

How Liberal is Soft Authoritarianism when Compared to Democracy? Arab and Western Media Systems Typologies

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Paper Presented at the
Arab Media Symposium:
Information Evolution in the Arab World
Georgetown University, Washington, DC
22 March 2010

Since the 1990s we have been witnessing the emergence of dynamic public spheres as a result of partly liberalized autocracies in many Arab countries. The Al-Jazeera network is the best known of hundreds of new electronic media in various segments of radio, TV and the Internet. Of course, most Arab countries still do not have democratic political systems, except, perhaps, for Lebanon. Nevertheless, of all the basic features of democracy – free elections, parties and opinion – media freedom seems to be the most vibrant and dynamic in the Arab world. Classical transformation theory has never granted the media a prominent place. Media were thought to follow rather than to lead democracy (McConnell/Becker 2002), and it is still true that changes in the media sector alone cannot transform political systems. However, we might still live in an era of a “communicative turn” of historical dimensions: Arab media and, with them, Arab political culture are developing faster today than any of the Arab political systems.

Last time the West witnessed such a transformation was during the period of the European Reformation. Enabled by the communicative revolution of the Gutenberg press, the large scale circulation of publications during the Reformation spread all over Europe and undermined the existing power structures in religion as well as in politics. No doubt, the European Reformation was an explosive period that accelerated turmoil and wars for centuries. Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli or Thomas Müntzer were radicals – another parallel to today’s Arab world (Hafez 2010). Modern day Islamists are among the best media tacticians. They were early adopters of the Internet and of satellite TV as means to spread their often highly symbolic activities. What distinguishes today’s Arab countries from Reformation Europe is that they are hybrids of various historical processes. While the Muslim world reveals traits of religious reformation, it has already begun with processes that happened much later in Europe: industrialization, proto-democratization and even consumerist post-democratization.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that we are witnessing a communicative turn in the sense that developments in the media sector and in the public sphere hurry ahead of changes in political systems. There is no comparison in this sense between, for example, Nasserist hard authoritarianism where people were afraid to speak out and Egypt’s current media situation where critical coverage of the government is widespread. One important indicator of the new epoch is that most Arabs are supporting democratic changes to their political systems, long

before electoral systems are introduced in their countries (Esposito/Mogahed 2007). Political scientists until recently considered such changes in political culture late developments of political transformation that only occur *after* the introduction of electoral democracies and “education programmes”. Constellations whereby political culture develops faster than political systems are a clear indicator for a change in political dynamics. It is not the political regimes and likely elites but civil societies and the media that have taken over the lead in societal and political transitions that might not be indicative of short-term but of long-term changes even in political systems.

But what does all this mean for Arab media studies? Clearly the most famous media systems classification, the “Four Theories of the Press”, first published by Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm during the Cold War (Siebert et al. 1963) and still widely used especially in Anglo-American academia, needs to be revised. In their classical typology Siebert et al. divided the world mainly into democratic and authoritarian media systems.¹ Democratic systems, they argued, allow freedom of opinion while authoritarian systems do not. Democratic systems develop a public sphere while authoritarian systems introduce censorship. Democratic systems develop a communicative link between government and the people as a means of legitimizing power between elections while authoritarian systems exert arbitrary power; they propagate rather than deliberate. They rule in the interest of elites insensitive to the thoughts of ordinary people. Therefore it seems that democracies have solved the problems of empowering the silent majorities while authoritarian systems have not.

This ideal typology of national media systems is still valid to a certain degree, but it must be updated. With the advent of new media technologies and transnational forms of mass communication the world-wide situation has changed. The “Four Theories” were developed during the Cold War, when the confrontation between Western-style democracies and Soviet-style autocracies was clear-cut. Today many authoritarian systems have been partly liberalized while Western democratic systems are developing traits of authoritarian systems that are captured by theoreticians of the so-called “post-democracy” (Crouch 2004); just remember the propagandist lies of the George W. Bush government during the war in Iraq 2003 or the restrictions of civil liberties during the “war against terror”. Many differences still exist between Western and other democracies and non-Western autocracies, but they are not as clear-cut as they used to be. It seems obvious that the above mentioned “communicative turn” is under way in large parts of the Arab world.

