

The Role of Media in the Arab World's Transformation Process

Kai Hafez

Introduction

In the Middle East, particularly in the Arab world, the notion of a powerful media sector has been welcomed by many observers. In the developed democracies of North America, Europe and Japan, high hopes regarding the media's role as watchdogs of government are usually rivaled by skeptical views of the media's susceptibility to power and commercial interests. In most Arab countries, which are still characterized by authoritarian rule and the stagnation of political development, more is expected of the media than in the postmodern western world. Will the media articulate the voices of society and break the political near-monopoly of the state? Questions like this have been dominating the Arab media discourse in recent years.

The advent of more than 200 new Arab satellite stations, the growth of the print media sectors in many countries and the younger generation's fascination for the media have helped a new public sphere to emerge in the Arab world. The foundation of the modern Arab nation-state after World War I has been followed, almost a century later, by the introduction of a media space that, however tendentious and restricted it might still be, allows for open debate on deep-seated taboos within Arab societies. Not only the now famous pan-Arab television network Al-Jazeera covers "hot issues"; regular programs such as Egyptian television soaps (so-called *musalsal*) also openly discuss sensitive topics like rape and the social stigmatization of women in Arab societies. Moreover, they debate politics now.

Many analysts from around the world are fascinated in particular by Arab satellite television's ability to demonstrate that Arab culture is not as hierarchical and traditional as many people had thought,

but rather encompasses a variety of viewpoints, ideologies and lifestyle-related world views from Nasserism to Islamism and from liberalism to neoconservatism. Without exaggeration, one can view Arab media as a balancing power to the other great mobilizing force of the last decades: political Islam. While Islamists seek to mobilize people through moral rigor, social networks and political organizations, the media have inspired people's minds through their liveliness, plurality and dynamics. The old idea that a "triangle of taboos"—politics, sex and religion—expresses Arab culture is outdated in the new media age. While religion is still sensitive, hedonism is an element of many Arab programs and it has become an acceptable part of life to debate politics.

From here it has been only been a small step for many observers to assume that Arab media are the vanguard of a democratic "revolution" and that they, especially their icon Al-Jazeera, are "rattling" authoritarian governments (el-Nawawy and Iskandar 2003; Mernissi 2007). Arab media almost seem like a replacement for political parties (Hafez 2006)—expressing what people think, especially about politics, molding public opinion on urgent questions of modernization, sometimes activating the "Arab street" for political demonstrations and at times even influencing the behavior of Arab regimes (Lynch 2006).

However, are Arab media actually that powerful? Can the mass media really be considered the counterparts of a social movement like political Islam? The following contribution will debate the rapid development of Arab media from the perspective of political transformation. The coming into existence of a public sphere does not indicate that all necessary preconditions for political transformation from authoritarianism to democracy are fulfilled. From a theoretical point of view, the media show varying potential to contribute to political change within various types and phases of transformation. However, in all possible situations, the mass media are not primary political actors but rather mediators between the government, the opposition and the people. For the Arab media to be successful in catalyzing change, it is vital that they maintain relations with the political opposition and civil society, and their interaction with political cultures influences the formation of democratic attitudes and values.

The Emergence of the New Arab Public Sphere

Comparative research has revealed that political transformation can be achieved in different ways. Wolfgang Merkel, for example, discerns five different modes of system change (Merkel 1999: 129 ff.):

- *Slow evolution*—the English model of democratization over hundreds of years;
- *Self-induced regime change*—“reform from above” as in the case of Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies in the Soviet Union;
- *Enforced regime change*—revolutionary changes, for instance, in France in 1789 or in Iran in 1978–1979;
- *Regime collapse*—a sudden loss of power experienced by authoritarian regimes, mostly through external intervention as in Iraq in 2003;
- *Negotiated system change*—“reform from below” that is achieved through pressure from strong opposition groups, parties and movements that have the capacity to engage with an authoritarian regime, that establish pacts and alliances within the ranks of the opposition, and that are able to force the regime to introduce political change, as happened in many cases in southern Europe and South America in the 1970s and 1980s.

