low level, reflects governmental awareness of a national development imperative to expand access to the internet to ensure their countries keep in touch with the digital revolution.

This means Arab governments are confronted with a vexing question when it comes to the new power of the internet. On the one hand they must expand the reach of the internet to keep pace with global change. On the other hand, the greater the reach of the internet, the greater its capacity to connect like-minded people who would like to get rid of their

regimes. The risk, as highlighted by the Egyptian blogger, Alaa abd al Fattah, is that government restrictions on the use of the internet in the interests of 'a measure of security' might serve to isolate important sectors of Arab society from advances in the rest of the world.[31]

In this context, abd al Fattah points to Iran, which has the highest percentage of internet subscribers (23%) in the Islamic Middle East. There the Ahmedinejad administration has responded to increasing dissent on the internet by escalating its repression of critics and ramping up its filtering and surveillance of the internet to the point where citizens are prohibited from accessing websites ranging from academic and social-networking sites to computer technology sites, especially those which relate to anti-filtering programs. The move might make the net more secure, but at the cost of impeding academic engagement with the outside the world.

The dilemma facing Arab governments is made all the more pressing by other developments. First, there is a disproportionate number of young people in Arab societies, a so-called youth bubble, with 60% of the Middle East population under the age of 25. This creates the prospect of a large class of unemployed, well-educated young people who are net-savvy and accustomed to using the internet as a place to express their opinion.

Second, there is a generation of younger people in the Arab world growing up with a new reality: through sites like Facebook they can participate in shaping decisions which affect their lives. AUC Professor, Dr Hussein Amin, cites a recent case of Egyptian students who used Facebook to organise action against their headmaster, a groundbreaking development in a society marked by paternalism.[32] The same school-aged children are growing up with the reality that with little or no money it is possible to start a site which might attract popular support for a cause.

Third, developments in technology will likely make the new media an even more powerful tool for citizens. The BBC's head of Arabic Services, Hosam Al Sokkari, predicts that the blurring of the borders between television and computers will produce 'a purely visual experience', which links both platforms.[33] 'In the future we'll be talking about all media, not new versus old. It will produce a consistent information environment and it will be easier for journalists to move from one platform to another.' This, Al Sokkari suggests, will produce a stronger flow between the media and will mean a stronger impact.

## Conclusion

In the space of little over a decade, satellite television and the internet have introduced remarkable change to the dynamic of Arab politics. Who would have imagined 10 years ago that a citizen-initiated action could lead to the gaoling of Egyptian police? Or that 70,000 people could be mobilised to protest against the government? The new media have therefore already forced a degree of accountability. They have empowered citizens to act. Most crucially, the new media have stimulated a degree of citizen participation in politically moribund, autocratic states.

## PUTTING THE GENIE BACK IN THE BOTTLE: RULING REGIMES AND THE NEW MEDIA IN THE ARAB WORLD

The new media has thrown down a major challenge to many Arab governments: how to exploit the internet and modern telecommunications in the interests of economic and social development, while at the same time limiting its use as a vehicle for organised dissent. In the short term the result is likely to be more of what we have already seen; a twin track response where Arab government will open e-portals and on-line newspapers while their security forces chase, harrass and arrest on-line dissenters.

Longer term, however, such an approach is likely to prove less sustainable. As the leading Egyptian blogger, Alaa abd al Fatah, has declared to the writer: 'The genie's out of the bottle.' But it is not just that Arab regimes will struggle to return the new media genie to its bottle; the question they face is whether they can afford to.

### NOTES

[1] Telephone interview with Hosam Al Sokkari in London, 27 August 2008.

[2] 2008 Annual Arab Public Opinion poll, Survey of the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland (with Zogby International). Survey conducted 28 March in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Sample size 4,046.

[3] Written response to questions and telephone interview with HRH Princess Rym Ali in Jordan, 29 September 2008.

[4] Telephone interview with contact (name withheld) in London, 22 July 2008.

[5] International Telecommunication Union report, 2007: www.itu.int.

[6] ITU report, 2007.

[7] See Daniel Brumberg, Islam is not the solution (or the problem). *The Washington Quarterly* 29 (1) Winter 2005-06 pp 97-116.

[8] In Arabic: http://www.idsc.gov.eg/upload/media/news/113/blogs%20final-2.pdf.

[9] Telephone interview with Wael Abbas, in Cairo, 18 July 2008.

[10] Telephone interview with Alaa abd al Fattah, in Cairo, 16 July 2008.

[11] Written response to questions and telephone interview with HRH Princess Rym Ali of Jordan, 29 September 2008.

[12] Telephone interview with Alaa abd al Fattah, in Cairo, 16 July 2008.

