

Reconsidering the Egyptian Media's Pioneering Role: Is it a myth or a joke?

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Introduction:

Year after year, Egyptian media officials like the ex-Minister of Information, Safwat Al-Sharif, who has been in office for more than 25 years, have kept saying: 'Egypt is the media pioneer of the Arab world'.

How could a country with extremely long queues of people buying bread (the most important food item for Egyptians); queues in which citizens are killing each other to get a few loaves, how could this country be a pioneer in anything, let alone media?

How could a country whose youth want to flee it risking their lives on the shores of Italy and Turkey, illegally immigrating to any country they can find which will be more kind to them than their own homeland, how could this country be seen as a pioneer among its neighbors?

How is it possible for a country, almost all of whose professional associations or syndicates have been or are going on strike, opposing the government and making rebellious gestures because of their dreadful economic status, how could this country be a pioneer in anything?

And last but not least, how is it possible for a country whose president, who has ruled it for more than 27 years, who was and is still ranked among the top ten rulers considered "Enemies of the Press" by associations like CPJ (Committee for Protecting Journalists) and Freedom House, how could this country be a media leader?, A leader in what exactly?

If arrogant media officials in Egypt want to be objective in their claims for a pioneering Egyptian media, they would say: 'it used to be a pioneering media' rather than: 'it is a pioneering media'. That linguistic change is so simple to make, yet is so profoundly different in meaning. Of course, it is one that is difficult and painful for those dishonest media officials to accept.

The methodology of this paper is simple. It will apply a broad qualitative system analysis that will have input and output. The input will be the truth about aspects of the media in Egypt and regionally in the Arab region. The output will show that we have an Egyptian media-scape that can not, by any means, create a pioneering media; in addition, the input will point to another media-scape which is considered the 'true' pioneer in the Arab world in recent years.

The research paper explores the political and economic reasons behind the deterioration of the role of the Egyptian media in the Arab World. Further, it investigates the global and regional reasons behind the success of the new Gulf media with their Western-style, well-financed and professional training centers that have set a new standard for media professionalism.

Additionally, the paper will put the notion of 'a pioneering role' in its larger political, economic and cultural context. The paper will use cultural analysis to investigate the determinants of being a pioneer. That proposition of a pioneering Egyptian media is only parroted nowadays by the corrupt political elite for internal consumption. This simply contributes to a chauvinist but illusory self-image. However, Egyptian and Arab media experts consider that proposition to be a myth at the present time. Also, Egyptian bloggers sarcastically mimic crooked official media figures just to show how pathetic their claim is.

Finally, the paper will investigate the future of true media leadership in the Arab region. Media experts consider the booming media in the Gulf do not make any of the Gulf States a new cultural pioneer in the Arab World because those media do not have a modern agenda for political reform in the region. Their main achievement is to add an artificial modern-like coat to the tribal societies in the Gulf. Freedom, not money, will lead to a 'real' pioneer. Only Egypt, with its historical weight, can lead the Arab media if its media support a project of real political and cultural transformation and manage to apply this reform first in Egypt. The paper traces that cultural debate.

1. System Analysis of the Egyptian Media

1/1. Domestic Media Input:

The print media in Egypt, whether national, partisan or private, have enormous problems that prevent them from providing a decent level of job satisfaction for journalists.

The national press, which was nationalized in 1960 under a Nasserite socialist state, owes huge financial debts to government that can not be paid and they have a long history of self-censorship. That prevents any serious criticism. Their poor non-computerized training centers are forcing their journalists to acquire real training outside those newspapers and magazines. Once a media professor exclaimed to me: Why is government still publishing all those newspapers and magazines? Al-Ahram is enough for Egypt. Moreover, they have lost their credibility because many editors are nothing more than marionettes manipulated by the president and his government.

The national press has witnessed the end of era of charismatic press figures like Mohamed Hasanin Haikal, who acquired his fine reputation because he was close to prominent figures in Egypt like Nasser and Sadat.

Throughout the long 27 years of Mubarak's rule, no journalist has managed to come close to the status of Haikal, who has continued to be the most well-known Egyptian journalist of all time. It came as no surprise to anyone when

he was contacted by Al-Jazeera and an exclusive talk show '*Maa Haikal*' or 'With Haikal' was launched.

