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The Crisis of Contemporary Arab Television: Has the Move towards Transnationalism and Privatization in Arab Television Affected Democratization and Social Development in the Arab World?

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ABSTRACT

Arab media has experienced a radical shift starting in the 1990s with the emergence of a wide range of private satellite TV channels. These new TV channels, such as MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Center) and Aljazeera have rapidly become the leading Arab channels in the realms of entertainment and news broadcasting. These transnational channels are believed by many scholars to have challenged the traditional approach of their government–owned counterparts. Alternatively, other scholars argue that despite the easy flow of capital and images in present Arab television, having access to trustworthy information still poses a challenge due to the governments' grip on the production and distribution of visual media. This paper brings together these contrasting perspectives, arguing that despite the unifying role of satellite Arab TV channels, in which national challenges are cast as common regional worries, democratization and social development have suffered. One primary factor is the presence of relationships forged between television broadcasters with influential government figures nationally and regionally within the Arab world.

Keywords: Arab television, satellite transmission, transnationalism, democratization, development.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars on Arab media (Douglas Boyd 1993; Naomi Sakr 2001, 2007; Marwan Kraidy, 2009) all note that since their early emergence, the majority of Arab TV channels have been both state–owned and government–controlled. Arab state officials have invariably argued that state control over the broadcasting system has been necessary to preserve the common Arab cultural heritage as well as to secure national unity and political stability. On Arab television stations, particularly

the national ones, TV shows undergo censorship for the depiction of excessive sex, violence and in the case of Saudi Arabia, any allusion to Christianity (Rinnawi 2006: 29). Arab government–controlled TV channels also serve to emphasize the ethno–national identity by promoting national products such as literature and sports. However, starting in the 1990s, the Arab television sphere experienced a drastic change with the introduction of a wide number of transnational and private channels. This new move in Arab media brought hope that Arab television, now mostly privately owned and operated, would adopt a more transparent and profound coverage of the most critical political and social issues in the region.

For instance, Marc Lynch argues that satellite Arab channels, particularly Aljazeera, helped to present imposing national problems in countries like Egypt and Lebanon as regional challenges that necessitate the involvement of every Arab state. While Lynch believes that this move has several positive bearings, other scholars, such as Muhammad I. Ayish, argue that the new transnational TV channels are government–friendly, as they are very reluctant and at best times cautious about discussing topics that might provoke the ire of state officials. This paper examines these two opposing arguments, focusing on the extent to which transnationalism and privatization in Arab media have effected democratization and social development in the Arab world.

In spite of the unifying role of contemporary Arab satellite channels, allowing widespread access of regional news within the Arab world, I contend that this new regime of accessibility has had very limited effects on the critical issues of democratization and social development due to three main reasons. The first is the close relationships between the media industry's owners with Arab leaders and the ruling political parties, which renders several satellite private TV channels as a propaganda voice for these interest groups. The second decisive factor is the enduring firm grip of Arab state officials over the visual content of satellite TV channels that they see challenges the state's notions of "national security" and "political stability." This obviously restricts the channels' critical coverage of the social and political changes taking place in the region. The third rational is related to the clearly biased agenda that Arab satellite TV channels adopted during the recent pro-democracy protests that spread across the Arab world. While certain private TV channels (Hannibal TV), afraid to provoke the ire of the regime's figures, provided no coverage of the ongoing unrest, others (Dream TV) provided a dishonest reporting by disseminating the government-molded discourse that presents the protesters as thugs who threaten the nation's internal stability.

Before making the case for these assertions, it is important to examine how the evolution of the rhetoric of nation–building on Arab television coincided with the initial post-independence launching of state–owned TV channels. In this context, I discuss the regional political circumstances that have facilitated a return to the Islamic–Arab heritage, seen as the most viable means for social and political progress, against secular ideologies. In fact, government–owned TV channels have become captive to conservative trends associated with culturally perceived offensive media content. The three main forces, I argue, have heralded the introduction of private satellite TV channels in the Arab world are: i) politics, ii) capital, and iii) religion. In order to

examine these forces closely, I focus on the most influential transnational TV channels in current Arab media, discussing how these forces have affected the channels' political agenda and economic structure, but more importantly their degree of transparency and neutrality in terms of news coverage.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE FORM OF NATION-BUILDING ON STATE-OWNED TV CHANNELS AND THE MOVE TOWARD A MORE 'CONSERVATIVE' MEDIA CONTENT