[13] Telephone interview with Ahmad Maher, in Alexandria, 4 August 2008.

[14] Telephone interview with Ahmad Maher, in Alexandria, 4 August 2008.

[15] Telephone interview with Alaa abd al Fattah, in Cairo, 16 July 2008.

[16] Telephone interview with Wael Abbas, in Cairo, 18 July 2008.

[17] Brotherhood Bloggers: A new generation voices dissent, pp 29-37, *On-line Islam*: www.arabinsight.org.

[18] Human Rights Watch, News 23 May 2008: http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/05/23/egypt-satellite-company-punished-protest-footage.

[19] Speaking at Brookings Doha Centre event, Forward or Backward? The 2008 Arab Satellite TV Charter and the Future of Arab Media, Society and Democracy, 17 March 2008: www.brookings.edu/events/2008/0317_arab_media.aspx.

[20] Statement issued by Wadah Khanfar, Director-General, Al Jazeera, February 15 2008, as reported by Al Jazeera English: http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2008/02/2008525142914447849.html.

[21] Also speaking at Brookings Doha Centre, 17 March 2008.
[22] Telephone interview with Professor Hussein Amin, in Cairo, 8 August 2008.
[23] Telephone interview with Professor Hussein Amin, in Cairo, 8 August 2008
[24] Telephone interview with Hosam Al Sokkari, in London, 27 August 2008.
[25] Written response to questions and telephone interview with HRH Princess Rym Ali in Jordan, 29 September 2008.
[26] www.almasry-alyoum.com, 10 June 2008.
[27] www.rsf.org.
[28] www.almasry-alyoum.com, 10 June 2008.
[29] Telephone interview with Professor Hussein Amin, in Cairo, 8 August 2008.
[30] International Telecommunication Union report, 2007: www.itu.int.
[31] Telephone interview with Alaa abd al Fattah, in Cairo, 16 July 2008.
[32] Telephone interview with Professor Hussein Amin, in Cairo, 8 August 2008.
[33] Telephone interview with Hosam Al Sokkari, in London, 27 August 2008.

**TABLE 1.** Internet usage figures – ITU (International Telecommunication Union)

2007

| | Subscribers per 100 | Users per 100 | Broadband subscribers per 100 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Egypt | 3.51 | 13.95 | 0.63 |
| Libya | 1.38 | 4.36 | 0.16 |
| Morocco | 1.55 | 23.38 | 1.53 |
| Bahrain | 9.15 | 33.22 | 9.07 |
| Iran | … | 32.3 | … |
| Iraq | 0.06 | 0.19 | … |
| Israel | 27.6 | 28.9 | 22.06 |
| Jordan | 3.8 | 19.02 | 1.55 |
| Kuwait | 10.54 | 31.57 | 0.9 |
| Lebanon | 8.58 | 26.28 | 5.3 |
| Oman | 2.71 | 11.6 | 0.7 |
| Palestine | 3.2 | 9.5 | 1.5 |
| Qatar | 10.34 | 41.75 | 8.37 |
| Saudi | 7.14 | 25.1 | 2.4 |
| Syria | 3.49 | 17.4 | 0.04 |
| UAE | 20.46 | 52.5 | 5.2 |
| Compare to: | | | |
| China | 11.31 | 15.81 | 5.00 |
| Australia | 34.25 | 54.00 | 23.3 |

2002

| | Subscribers per 100 | Users per 100 | Broadband subscribers per 100 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Egypt | 0.93 | 2.82 | - |
| Libya | … | ... | ... |
| Morocco | 0.2 | 2.4 | 0.1 |
| Bahrain | 7.6 | 17.7 | 0.7 |
| Iran | 1.25 | 4.85 | - |
| Iraq | 0.06 | 0.1 | - |
| Israel | 15.1 | 17.0 | 3.49 |
| Jordan | 1.2 | 5.8 | 0.1 |
| Kuwait | ... | ... | 0.44 |
| Lebanon | 3.81 | 11.7 | 1.0 |
| Oman | 1.9 | 7.2 | - |
| Palestine | 0.72 | 3.0 | - |
| Qatar | 3.05 | 10.4 | 0.03 |
| Saudi | 2.42 | 6.17 | 0.15 |
| Syria | 0.4 | 2.1 | - |
| UAE | 7.7 | 27.1 | 0.4 |
| Compare to: | | | |
| Australia | 23.2 | 45.8 | 1.3 |

"-" means Zero or Less than 0.005
"…" means Data Not Available

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

***David Hardaker*** is a former award-winning Middle East correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. He speaks Arabic and has lived and worked in the Middle East for a number of years. David Hardaker has established Middle East/Gulf Connection, a consultancy which specialises in the media and the Arab world.

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