Partisan print media still struggle to be printed and have huge financial problems and poor standards. Yet their critical tone is still a die-hard one. However, an excessive demagogic tone can cause a newspaper to be shut down or to have an administrative closure, not a closure by a judiciary verdict. This is what happened to Al-Shaab, one of undercover mouthpieces of the banned Muslim Brotherhood group under the label of the Labor party, which now have only an online version. Some writers of partisan oppositional newspapers moved to visual satellite media to create their own stardom. One example is Hala Sarhan, a controversial talk show hostess who moved to work in the Saudi capital for the Rotana satellite channels.

Only private print media are finding financial and professional success in Egypt. The best of these are newspapers like Al-Masrey Al-Youm, Al-Fagr, Al-Doustour and Sout Al-Ouma which wage constant campaigns against the widespread corruption there. The majority of their editors and journalists are considered pariahs by the government who are trying to entangle them in politicized libel trials.

The Egyptian private newspapers have secured what is called in Egypt a 'Democracy of Screaming'. Their loud tone in uncovering corruption in Egypt, as well as opposing the scheme to pass on the presidency to Jamal Mubarak, son of President Hosni Mubarak, has played the role of a release valve in a political pressure cooker. The attention they pay to sensational topics like religion and sex have kept readers attached to them.

The private press also faces a serious problem. They still do not have their own independent printing houses so they are at the mercy of the national printing industry.

Not only that, on September 13th 2007, Ibrahim Eissa, editor of Al-Dostour newspaper, and one of the Egyptian government's most lively critics, along with Wael Ibrashi, editor of Sout al-Ummah, Adel Hammouda, editor of Al Fajr and Abdel Halim Qandil, former editor of Al-Karama, were all given jail sentences, subject to appeal, for 'insulting the president'. This latest case seemed to be crisis point in what has been a general trend.

But aside from the recent spate of state bullying, in the last three or four years it has been much noted that something fundamental has happened to the newspaper business in Egypt. More than at any time in recent history, journalists now feel at liberty to openly criticize the regime and its personages. This new-found liberty has kept pace with the recent stop-go political liberalization project in Egypt, which began with a public outpouring of discontent when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003.

But by the autumn of 2007, confrontation between the government and a once-obedient profession reached critical proportions. In these last years of Hosni Mubarak's presidency, Egypt's independent newspaper proprietors are 'feeling the contradictions between an active free press and authoritarian government more acutely. In Egypt, the current discussion about press freedom centers on laws that allow government to harass, manipulate and silence the media as it chooses' (Black, 2007: 1-3).

All of the above types of Egyptian press are subordinate, to a greater or lesser degree, to the state. The primary instrument of state control is the Supreme Press Council, a body which both owns the 'national' press outright and holds the right to issue licenses for the rest. The SPC is an adjunct of the *Shura* Council, and as such is effectively controlled by the ruling party and executive.

The traditional paper-printed media has witnessed a drastic decline in its readership and has given ground to visual media mainly satellite TV. In the first decade of the current century, Egyptian newspapers' sales have declined from a modest figure of 5 million copies daily to an even more modest figure of 1.8 million copies. Many newspapers have found it necessary to have an online version to keep the new generation in Egypt informed (1).

Moving on to visual media, statistics show that government channels whether terrestrial or satellite, have lost their audience to private satellite channels, either Egyptian or Arab.

Egyptian TV once really was a 'pioneer' in the Arab World. Arab countries used to send their professionals to get their training in Egypt in the 1960's and the early 1970's or invited Egyptian professionals to give training workshops abroad. That TV has been transformed into a nest of corruption.

The Egyptian radio and TV union is now a family institution open almost exclusively to sons and daughters, or brothers and sisters of the top brass in many TV channels and production sectors. Names of families like 'Al-Atrebi', 'Basuoni', 'Al-Nadi', 'Al konaisi', 'Farrag', and 'Al-Zomer' are just a few examples. Not only do heads of TV channels bring members of their families to work as anchors and presenters by manipulating the results of admission tests, but also top officials in sectors like broadcasting engineering are doing the same with their offspring. It is no surprise to find it is these corrupt officials (along with the Minister of Information) who claim that Egypt is still a media pioneer in the Arab region.

These are the people who have caused Egyptian TV to be paralyzed by stupid bureaucracy, a lack of transparency, and a lack of creativity. They are the "stigma of Egyptian media failure, whereas just one channel like 'Al-Jazeera'

from a small country like Qatar would vastly outstrip everything that is aired on Cairo's news channels" (2).

