New Media
and the
New Middle East

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New Media and the New Middle East

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Preface

This book was born at the 2005 annual conference of the Arab-U.S. Association of Communication Educators in Kuwait City. The vitality of the discourse at that meeting so impressed me that I asked a number of the young Arab scholars presenting papers to contribute chapters to the book. In addition, I recruited several Israelis and Westerners to bring their perspectives to the issues addressed in this volume.

The theme of the book is the role of new media—principally satellite television and the Internet—in stimulating change in the Middle East. The "new Middle East" referred to in the book's title differs from the political incarnation that Condoleezza Rice saw emerging from its "birth pangs" during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. Rather than being wholly a creature of conflict, this is a Middle East being shaped in part by the steadily growing and ever more accessible flow of information delivered by new communication technologies to people in the region.

As several contributors point out, these changes are affecting how those in the Middle East view the rest of the world and how they see themselves. Pan-Arab talk shows that challenge the region's governments as well as blogs and cell phone text messaging used to enhance women's political clout are just two of the ways that change is occurring. Despite such encouraging developments, progress does not proceed unimpeded. Governments have become more innovative in censoring information, and terrorist organizations have appropriated new media for their own evil purposes.

New media cannot in themselves bring about a new Middle East, but they can be valuable tools in the hands of people committed to democratization and other kinds of reform. That is why the topics examined in this book are so important. The authors are witnesses to change, and their tone is generally hopeful.

Throughout the world, the traditional structures of information cultures are changing. In the past, relatively few sources of news and other information were available to consumers. A small number of news organizations, which in some countries were merely mouthpieces for the

government, delivered what they wanted when they wanted. News consumers in many countries had few options. Governments could exercise direct or more nuanced control over dissemination of information or at least had to deal with only a small number of providers.

That is no longer the case. During recent years, the flow of information has grown exponentially primarily because of the development of new media.

In terms of brand recognition, the best known international satellite TV channel is Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based station that began operations in 1996. After several years of dominating its region, Al Jazeera now has plenty of competition—more than 200 Arab satellite channels are on the air—but it remains an intriguing paradigm. Within a few years of its startup, Al Jazeera had established itself as the dominant television channel featuring the Arab viewpoint of major events, particularly those related to conflict. In 1998, when the United States and Britain bombed Iraq because Saddam Hussein was blocking the work of weapons inspectors, Al Jazeera was there. In 2000, during the Palestinian *Intifada*, Al Jazeera's graphic coverage attracted a large audience throughout the Arab world. And in 2001, when the United States attacked Afghanistan, the Taliban ordered all Western journalists to leave but allowed Al Jazeera to remain. By 2003 and the beginning of the Iraq war, Al Jazeera's success had encouraged rivals, such as Al Arabiya and Abu Dhabi TV, to emphasize live, comprehensive coverage. For the first time, many Arabs did not have to rely on the BBC, CNN, or other outside news sources when a big story broke. They could instead find news presented from an Arab perspective.

One of Al Jazeera's strengths has been its introduction of energetic and sometimes contentious debate into an Arab news business that was previously known for its drab docility. The high production values of the channel's newscasts and the lively exchanges in its talk shows have expanded the news audience and changed the nature of political discourse within the Arab public sphere. Getting more people to pay attention to and talk about news is an important facet of larger issues related to democratization.

The style and substance of Al Jazeera's programming has led its audience to become more engaged with the issues addressed in news coverage. This is largely due to the channel's being trusted more than many of its competitors. Critics of Al Jazeera, particularly in the West, often challenge the channel's objectivity, but such criticism misses the point in terms of understanding the channel's baseline strength. Rather than judging the news product they receive according to standards prescribed by outsiders, most of Al Jazeera's viewers consider

credibility to be a news provider's most important attribute, and these viewers want news that is gathered independently for Arabs by Arabs and that sees events through *their* eyes. In the new era of proliferating satellite television channels, state-controlled and Western broadcasters have found that they are at a significant competitive disadvantage in the Arab world because they are not seen as being as credible as Al Jazeera and some of its Arab competitors. Furthermore, the presentation of news on Al Jazeera reflects a passion that is well suited for an audience that feels passionately about many of the issues and events that the channel covers.

