

Occasional Paper

# Uncovered: Arab Journalists Scrutinize Their Profession

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**Introduction: Michael C. Hudson**

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This conference is entitled “Uncovered: Arab Journalists Scrutinize Their Profession” because we want to dissect, uncover, and analyze the state of the Arab media. Four distinguished Arab journalists will lead us in that quest. They are insiders, people who really know the business, and I anticipate hearing some very insightful comments and views.

There is an enormous amount of interest here in the United States, and especially in Washington DC, about the explosive development of the Arab media in recent years. There have been many technological developments that have made the Arab media much more active and important in public affairs, and in shaping and framing culture and values, than the media was in the past. Here at the Center, the Arab Information Project has been monitoring the new media since 1995, holding a number of workshops and operating a website ([www.georgetown.edu/research/arabtech](http://www.georgetown.edu/research/arabtech)) which is linked to CCAS’s main website (<http://ccas.georgetown.edu>). The project has put online (at <http://nmit.georgetown.edu>) a number of working papers dealing with aspects of the information revolution in the Arab world. The Center regularly offers graduate seminars on the Arab media and information technology.

Decades before the present Administration in Washington proposed that the Arab world reform itself there were stirrings in Arab civil society toward easing the prevailing authoritarian order. Despite many “official” obstacles, the Arab print media came to play a role in creating a public space for debate and dissent, filling as it were the vacuum left by the suppression of political parties and interest groups. A certain weakening of the “*mukhabarat* state”, owing to the collapse of oil prices and the demise of the Soviet Union, was accompanied by the arrival of a new generation of information technologies—computer-assisted publishing, satellite television, cellular telephony, and the internet. Within the past decade the Arab media have undergone a significant transformation. Transnational media institutions—both print and electronic—have challenged the state’s monopoly of information. New “constructions” of “reality” are proliferating, some reinforcing but others challenging the accepted order of things. Little wonder, then, that the Arab media is emerging as a genuine “fourth estate” in Arab public life. As such, social scientists (Arab and non-Arab) are increasingly interested in studying the media as a social institution, and Arab media professionals themselves are reassessing their function and significance in these times of transformation. Among the issues now being raised is the quality and professionalism of the media “industry” itself.

In order to explore these issues we brought prominent representatives from both the Arab electronic and print media to the Center in October 2004 to hear their views. The conference was entitled “Uncovered: Arab Journalists Scrutinize Their Profession.” We asked our distinguished speakers to dissect, uncover, and analyze the state of the Arab media. Four distinguished Arab journalists kindly accepted our invitation and led us in that quest. Each is very well-known; each knows the Arab media business very well, and (as the reader will see below) each spoke in a frank and critical manner. They reflected on key questions having to do with the direction of the media. They also put on their critical glasses and commented candidly on the strengths and weaknesses of the Arab media today.

**Thomas Gorguissian**

*Thomas Gorguissian is currently the Washington correspondent for Al-Gomhouria in Egypt and a regular contributor for other Egyptian publications—both governmental and independent, in both Arabic and English. From 2003-2004, he was the Washington correspondent for the Lebanese daily An-Nahar. Prior to that he was the Washington correspondent for Al Wafd, the Egyptian opposition daily, for nearly ten years. He received a master's degree in mass communication from the American University in Cairo in 1989, with a thesis entitled "Daily Columns in the Egyptian Press: Their Role in Shaping Public Opinion and Policy Making." He was also awarded a diploma in television reporting from AUC's Adham Center for TV Journalism. Over the past 25 years, Mr. Gorguissian has participated in many Egyptian, Arab, and American television programs as a guest, commentator and occasional writer/producer; he has also participated in numerous seminars and panels.*

I wish I were able to announce, like the American president often does in his State of the Union Address, that "The state of the Arab media is confident and strong." Why not say it? The line would surely get some applause. But unfortunately, realistically speaking, that is not the case here.

From reading and watching the media a lot, and from meeting many Arab media veterans, I believe that much better things have come, can come, and must come out of that part of the world—where I was born and started to read, write, communicate, publish, argue, and dream. Putting aside my dreams and nightmares, let's talk about the reality, or as some would say, the plural "realities" of the Arab media.

First, nowadays there is a big *moulid* (festival), a big *souk* (market) of Arab media outlets, especially in satellite broadcasting. Satellite dishes are mushrooming all over the region, and all kinds of programs—*al-Jazeera*, *al-Arabiyya*, *Abu Dhabi*, *LBC*—are being beamed from different places, sometimes just targeting specific audiences. *Al-Jazeera* has a special place in times of crisis, but the remote control is always there. And you will often hear people say, "Change this, let's lighten up," and they will switch. As most of us know, entertainment video clips, films, mini dramas, soap operas, and "Superstar Academy" are the things that people mainly watch, that they want to watch—not Pentagon briefings or tapes from Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Second, pan-Arab television has been the fashion and the trend for the last ten years, but since the creation of *al-Jazeera* in 1996, the question has become "What about the content and quality of the programs and the news reports?" This is the main obstacle: How authorities in different countries accept or reject this or that television channel and its reporters and cameras. If there is no reporting, if there is no free movement and access, and if officials are not willing to talk about events, then reporting will come only from the US, Europe, Israel, or Iraq—but not from the capitals and cities of the Arab world. The reporting about Arab issues will be mainly opinions expressed from studios or by telephone.