From a historical perspective, negotiated system change has not only been one of the most successful ways of instigating democratization (Karl and Schmitter 1991: 281), it has also been a scenario in which the mass media, small media and all sorts of non-mediated political communication have played a decisive role. While revolutions and regime collapses are mostly short-lived phenomena where various forces try to control media environments for means of propaganda, negotiated system change involves various oppositional groups within a given state and society that seek to utilize the media for the dissemination of political alternatives and the mobilization of populations against regimes. The authoritarian governments’ near monopoly of public information must be gradually lifted in order to allow oppositional views to present themselves and their political alternatives and to enable active or passive mobilization of the population for political reform and transition.

For several reasons, mainstream transformation theory has never

considered major mass media as an avant-garde of democratization. First, transformation theoreticians believe that television, in particular, but also other large mass media, act according to the primacy of organizational goals. Politics or market forces seem to dominate the media, and the organization of the media constantly struggles for its own survival. Television in particular is an industrial process that can be easily controlled by the state (McConnell and Becker 2002).

While in principle it is true, as Patrick O'Neil has argued, that television in particular can galvanize people and is likely to have the largest mobilization effect, at least in the short run, authoritarian rule usually poses the most severe restrictions on the broadcasting sector (O'Neil 1998). Broadcasting is both relatively effective in mobilizing people and highly vulnerable to state intervention, because its extensive technical equipment requires structural centralization. Mass communication is an almost industrial process, which is the reason why small units—sometimes individuals such as dissidents, artists and writers—are sometimes more effective in opposing authoritarian rule than big media.

Second, the mass media have never been considered primary social actors. Rather they seem to be determined by actors like governments, lobbies or political parties. The classical and influential book *Four Theories of the Press*, by Friederick S. Siebert, Wilbur Schramm and Theodore Peterson, claimed that the media have always been shaped by their respective social and political structures, be these structures authoritarian or democratic in nature (Siebert, Schramm and Peterson 1956). It is only after a systemic transition to democracy occurs and electoral democracy is established that television is considered important for formulating the public agenda and representing civil society in a functioning democracy. Transformation theoreticians posit that mass media, television and the major print media are not as crucial in the authoritarian phase as certain dissidents, artists and other freedom fighters might be, and that it is only during the consolidation phase of democratic institutions and after system change is achieved (free elections, etc.) that the mass media are effective.

However, while some of these views on the media's role in political transformation—especially the notion that the media depend on a vibrant civil society and a functioning opposition—are still valid,

Arab media have also demonstrated that the theory must be reconsidered. Even though most Arab countries—perhaps with the exception of Lebanon—are ruled by authoritarian regimes, a vibrant public sphere has emerged in recent decades. The number of print media in countries like Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine and the Gulf states has grown tremendously.

National and transnational Arab television channels have multiplied to more than 200, and private sector broadcasting in particular has come up strong and bypassed the original state monopolies (Hafez 2001; Sakr 2001, 2007). While it is true that in certain types of totalitarian states like Tunisia, Syria, Iraq under Saddam Hussein and Saudi Arabia the media sector is still a highly censored and controlled appendix to the ruling regimes, in most other Arab countries a public sphere has emerged (Eickelman and Anderson 1999) that is not only impressive in quantitative terms but also has changed the basic character of public discourse from the propaganda model to a relatively open sphere.

Many political issues that were previously banned from open debate are covered by the media today, and Arab governments are criticized, although even in countries like Morocco, Egypt and Jordan certain limits must be accepted—for example, the supreme leader, be it the king or the president, is not to be criticized. Arab media systems are still far from being institutionalized and well-protected democratic systems. Media laws are often strict, putting severe constraints on journalists and media organizations.