During the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, the Arabic channels—particularly Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya—provided more extensive coverage than was offered by other international channels. Their reports, which often featured graphic images of dead and wounded Lebanese civilians, affected the region's politics by stoking Arab anger toward Israel and the United States, and toward Arab governments that were slow to support Hezbollah. Al Jazeera's talk shows provided forums for public criticism of Arab leaders, and the overall coverage helped push countries such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan closer to Hezbollah's cause.[1]

Although Al Jazeera may be the best known player in the Middle East's media development, many others are in the game. Even more than satellite television, the Internet brings a whole new dimension to questions of media credibility. Plenty of online news providers offer detailed, sophisticated content, with greater depth than is found in print or broadcast sources. Beyond that, much of the news delivered on the Web—particularly the quasi-journalism of blogs—constitutes a populist approach to information dissemination that signals a significantly altered balance of media power.

The vast breadth of the blogosphere and its rate of growth make it difficult to evaluate. By mid-2007, Technorati—a Google-like search engine for blogs—was scanning more than 75 million blogs. By October 2006, the number had exceeded 54 million, and by early 2007 it had risen past 67 million. Some blogs are written by government officials, journalists, soldiers, and academics and convey valuable information. Some are musings of people with time on their hands and whose blogs range from personal confessionals to rumors, gossip, and conspiracy theories. Whatever they happen to be saying, bloggers are opening up discourse and creating new online communities linked by language, interests, and a growing commitment to free expression.

Many blogs provide an intriguing subtext to conventional news coverage. Just as reading a newspaper's "Letters to the Editor" section

can provide insights into public attitudes, so too can an exploration of blogs. The results may not be as reliable as those from a properly constructed opinion poll, but they nevertheless are interesting as snapshots of what some people consider important. As the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war was underway, bloggers in Israel and Lebanon kept talking. On the Face, a blog written by an Israeli, asked, "Will this turn out to be the first time that residents of 'enemy' countries engaged in an ongoing conversation while missiles were falling?"[2]

Blog-based conversation can become a significant undercurrent and may influence coverage by mainstream news media when the chorus of bloggers' voices becomes so loud that it attracts attention. If big news organizations are slow to pursue a story, bloggers may highlight bits and pieces of the story until conventional media take notice, investigate, and report it to a larger audience. Bloggers tend to have less tolerance for conventional wisdom and less trust of government and so are little affected by the relationships between governments and journalists that can influence the breadth and tone of coverage. But, by the same token, some bloggers are also less concerned than are professional journalists about commitments to accuracy and objectivity.

The various Internet-based modes of communication affect not only the Web-oriented public, but policymakers as well. Because anything on the Internet can have global reach, international news coverage and public attitudes can be affected by this vast new chorus of voices. During 2006, planners of Israel's public diplomacy efforts, for example, had to reckon with not just conventional international news coverage but also the international online audience's reaction to partisan Web sites and blogs from dissatisfied soldiers, civilians under fire in Gaza and Lebanon, and diverse commentators. Challenges to government pronouncements are more numerous and forceful, escalating the intensity of the competition for public opinion.

These are just some elements of the wildly dynamic world of new media. In the Middle East, media development must coexist with various tensions at many levels, but the growing pervasiveness and influence of new media are clearly among the most significant stimuli for change within the region.

Appraising different aspects of new media from different perspectives, the authors of this book provide much to think about as they offer a preview of tomorrow's Middle East.

Philip Seib

Notes

1. Ali Khalil, "Major Arab News Channels Tested in Lebanon War," *Agence France Presse*, August 9, 2006.
2. Mike Spector, "Cry Bias and Let Slip the Blogs of War," *Wall Street Journal*, July 26, 2006; Sarah Ellison, "In the Midst of War, Bloggers Are Talking Across the Front Line," *Wall Street Journal*, July 28, 2006.