Third, the relationship between Arab media and Arab governments is not clear. The desire to control and interfere in any form is always there, directly or indirectly. This is not just an issue of ownership. As media institutions try to survive, even independent ones are subjected to various forms of control, even if it appears to be remote or careless control. There are many examples in the Egyptian or Lebanese press, and in other places too. There

is a working traditional and effective mechanism by which authorities in Arab countries use both carrots and sticks to keep journalists in line. Publishers and journalists have some privileges that others do not. So they must risk losing them. Protect them, otherwise their privileges will be taken away. There is an arsenal of press laws usually revived or shelved according to the prevailing winds blowing on issues raised in political circles, and there are also other methods of control—intimidation, harassment, criminal prosecution, closure of newspapers, and imprisonment. Nothing is personal, everything is business, and “business as usual.” Luckily, more of these attacks are now being monitored and documented by various regional and international organizations. *Fox News* makes the claim: “We report, you decide.” The belief among Arab authorities handling media seems to be the opposite: “We decide, you report.”

The print media, on the other hand, is witnessing a big boom, at least quantitatively. Dozens of newspapers, mainly of tabloid style, have appeared. In the last few months, 17 sports newspapers, have been published in Egypt, and in Egypt, “sports” means soccer. A lot of local publications are coming out, and they have good circulation. The opinion pages in the print media and especially in the so-called “independent” newspapers are vivid and full of debate on religious and social issues. There is much more than anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism—despite the people whose favorite sport it is to watch the Arab media to say “Hey, we found out why they hate us.” Pan-Arab media are at a turning point, as many of their resources from the last decade are diverted to satellite programs, the social and political obsession of our time. The merging of television stations and newspapers may become a solution.

The state of the Arab media raises some other issues. First, how will Dubai, the hub and center of electronic and broadcasting media, shape and reshape the reality of pan-Arab media? Second, what will be the future of *al-Jazeera*, and consequently the future of other satellite stations which were introduced as an “antidote” to what was coming out of *al-Jazeera*? Political and economic factors will play a great role in these changes.

Third, how will the media moguls or emperors, like Sheikh Salah Kamal, Prince Walid bin Talal, Rafik Hariri, and others, play the game in the coming years? The economics of the Arab media definitely needs better analysis and understanding. The role of giant businesses and the dominance of ruling systems will be shaped and decided. This relates to the issue of bread and circuses from ancient Rome—to tame the beast, the masses, and the public. Governments in the Arab world long provided both, or promised to provide both, or announced that they were providing both the bread and the circuses. Now the case is different, and it needs a solution.

## Rami Khouri

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*ancient history and archaeology, general manager of Al Kutba Publishers, and wrote for leading international publications, including the Financial Times, the Boston Globe and the Washington Post. He often comments on Middle Eastern issues in the international media, including the BBC and US National Public Radio, and lectures frequently at conferences and universities throughout the world. He has BA and MS in political science and mass communications from Syracuse University.*

I will look broadly at trends in the mass media in the Middle East, and then focus more on the satellite channels, which seem to captivate a lot of people in the West. Here are several broad impressions.

First, Arab media cannot be understood except as a reflection of the wider political culture in the Middle East. To try to analyze the media by itself would be an impossible and irresponsible task. The wider political culture from which the media emanates makes it a lot more understandable. What one sees in print, on the Internet, on satellite television, and on the radio is a much broader range of expression, sometimes extreme expression, not only of political positions and polarization but also emotional sentiments, ethnic, religious, national and other identities. It is interesting to see the tremendous range of views that are expressed both on mainstream channels like *al-Jazeera*, *LBC*, *al-Hayat*, *al-Arabiyya*, and also on more specialized media like Internet websites.

A great proliferation of forms of media is taking place. It is dangerous to focus too much on satellite stations, which are only the first and most dramatic examples. FM radio is also exploding, along with Internet sites, satellite television, and the offshore press, of which the *Daily Star* is an example—we are now printing in Kuwait, Qatar and Lebanon, and in a month we will be printing in Cairo, Bahrain and the UAE. This means that we do not particularly care if any Arab government forbids us to send the paper to their country. It does not matter anymore if the Syrians, Saudis, Jordanians, or Egyptians do not like an article and forbid it to be distributed, because then they're the loser, not the *Daily Star*—the paper is sold in ten other Arab countries, and anyway people can go to the Internet and read it there.