New complexities are better captured by media typologies for the Arab world and for the Middle East that have been developed by various scholars over the past decades. In his well-known book “Arab Mass Media” William A. Rugh differentiated between different types of Arab press which he considered to be, by and large, linked to respective features of national media systems: the mobilization press (Syria, Libya, Sudan, pre-2003 Iraq), the loyalist press (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, UAE, Palestine), diverse print media (Lebanon, Kuwait, Morocco, Yemen) and the transitional system of print media (Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria) (Rugh 2004). Only recently Jabbar Audah al-Obaidi developed quite similar categories and distinguished between mobilization, conservative, democratic and semi-democratic or emerging media patterns (al-Obaidi 2007). The most obvious progress found within these typologies, when compared to Siebert et al., is that national media systems are no longer confronted with the forced choice of being *either* autocratic *or* democratic. Instead they can be considered to be “transitional” or “emerging”, somewhat “mixed” we could say. While such perspectives are certainly closer to reality, these categories are still

¹ Siebert et al. distinguish more precisely between authoritarian, libertarian, Soviet and social responsibility theories of the press.

what I would call container typologies², because whole national media systems are lumped under very vague terms. The challenge is to identify the exact features qualifying media systems as being “transitional”.

More promising is the typology developed by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini for media systems in Europe and North America (Hallin/Mancini 2004). It is probably the most widespread taxonomy in comparative media systems nowadays, with a certain tendency to be applied to other world areas outside the realm of Western democracies, for instance to Asia and/or individual Arab countries like Egypt.³ Despite the fact that Hallin and Mancini’s typology deals with democratic countries and does not fit easily to authoritarian or transitional states, the great advantage is the relative sophistication of the categories and their historical and theoretical derivations. Despite the fact that Hallin and Mancini limit their interest to the West, their complex argumentation invites in-depth cross-cultural comparison in search of the various roles media play in modern nation states. It is probably the best approach to the question: “How liberal are contemporary Arab media?”

Of course, applying the categories of Hallin and Mancini to the Arab world, for instance, is merely a first step in a longer process of theorizing Arab Media Studies (Hafez 2008a). For those social scientists who, in the tradition of Max Weber and others, believe that the development of theoretical categories is unavoidable for scholarly work, universalizing Western theories is a first step in a search for *appropriate* categories. While the central aim of this paper is to make use of Hallin and Mancini’s work for a better understanding of the Arab world, a final chapter will discuss whether it is necessary to go beyond their work in order to avoid ethnocentric biases of theory building.

I. State Interventionism

David Hallin and Paolo Mancini operate with four major criteria, which are used to identify commonalities and differences between national Western media systems:

- State interventionism
- Political parallelism
- Media industries
- Professionalization.

In the end, the authors discern three large patterns within Western media systems that can be grouped according to the criteria:

- the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model
- the North/Central European or Democratic Corporatist Model
- the North Atlantic or Liberal Model.

In what follows, the criteria and media patterns will be introduced step-by-step and discussed with regard to their relevance for the Arab world.

The first criterion – state interventionism – covers the degree to which elected governments have a legal impact on democratic media systems. Hallin and Mancini argue that state interventionism is usually very low key in the US where the private media dominate

² The term „container theory“ is borrowed from Ulrich Beck, who used it in a different sense in his critique on nation state approaches (Beck 1997, 49).

³ Cf. Khamis 2009. For more information see the conference programme of the International Communication Association, Chicago 2009, Section 5232, <http://www.icaheadq.org/conferences/2009/confprg.asp>.

markets, but growing in Central and North Europe with their large public broadcasting corporations. It tends to be strongest in Mediterranean European countries where, for instance in Spain and Italy, directors of public broadcasting stations are hired and fired by prime ministers, while governmental influence in North and Central Europe is mostly indirectly applied through the various boards of public broadcasters. Such classification seems by and large correct although a number of questions remain, for instance: How does Great Britain with the large BBC fit into the scheme of a liberal, privatized transatlantic model? Is the indirect influence of governments on Central and European public broadcasters really less effective than the direct influence exerted by figures like Silvio Berlusconi? How liberal is a system like that of the US, which, by introducing the Patriotic Act for example, limited some of the media's freedom as specified in the First Amendment of the Constitution?