Let's turn now to cinema. Egyptian film industry is still the prominent one in the Arab world although it has lost its vigor. The golden era was over by the early 1960's. The 'heavy government hand' that accompanied the nationalization of Egyptian film stifled its innovative trends and sapped its dynamism.

The late 1970s and 1980s saw the Egyptian film industry in decline, with the rise of what came to be called 'contractor movies'. Actor Khaled El Sawy has described these as films 'where there is no story, no acting and no production quality of any kind...basic formula movies that are aimed at making a quick buck'. The number of films produced also declined from nearly 90 a year in the industry's prime to about a dozen in 1995. However, "the success of *Imarat Yacoubian* (The Yacoubian Building, 2006) starring Adel Emam, Youssra, and Nour El-Sherif, is a sign of the continuing dynamism of the Egyptian Film industry" (3).

An investigation into the training capabilities of the Egyptian media soon reveals that there are many training factors that contribute in the low-standard of Egyptian journalistic professionalism.

First, Egyptian journalists are very diverse in their academic specializations. Add to that the fact that it is not necessarily for them to be graduates of colleges of mass communication for them to be appointed in media posts. Therefore, the process of getting them integrated with their peers to understand working practices takes a considerable length of time.

Second, Egyptian journalists often don't take systematic training seriously, so that Egyptian press syndicate does not have the motivation to spend money and effort to train them. Instead, the syndicate depends on unsystematic and poorly-prepared foreign financing for training workshops. Only the Al-Ahram national establishment, which publishes the famous daily Al-Ahram, has a regional institution for journalistic training. However, government bureaucracy prevents it from having a wider influence on Egyptian journalistic arena. The Egyptian radio and TV union once had a good TV institute for training, but the new training centers like Al-Jazeera Media Training and Development Center rendered it obsolete.

Third, the new generation of Egyptian journalists lacks the proper 'ideals' or 'models' that can be found among the old generations who have "historically submitted to either self-censorship or an ingratiating attitude towards the state. The pathetic status of partisan oppositional journalists does not make them an ideal for young journalists" (Ismail, 2003: 198-200).

1/2. Regional Media Input:

Over the past seventeen years the Saudi establishment has used its deep pockets to influence the region's media and minds, using methods that paid off or intimidated media that ran negative reports on the kingdom. The Saudi establishment has become one of the Middle East's most influential media owners.

Saudi Arabia's takeover of the region's media is a reflection of what is occurring globally, where a handful of multinational companies increasingly dominate the media.

The only other political outlet in which the Saudi government has a reportedly direct stake, other than newspapers and domestic media outlets which are subjected to draconian laws within Saudi Arabia, is MBC's all-news satellite channel Al Arabiya. This network was established in 2003 to counter Qatar's Al-Jazeera, a channel Riyadh has disliked ever since it went on air in 1996. Investigative reports on corruption in many Arab countries have rankled, as have the airing of Osama bin Laden's video statements. Al-Jazeera was seen as so controversial that at one point Saudi Arabia banned men from watching television in cafes to prevent public discussions of what was on.

Although Saudi influence over the region's newspaper business (particularly pan-Arab publications) still remains high, their reach is not as great as it used to be. Like everywhere else on earth, people in the Middle East are tuning into TV news rather than picking up a paper.

Although much Saudi media ownership revolves around entertainment, all these companies like MBC, Orbit, and Rotana, which have a big Saudi stake, are not really about appealing to viewers in Saudi Arabia, but about appealing to a pan-Arab audience. That is perhaps why Saudi shareholders, who are most linked to the royal family, are able to dictate what is and what can be aired to a pan-Arab audience, even if it is only entertainment. Entertainment television actively contributes to shaping what Arabs both discuss and do in social and political realms.

The fact that "most channels in the region are not running at a profit also reveals what motives are behind acquiring media outlets. 'Channels are set up for different reasons, but one thing they're not set up for is to make money', said Hugh Miles, author of 'Al-Jazeera: How Arab TV News Challenged the World'. A TV channel is a very economical way of influencing people. Bang for your buck it's much cheaper than guns. It is about controlling the discourse and for Saudis it's about being in charge" (Cochrane, 2007: 5-7).