Arab media has long promoted the project of nation–building as a means of social development. Douglas Boyd traces the evolution of nation building in Arab media to Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime when radio and print media were more widespread than television. Boyd focuses more on the way radio channels in Egypt were constructed to serve Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan–Arab projects. Moreover, in his examination of the development of broadcasting in the Arab world, Boyd explains that Nasser took advantage of the Arabs' emotional attachment to the Arabic language to advance his political schemes. Boyd asserts that Nasser's modest rural background made him aware of the significance of the oral tradition in Arab culture and thus incited him to expand the national broadcasting system, particularly radio, for propaganda reasons. Boyd also discusses Nasser's three circles that the latter believed would form an economic and political power base in Arab countries and beyond in order to stand up to Western imperialism. The three circles consisted of the Arab circle, the African circle and the Islamic circle.

It should be noted that Nasser's pan–Arabism project had been based on liberal and socialist foundations in which religion did not play an integral part. Nasser's Islamic circle was not given priority in his monograph, instead he focused on the theme of Arabism and the African continent's shared social and political challenges. Michaelle L. Browers points out that, even though the religious dimension has always been present in Arab nationalism, it has mostly been overshadowed by a strong secular trend. Arab nationalism has generally "based its principle of unity around such factors as language and geography rather than faith" (Browers, 2009: 20). This liberal orientation which strengthened during Anwar Sadat's term was reflected in the content of media productions. For instance, themes that are considered taboo now and seldom feature in cinematic or television production, such as homosexuality, rape, and atheism, were treated in films like *al–Karnak* (Dir. Ali Badrakhan, 1975), *Alsood ila–Alhawiya* [*Climbing to the Cliff*] (Dir. Kamal al–Sheikh, 1978) and *Qalbo Alayl* [*Heart of the Night*] (Dir. Atif al–Tayeb, 1989).

However, after the failure of Nasser's pan–Arabism project, Arab disappointment over the 1967 military defeat and Sadat's ostracized political actions (the 1979 peace treaty with Israel), conservative and oftentimes extremist trends began to intensify in response to the failure of the past secular regimes. Islamists in the Arab world reacted to the *Azamat* (defeats) succeeding the 1967 period by demanding a return to the Arab–Islamic cultural heritage (Browers, 2009: 29–30). Moderate Islamists not only believe that Islamic laws are tolerant of

national ethnic and religious differences but see that political freedom and democracy in the Arab world cannot be reached without allowing for an open participation of different ideological groups in the national elections.

Moreover, the recently overthrown president Hosni Mubarak authorized the Muslim Brotherhood[1] to perform their religious *da'wa* (missionary) as long as they abstained from challenging the dominant ruling party, the National Democratic Party, in the political realm. In fact, pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and *Wahabisim*[2] in Saudi Arabia, as well as the profusion of Islamist groups in other Arab countries, has created a form of cultural conservatism present in recent films and series. Arab media productions had to abide by the socio–religious redlines set by those pressure groups and this applies to both locally produced and imported media. However, a number of Arab satellite TV channels have been able to bring to the surface taboo topics that the traditional government channels usually resist tackling. For instance, Al–Mehwar, a popular private Egyptian channel launched in 2001, aired a talk show called *Kalam Kebir* (*Brave Talk*) in which the presenter, a veiled middle–aged Egyptian psychologist, openly discusses sex issues, offering the audience advice regarding their sexual life in a straightforward and explicit manner.

POLITICS, CAPITAL, AND RELIGION HERALDING THE EMERGENCE OF SATELLITE TV CHANNELS

Paralleling the "conservative" backlash displayed in media content, the structure of Arab media has also witnessed a radical change. A large number of private satellite TV channels emerged in the 1990s and secured an important status in the Arab media landscape. This shift towards privatization and transnationalism is the offshoot of three main forces: the constant political changes, the flow of capital and the growth of conservative religious trends. In this regard, Naomi Sakr asserts that the growing number of Arab emigrants and expatriates abroad was among the reasons that prompted Arab media officials to introduce satellite TV channels for fear that their citizens would be attracted to other satellite channels, and thus to other Arab countries'

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[1] The Muslim Brotherhood is a globally known Islamist group that was initially founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna who called for the establishment of Islamic states. It faced fierce oppression during Nasser's and Sadat's regimes. However, its voice became stronger during Mubarak's ruling period and its members were able to win 20% of parliament seats in 2005 though electoral fraud later in 2010 negatively affected their political gain. Members of the MB were able to run for presidency, following the uprisings that ousted Mubarak, leading Mohamed Morsi Isa El-Ayyat, a leading figure in the MB, to become Egypt's first civilian president.