This explosion, and the diversity of offshore as well as domestic electronic and print websites, has fundamentally changed the nature and impact of the media. These other forms are important to keep in mind. Remember the most dramatic and barbaric examples of media use: the videocassettes from Bin Laden, the beheadings of hostages on the Internet, and Zawahiri's audiotapes.

Second, there is a lot less government control over the media, broadly speaking. A general liberalization is taking place. Liberalization means a more open, more liberal system, where more views are being expressed. Even in state-controlled media like the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Moroccan systems, as well as in offshore satellite stations not controlled directly by governments, a wider range of views is being expressed.

Today, there is also a much greater commercial impact on media across the board. Privatization, commercialization, and globalization are probably the three most significant forces in the short run that determine what happens in the media. These are market-driven, as opposed to ideological, institutions—with some exceptions, like *al-Hurra*, Hezbollah's station *al-Manar*, and the media of some Islamist groups or very ideological groups on the right or left. But despite those ideologically-driven exceptions, most of the media are



commercially-driven. In the end, they need to sell advertising and get audience share; one needs to be very aware of that to understand what they are doing. Privatization, globalization and commercialization are far and away the largest forces that impact these media.

Pan-Arab satellite channels have had a major impact, but on the whole, their impact is still unclear and very varied—strong points and weak points. State-owned media, like governments themselves, are losing audience share, credibility and legitimacy. The governments and states in the Arab world are gradually being weakened in terms of their credibility and impact on their own people. Most Arab governments cannot collect income tax from people. They get only about 10%-15% of their budget from income tax because they simply do not have the political authority or legitimacy, or the practical, logistical means, to go out and tax their own people—unlike in America, where income tax probably accounts for 50%-60% of government revenues. State media, like governments and states, are losing impact, audience and credibility, and private media are taking over much of their role.

During several recent tensions—the war in Iraq, in Palestine and Israel, and with reform issues—the media have become elements of warfare, and instruments of war, in all respects. The American forces have attacked, shot and killed Arab members of the media—accidentally we are told, and maybe we have to assume this is true. The same thing has happened in Palestine, where the Israeli army has shot and killed or injured members of the media. Whether this has happened accidentally or on purpose, history will determine. But clearly the media is an instrument of warfare, in the sense that the US government started by criticizing and attacking *al-Jazeera*, *al-Arabiyya* and the satellite stations, and creating its own media to counteract what it thought was the negative impact of Arab media.

This is a quite extraordinary and rather hallucinogenic development on the part of the US government, a totally senseless and extraordinary waste of money which will have no impact, or possibly a counterproductive impact. But it is interesting to see the US government creating instruments of media warfare to fight back against Arab instruments of media warfare. In the media field, and only in the media field, Arabs have been able to fight the US to a draw. This is why American Secretary of State Colin Powell and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld criticize *al-Jazeera* every third Thursday and send a complaint to the Qatari government—because they cannot tolerate an Arab institution that is fighting an American institution to a draw on an equal battleground. In diplomacy, economics, technology, armaments, and every other respect, the US is far more powerful than the Arab world—but the US government simply cannot handle an equal battle in the media, and the government does not know how to respond to this. Initially, the US is responding rather hysterically and irrationally, trying to create its own media in Arabic. I predict all these things will be dropped in the next few years and will be seen as an incredible waste of time. But it will be interesting to see what happens when you have an Arab and an American media sector that are able to compete on a level playing field.

Media in the Arab world should be seen as a surrogate for political development that does not take place in the normal political arena. In all dimensions of political life—pluralism, participation, accountability, a competitive marketplace of ideas, equal access for all groups of society—the media provides the average Arab citizens, individual corporate investors, and political groups with the ability to engage in this public arena in the political or cultural sense, or whatever dimension these groups want to use. All these venues are not open to most Arab individuals, groups, or institutions, because the political arena is still

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tightly controlled by states and their allied elites.

Regarding the satellite television stations, every day I watch Arab satellite stations, and also Western stations from the US. The ones I see regularly are *MSNBC*, *CNN*, and the mainstream broadcast networks—we get them on systems in Beirut. I have a pretty good view of a broad range of American television, and then I watch European television. Every single day, I flip through the channels to see what they are reporting. I concluded that if you wanted to see the most comprehensive coverage of the Iraq war, you should watch *al-Jazeera* or *al-Arabiyya*, no doubt about it whatsoever. I challenge anyone who has done an empirical study, to go back and do a content analysis, to look at *CNN* or *CBS* or *NBC*, to look at European stations and at the Arab satellite stations. Far and away, the Arab satellite stations presented the most comprehensive coverage. They broadcast every single American official press conference with live simultaneous translation into Arabic, they aired the Iraqi government spokespersons, they put on Arab commentators and analysts from other Arab countries, they interviewed the American generals sitting at their control centers in Doha, and they interviewed the mothers whose children had just been killed by American bombs.