However, if media content is much more politically vibrant and diverse in many Arab print and electronic media today than it was a decade ago, and if even under authoritarian rule a public sphere has started to emerge, then the argument of classical theory that the mass media are largely ineffective before democracy is introduced must be reconsidered. Is it feasible then, we have to ask, that the mass media could take a leading role in the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy and thereby help the Arab opposition to mobilize people for reform and the creation of an Arab democratic movement?

To answer this question, we must first consider why some Arab regimes have started to liberalize their media systems and let a diverse public sphere develop. Two main factors can be discerned. First, the fundamental character of authoritarian rule in Arab states

has changed in recent decades, leading from the “hard authoritarianism” of the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein to the “soft authoritarianism” of President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, King Abdallah of Jordan and Prime Minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria.

The post-totalitarian Arab state compensates for its loss of legitimacy, which is caused by growing poverty and social diseases that the state is unable to cope with, with greater tolerance toward the media. Only states that have the financial means to contain social crises, like Syria, Tunisia, and particularly Saudi Arabia and Libya, can still afford hard authoritarian or totalitarian styles of rule. In hard authoritarian systems like the former Soviet Union, small clandestine media (like the famous *Literaturnaya Gazeta*) are the only “free” media that can exist.

In soft authoritarian systems (like Morocco, for instance), a certain liberalization of the press and sometimes even television and radio is allowed. Even in soft authoritarian systems, the big media are prevented from posing a number of essential political questions concerning the future of the political system. The basic trait of the media policies of these Arab countries, however, is a carrot-and-stick approach that allows for significant freedom within a new public sphere while retaining certain “red lines” as to what constitutes legitimate or legal reporting.

Second, transnational media access in the Arabic-speaking world, which stretches from the Maghreb to the Mashreq and the Persian Gulf, has undercut all efforts to create sealed-off, fully controlled national media realms. Since it became almost impossible to control access to television from beyond individual state borders, the liberalization of Arab media has been an almost natural consequence, even though different media policies have been adopted in Arab countries.

While soft authoritarian countries like Egypt spurred liberalization and privatization in the broadcasting sector to be able to cope with pan-Arab broadcasters like Al-Jazeera, which offered a new form of politically diverse and critical programming, hard authoritarian countries like Syria had to tolerate spillovers from other Arab countries and the spread of satellite dishes without diversifying their internal media sector on a significant scale. Classical pan-Arabism brought the Arab peoples wars against Israel and the West during

the period spanning the end of World War II through the 1970s. Today satellite television represents a new pan-Arab dimension that offers new programs and better political information (Hafez 2006).

These and other factors have contributed to the emergence of the new Arab public sphere. But while the traditional view of the public as a result rather than the cause of political transformation seems outdated at first glance, we must be careful not to overstate the point. The emergence of a public sphere is not necessarily identical with a situation in which the media spearhead a national political transformation that results in reform from below or negotiated system change.

It is important to remember that classical theory was skeptical of the media not only because they were deemed to be easily controlled—a situation which, as demonstrated above, is not absolutely true in today's media world—but also because the media are not primary social and political actors. Even though special branches of Western media theory, such as the civic journalism approach, would like to transform the media into such actors (Rosen 1999), today's large industrial mass media—i. e., the press, radio and broadcasting—are mostly organizations *sui generis* whose primary task in society is to provide “objective” and useful information about political actors, ideas and processes, not to replace political parties and movements.

From the perspective of media theory, it is legitimate to ask the media to abandon the role of neutral observer and to actively advocate political change and democratization in order to protect themselves and enhance media freedom (Hafez 2006). Yet it is difficult to conceive how the media can be real oppositional policymakers.

Mass Media and System Change—the Missing Link to Civil Society

Negotiated system change is never achieved by the media alone. The public sphere is merely a means to enhance interaction among various oppositional groups and connect the opposition with civil society in order to influence public opinion and mobilize support. Whether

system change by any kind of reform from below can be successful depends not only on the media but also on a number of other factors:

- the development of stable opposition groups and parties;
- alliances and cooperation among different opposition groups;
- protection of the opposition by so-called “strategic groups” among the ruling elites (Schubert, Tetzlaff and Vennewald 1994) that are supportive of political change.