[2] Wahhabiya or Wahhabism is an Islamic movement that began in Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth-century by a religious reformer named Mohammed ibn abdel-Wahab, who advocated the exclusive reliance on Koran and Sunna (the practices of the Prophet Mohammed). Today, Wahhabism is known as a zealous religious trend that strives to revive the prophetic tradition like Salafism but is more strict in its dictation of what is haram (religiously forbidden) and halal (religiously allowed) particularly in terms of gender issues, punishment laws and dress code.

political propaganda. Additionally, in light of the different wars that took place across the Arab world in the 1990s, national governments saw the need to launch transnational TV channels, again for purely political reasons. The Egyptian Satellite Channel (ESC) that was first aired in December 1990, aimed at reaching Egyptian soldiers during the Iraq–Kuwait war, opposing Iraqi state propaganda.

Moreover, the surfacing of an important number of private TV channels is the result of the flow of capital in Gulf countries subsequent to the oil boom. Thus, the Dubai–based MBC (the Middle East Broadcasting Center), which is the first private and commercial–based Arab channel that went on air in 1991, was initially owned by two Saudi media moguls Alwaleed Bin Talal and Kamal Shaikh before the withdrawal of the latter. Similarly, though LBC started as a militia–war channel during Lebanon's civil war, it has become a very popular Arab satellite channel due to its increasing load of entertainment that reflects its commercial–oriented and liberal agenda. It should also be stressed that LBC is now mostly owned by the Saudi media mogul Walid–ibn–Talal, who despite his conservative social background, is more interested in the profit to be gained by media entertainment. Therefore, apart from the consistent airing of the latest Arab music clips, LBC also hosts the most successful yet controversial reality TV shows such as *Alwadi* which consists of local stars living together on a farm governed by the Lebanese pop singer Haifa Wahbi.

As to the role of religion in this new phase of Arab television, it should be stressed that a wide range of private religious channels emerged recently as the result of the financial power of Saudi media moguls, who are capitalizing on a newly emerging conservative religious context. An example of this trend is the satellite channel, Iqraa, founded by the Saudi businessman Kamal Shaikh in 1998. It is considered to be the most widely–watched Arab religious TV station. Alwaleed Bin Talal has joined the competition regarding these specialized TV channels by introducing Al–Rislah in 2006. The fact that these two TV channels are both owned by Saudi media moguls and are widely popular has further substantiated Saudi Arabia's religious hegemony in the Arab Islamic world.[3] Nevertheless, Egyptian media officials allowed for the launching of the 24 Al–Nas in 2006 which hosts different types of religious preachers and not only the ones from Al–Azhar.[4]

The real gain for these channels' owners is their ability to secure constant media exposure on the national level that they can use towards political ends (Ferjani, 2010: 87–88). In this

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[3] Saudi Arabia is the country where Islam originated and it is birthplace of the prophet Mohamed. Muslims all over the world travel to Saudi Arabia to perform the Hajj, the pilgrimage that must be carried out at least once in a Muslim's lifetime. For these reasons, Saudi religious clerics' fatwas (religious statements) are held with great reverence across the Muslim world.

[4] Al-Azhar is the official religious authority in Egypt. Its preachers are believed to be more traditional in their preaching methods than the famous TV preachers who typically dress modern and do not appear in religious attire, and who speak in the vernacular languages, and not in standard Arabic. The most popular TV Islamic preacher presently is the Egyptian Amr Khalid who has featured in a large number of both religious and non-specialized Arab channels. He is mostly famous for his casual garb, emotionally-charged speeches that mainly target the youth, and his use of colloquial Egyptian.

context, Sakr has quoted Kamal Shaikh's statement on the general agenda of his TV channels, particularly Iqraa. He says: "someone like me, not completely to the left or the right– and there are millions [of Muslims and Arabs] like me–wanted to present a more tolerant, middle–of–the–road message to the Arab and other peoples of the world" (Sakr, 2001: 47). Kamal Shaikh's phrase clearly demonstrates that he is more concerned about disseminating his ideological messages than making financial profits. Interestingly, Alwaleed Bin Talal also claims that Al–Rislah fosters moderate Islamic views. Sakr quotes his 2003 press conference speech in which he asserts that Al–Rislah "would project our Arab heritage through a modern medium and project Islam as a religion of moderation" (Sakr, 2007: 154–155).