Comprehensive coverage unrivalled by any other media institution is the strong point of the Arab satellite phenomenon. Their spot reporting and news coverage has become very good, and the range of opinions they present is extremely impressive. You get American government, anti-government, European, and Arab commentators providing a truly wide range of opinion, a much wider range than you get on any American television or radio station, with the possible exception of *National Public Radio* (NPR), which seems to be a bit more balanced.

But the strength of the Arab satellite stations is offset by some of their weaknesses. They provide a mechanism for the release of stress, tension, energy, political pressure, and frustration that naturally build up. People watch Arab television stations and they see people debating and criticizing the US and Israel and the Arab leaders, all the things ordinary people in the Arab world want to see criticized, and it releases the tension that would normally be channeled into a political process. The great weakness of the media is not a weakness of the media, but a weakness of the political cultures in which the media operate because there is no link between what happens in the media and what happens in the political culture. Angry citizens and angry viewers who watch the media in the Arab world cannot then go and vote to change their leadership; there is no link between the political and emotional sentiments of the average citizen, the information that comes to that citizen from the print or satellite media, and the ability of that citizen to engage in the political process to change governments or state policies. So we have this ridiculous phenomenon of the leader of Libya being in power for 30 years, the leader of Egypt wanting to have a 5<sup>th</sup> term, the leader of Tunisia wanting a 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> term—this extraordinarily degrading process by which Arab leaders stay in power for 30 or 40 years.

This phenomenon includes people like Yasser Arafat of the Palestinians, to whom I tip my hat as a great leader who led the Palestinian cause for many years. But the fact that these people can stay in power for 30 or 40 years reflects political systems that simply do not give their citizens any political rights, or even a modicum of decency and integrity that allows them to live their lives as normal citizens who feel they can participate in the decisions that affect them, and change the rulers and policies that are made in their name. That lack of link between the mass media content and the ability of Arab citizens to engage in

the political process, to either manifest their views or change their government—that is a huge handicap, the single greatest weakness. It is not the media's fault; it is the fault of the political culture in which the media operate.

A second major problem is that satellite stations have still refrained from addressing the real roots of power in the Arab world—the money and the guns. If the use in society of money and guns—the military, security, police and defense services, and the government budgets—is not subject to public analysis, accountability, comment, and interpretation, then there is a flawed political process. The media by and large have refused to deal with the real issue of how political power is exercised in the Arab countries. That does not detract from the strong points: the diversity of views, the debate, the pluralism, the comprehensive coverage, the good reporting. Those are all good things, but in the end if the Arab media are not going to address the real roots and forces of power, and if they are not going to be instruments of accountability and political exchange, they will predominantly be media of entertainment, rather than media of political transformation, accountability and modernization.

This is the point we are at now. Will the Arab satellite stations take that next leap forward and really start addressing and analyzing domestic issues more carefully; or will they continue what they're doing now: better news reporting, political debates, and analysis, but leaving the central issue of how power is exercised to people who are in power for 30 and 40 years at a time? Will they leave this issue to people who increasingly put their children into positions of power, a continuing degradation of the basic integrity of not only Arab political society, but the very dignity that an individual Arab human being feels when subjected to this political nonsense generation after generation?

The media are starting to express these views, and people are starting to say these things, which is a positive step. There was enormous criticism of the Syrians when they started to extend the Lebanese president's term a few weeks ago; there was a very strong response, and people were speaking out. In Egypt and other Arab countries, people are speaking out against the son of Hosni Mubarak possibly being groomed to take over. This debate and criticism would not have happened 20 years ago, but it is starting to happen, partly because of the impact of the media. The best scenario would be for the Arab media to keep developing, to keep extending its professional qualities and the strong points it has already exhibited, and to take the next step into that domain of political accountability and political change.

### **Salameh Nematt**

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week, *BBC World Service (English)*, *UPI*, *Oxford Analytica*, as well as international broadcast media such as *BBC World*, *ITV News*, *ABC news*, *PBS*, *CBS radio and TV*, *al-Jazeera*, *al-Arabiya* and *al-Hurra*, and numerous other media. Over the past 20 years, his work involved reporting on and analyzing developments related to the Iran-Iraq war, the 1990-1991 Iraq invasion of Kuwait and the second Gulf war, and the Arab-Israeli peace process.

I want to present a very critical view of the Arab media today as an instrument for change, and as an instrument for freedom of expression, democracy, and human rights.