In the Arab world, all these ingredients for system change are currently deficient. First, the sole functioning opposition in many Arab countries is the Islamist camp, which uses traditional religion as a protective shield against regimes. Secular opposition has been successfully oppressed in many Arab countries, and the remnants of such movements often suffer from a poor image among Arab populations (Hegasy 2000). Alliances between secularists and Islamists frequently occur in many Arab countries, as in the cases of the *Kifaya* (“Enough”) movement in Egypt or collaboration with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Second, while historically cooperation among forces that have questionable democratic intentions can in fact lead to democracy-oriented compromises, such as in Northern Ireland and Spain (Salamé 1994), inter-oppositional cooperation in the Arab world is still fragile.

And third, protection of democratic change by reform-oriented factions of the ruling elites is hardly discernable. There is no “Arab Gorbachev” on hand, and the high hopes for reform in countries like Morocco and Jordan were dashed because reform-oriented elites stopped short of free elections.

It is quite ironic that of the core elements of any democratic change—free elections, free party formation and freedom of expression (Jahn 2006: 60)—media freedom appears to have been achieved to the greatest extent. Even soft authoritarian Arab states that have not been able to fully control the media have proven capable of preventing effective opposition movements that could utilize the media for political strategies. The media’s influence on political transformation processes increases with the number and quality of ties existing between the media and oppositional groups as well as other elements of civil society.

It is hardly imaginable that the media alone could have a transformative effect on the political system. Rather it is the societal elites that seek to express political alternatives through the media. The media might be more effective in trying to articulate alternative views and mobilize people for transition when the expressed views are in line with specific political agendas or existing groups or networks. The existence of a public sphere as such is not a sufficient condition for political change; rather, it is the link between civil society and the media that is decisive. And this link is fragile in many Arab countries and is completely lacking in others.

Even in western democracies, the media's effect on politics is difficult to capture and/or quantify. In Europe, for example, the growing influence of the media on politics has frequently been bemoaned (Meyer 2001). Yet the so-called "CNN effect"—a term summarizing the influence of major television networks on U.S. politics—is a rather elusive phenomenon. It has been possible to verify the effects of U.S. mass media on U.S. foreign policy only in specific situations in which, for example, public opinion gels into a humanitarian consensus. In all other situations where national or even vital interests of the United States are at stake, the White House is quite able to control the foreign policy agenda (Robinson 2002).

However, even though the media can be effective in individual cases and cause the resignation of politicians, in general it is not the power of the media as such but rather the detrimental effect that political spin has on traditional political institutions such as parliaments and political parties that must be criticized. In other words, in western democracies the media are manipulated as much by politicians as the media manipulate politics. Again, it is not the media but rather the link between the media, civil society and political elites that seems to determine the effect that the mass media have on politics.

Much as in the West, the effect that Arab media have on domestic or foreign policies is limited in scope. Do Arab media, especially the new Arab satellite television stations, follow a real democratic agenda or any other agenda conducive to system change? And how likely are they to exert positive influence?

Many observers have argued that Al-Jazeera is probably the most independent television network in the Arab world. While most mass media in soft authoritarian countries criticize domestic policies, their

critical function is limited by Arab regimes. Therefore the special status of Al-Jazeera as a vanguard of open political expression is not typical of other Arab media. It seems rather unlikely that a single television network could possibly frame the policy agenda of some 20 Arab countries. Nevertheless, it would appear useful to analyze Al-Jazeera's political content when considering political effects. As can be demonstrated quite easily, even the new, freer Arab journalism suffers from deficits due to the poorly developed political opposition and the missing link between the media and Arab civil society.