While in the West media systems are not completely liberalized, intervening governments are at least democratically elected and their interference is guided by laws, rules and regulations. This seems to be the major difference to most Arab countries, where authoritarian governments are defining the "red lines" that might be crossed by journalists. However, these red lines are not so fixed any more. The characteristic of soft authoritarian countries – mainly those countries that William Rugh listed above as hosting either "diverse" or "transitional" media systems – is not only that more can be said, but that what can be said is also increasingly unclear. There is, of course, still a deep gulf to be crossed between the West and the Arab world, where the "public" media sector is really a state media sector and the private media basically have to be loyalist in order to survive. At the same time, a major trend of reduction or at least "civilization" of state intervention can be discerned. It is as if Arab governments and societies in countries like Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria have started to observe each other, to react to each other and to bargain with each other, which is a sign of proto-democracy. Arab governments in some countries have closed information ministries. They have adopted TV-friendly modes of conduct (Sakr 2007). Punishments against journalists are rather low-key compared to the past. Relations between media and the state are not static any more, but both spheres coexist in a flexible equilibrium of sometimes increasing and sometimes decreasing autonomy. That many Arab media systems are "transitional" therefore means that not only the dichotomy between democratic and authoritarian media systems, which was introduced by Siebert et al., is increasingly blurred, but that the state has lost part of its capacity to define media policies, which have shifted from top-down-control to some kind of informal, hard to define but culturally accepted "bargaining situation". Media policies are the net sum of a state's desire to define red lines and the media's and the people's constant efforts to extend the realm of freedom of opinion.

There is a certain insecurity about the size of the media system(s) in the Arab world. Media system typologies based on the nation state approach, like that of Hallin and Mancini, are confronted with a regional speciality: other than large parts of Europe, Arabic speaking North Africa and the Middle East form a geo-linguistic entity (Hafez 2007). But what are the implications? Egyptian scholar Sahar Khamis argues that Arab governments can no longer risk withholding information, because it would be immediately accessible across Arab borders (Khamis 2009). I am more sceptical here. The transnational Arab public sphere represented by television networks such as the famous Al-Jazeera tends to be superficial. Those media rarely cover nationally or locally relevant issues. The handful of transnational news networks are overburdened by the task of compensating for limitations that exist in more than twenty Arab countries (Hafez 2006). Therefore, the further development of national media systems will be decisive for the liberalization and democratization of the Arab media sphere.

II. Political Paralellism

The second criterion for Hallin and Mancini's media systems typology is "political parallelism". In essence, it captures the co-evolution of media and political parties or political ideologies. Hallin and Mancini describe Western democratic media as a continuing emancipation from narrow political perspectives, with the US centrist liberal model at the top, the North and Central European ideological orientation of the press as the middle ground and the Mediterranean European orientation towards specific parties as reminiscent of earlier Western European stages of the party press. For instance, in Germany between the World Wars newspapers were usually oriented towards political parties, and it was only after the Second World War that, despite still favouring certain ideological world views – left, liberal, conservative etc., – the press emancipated itself from parties and political players. In the US centrist model even ideological differences are said to vanish behind the liberal-commercial orientations of the press.

Of course, as with all typologies, a considerable number of exceptions seem to challenge the categories. In the US, for example, the so-called "centrist" or liberal model of the press is very often limited to mainstream views, mostly reflected by the Democratic or Republican Parties, while alternative views that could indeed be part of the more ideological European press are seldom covered. Britain, which Hallin and Mancini consider part of the transatlantic liberal model is more like Central Europe in the sense that political orientations are quite elaborate in the British press. Also, Central and Northern European newspapers sometimes still show party affiliations, especially during elections when many of them get close to voting recommendations. In sum, the differences with respect to political parallelism do certainly exist, but they are not as clear-cut as the authors sometimes seem to suggest.

What is the situation in the Arab world, especially in the transitional, soft authoritarian states? In those countries not only the state and official press flourishes, but also a vibrant party press. In a recent analysis of Egyptian media, for example, the party press was described as being more successful than the political parties themselves (Richter 2010). Egypt is also host to newspapers that are developing a "centrist" quality, like the upcoming Al-Masri al-Yaum, which prides itself of representing all sorts of political viewpoints. Press-party parallelism in contemporary Arab countries is reminiscent of earlier Western developments, for example, those evident in 1920's Germany, where a multiplicity of political parties and movements existed, often one-person-parties, and all sorts of more or less radical views were circulated. We should not belittle these phenomena and argue that the Arab party press, in particular, is biased and not neutral enough, because such phases "opinion press" grow rapidly are really important for the political processes of early democracies. One reason why transformation theoreticians in most cases do not value the media very highly is because they are not political actors (McConnell/Becker 2002). We might discuss whether existing groups and parties in the Arab world are really mature enough, whether existing parties are the ones the countries need to sustain political development (Hegasy 2000). Yet we definitely need a close link between parts of the media and civil society. Lebanon has been criticized for the fact that most TV networks show group affiliation (Nötzold 2009). However, I would like to point out that developing countries need organized groups and parties to oppose governments. Social and political networks on the Internet might outnumber party websites and the party print media, but especially the case of Iran shows the weakness of purely Web based "2.0" revolutions. For the political process therefore, the further development and stabilization of political parties and their media seems vital.