Powered by vast petrodollar resources, a concerted Saudis thus began attempt to dominate the world of cable and satellite television media in the Arab world

and steal the thunder of Egypt, once the leader of Arab media in the 1950s and 1960s with its Arab nationalist political ideology. Egypt's once omnipotent 'media of mobilization' (*i'lamta' bawi*) gave way to Saudi Arabia's 'media of pacification', or *i'lam tanwimi*—a new soporific media of arguably far greater proportions and reach than anything Gamal Abdel-Nasser ever had. In this media, entertainment helps put the political mind to sleep and politics is maintained within strict limits. If Nasser wanted you *fi-shari* (on the streets), Al Saud wants you *fi-sala* (in the living room)" (Hammond, 2007: 2-4).

The Arab media game continues to be played outside Egypt, and mainly between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Despite this Saudi dominion, Qatar's Al-Jazeera entered the fray in 1996 with a ground-breaking news policy that filled the glaring gaps in the political and social coverage of the Saudi media, with frank discussions of internal situations in Arab countries where opposition and government figures were equally welcome to offer their viewpoint. Al-Jazeera has made history because "it has reversed the flow of information so that now, for the first time in hundreds of years, it passes from East to West" (Miles, 2005: 426). Saudi Arabia's response to Al-Jazeera came in 2003 with Al Arabiya.

If we now investigate the role of Dubai in creating an advanced media hub, we will see that it's incredible what money can buy. While it took centuries of strife, clashes and debates to create media hubs abroad, Dubai built its own in just six years. All it did was create a media park for big media houses to play in, and there you have it: a media hub.

The plan was simple: to offer media companies the opportunity to set up their headquarters in Dubai, and to give them reasons to stay. It's no wonder, then, that when The Times and The Sunday Times announced plans to publish an international edition in the Middle East, there was no doubt that it was going to be printed in Dubai, even though SAB Media, a Saudi Arabian company had bought the license. With Dubai Studio City (DSC), Dubai Media City (DMC), and Dubai Internet City (DIC), the emirate has the infrastructure to back its bullish drive to attract media houses from around the world (when Dubai Holding's International Media Production Zone is built, the region's first free-zone for all forms of publishing 'activities', the emirate's infrastructure will be even more comprehensive).

Cut-throat highly competitive industries abroad have made careers in publishing near impossible for many talented writers, thus forcing them to consider options abroad. And what better place than Dubai, where foreigners are in the majority, where the turnover of expatriates is exceptionally high and job vacancies are announced regularly, and for six months of the year the weather is absolutely stunning?

When it comes to political strife and the possibility of war, "Dubai is a safe haven in the region. And for media agencies keen on maintaining a presence in the Middle East, without having to cope with the possibility of losing their investments to suicide bombers, months' long demonstrations and war, Dubai and its plush offices are big attractions" (El-Baltaji, 2007: 2-5).

Across the Middle East, new television stations, radio stations and websites are sprouting like incongruous electronic mushrooms in what was once a media desert. Meanwhile newspapers are aggressively probing the red lines that have long contained them.

Moving to another kind of pioneering, Al Manar's coverage of 2006 summer's Israel-Lebanon conflict galvanized audiences across the Arab world – many of whom switched to Al Manar from Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya – generating widespread support for Shiite Hizbullah among all Arabs, Sunni and Shiia alike. Public opinion forced Saudi Arabia and the Gulf regimes into reversing their policies, shifting from criticism of Hizbullah early in the war to ultimately praising Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah as an Arab hero (Pintak, 2007: 10-12).

Think about that: Arab governments are changing their foreign policy in response to public opinion driven by the media.

The current capability of Arab media professionalism introduces us to another way in which Egypt has failed. Instead of having undergraduate Mass Communication degrees from Egyptian Universities principally Cairo University, Arab media men and women have moved to American, British and Australian universities to get better journalism and mass communication education. As regards training, they have shifted to the prominent Western training centers like the BCC center, and have ended up inaugurating their own western-like media training centers such as the sophisticated Al-Jazeera Training center in Qatar.

With successful crews of media experts from more than five countries, Al-Jazeera Media Training and Development Center, which only began in February 2004, has already achieved a very good reputation internationally as well as in the Middle East. Because of cooperation agreements with some prominent international training centers and academic bodies such as the Thomson Institution in Britain, the CFPJ in France, Ohio University in the United States, and the UNESCO center in Paris, the AJMTDC has managed to build up a reputation for itself as an international training center and an international counseling center for all kinds of media projects, not only satellite channels. This center is the first of its kind and its caliber in the Arab region. It proved itself to be a very successful economic project (4).