Academic perceptions of Al-Jazeera in particular have passed through two very distinct phases that are framed by the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Before that date, Al-Jazeera was almost unanimously applauded outside the Arab world for its ability to criticize governments and discuss matters in the public sphere that were previously taboo (i. e., sex, religion and politics). After the attack, however, Al-Jazeera was confronted by increasingly harsh criticism of its perceived anti-Israel and anti-U.S. coverage and support of Arab-Islamist terrorism due to its broadcasting of video tapes by Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

Al-Jazeera's capacity to serve as an alternative to the information and mobilization role that is usually fulfilled by political parties is difficult to discern and it seems to change over time. Many talk shows on Al-Jazeera provide forums in which Arab governments are criticized, and this seems to be the specific contribution of the network to Arab political culture. However, analysts often have conflicting views of Al-Jazeera's programming in relation to the issue of democracy.

A number of observers have argued that Al-Jazeera's talk shows and open style of debate have a positive impact on Arab civil society (El-Nawawy and Iskandar 2003). Al-Jazeera's willingness to break taboos in various fields—including women's issues, social practices such as circumcision, and previously undebated foreign policy issues such as the conflicts in the Western Sahara—is widely interpreted as a breach with authoritarian broadcasting practices and has caused Al-Jazeera to gain a reputation as the first pluralist television network in the Arab world.

In the words of Mohammed Zayani and Sofiane Sahraoui: "Al Jazeera has brought noteworthy innovations to Arab broadcasting

and reporting, airing hard-hitting programs, bold and uncensored news coverage, passionate political debates, and on-the-ground reporting. (...) [Al Jazeera] has been hailed as a beacon of free press, a bold initiative in journalism, and a revolutionary force among Arab media long constrained by state control. It has an approach to the news that was unthinkable in the Arab world not long ago. With its heated debates, daring commentary, bold coverage, public affairs interviews and viewer participation, Al Jazeera appears to be breaking new media ground and venturing into a realm of open discussion rarely attempted by other broadcasters in the region where public political debate is considered subversive" (Zayani and Sahraoui 2007: 23 f.).

Around the turn of the millennium and even more so after the 9/11 events, critics—not only in the West but also among Arab scholars, journalists and experts—increasingly bemoaned the limits of Al-Jazeera's approach to political affairs. The network's analytical capacity has been criticized time and again. Critics argue that controversy and sensationalism are prioritized over in-depth political analysis. They also point out that debates between Islamists, nationalists and others tend to focus on "empty controversies" (Steven Wu) and a "monotony" of political scenarios (Zayani 2005: 20, 30). Layla al-Zubaidi goes even further when she argues that there is "not much more than a shimmer" of democratic debate on Al-Jazeera, which is "almost completely detached from the sociopolitical realities of most, if not all, Arab countries" (Al-Zubaidi 2004: 20).

But how substantial are complaints that Arab satellite broadcasting is too sensationalist (Ayish 2002)? One could argue with Matthew A. Baum that soft news or entertaining forms of news journalism are, in fact, necessary for television to function as an agent of popular mobilization that can then foster opinion-building, political action and democratic change (Baum 2003). Fatima Mernissi (2004) is correct in claiming that Arab satellite broadcasting has widened the public sphere for critical journalism and Arab dialogue. However, she ignores all the literature on the agenda-setting effect of political reporting when she declares that television's programming agenda is irrelevant and, at best, secondary in importance to the revolution in style that the new networks have brought to Arab television news and political reporting.

If agenda is relevant, and if critics' arguments are true that Al-Jazeera—as much as one might applaud its pioneering role in promoting open speech—has no consistent agenda for democratic reform, how does this affect the transformation of Arab society and politics? Does Al-Jazeera remain a model in style rather than substance, and in presenting pluralist debate rather than providing evidence that a network can assume a responsible role in democratic transformation? In the words of Marc Lynch: “Talk shows will not be enough” (Lynch 2005).