Of course, media-party parallelism is not sufficient, and therefore centrist media like Al-Masri Al-Yaum or Al-Jazeera are positive signs that, while still in an early phase of public political debate, Arab countries are increasingly able to develop much more pluralist and balanced media. What might be missing in the Arab world today is the ideologically oriented, but politically (more or less) independent press as it exists in North and Central Europe or in England. Those media often reveal heavy biases in their reports, but their advantage is that

political arguments are embedded in a more stable and differentiated culture of political interpretation. As a European reader one really misses a certain depth and variety within political argument in the standard US press, and I also miss that in Arab papers. Europe is certainly also witnessing a post-ideological trend in the European media these days, where the differences between right, liberal and left views are melting away. But such trends, as important they might be for consensus orientation in societies, are also regrettable since the press in particular, which is an elitist medium in the Arab world more than anywhere else, has an intellectual role to play. The press should not be limited to being either a political party hub or a commercial centrist asset.

III. Media Industries and Markets

In their well-known book “Comparing Media Systems” Hallin and Mancini contrast private US media with the dual systems (private/public) in North and Central Europe. Public corporatism here differs from public corporatism in the Mediterranean countries, because there, as was already mentioned, state influence in the corporations is at least more obvious. Hallin and Mancini continue to argue that these differences in ownership correspond with very different market sizes, especially in the the press sector, where circulation numbers are much smaller in the Mediterranean area than they are in both North America and North and Central Europe. This means that the differentiation between the private transatlantic model and the dual North/Central and Mediterranean model must be further refined by highlighting a cleavage between a press friendly North America and North/Central Europe on the one hand and a press unfriendly Southern Europe on the other hand (a phenomenon which could also be extended to Turkey: a country, Hallin and Mancini neglect). In the final analysis, the US seems characterized by large private newspaper and broadcasting industries, because historically markets for both media segments have been huge. In North and Central Europe likely market conditions exist, although the state and societal institutions exert more influence through public broadcasting corporations. In Mediterranean countries, except maybe for France, the rivalry between state and private capital is largely confined to the broadcasting sector since the (often still party-oriented) press has a very limited readership.

In many Arab countries governments since the 1990s have allowed private capital to enter media markets in order to remain competitive in the face of transnational competition, above all in the satellite TV sector (Guaaybess 2001). However, the state remains the dominant player in most countries, at least in broadcasting. In countries like Egypt most TV channels are still state financed; governments have the biggest share in the upcoming “media cities” etc. Lebanese dominance of private media capital seems exceptional, while even in Saudi Arabia nominally “private” media capital is often related to the Saudi ruling family. Altogether, good preconditions for the future development of dual systems like those in Europe seem to exist. Of course, such systems might only emerge after democratization when the chances might be high to transform state media investment into public corporations. Some experts could argue for a more radical privatization, meaning that Arab media should orient towards the US model. In the current situation of soft authoritarianism in many Arab countries privatization would certainly add to continuing pluralism within Arab national media systems. However, privatization is not a *guarantee* for pluralism, because much of the Arab media capital is “loyalist” to the state. Already William Rugh pointed to the fact that private capital does not necessarily support pluralism, media freedom or democracy, but may support the authoritarian state as long as such regimes allow for a certain degree of commercial freedom. A comparison with Latin America indicates that private media can be helpful in turning autocracies into electoral democracies, but that it has a tendency to turned into media monopolies, which, as is the case in many Latin American countries today, can have an

unhealthy influence on the consolidation of democracies (Flemes 2001). For the moment I think more privatization in the Arab world might be helpful. The future, however, lies with dual systems.