The Arab media is worse off today than it was in the '50s and '60s, worse off in many ways. I would not dispute at all that the Arab satellite media covered the Iraq war better than the American media—but why wasn't the Arab media covering Iraq before the war? The media did not cover Iraq before the war because it could not. The Arab satellite channels were able to freely cover Iraq only because the regime was brought down by the Americans and because the American occupation of Iraq allows the Arab media to function freely, basically showing all the atrocities as well as the reconstruction efforts and daily events inside Iraq. There is a parallel picture in the Palestinian territories. The only reason pan-Arab media can cover Palestine and the Israeli occupation of Palestine is that the people in charge, the Israeli occupiers, allow the media to function freely.

Aside from the two occupations in Iraq and Palestine, the question that needs to be answered is, "Where do we have a free Arab media?" It does not exist. In the '50s and '60s there were more independent media than there are today. Let's not fool ourselves; there is not a single medium in the Arab world that is not government-run or government-controlled, or at the very best government-influenced, as in the case of Lebanon. Relatively Lebanon is the best place where you have examples of media showing independence, to a certain limit; yet it is clear that the Syrians can shut down a television station in Beirut like they did with *MTV* about two years ago. Everybody knows there are limits to what you can do. It varies from countries like Syria, where there is no freedom of expression in the media, to countries like Yemen and Jordan, where there is some kind of relative freedom within a certain margin that does not threaten the establishment. So to say that the media is better off today is absolutely misleading.

The trend in the pan-Arab media today is basically the consolidation of power of Arab autocracies, dictatorships, and corrupt regimes. Since the 1950s, the phenomenon of pan-Arabism has developed, from Gamal Abd al-Nasser and "Voice of the Arabs" in Cairo. In this context, people are not supposed to debate national issues, problems, or their own freedom—freedom of expression, human rights—because of the big fight with the Israelis, the big fight with the West. So everyone had been subjugated, the media included, to fight only these external wars. And so the media served as a weapon in the hand of the pan-Arabs, who took over power to basically silence internal opposition. That is one explanation of why there are regimes that have been in power for 30 years: citizens are not allowed to debate internal issues.

As a result of this situation, what did *al-Arabiyya*, *al-Jazeera*, and the others do? They took over the mantle of "Voice of the Arabs" in Cairo, which was very lacking in credibility. Everyone remembers when Ahmed Said told the fish in the sea to get hungry because the Israelis would be thrown in; he actually made this statement on the radio. So today we

have an amplified version of “Voice of the Arabs.” Of course, the technological difference here is that *al-Jazeera* can do much more damage than “Voice of the Arabs” in misleading people as to what is really going on in their own region.

Again, these stations can function freely in Iraq under occupation and in Palestine under occupation, but everywhere else they are banned and not allowed. Surely, *al-Jazeera* did try to cover internal problems in other countries, to its credit, but it was banned, its offices were closed, and everybody learned a lesson: don’t even try. Basically, there is no room to do it.

At one point when *al-Jazeera* was criticizing Egypt, I heard a story I was never able to verify (but from a very good source) that the Egyptians sent a television crew to Geneva, where the deposed emir of Qatar is in exile. They interviewed the emir for 12 hours, and he said lots of not-so-nice things about his son who took over power in Qatar. They sent the tapes to Qatar, and said “If you do not stop your attacks against Egypt, we will broadcast these tapes.” Sure enough, *al-Jazeera* stopped attacking Egypt. The same treatment can be applied to different governments, and the Qatari government (which runs *al-Jazeera*) can calculate whether it can tolerate this or that pressure, whether it can survive with it or not.

What Arab audiences today see throughout the Arab world every night are two main stories: Israelis killing Palestinians in Palestine and Americans killing Iraqis in Iraq. It does not matter here whether there is an exchange of fire in Najaf, Karbala, Samarra, or wherever, and civilians die. It does not matter; the viewers are not going to go and verify who killed whom. It is easy to blame it on the Americans. No one is going to question why Moqtada al-Sadr goes with his armed people into the holy mosques of Najaf—the viewers question why the Americans are after him. The pan-Arab media discredits the Iraqi interim government, discredits the whole process of change, and nobody is willing to entertain the possibility that the future of Iraq might look much better than the past.

The Arab masses see these two stories—Americans killing Iraqis and Israelis killing Palestinians—and no one cares about Saddam Hussein killing 300,000 of his own people. This is not a story that sells, as far as the Arab media is concerned. It does not matter that the Syrians killed 20,000 of their own people, and it does not matter what goes on in torture chambers throughout the Arab world, simply because the media cannot cover it. And if they wanted to cover it they would think twice, because the Qataris know they’re not a democracy. If they attack other Arab non-democratic governments too much, they might suffer the consequences, because their house is made of glass.