Even in the domain of drama, Syrian TV series have proved themselves to be a real competitor to the once-dominant Egyptian ones.

From all the evidence above, there is no room to claim a current pioneering role for the Egyptian media. That forces us to investigate under what conditions a specific country could be a pioneer among its neighbors, and therefore, under what conditions its media could claim the same role.

2. Determinants of Pioneering

Being a pioneer these days is determined by many factors, such as science and technology, the financial and social circumstances of the citizens of a specific country, and the ideology of that country itself. In all the three former domains, Egypt is a consumer of others' pioneering ideas. Ancient Egypt perhaps really was a pioneer in those areas 4000 years ago, and it is likely that a country with ancient civilization tend to feel the necessity to be advanced and superior. India used to make such useless statements but it stopped repeating them when it started to notch up real achievements.

Egypt was a pioneer and ahead of the rest of the Arab countries when it came to adapting modern ideas acquired from Western countries. This began in the mid 1800's and lasted until the mid 1900's. Therefore, Egypt had the first parliament, the first modern university, and the first social institutions and sports clubs. Most critics believe that Egypt began to lose its pioneering role after the 1952 revolution. The elite army group who carried out the revolution were against democracy, and lack of democracy resulted in major disasters for Egypt.

The Egyptian revolution of 1952 was "a pioneer in the area of loud political slogans and that 'achievement' ended with the catastrophe of military defeat in 1967. All in all, Egypt is a poor backward country ruled by a police state, and such a situation does not lead to any pioneering role" (5).

To be a pioneer, a country must have both the readiness and the desire to achieve that position. Being a pioneer is not a divine gift. Egypt since 1952 has undergone a historical plight. The state took everything for itself and deprived society of every possible opportunity to renew itself. The political elite have not improved themselves, and the result is that we have seen the same old faces dealing with recent variables with the same old jargon (6). To activate part of Egypt's dynamism, a political change is needed.

However, another critic thinks that "In the Nasserite Egypt of the 1950's and the 1960's, many Arab countries were guided by Egypt's political position, whereas nowadays the same countries decide their own independent political positions with respect only to their economic ones. Internal developments in Egypt negatively influenced its pioneering role. For example, Egypt had the

first parliamentary experience in the region, yet the successive setbacks of democracy in Egypt have resulted in a serious loss of credibility" (7).

Regarding Education, the Egyptian teacher, until quite recently, was the teacher of choice for the majority of Arab countries. Modern Egyptian thinkers like Refaa Al-Tahtawy, Taha Hussein, and Abbas Al-Akkad, to mention just a few, were cultural minarets in the Arab world. Even modern Arab thinkers once found in Egypt a proper milieu for their thoughts to be heard and distributed in. All this began to fade away when some of the Egyptian intelligentsia stood against democracy and supported the totalitarian regime of Nasser that ultimately brought Egypt to its recent miserable situation. In spite of a partial victory in the 1973 war, Egypt never retained its political vigor in the region because other Arab countries, [such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Algeria] inspired by their booming economic status, tried to take this role from it.

Ironically the word pioneer can have a negative meaning if a country takes the lead in awful and undemocratic acts like inventing special courts. In Egypt, "State Security Courts" are an example of this, and they have been imitated by some Arab countries.

This implies that Egypt is an important country in the Arab region, whether it uses its influence positively, like it did in spreading modernism in the Arab world in the first half of the twentieth century, or whether it used it negatively like it did in leading the Arab world to an unsteady peace with Israel (8).

'Pioneering Egypt' is nothing more than a narrow chauvinist attitude and a mind-set that leads to discrimination.

Some Arab commentators believe that this kind of element in Egyptian culture can be traced to the early 1970's when Egypt changed its foreign policy towards other Arabs and their big nationalistic causes by making a unilateral peace with Israel. After that, Egypt lost a lot of its soft power in Arab diplomacy.

In an age of digital satellite dissemination and hegemony of capital over media production, and in an age of governmental deregulation of media, it is difficult for one country to keep a pioneering cultural role when it is linked only to cultural heritage. This is especially true when this heritage is imprisoned in a specific historical era. Besides, being a cultural and regional pioneer is not a role that can be forced upon neighbors. A country must first establish its credentials as a pioneer. Finally, being a pioneer is an intellectual honor with political and strategic elements to it; it is not an award or something to brag about, instead it is an epithet given by others who feel the country merits the name (9).