THE CRISIS OF SATELLITE ARAB TV CHANNELS: A DISCONNECT BETWEEN RAISING POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND ADAPTING CRITICAL POLITICAL AGENDA

In light of the rapid profusion of all these satellite Arab TV channels, one might wonder if the shift towards privatization, transnationalism and liberalization in Arab media has only led to the emergence of commercially–based entertainment programs and ideologically–oriented religious channels, without affecting the issues of social development and democratization. In fact, Rinnawi holds a very positive view regarding the role these private and transnational TV channels play in raising political consciousness. For instance, he praises the structure of MBC because of its adoption of CNN's news casting form, with its exclusive coverage of politically sensitive issues that are usually disregarded by other Arab TV stations, in addition to its first–hand reports. Also, Aljazeera, the Qatari all–news channel launched in 1996, is argued to offer a different take on politically and socially controversial issues in the Arab world. This is primarily the result of Aljazeera's *laissez–faire* policy in which the station has autonomy from the Ministry of Information, making it an exceptional media case in the Arab world. The channel airs the most popular political Arab talk shows, such as *Shahed'Ala al–A'ser* (*Witness to An Era),* hosted by Ahmed Mansour*,* which invites Arab political figures and spokesmen (though most of them have already retired) to give their opinion about the most important political events that took place during a particular regime. *Akthar min Ra'iy* (*More than One Opinion*), hosted by Sammy Hadad, also strives to present a variety of opinions regarding the latest news topics by featuring guests from different political and social persuasions.

The second significant all-news channel in the Arab world is Al-Arabiya, launched by Al Walid Al Ibrahim, son-in-law of the late King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, in 2003. Unlike Aljazeera, Al-Arabiya has adopted a moderate approach in its coverage of the political conflicts in Arab countries. For instance, during its coverage of the Iraqi war, Al-Arabiya showed less sympathy to Saddam's regime in contrast to Aljazeera, which made it more popular in Iraq. Also, unlike Aljazeera, Al-Arabiya shuns the use of ideologically loaded terms like "martyrdom" during its

reporting of the ongoing wars and conflicts in the region. However, despite this supposedly more balanced approach, Al-Arabiya's editorial line is very deferential of Saudi Arabia's political interests.

In the same vein, the change that electronic Arab media have experienced since the 1990s is believed to have generated public mobility in the region. Marc Lynch argues that the relatively new satellite TV channels, particularly Aljazeera, have been able to act independently of the repressive government laws and suggests that this transformation has led to the emergence of a new Arab public sphere attuned to public affairs. Lynch contends that "where Arab public life had for decades been dominated by the voice of the state, al–Jazeera ushered in a new kind of open, contentious public politics in which a plethora of competing voices clamored for attention" (Lynch, 2006:2). For instance, Aljazeera's *Al–Itijah al–Mu'aks* [*The Opposite Direction*], which invites guests with opposing political affiliations, is known for raising very sensitive questions that relate to political oppression under contemporary Arab regimes. It also discusses a variety of political and social ills that include the spread of AIDS in the Arab world and the present deteriorating economic and social status of Arab countries. Given this TV show's bold approach and content, it is argued to have succeeded in engaging and mobilizing the Arab public.

Similarly, Aljazeera's reinforcement of the shared Arab–Islamic identity and its equally diligent treatment of the imposing problems in every Arab country are acclaimed for having created a public sphere where viewers across the Arab world invariably relate to the raised issues and critically discuss them. Lynch enthusiastically notes that "the new television stations create warm relationships among physically distant Arabs and greatly increase the emotional salience of political issues" (Lynch, 2006:35). Lynch stresses the important role that transnational channels, specifically Aljazeera, have played in bringing Arabs together due to its presentation of national problems as urgent regional challenges that demand the involvement of every Arab actor.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the Arabs' rising involvement in public life and their critical and open discussion of the regional political and social problems cannot be separated from the role Aljazeera and other private satellite channels played in fostering diversity of opinions and adapting more transparent coverage of sensitive regional issues. In fact, this new Arab public is primarily instigated by these TV channels, and other factors mentioned by Lynch that include the growing number of independent newspapers and news websites are of minor importance, due to the high rates of illiteracy and the limited accessibility of modern technology to citizens across the Arab world.

More importantly, the effects of the close relationships between the TV broadcasters and the Arab ruling families on the channels' degree of neutrality in relation to news coverage have not been extensively discussed by Lynch. In fact, these private and more liberal TV channels have not, by any means, led to noteworthy social development or serious political liberalization in the region primarily due to this particular reason. There are a number of satellite TV channels that have close connections with ruling families like Rafiq Hariri's Future TV. The Sunni Rafiq

Hariri received support from the Saudi royal family to launch his channel that would counter Hezbollah's Shi'aa religious propaganda. Other private TV channels obtain direct sponsorship from Arab and Islamic governments, such as Hezbollah's al-Manar whose main financial sources come from the Iranian and Syrian rulers. Thus, the close relationships of these media moguls with ruling class interests have meant that they lack credibility.