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New Media and Prospects for Democratization

Philip Seib

INTRODUCTION[1]

New media are affecting democratization within the Middle East, particularly in terms of their transnational impact. This "Al Jazeera effect" is a relatively new phenomenon but may become more significant as the number of regional satellite television stations grows, along with the proliferation of other new communications technologies, such as the Internet and cell phones. Communications and information technologies can be potent tools in fostering political transformation, although they remain to varying degrees dependent on political institutions and other nonmedia factors.

Empowerment through information has been greater in recent years from the growing pervasiveness and influence of satellite television, the Internet, cell phones, and other such devices. The Internet, for instance, has been put to work by news organizations, governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), terrorist groups, bloggers, and others and has had impact on political processes. Democratization does not, however, come easily, and it is important to resist the temptation to assume that technology can, in and of itself, transform political reality.

So, the effect of new media on democratization is very much a work in progress, as reflected in the Middle East by various elections during 2005, other political mobilization, and American public diplomacy efforts. Next steps in this process will include development of norms for media and other professionals who use these technologies.

Media Effects and Transnational Presence

In the Middle East as elsewhere, politics sometimes receives an unexpected jolt that produces unanticipated consequences. This has happened during the past decade as information and communication technologies have become more pervasive and influential. This process is accelerating, pushed along in part by transforming events such as the American invasion of Iraq.

A key factor in this expansion of media reach and power is the growing irrelevance of borders. New media will facilitate transnational trends in politics and other facets of globalization because the media themselves are increasingly transnational. This will affect the dynamics of democratization by reducing the isolation of movements for political change and by facilitating detours around obstructions created by governments that have traditionally controlled the flow of information.

The complexity of democratization should be respected, however, and no single factor's impact should be overrated. Media effects, for instance, are just parts of a large political universe, the constituent elements of which must come into alignment if democratization is to develop. That said, the role of the media should also not be *under*-rated. Mohammed Jassim Al Ali, former managing director of Al Jazeera, has said: "Democracy is coming to the Middle East because of the communication revolution. You can no longer hide information and must now tell the people the truth. If you don't, the people won't follow you, they won't support you, they won't obey you."[2] That may overstate the situation, but the premise is sound in the sense that democratic reverberations are being felt in parts of the Middle East that have rarely been touched by such impulses in the past.

This is not merely a matter of theory. Media tools have been put to use in political protests in Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait, and elsewhere. Transnational satellite television, for example, can—to a certain extent—evade controls imposed on news coverage within a country. The 2005 "Cedar Revolution" in Lebanon demonstrated how this can work on two levels. Regional/international coverage—such as is provided by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, among others—could provide information to Lebanese audiences with less concern about political repercussions that might deter some indigenous media organizations. By showing the size and energy of the protests, such coverage helped fuel the demonstrations and encouraged broader pressure for Syrian withdrawal. In addition, news organizations based outside the country

may be trusted more than those that are presumed to be susceptible to localized political pressures.

The lines between national and transnational are not always sharply drawn; transnational media are not necessarily external media. In this case, Lebanese television channels, some of which are available on satellite, also intensively covered the post-assassination (of Rafik Hariri) story, as did radio stations and print media that reached regional and global audiences through the Internet. In Lebanon, as in any other country, indigenous news content is likely to be affected by the political, sectarian, and other interests of those who own and run media organizations. News consumers must take this into account when evaluating the information they receive.

The reports from Lebanon influenced longer-term political dynamics as the coverage reached viewers throughout the region, letting them see political activity that they might decide to emulate. During the following months, demonstrations elsewhere incorporated television-friendly tactics that were seen in the Beirut coverage. In Jordan, national flags were prominently displayed in front of the news media's cameras, which helped avoid having the protests dismissed as simply factional discord.[3] Overall, noted Bernard Lewis, television "brings to the peoples of the Middle East a previously unknown spectacle—that of lively and vigorous public disagreement and debate."[4]

Coverage of the Lebanon story is just one example that underscores the significance of the transnational nature of new media technologies. Some governments try to impose an intellectual sovereignty that ensures perpetuation of the status quo and prevents penetration by "discordant" ideas and actions. Freer movement of information, which is partly a function of globalization, works against repressive sovereignty of this kind and improves prospects for democratization. The increased flow of information does not, however, in itself guarantee a surge of democracy. Lebanon, for instance, continued to struggle in 2005 and then was wracked by war in 2006.