In recent years, observers of Al-Jazeera's content focused on a third trend that emerged in the course of 2005 as the network responded to opposition movements in countries like Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. During this period, the network served as a mouthpiece for Arabs' critique of their governments. In 2005, Al-Jazeera reported extensively on ongoing political protests in countries like Lebanon and Egypt, where the Kifaya movement were active. Many people expressed hopes that Al-Jazeera would function as the information hub for a spill-over of protests throughout Arab countries. Marc Lynch argues that Al-Jazeera's coverage of the events provided a “demonstration effect” for Arab democracy (Lynch 2005).

However, without in-depth content analyses of Al-Jazeera's programming, it is possible only to identify provisional trends in the network's coverage. To that extent, it can be said that Al-Jazeera's democratic agenda appears reactive rather than proactive, although it is also true that Al-Jazeera, with all its elements of “politainment” and political information, has never considered itself to be a network that focuses solely on the dissemination of event-centered news. Because its programming appears to foster cultural acceptance of open debate, which is an essential element of pluralist societies, the network does have a liberating appeal. But it is not able to *lead* a process of political reform, because it does not appear to be capable of engaging in the systematic advocacy of specific intellectual/political agendas or of combining the fragments of political movements scattered throughout the Arab world into a cohesive message that would give Arab publics a clear vision for political action.

In sum, mass media like Al-Jazeera seem quite able to assist system change in situations where political movements are dynamic and political transformation processes have already begun to unfold. But

mass media's impact is limited where these ingredients are missing, where authoritarian policies are stagnant and where the media are left alone to face the overwhelming task of toppling authoritarian regimes. Arab media today can be considered to be at the forefront of political transformation, but they lack the decisive political message to assist far-reaching political reform from below that must originate with an active opposition.

The Media and the Transformation of Arab Political Culture

Perhaps the real power of Arab media needs to be situated in a sphere that lies beyond the realm of *realpolitik*, governments, parties and social movements vying for power. Rather, it can be posited that the new Arab public sphere is intertwined with the modernization of political values and attitudes and the entire fabric of Arab political culture. The effects of the media and interactions *with* the media on these social and discursive levels often escape academic attention, although they can in fact lead to long-term political and social change.

While Islamist political organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood have established their own "parallel polities" (a term the former Czech President Vaclav Havel once used for oppositional networks in the Soviet bloc), Arab media may well be fostering political participation in the virtual Arab parliaments of talk shows that could one day contribute to real political change. It is surely conceivable that, although the Arab mass media have only a limited influence on the concrete political decisions of power-holders, they may well have a far-reaching impact on public opinion and on the political discourse that shapes the political opinions, values, attitudes and political cultures of Arab populations.

Moreover, several observers argue that the real revolution brought about by the Arab media is not taking place in the field of political reporting and news coverage but rather in popular entertainment (Alterman 2005). According to this argument, the increasingly diverse content produced by more than 200 television programs together with print media, the Internet and blogs may serve to reinforce

the trend toward individualization—a development that could be conducive to democratization.

Such long-term and indirect potential effects seem to be at loggerheads with traditional transformation theory, which categorizes transformatory developments in successive but largely separate phases and developments—an authoritarian phase, a transition phase and the phase of democratic consolidation. Since democracy provides the overall framework within which the media can develop pluralist views on all aspects of society, it was only during the consolidation phase that mass media were considered to play a key role. Free of authoritarian intimidation and restrictions, it was argued, the media develop rapidly, as was seen in countries like Indonesia and even Afghanistan following the overthrow of the Taliban.

The current development of the media in the Arab world involves a combination of classical transformation clusters. Although still authoritarian in nature, the Arab world today already displays characteristics of transformation processes that have traditionally been thought to belong to *late* transformations, i. e., of consolidation processes *following* the fundamental change of political systems from authoritarian to democratic rule through free elections. Many Arab countries have already started to develop the traits of a political culture that accords a high level of importance to open political debate and exchange.