Viewers have a distorted picture of what is going on—they are given a perspective that is anti-American, anti-Israeli. I’m not saying the Americans and Israelis do not deserve the negative publicity they are getting; obviously there are crimes being committed under occupation. But people have a disproportionate, distorted image of Americans and Israelis because they can see only these two stories being reported freely. Everything else is hidden. What is happening to democratization and human rights in the Arab world, the manipulation of power, Mubarak wanting his son to succeed him? Can you really do a documentary on any television station in Egypt discussing or debating the issue of the succession? Of course not. We should not forget about Saad El-Din Ibrahim, and what happened just because he said something on a television interview.<sup>1</sup>

As I have said, unfortunately, Arab media are worse off today than they were 40-50 years ago. Technology has developed but there are no standards of journalism being imple-

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mented, and there is no accountability. Television stations' correspondents in Iraq were found to be on the payroll of Saddam Hussein's regime for years, yet nobody was fired, nobody held accountable. It is not like the *New York Times* Jayson Blair scandal; it's just okay. So if governments in the region are not held accountable by the people, the media—which is run by the government—is not going to hold itself accountable, because this media is the government, and so unfortunately the pan-Arab media has contributed to consolidating the regimes' power.

The success of *al-Jazeera* was initially achieved by its decision to present the opposition's view to the current situation throughout the Arab world. This is a fantastic development in a sense that all of a sudden the opposition had a voice. The problem is that this voice, the counter-voice—which includes fundamentalist and extremist voices—took over and hijacked the station, and the moderate Arab forces and leaders have been eclipsed by the extremists. Many Arab leaders and moderate political forces are afraid to go on *al-Jazeera* because they are going to be massacred by the people running it. The agenda has been taken over by the radical people; they are not talking about dialogue, they are committing incitement. The coverage of Iraq, glorifying terrorism as opposition and resistance, beheading people as resistance—this is not good media or professional practice. Yes, it is happening, but I would not broadcast the full tapes, or describe it as resistance, because it is not resistance. These people are killing Iraqis, they're killing Americans, anyone they get their hands on. You may tell me that it sells. Of course it sells; sex and crime sell on television, but does that mean they should be broadcast and given all that airtime?

Because of this proliferation and explosion of Arab satellite channels, who are the key players? Mubarak has been eclipsed, King Abdullah eclipsed. Now there is Zarqawi and Bin Laden; they are the ones debating now on the international front. The American government responds; even the president mentions Zarqawi about a dozen times, and so it looks like the Arab media style has helped these people achieve this high profile. They became indirectly the political players, the ones conducting the political discourse in that part of the world, at the expense of all the moderate forces who otherwise could probably accomplish something.

### Hafez Al-Mirazi

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It is very easy to tell people what they like to hear, bashing Arabs, Muslims, and their media. It is easy to thank the US for opening the media in Iraq for *al-Jazeera* to cover—but *al-Jazeera* had exclusive coverage in Afghanistan, and when the American-appointed government entered, *al-Jazeera* was shut down for a while. *Al-Jazeera's* office in Baghdad is now closed down, thanks to whom? This is the problem when we try to have the cake and eat it too: when an Arab journalist works with Arab media, receives a salary from a Saudi publication like *al-Hayat*, and is also a permanent contributor on the payroll of *al-Hurra* television. If it is poor, get out of it. You cannot debate both sides.

This is the problem that the media really has: we have to tell people the truth. They might like to hear that *Fox News* is the most fair and balanced. But if we said so, we would not be doing them a service. I tell the truth on *al-Jazeera*. My son asked me once why I present unpopular points of view; why I go on *CNN* and tell them what they don't like to hear; why I bring the Israeli ambassador on *al-Jazeera*. Why do I like to anger people like that? But I don't see myself as angering them; I am showing them what is missing in their point of view. If the Arab audiences have enough from the Arab capitals' point of view, my role in Washington DC is to give them what is missing from it, including inviting Salameh, Thomas, and anyone with different points of view on my show. Even people who call me by name and say, "This guy Hafez brings in Israeli officials while they are killing us in Gaza, and acts as if they are colleagues from high school"—that's alright, that is the commitment we make as journalists. We have to take the heat.

I worked before in a Saudi media outlet, and when they did not allow me to interview a Saudi opposition leader, I got out—the same as I would do with the Qatari television station *al-Jazeera*. I brought people to criticize the emir of Qatar while he was visiting Washington DC. I remember commenting on the first casualty in the war in Afghanistan that was at al-Udeid air force base, and I said contrary to what Qatari officials were saying—that Qatar is not helping the war effort in Afghanistan—the first airman to be killed in Afghanistan happened in Doha, very close to *al-Jazeera*. No one criticized anything about that report. To the contrary, that same episode I did a show on the US-Qatari relationship, and when I found that some of the guests were not critical enough, I said that while the rest of the Qatari media is like any other government-controlled media, *al-Jazeera* is the exception. That same day, the emir of Qatar thanked me for giving credibility to the station.