True democratization takes time to gain traction. Increased plurality of self-expression is useful, but sometimes it can be more a cacophony than a coherent, purpose-driven chorus. As with many of the elements of democratization, expanding public debate and participation is merely one of the numerous incremental steps needed in the process.

Governments' Reactions

Communications pressures in the Middle East have been building for more than a decade, and governments have tried to control

emerging technologies by licensing fax machines, blocking Web sites, finding friendly owners for satellite TV stations, and so on. But such measures can be circumvented as more satellite stations begin broadcasting, cell phone owners send text messages, and public ingenuity finds new ways to outdistance government controls.[5] For example, the London-based Saudi Human Rights Center has used satellite radio and television to encourage demonstrations in Riyadh. Islah Radio promoted Saudi reform in its broadcasts from shortwave transmitters at an unrevealed location (thought to be in Lithuania) and via the Hotbird satellite to take advantage of the substantial number of households with satellite reception in Saudi Arabia. Since most of the audience prefers even the most basic TV presence rather than merely words from a radio, Islah Television was born, initially presenting just its logo with text information scrolling on the screen and radio broadcasts as the audio. The station eventually provided programming with more audience appeal, including a call-in show featuring the station's driving force, Saad Al Faqih, who responded to viewers' emails, faxes, and phone calls placed through an Internet phone service (which allowed them to avoid government eavesdroppers). Al Faqih consistently criticized the Al Saud princes, at one point calling them "thieves who should be beheaded instead of petty criminals."

The Saudi government apparently fought back, as the shortwave and television signals were jammed and pressure was brought to bear on the European TV transmission providers to drop the station. In December 2004, the station was on the air with a new satellite home that let it be more insulated from economic pressure. As all this was going on, the station had achieved small but noteworthy results in its efforts to encourage demonstrations in support of human rights within Saudi Arabia.[6]

Without judging the merits of the station's content, its struggle for existence illustrates the kind of battle that can be expected as new media organizations jab at governments that are unaccustomed to being challenged. The on-and-off process will continue as each side finesses the other's latest technological gambit. Other Arab broadcasting and print news organizations that are based outside the region and compete against state monopolies are further expanding the amounts of information available to Middle East publics.[7] As journalist Youssef Ibrahim has observed, "The din of democracy talk has been amplified by satellite television, the Internet, and cell phones, and that is a new wrinkle for autocratic regimes experienced at quiet repression."[8]

New Media as Political Tool

Over the long term, the Internet may prove to be even more potent as a force for reform, although this will take time given the limited Internet access within most of the Middle East. As more widespread Internet access and use take hold in the region, the intrinsic political vitality of the World Wide Web is likely to change the way people view their own countries and the rest of the world. Information from news organizations and other sources that were previously out of reach will be tapped and the interactive nature of the Internet will foster the intellectual enfranchisement that opens the way to political change.

The Internet is an increasingly significant presence in international politics, but its lasting impact remains uncertain. Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas noted that the Internet "is only a tool, and its specific uses by political, economic, and societal actors must be carefully weighed and considered,"[9] and Charles Kupchan observed that the "international effects of the information revolution, just like those of economic interdependence, depend upon the broader political context in which these technologies are deployed."[10] In other words, the Internet should not be viewed as a cure-all by advocates of democracy. As with any political enterprise, the abilities and character of participants, the resources available, other political occurrences near and far, and sometimes good or bad luck will affect any given democratization venture.

The Internet can generate political pressure because it is itself intrinsically democratic and can foster populist participation. That is not yet fully understood, but it can be seen in the fervor of political discussion that takes place on a scale and with an audacity new to politics in much of the world. People advocating change do not have to take the risks involved with public demonstrations in a police state, and they don't have to rely on slow and small-scale dissemination such as the *samizdat* endeavors in the Soviet Union. Instead there can be a political presence such as sprang up in late 2005 in Syria, where, according to *The Washington Post*'s David Ignatius, "Internet cafes are scattered through Damascus, allowing people to constantly share news and gossip. The security forces have been arresting dissidents, but that doesn't stop people from talking."[11]