While it is extremely difficult to assess the deep-seated political values of societies that are ruled by authoritarian governments because large-scale opinion research is impossible, the old idea that Arab political culture is dominated by an intrinsic fear of open political discourse appears outdated ever since Al-Jazeera and other Arab broadcasters took the stage and attracted large numbers of enthusiastic Arab viewers.

It is true that we have no exact figures on the audience reach of pan-Arab television networks like Al-Jazeera. However, it is widely estimated that around 40 million Arab viewers watch Al-Jazeera on a daily basis, not to speak of the hundreds of other transnational and national Arab television stations and other media. Since the values of democratic citizenship must be developed over decades (Merkel 1999: 143 ff.), the Arab world has taken the first steps in a multi-generational project involving the democratic transformation of po-

litical values and cultures. This is something that countries like Russia, for example, have never experienced, which may partly explain the instability of the renaissance of authoritarian rule under Vladimir Putin.

There are other features that distinguish the Arab media landscape from classical transformations. The process of democratic consolidation contains not only opportunities but also challenges and risks. For example, Latin America in many ways provides proof that rapid commercialization within the media sector following long periods of state control can lead to immediate media concentration that again limits the media's capacity to function as a catalyst of political change.

In Latin America, as in post-Suharto Indonesia, many journalists with only limited training entered the public sphere without any real understanding of the journalistic craft and professional ethics. In contrast, journalism in today's Arab world is rapidly developing a professional culture that adheres to western standards. In democratic countries such as Lebanon, but also in soft authoritarian states, state cadres of journalists are a dying species.

Of course, the Arab world is not immune to authoritarian backlashes. The idea that contemporary Arab populations live in "virtual parliaments" created by new Arab television broadcasters cannot erase the fact that national Arab media in particular are still highly controlled and loyalist in their political coverage. Moreover, many of them are dominated by a focus on commercial entertainment (Ayish 2003).

Widespread slogans such as "entertainment is political" need to be substantiated. Entertainment is surely a social and cultural phenomenon, and it can surely foster individualization and lifestyle differentiation in Arab societies. But is entertainment really *political*? How does one argue with critics of media commercialization who suspect that the fast-growing popular culture in the Arab world diverts attention away from political change, instead contributing to a long-term "Chinese" coexistence between a modernized socioeconomic sector and a retarded or even stagnant political sphere?

Conclusion

The main question this paper has considered is whether and how contemporary Arab media contribute to political transformation processes. The answer is a qualified “yes and no” or, depending on one’s normative predilections, a combination of both optimistic and pessimistic insights. The good news, it seems, is that especially in soft authoritarian states such as Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan and Palestine, and in democratically oriented Lebanon, a vibrant public sphere has emerged with the assistance of the mass media, particularly television; this positive development contradicts earlier assumptions that the mass media are relatively weak in early processes of political transformation. This trend is linked primarily to the internal reconfiguration of the authoritarian state, which has partially lost control over the media, and to transnational spill overs in geo-linguistic realms like the Arabic-speaking world.

What remains true of the old theory is that the media are not primary social actors and that they are no substitute for a vibrant political opposition that must serve as the prime mover of any negotiated system change or transformation from below. Because their links to a functioning opposition and civil society are fragile and in some cases completely non-existent, Arab media lack a clear democratic agenda. It is only in special cases and brief moments of transition (e.g., the Cedar revolution in Lebanon, the Kifaya movement in Egypt) that the media can actually serve as a catalyst for systemic change—so far, however, without any clear, lasting impact.

In the long run, however, it can be said that the media have paved the way for subtle but fundamental changes within Arab political cultures. The great enthusiasm that Al-Jazeera and the new Arab journalism have engendered throughout the Arab world demonstrates that many Arabs place a high priority on open discourse and fundamental freedoms. A participatory political culture has started to evolve in many Arab countries even before the achievement of systemic change, and these developments pose a challenge to traditional transformation theory.

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