With respect to the size of markets, the basic situation of many Arab countries seems to be comparable to that of the Southern European countries. The press is a rather elitist medium with mostly moderate circulation numbers. Nevertheless, as the example of European Mediterranean shows, this is not necessarily a disadvantage for the process of democratization. Also in times of the Internet many people read the “press on Web”, which makes the newspaper circulation figures in the Arab world less reliable. In any case, the possible culturalist argument that modest newspaper circulation figures are an indicator for backward modernization can be rebutted using Southern Europe as an example. Despite high illiteracy rates in some states, development indicators in the Arab world in the fields of media and education (for example, the number of university degrees) fluctuate somewhere between the low level of South Asia and the far better situation in Turkey or Eastern Europe.⁴

IV. Professionalization

Hallin and Mancini argue that the freedom North American and North and Central European media enjoy is partly the result of journalistic professionalism, which serves as a prerequisite for autonomy. The indicators for professionalism are: the advanced state of journalistic ethics, ethical self-regulation through press councils etc., and a long tradition of journalistic training and education. In Central and Northern Europe, the authors maintain, journalists complain less about editors’ interventions in newsroom affairs than in the US and in the Mediterranean countries (Hallin/Mancini 2004, 174). In Southern Europe, the argument continues, journalistic professionalism is less developed and journalistic cultures do not adhere to a strict division between fact and opinion. Journalism, it seems, tends to be essayistic in style and, often as a result of the political party orientation, especially of the press, rather opinionated.

Historically this argument might be valid, but it is really almost impossible to empirically substantiate such differences in professionalism for contemporary Western journalism. For many reasons, I tend to think that the argument is outdated and the vision of the mass media in the US, England and Central/North Europe as being more neutral and objective tends to be stereotypical. Firstly, objectivity in texts is hard to measure and systematic comparative content analysis across the countries of North America and Europe has never been done. The empirical basis for such a distinction in quality is weak and almost left to scholarly intuition. Secondly, in the US, the supposed homeland of journalistic professionalism, ethical self-regulation is rather weakly institutionalized when compared to Europe. Press councils, for example, that exist in most European countries are unknown to the US. Thirdly, Mediterranean journalism has made great advances in ethics, training and professionalism since the democratization of such countries as Portugal, Spain and Greece. In essence, I would argue that professionalization *really is* a distinctive feature of Western journalism that is intrinsically related to the ideas of ethical self-control and freedom from external influences, but that this is by and large valid for all Western countries and not only for the US, and Western, Northern and Central Europe.

Comparing the situation with the Arab world, it is interesting to see that a recent study involving Egyptian journalists (Ramaprasad/Hamdy 2006) showed that the order of values held by Egyptian journalists is

⁴ See Telecommunication Indicators of the International Telecommunication Union.

- 1.) support for the Arab community and loyalty to readers/viewers;
- 2.) the promotion of democracy: this dimension includes many of the characteristics that can be defined as core elements of objective journalism, e.g. accuracy of reporting, incorporation of society's views and a critical assessment of government policies;
- 3.) loyalty to governments.

It is obvious that democratic journalistic values like pluralism, objectivity and giving people a voice are already very strong in Arab journalism. Codes of ethics such as the one used by Al-Jazeera contain many, if not all the decisive values that are principle to Western journalism ethics: the search for truth, objectivity, and features like the right to privacy, which many codes contain (Hafez 2002). At the same time, the importance Arab journalists ascribe to their governments is clearly decreasing. Propagandist and "mobilizational" media approaches are less and less well supported. State orientation, however, is being replaced by community orientation, which is clearly expressed in the ethical code of Al-Jazeera, for instance (Hafez 2008b). As long as "community" and "objectivity" are congruent such orientation toward civil society is a valuable move towards reinforcing pluralism in Arab media. But support for community and objectivity can also collide, for example, in times of international conflict, when many Arab media tend to be heavily biased in favour of the "Arab cause" (Hafez 2006).

When reflecting on Western and Arab media ethics, one has to consider commonalities and differences. During the Iraq war in 2003, for example, mainstream US journalism showed a heavy community bias, despite all the rhetoric concerning objectivity: The real problem today might not be, as at the time of the creation of Siebert et al.'s "Four Theories of the Press", that journalists in autocratic countries like in the Arab world hold values that are distinctive when compared to the West, but that both Western and Arab journalistic cultures are prone to nationalist temptations and biased coverage of world affairs at times of severe crisis. Once Western journalism really starts to consider its ill-reflected community biases, it might come to the conclusion that contemporary journalism has come to a "dead end" and that many of the old professional values have to be substantially globalized to meet present day challenges.