Nevertheless, how much effect the Internet will have in the Arab political world remains speculative, particularly because Arab states lag far behind most of the rest of the world in taking advantage of this technology. As of 2003, there were only 18 computers per 1,000 people in Arab countries, compared to the global average of 78 per 1,000.[12]

Even when they have access, Internet users in some countries encounter government controls, with sites that are found officially bothersome blocked. The Saudi government's Internet Services Unit states that "all sites that contain content in violation of Islamic tradition or national regulations shall be blocked."[13] Among these blocked sites are Amnesty International's Web pages related to Saudi Arabia, the Encyclopedia Britannica's "Women in American History," *Rolling Stone* magazine, and Warner Brothers Records. In Egypt, some of the Muslim Brotherhood's Web sites, such as ikhwanonline, have occasionally been blocked, which is noteworthy given the putative efforts to make more open the Egyptian electoral process.

Besides blocking, some governments establish their own Web sites to present their version of issues and events that people may be learning about from other news media. How much credibility these quasi-news sites have with the public varies from country to country, but they provide a means for governments to compete with conventional news providers as sources of information.

Other entities such as NGOs effectively use the Internet to make their case to global audiences and for purposes ranging from stimulating news coverage to raising money. Terrorist organizations also use Web sites to recruit, raise funds, and proselytize. Despite government efforts to deny these groups access to the news media and the public, terrorist Web sites have proven successful in disseminating material such as pronouncements from Osama bin Laden, propaganda disguised as newscasts, online jihadist magazines, and video clips of executions of kidnap victims. Since the goal of these organizations is to instill terror in the public, the Web is a valuable device for delivering their message in sometimes horrific fashion.

The Internet is also important in recruiting, training, and communicating with terrorist groups' adherents, for example, the June 2005 online release of a forty-six-minute video, "All Religion Will Be for Allah," produced by Abu Musab Zarqawi's Iraqi branch of al Qaeda that featured a corps of suicide bombers-in-training. It was disseminated by a specially designed Web page with numerous links for downloading, including one for playing it on a cell phone.[14] Even cartoons depicting children as suicide bombers are easily accessible on the Web.[15]

The Mechanisms of Information Democracy

Open access to media venues and the easy dissemination of unmediated media may be viewed as information democracy, but because this

freedom is available to all, regardless of their intentions, it may be abused, as can be seen in the terrorist examples. News organizations are sometimes inadvertently complicit in this as their coverage of terrorists' pronouncements reaches a much larger audience than could be achieved through the original webcast, videotape, or other message. This raises issues about mainstream media's gatekeeper role, and the European Union has urged media organizations to draw up a code of conduct to ensure that they do not become de facto propagandists for terrorists.[16]

Yet another use of the Internet with significant political potential is blogging. Blogs amplify voices that may have previously gone unheard. As such they foster a degree of democratic parity at least in terms of expanding audience access for those who feel they have something worthwhile to say. The blogging firmament is already crowded and becoming more so. As of October 2005, blog search engine Technorati covered roughly 19 million blogs; by January 2006 the figure was 25 million; in April 2007, it was 75 million.

Particularly in countries where governments have tried to suppress political organizing, blogging may prove to be valuable in orchestrating pressure for reform. In 2005, bloggers in Lebanon and elsewhere spurred debate about the perpetrators and aftershocks of the assassination of Rafik Hariri—debate that could be joined by anyone with Internet access, regardless of some governments' desire to stifle these discussions. Another example of political blogging could be seen in 2002 when Bahrainis dissatisfied with conventional media coverage of a scandal related to the national pension fund could read less constrained analysis on blogs such as "Bahraini blogsite" or "Mahmood's Den."[17] Many Bahraini villages have their own Web sites and chat rooms where discussions about the ruling Khalifa family are less restrained than they usually would be on street corners. By late 2005, BahrainOnline.org had become a go-to site for anyone interested in political news. Its iconoclastic success was evidenced when the irritated government jailed several of the site's Web masters for a few weeks.[18]

Talk about politics has expanded from the neighborhood coffee house to global proportions, enlisting participants and encouraging electronic speech and the thinking behind it. This is networking in the sense that likeminded activists can find each other and form partnerships of various kinds. Information—some of it solid, some of it wild—can be disseminated quickly and widely. Some time will have to pass before this phenomenon's long-term political impact can be determined, but if bloggers' talk leads to expanded bloggers' activism, this may be yet another way that mass media provide impetus for democratization.