The denigration, setbacks and embarrassment caused by the way this American administration deals with the media should not be celebrated. In May 2001, six months before 9/11, there was a piece about *al-Jazeera* on *60 Minutes*. The American occupation was not needed to make a name for *al-Jazeera*. We need to be honest with ourselves and with our audience on both sides of the aisle. Trying to blame everything on the media is exactly the same mistake that the Arabs and Muslims made especially after the hostage crisis in Tehran, when people started to restudy Islam and talk about Islam and the hostage-takers and all the bad images of Muslims. Many conferences have been held in the Arab world at which people have discussed how to communicate with the West, and why the image of Arabs and Muslims is so distorted in the West. People often say it is because of the Zionist-controlled American media. I remember a Saudi intellectual who once said that instead of wasting all these resources on improving the image of Muslims in the West, we should spend 10% or 20% of that on improving the real conditions of Muslims, which might reflect well on their image.

## UNCOVERED: ARAB JOURNALISTS SCRUTINIZE THEIR PROFESSION

Negative perceptions of America in the Arab world should not be blamed on the Arab media; they are formed by what America is doing, especially in the occupation of Iraq. As someone told me two days ago, if you do not mention whether video footage is from Iraq or Palestine, and you just run clips back to back, many people would not be able to distinguish which bombing took place in Gaza, or Falluja or Samarra. The Arab media was not responsible for convincing the Pentagon to put America in this position. America's actions, not the Arab media, are responsible for the negative consequences on America's relationship with the Arab world.

The Arab media deserves a lot of criticism, and *al-Jazeera* deserves a lot of criticism. Not a month goes by without me writing a memo, or picking up the phone, or even having a fight with people there about issues on which we disagree. This vibrant discussion exists in the newsroom of any Arab media outlet, encompassing many different shades of opinion on the problems.

I agree with the analysis that when you obstruct Arab media from reporting, when they cannot get into Saudi, Bahrain, Tunisia, sometimes Algeria, or Egypt (if you cross its red lines), you are pushing Arab media instead of carrying news, to carry views. Thank God that people here in the US do not follow the advice of many of our colleagues who advocate shutting down *al-Jazeera*, or boycotting it, in order not to lend it credibility. *Al-Jazeera* still has people in the White House, the State Department, and the Pentagon who speak to the bureau in Washington DC, people who appear on *al-Jazeera* and make sure the US point of view is represented. They know they are talking to a credible media organization; they do not have to reinvent the wheel and find another Arab media outlet.

There are positive ways to answer *al-Jazeera*, and there are negative ways. *Al-Arabiyya* is a good answer to *al-Jazeera*, even if it is a Saudi-owned, all-news network. The idea was to get some of the people who founded *al-Jazeera* and try to construct the same model, with different red lines and different sensitivities, but not to do it as big as *al-Jazeera* has. In order to compete with *al-Jazeera*, you have to push the envelope, widen the margin of freedom. That is healthy competition, because it prevents *al-Jazeera* from retreating and covering up something that happened in Qatar, like the car bombing of some of the Chechen leaders that took place there.<sup>2</sup> If *al-Jazeera* does not broadcast that picture, *al-Arabiyya* will. Thus this dynamic really helps to prevent de-liberalization by *al-Jazeera*.

When the leader of the free world is encouraging Arab people to be free, and is promoting democracy and non-government intervention in the media, it really sets a negative example by contributing to a government-run station like *al-Hurra*. By creating *al-Hurra* as the "answer" to *al-Jazeera*, the US is telling the Arab world that to solve its problems, get the government-controlled media to answer more independent media. The US is trying to diminish a non-government-controlled media outlet that is modeled on the *BBC*, a public corporation.

The Internet now allows print media to have the same advantage that satellite television and "Voice of the Arabs" had—the ability to cross national boundaries. "Voice of the Arabs" used the new radio transistor, empowering people as far away as the mountains of Yemen to hear the broadcasts. The main message and achievement of "Voice of the Arabs" was national liberation against colonialism. It started in 1954 and after about 15 years, colonialism was finished in the entire Arab world. There was certainly exaggeration in the message, which was revealed as a fallacy in 1967. But *al-Jazeera* learned an important



lesson: that technology can be used to cross national boundaries and prevent government censors from restricting newspapers or articles. This lesson is wonderful. It was the first thing “Voice of the Arabs” accomplished, to be followed by achieving national liberation and reawakening pan-Arabism in the Arab world. Without it, we would have had much greater division. “Voice of the Arabs” reinforced the idea that Arabs have one common enemy, European colonialism, which we should fight despite our differences, and eventually the station achieved that goal.