Arab journalism has advanced also with regard to other criteria Hallin and Mancini introduced for professionalism. In many Arab countries professional training and education, very often taught at universities, are flourishing (Pies 2008). In particular, women are taking advantage of a career in journalism (Sakr 2004). Thus in terms of ethics and professional standards journalism in many Arab countries has progressed enormously over the past two decades. The professional gap between Western and Arab journalism is being increasingly closed.

However, at the same time it seems that greater professionalism is only weakly related to more media freedom. We have no clear research on newsroom independence and political and/or political intervention. Intuitively one would assume that, with the exception of the flagships of New Arab journalism like Al-Jazeera or well-known commentators working for the major media, most common Arab media are still more vulnerable to political pressure than their Western counterparts. Important institutions of journalistic self-regulation like press councils or journalism associations and trade unions are still by and large controlled by governments (Vogt 2003). Nevertheless, improving professionalism is an important asset for modern-day Arab journalism to bargain the "red lines" of what can be published (see above: Ch. I).

V. Media Systems in the Arab World: Beyond Hallin and Mancini?

Arab media in transitory countries like Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Yemen and Morocco share many features with the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model of Hallin and Mancini. State intervention in the media sector is, of course, still stronger since those countries, perhaps with the exception of Lebanon, are not yet effective democracies. However, political pluralism is as clearly visible as in Southern Europe and probably more than in Central and Northern Europe where the traditional party press has almost vanished, giving way to ideological or even post-ideological (centrist) media, which are also developing in Arab countries. As in Southern Europe, Arab newspaper markets are usually small and elitist; a fact that surely differentiates the Arab world and the whole Mediterranean from the rest of Northern and Central Europe as well as from England and the US, but which is not necessarily a disadvantage for national development, especially not in times in which the Internet is increasingly penetrating societies. Historically, journalistic professionalism was as underdeveloped in the Arab world as it was in the European Mediterranean area. But professionalism is clearly on the move in Arab media which might comprise one of the most modernized sectors within Arab societies these days.

Having summarized some of our findings based on the Hallin and Mancini model, we need to reassess the applicability of the model itself. Media system typologies tend to be controversial. Their dichotomous logic according to which whole countries are categorized as being “either” this “or” that is provocative since it reduces internal complexities that exist in all countries. Moreover, typologies are contested because the categories *themselves* – the criteria on which every systematization is based – will always be open to debate. The reasons for more profound critique are manifold, but disputes reflect two major problems:

- the theoretical fit of media typologies;
- the cultural fit of media theory.

Much can be criticized about the way Hallin and Mancini theorized the media. For example, it seems rather dubious as to whether in the 21st century media systems can be reduced to classical journalism, ignoring the changes in public spheres due to the spread of the Webs 1.0 and 2.0. Of course, modern theories of the public sphere, like that of Habermas, were written before the Internet came into existence, and so far the Internet has not been convincingly integrated. Efforts that were made under the headlines of the Information- or Network Society (Castells 1996 ff.) or Virtual Community (Rheingold 1993) have not managed to explain the role of the Internet for democracy. Despite all the publications on the subject, the question remains as to what exactly the role of the Internet in democracies is other than to reinforce existing systems’ functions. Since everybody, governments, traditional mass media and private individuals alike, can be present on the Internet, it is hard to define specific political functions of the Web. This is probably why Hallin and Mancini chose to leave the Internet out of the scheme.

Another possible critique is that Hallin and Mancini never really captured the so-called “post-democracy” developments. Naming media systems like that of the US “liberal” ignores the fact that Western media systems can, at times, be highly illiberal; just remember the US media’s patriotic rallying during the early Iraq war. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Sheldon S. Wolin of Princeton University suggests that an “inverted totalitarianism” is gaining momentum in the United States (Wolin 2008). In contrast to classical authoritarianism, the author asserts, in this system of rule democratic institutions are not smashed but hollowed out. Freedom of opinion *and* propagandistic manipulation of the media by governments (“weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq) is the sign of a democracy managed by small elites. Media typologies like that of Hallin and Mancini are certainly much too static to capture the “ups” and “downs” of liberalism in Western countries and the dynamic relations between politics, media and the public.