While the Internet is put to increasing use, an even more common communications device is proving increasingly useful in mobilizing activists: text messaging on cell phones facilitates organization of demonstrations and circulation of political information. Particularly when political parties are restricted, text messages can be sent to unofficial membership lists. In Kuwait, women organizing protests about voting rights in 2005 found their effectiveness increased because they could summon young women from schools by sending text messages. (In May 2005, Kuwaiti women were granted the right to vote and to be candidates in parliamentary and local council elections). In Lebanon, text messages (and emails) were used as yet another means to mobilize anti-Syrian demonstrators in March 2005.[19] Fawzi Guleid of the National Democratic Institute in Bahrain observed that text messaging fosters expansion of speech because it "allows people to send messages that they would not say in public." It should also be noted, however, that text messaging lends itself to the spread of rumors and anonymous attacks. Rola Dashti, one of the organizers of the women's rights demonstrations in Kuwait, was the subject of widely circulated text messages that criticized her for her Lebanese and Iranian ancestry and alleged that she had received funds from the American embassy. Her response: "It means I'm making them nervous . . . and I'd better get used to it."[20]

Is the Time Right?

Advocates of democracy in the Middle East cannot ignore the reality of having many obstacles to overcome. In terms of Web access, there is a digital *wadi*, a deep and daunting canyon, between the region and much of the rest of the world.[21] Among the factors contributing to the level of technology use in the Middle East and some other parts of the world is the overall literacy rate and the usefulness of having a working knowledge of English.

Even a development as encouraging as the increased availability of satellite television is not a panacea for political problems. Hugh Miles has observed in his book about Al Jazeera that

optimists theorize that satellite TV will sweep away traditional Arab obstacles to progress and dissolve seemingly intractable problems and that an 'Islamic Glasnost' will ensue . . . . But to believe that satellite television is automatically going to make Arab societies democratic is to presume that the current state of affairs in the Arab world results from an information deficiency, which is not true. Except in the most authoritarian Arab countries, the news has long been available to the

determined via the radio, and that has never brought about much democracy.

Miles added that even if Arab satellite television viewers see something on the air that leads them to change their minds about an issue, "there is still no political mechanism in place for them to do anything about it."[22] Miles makes a valid point, but it should be kept in mind that audience size is in itself important and the significance of sheer numbers with easy, frequent access to diverse sources of information should not be underestimated. When a critical mass has better access to information, political processes are more likely to change.

Nevertheless, optimism about prospects for media-inspired reform should be tempered with caution. As Jon Alterman pointed out, much of the debate that can be seen on Arab satellite television "is still largely about spectacle and not about participation." There are, as Alterman noted, some encouraging exceptions to this. He cited the example of Egyptian televangelist Amr Khalid who has cultivated a large following by eschewing the finger-pointing lectures favored by many Muslim clerics and instead quietly urging his audience to "sanctify the everyday." Alterman wrote,

> Through huge revival-style events in Egypt and increasingly via satellite television broadcasts beamed throughout the Middle East, Khalid has created not just a community of viewers, but also a community of participants. His followers do more than write and call in to his programs. His increasingly global audience participates in charity drives, organizes study groups, and seeks to apply his specific lessons to their daily lives.[23]

Khalid's success undermines the stereotype of the stern Islamic preacher with a forbidding television presence. Khalid's more modernist approach illustrates the multidimensional aspects of new media influence and the need to recognize that those who use these new media must be sensitive to the changing expectations of the mass audience.

No medium in itself can create change. It has to be used creatively and with an eye to its relationship with other social and political institutions. Along these lines Mohamed Zayani wrote,

> One should be skeptical about the often ambitious transformative claims for new media as well as the claims about its democratizing potential and its ability not just to increase and widen participation among the various social strata in the Arab world, but to transform social and political