*Al-Jazeera* satellite television entered into an environment that previously had only broadcast television. In the old environment, the state’s ruler would control the message. But satellite television allowed people to watch from across borders; rulers could stop journalists or offices from being in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Bahrain, or Egypt, but they could not stop satellite signals. Satellite signals cannot be jammed. The only way to prevent *al-Jazeera* from reaching its audience was demonstrated in Algeria. When an ex-general was to reveal allegations about the Algerian military’s use of death squads in the civil war, after failing to pressure the station to stop the show, the Algerian government cut off the electricity from the capital and many other cities during the show’s broadcast, from 9pm to 11pm. This is the maximum that can be done.

The Internet now allows print media to go online, so *al-Hayat*, the *Daily Star*, *al-Quds al-Arabi*, and others can be read regardless of censorship. Some countries are trying to block these sites, but they have not succeeded. The Internet is now the vehicle for carrying ugly and horrible images of beheadings of hostages. Thank God that *al-Jazeera*, *al-Arabiyya* and others are censoring these videos, by broadcasting about a one-minute clip out of the whole thing. *Al-Jazeera* never broadcast a beheading of a person; these images are on the Internet instead.

Everyone, on both sides, is trying to use and politicize the media. When *al-Jazeera* carries President Bush’s news conferences, he warns that America’s enemies are “thugs and animals,” and that the US would kill them. Even Senator Edwards is talking about finding and killing these people without any trial or process to prove their guilt. This kind of political discourse happens on both sides; both are using the media for political purposes. It is up to the media to decide what is newsworthy and to find ways to avoid being used.

Do not blame everything on the media and *al-Jazeera*; we have to serve our audience and tell the truth. The truth is that the American policy is wrong, and that its policy regarding the Middle East is causing all that anger. These media outlets are market-driven, and they are going to reflect what the audience cares about. The audience cares about two occupations, military intervention in their own land, in Iraq and Palestine. Of course they don’t care about a new sewage system or power plant in Iraq. You’ve never heard *CNN* or *Fox News* reporting that ten babies were born in Baghdad today; you hear that ten people were killed in Baghdad. That is the nature of the media, the nature of the beast.

## Conclusion: Michael C. Hudson

Having listened to the spirited debate among our four distinguished media guests at the conference and now having read the transcript of their remarks (ably edited by our graduate student David DeBartolo), I am struck both by the areas of agreement and disagreement. All four participants seem implicitly to assume that the Arab world at this juncture is in a state of flux, if not crisis. In their different ways they all accept the growing power of the media in a changing Arab region and in the global information economy: the media are proliferating in a rather chaotic manner. But again in their different ways, they all feel that the Arab media are some distance away from the highest standards of competence, capability and professionalism.

The Arab media, according to Thomas Gorguissian, is a “big *souk*.” The relations between the media and government are murky. Commercialization advances hand in hand with ideological agendas. Bin Laden would seem to have a media strategy as well thought out as those of the Saudi and Egyptian media moguls. Rami Khouri, while praising the professionalism of *al-Jazeera*, still has many reservations about the ability and the will of the media to address the roots of power in the Arab region. Where, one might ask, are the investigative journalists? And what happens to the few that dare to probe the citadels of authority? Compared to his fellow panelists, Salama Nematt is brutal in his critique, insisting that the Arab media is doing a worse job than it did in the 1950s and 1960s: “the trend in the pan-Arab media today is basically the consolidation of power of Arab autocracies, dictatorships, and corrupt regimes.” His attack on *al-Jazeera*, which mirrors that of the Bush Administration, is vigorously contested by *al-Jazeera’s* Hafez Al-Mirazi, who derides those “pots that call the kettle black” and who insists that the Arab media are not responsible for America’s bad reputation in the region.

As a more-than-casual observer of the Arab media scene, I found the debate—both the light and the heat—here at Georgetown University genuinely illuminating. I wasn’t persuaded by Mr. Nematt’s most severe criticism, but he and the others were certainly right to remark on the failings of the fast-growing Arab media. As we watch the development in the Arab media, a little comparative perspective may be helpful: recall the unruly and sometimes outrageous history of the media in the United States and Europe. Indeed, one is reminded of the torrent of criticism and self-criticism of the American media business today. The media in the Arab world—warts and all—are now coming of age. They have the possibility of playing a guiding role in the larger social and political transformation of the region. ■

[Endnotes]

<sup>1</sup> During live television coverage after the death of Hafez Al-Assad and the father-to-son succession of Bashar Al-Assad, Ibrahim suggested how such a succession might take place in Egypt.

<sup>2</sup> Zalmakhan Yandarbiev, the ex-President of Chechnya, was assassinated in a car bomb explosion in Doha, Qatar on February 13, 2004. Yandarbiev was living in exile in Doha.





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