Finally, Hallin and Mancini's theoretical base can be contested as being too firmly rooted in Western political experience. This, of course, is not much of a critique of Hallin and Mancini, who deliberately limited themselves to Western countries. The question remains, however, whether their model can "travel" to other parts of the non-Western world since many relevant processes like nation-building, which by and large have already been settled in the West, are highly relevant in other parts of the world. When "travelling", Hallin and Mancini's model will surely have to be adapted to the political and social realities of the respective countries, meaning that categories like state intervention, political parallelism, markets or professionalism must be supplemented by more criteria that characterize the relationship between media, politics and society in Arab countries.

But is the need for the re-adaptation and fine-tuning of the Hallin and Mancini model an argument against the universality of the model as such? Khamis, for example, suggests that because Hallin and Mancini's assessment is based on a distinct European history of multi-party development, industrialization, commercialization etc., we should "avoid the temptation to over-generalize it as a widely applicable model to other countries or regions around the world" (Khamis 2009). And she continues to opt for "culturally-sensitive" media systems that remain "within various regions". Long before Khamis, several Arab and Iranian scholars pointed to the culturally distinct values and traditions of the Arab world that call for culturally distinct media theories and media typologies (see: Mellor 2005). Such fundamental rebuttal of Western theories has a long tradition, and it is of course rooted in much older debates on the unity and diversity of modernity/ies, on post-colonial identities, on Asian values, Arab or African nationalism etc.

What bothers me, however, is the question whether obvious differences in historical experience really lead to completely different theoretical models. If human experience is essentially different, how can we explain that we can, by and large, translate languages? How do we deal with the fact that processes like democratization or industrialization might first have occurred in certain areas of the world, but that they spread to other parts of the world? How can we explain the triumphal procession of Western media technologies throughout the world? And why do Arab media scholars today use Western theories and concepts like the public sphere, agenda setting etc. to explain media developments in their own countries?

Questions of universality and cultural difference are very old, but they are often based on an epistemological misunderstanding. Is what we perceive as "cultural otherness" not really a temporal and spatial variation of things that have happened in similar ways in other places in the world? For the observer, the state of affairs is neither entirely sealed off and comprehensible only in its own terms, nor is it simply a re-run of Western history, which in any case presents no uniform picture. Therefore, post-Orientalist comparative scholarship is conceptually open. It neither closes its mind to the specific nor the universal. It seeks to transfer Western theoretical knowledge to the East while at the same time instantly distrusting its own simplicity. It remains open to new theoretical approaches (Somjee 2002; Benhabib 2002).

In this sense, rather than reviving old fundamental debates on the universality or cultural distinctness of theory, one way of advancing in scholarship is to make use of Western models and adapt them. If in the course of such an exercise substantial theoretical alternatives come up, we will have to revise our views; so far, however, I can see no viable alternative to the so-called "Western" theories and models which are the most elaborate in political communication studies. Where is there an authentic Arab media theory today? Even those authors who criticize Western theory have nothing else to offer. Western models must certainly be made fit for adaptation. We need more historical sensitivity and a high degree of intercultural academic competence to make use of it. But for the moment, they define the standards of academia.

The issue of “religion” can be taken as an example here. It was argued that Hallin and Mancini forgot to conceptualize the role of religion. Did they really? Hallin and Mancini explain the differences in press orientation in the countries of the West – large readerships here, smaller ones there – with the protestant heritage of those countries that today have large newspaper circulations. The press, they say, came into existence on a battle ground of religious forces at the times of European Reformation. Rather than unjustly criticizing Hallin and Mancini for ignoring religion, a careful reading of their work shows that religion is intrinsically there as an important historical element influencing media development. In the Arab world today it might be justified to further upgrade the category of religion and the role of religious norms and institutions in media typologies.

Not only religion, but also other phenomena like oral political communication are not unknown to the West. Interesting enough, the “travelling” and adaptation of Western models can also help to make the West aware of the almost forgotten parts of its own media history or even of the underestimated aspects of contemporary Western media research. For example, it is my impression that non-mediated political communication – of politicians communicating on marketplaces and through various channels of interpersonal communication – although it is still vital and much practiced in the US as well as in Europe, is much less explored than mediated political communication.

The main problem of Arab media studies today is not the application of Western theories and models, but their superficial interpretation, which is often accompanied by very vague allegations concerning the cultural distinctiveness of the Arab and Muslim world. For cultural anthropologists, such attitudes might be acceptable. For social scientists, however, developing no categories that can be empirically tested is not a legitimate approach to theory.

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