As Salah Essa, a famous leftist writer put it: "The idea of Egypt as a pioneer came from outside Egypt when Arab intellectuals appreciated Egypt's role in the region. This is completely different from the present pathetic usage by some officials who try to hide Egypt's backwardness in the region. It is an unrealistic chauvinist statement that assumes that Arab countries are still pygmies led by Egypt"(10).

This kind of false discourse is just a kind of compensation for the dire state of affairs that is in contemporary Egypt. It is repeated only by the corrupt political elite for internal consumption. However, nobody in Egypt, not even the most naïve, can accept this discourse anymore.

Recently, Egypt's economy has registered moderate macroeconomic growth under IMF-sponsored programs along with substantial improvements in infrastructure. But it remains uncompetitive in the global market, unemployment rates remain high, particularly among Egypt's large youthful population (two-thirds of its 78 million people are under the age of 30), and widespread poverty, corruption, and an unwieldy bureaucracy continue to cast a shadow over Egypt's prospects.

Politically, Hosni Mubarak's 27-year rule is attracting increasing scrutiny, both at home and among foreign proponents of reform. Criticism is focused on the absence of movement towards genuine political pluralism and harsh treatment of dissidents and social groups deemed deviant (e.g., Kefafia). Moreover, as the 80-year-old president's health appears less robust, the absence of a vice-president and designated successor, even as Mubarak grooms his 45-year old son, Gamal, for future office, are additional sources of concern. Six hundred and fifty Egyptian politicians, academics and journalists from across the political spectrum called for Mubarak to step down in October 2005, for an overhaul of Egypt's 1971 constitution, and for an end to the 27-year state of emergency. In addition, terrorist bombings at Sinai tourist resorts in 2004 suggest that the scourge of radical Islamism, which plagued Egypt during the 1990s, might be re-emerging in a mutated form, either with the direct involvement of al-Qa`ida or as a result of its example.

Generations of Egyptians have been nurtured on the notion of Egypt's special role in the region and even in the international arena. However, the gap between Egypt's self-image and sense of high entitlement and its actual abilities to shape events has become painfully obvious in recent years. Still, Egypt continues to have genuine regional interests, and promoting them in ways that make sense to Egyptians is one of the regime's traditional tools for reinforcing its legitimacy at home.

3. Future of Pioneering Media

Media freedom is the locomotive of any media attempting to be a pioneer in the Arab region. Money is not enough. Chanting 'our country is a media pioneer' is no longer either appropriate or ethical.

Entertainment television actively shapes what Arab peoples both discuss and do in social and political realms. In the final analysis, it may well hinder peoples' ability to discuss important political and economical issues in particular those which relate to sharing power and wealth.

Saudi Arabia's approach to controlling the media, and the harsh punishments it deals out to on those who portray a rose-tinted view of the royal family and the kingdom, is mirrored in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which have similarly draconian media laws to retain monarchical power bases. Qatar can be considered something of an exception with Al-Jazeera, but when it comes to the channel applying the same exposure to governmental malfeasance and social issues in Doha as it does elsewhere in the region, Al-Jazeera comes up short.

Ultimately, Saudi influence over the media is having a negative effect on journalistic ethics, investigative reporting, and balanced coverage as well as providing substantial information to the Arab public about issues that are important to the region. Furthermore, with criticism and insightful stories about Saudi Arabia off limits to most Arab journalists, the problem is compounded by non-Arab journalists not able to take up the slack due to onerous visa regulations and limited access to sources, particularly for stories that relate directly to the state, which is notoriously secretive in handing out information (Cochrane, 2007: 10).

Even in Dubai, the government's involvement in the regulation of the media has driven a number of journalists to exercise self-censorship, which, in the region's and possibly the world's media hub, degrades the journalistic integrity of those writing and publishing articles in Dubai.

One detail that keeps Dubai on edge is the plight of over a million construction workers who toil endlessly under the desert sun to build the world's largest hotels and malls. The workers (mostly from the Indian Subcontinent) suffer and their daily struggles include basic issues such as payment, lack of proper accommodation, and the long, long wait many endure before they can afford the plane ticket to visit their families back home (El-Baltaji, 2007: 15).

Yes, the number of the new satellite channels and private newspapers and magazines has dramatically increased, but make no mistake, not all of this change has to do with freedom of speech in the classic sense. Or even about making money, which few – if any – satellite channels actually do. A desire for

political influence is probably the biggest factor driving channel growth. But ego is a close second.

Salama Ahmad Salama, a deputy editor of the influential Egyptian daily newspaper Al-Ahram thinks that cultural euphoria in the Gulf States will remain "artificial to a great extent unless a real enlightenment movement accompanies it. Money can not buy culture. A country may benefit from its affluence to copy some cultural aspects from the articulate world outside, yet this is far from enough" (11). A rich Arab country should make a real change in the collective awareness of its people before it brings them a museum from France like the Louvre, which now has a branch in the United Arab Emirates. A rich Arab country should have a cultural infrastructure which brings the winds of modern values themselves that can be integrated to everyday life. There is a big difference between a real modern society and a society that has a poetry festival and lets satellite channels disseminate it to pre-modern people.

Al-Jazeera has positioned itself in the market with its new critical tone yet its true achievement is that it has managed to reach a vast audience with its exclusive leads; however, ultimately it is a pragmatic channel that can not create critical awareness in its audiences.

Still Arab journalists are jailed, assaulted or even killed on an almost daily basis. Egypt is a true leader in suppressing journalists. The trial of four of the most vocal critics of the ruling party and President Mubarak, the one which mentioned earlier in this paper, is the latest event in an ongoing tug of war between journalists and the state in Egypt. However, silencing journalists is definitely not a way to be a true pioneer.

The only way Egypt will regain part of its lost role is to have a real cultural project like modernizing Arab political regimes, and persuading Arab society to accept the cultural and political diversity protected by modern constitutions. Of course Egypt should begin with its own society. To activate part of Egypt's dynamism, political change is needed.

The power of blogging, perhaps, is one vital mechanism for achieving political reform in Egypt. Egyptian bloggers were one of the reasons I began to think about this paper. Their satirical remarks on pioneering Egyptian media made me laugh. Bloggers mimicked corrupt media officials. Also, I believe one of great achievements of the bloggers is to create a new breed of citizen journalist- men and women who are able to communicate what they witness just like any correspondent.

Just after midnight on Wednesday October 25 2006, Malek Mostafa published a post on his blog malek-x.net entitled Downtown's Sexual Rabies. He did not know that his post would prove a blogging sensation and send shockwaves through Egypt's independent media. The post comprised an eye-witness

account of what happened backed up by photographs taken by journalist and fellow blogger Wael Abbas. A total of 60,000 people read the post and for a week, Malek's site was getting some 8,000 visitors a day.

From there, the story migrated to the independent press with columns appearing in the daily Al Masry Al Youm, Al Dustour, El Karama, El Fagr and also on Orbit's top show Al Qahira Al Youm. The story shows the extent to which bloggers and independent media may be increasingly challenging the narrative provided by Egypt's state-run media. But the growing willingness of private media to harness blogs poses difficult questions about the ability of individual bloggers to provide accurate accounts of events. It also calls into question whether blogs alone can drive the push for political reform in Egypt and the wider Middle East (Al-Malky, 2007: 2-4). Something like that happened with the call for a strike on April 6 2008.

The Interrelationship between the Kifaya movement and Egyptian Bloggers is obvious. The emergence of activist blogging in Egypt is closely tied to the Kifaya National Movement for Change, a loose grassroots, all-encompassing movement that has been agitating for human and civil rights and political reform since December 2004. If Kifaya has provided the political space for voices of opposition to speak out, blogs have provided the means for Kifaya's mobilization. Not only have bloggers continued to challenge the official version of events, exposing a wide array of abuses by Egypt's authorities and monitoring fellow activists' lives in jail, they have also rallied other activists to the cause by publicizing Kifaya demonstrations, which are often overlooked by mainstream publications.

Unfortunately, political upheavals in Egypt as well as dire economic facts make peaceful change in Egypt unlikely. A much more likely scenario is something far more explosive with unforeseen consequences.

Notes:

1- Mohamed Farag, Egypt's Early Aging, Al-Badel,
http://www.elbadeel.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2305

2- Nabil Sharaf-Eddin, "Egyptian TV is a Family Institution",
<http://www.elaph.com/Politics/2005/1/31158.htm>

3- Cinema of Egypt, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_of_Egypt

4- AlJazeera Media Training and Development Center, Integrated media Environment for Creativity, <http://training.aljazeera.net/mediaconsulting.htm>

5- Samar Jasser, Egypt Was Pioneer in Demagogic Loud Media Voice, Al-Badel,

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