Gouda Abdel-Khalek and Mustapha K. Al Sayyid also point out that unlike Latin American countries, such as Brazil, where businessmen and entrepreneurs participated in the public mobilization that changed the military-based political system to a civil one, Arab entrepreneurs rarely represent civic goals. In Egypt, for example, the entrepreneurs might be the only social group that showed support to the ousted regime. This is due to their involvement with the preceding ruling National Democratic Party, which explains their contribution to shaping public opinion for the regime's own interest. For instance, the first private TV channel to be launched in Egypt in 2001, Dream TV, was mostly owned by the Egyptian businessman Ahmad Bahgat whose close relationship with the ruling party made the incredibility of his channel quite expected. Also, the private satellite channel Al-Mehwar's redlines are by and large determined by its owner, the businessman Hassan Rateb. The most important boundaries had to do with avoiding any criticism to the ousted Egyptian regime. Abdel-Khalek and Al Sayyid conclude that "instead of being an agent for democratization, the nascent bourgeoisie [particularly the business owners] in Egypt has become, in fact, a major foundation of support for an authoritarian regime" (Abdel-Khalek and Al Sayyid, 2011: 268).

More to the point, the religious affiliations of the private TV channels' owners contribute to their religious and political partiality. For example, the religious TV channel Iqraa presents religious issues predominantly from a Sunni Islamic perspective reflecting its Saudi owner Kamal Shaikh's religious affiliation. On the other hand, Hezbollah's Al-Manar focuses on issues that are mostly shared by Muslims from a Shi'aa perspective, which explains its airing of dubbed Iranian films and its exclusion of opinions that contradict its religious and political affiliations. Thus, despite the intense competition between different Arab media actors, this has not yielded free and critical debates of the most imposing social and political issues in the region because every actor has a particular ideological agenda that they strive to promote through a personal TV channel. Muhammad I. Ayish makes this point clear by asserting that "development materials carried by the Arab media were personality-oriented, protocol-oriented, superficially treated, and overwhelmingly positive, lacking critical discussions of issues relating to public policies" (Ayish, 2001: 127).

As to the assertion that Aljazeera represents an exceptional case in the Arab mediascape in its approach and structure (being independent of the Ministry of Information), Aljazeera, in fact, lacked a religiously impartial editorial line. The Palestinian-born Aljazeera manager, Wadah Khanfar, who was the managing director of Aljazeera for several years, had employed hardline Islamist journalists, which made the channel foster radical forms of Islam in addition to a biased treatment of violent events taking place in the Arab world. It should also be noted that Aljazeera's popular political talk shows divulge troubling secrets mostly about past Arab

regimes. For example, *Witness to An Era* has disclosed information about the way the late Moroccan King, Hassan II, ordered the elimination of his opponents following the failure of a state coup in the seventies. The same talk show made known confidential information regarding the inhuman treatment of Islamists during Nasser's regime. Conversely, Aljazeera's political talk shows would be very cautious if the topics under discussion pertain to human rights violations that are connected with present regimes or existing political figures. The main reason behind Aljazeera's selective agenda is the fear of provoking the ire of Arab leaders and important state officials particularly in the Gulf region who can, in turn, divulge unwanted information about the Qatari ruling family. Thus, one can conclude that the rise of privately owned satellite TV channels in the Arab world has had no impact on democratization but has instead merely provided a forum in which political opposition can be voiced, pressure can be released, and regimes can be put into question within a controlled environment.

The second important reason that restricts critical discussion of the sensitive issues in the region is the government's endless firm grip on the content of different media forms. Arab statesmen have invariably advocated the idea that "freedom is a relative concept that has to be carefully applied in the context of responsibility, and Western free press may not necessarily be replicated in the Arab world" (Ayish, 2001:122). Arab official statesmen usually advocate this discourse by referring to the precarious economic and political conditions in Arab countries, such as the high rates of illiteracy or the ethnic and religious rivalries, claiming that the presence of a free press and media institutions independent of the state might lead to chaos and instability. Also, it is true that in the 1990s, Arab countries like Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon and Kuwait allowed for the launching of a private oppositional press that could enjoy complete financial autonomy. However, individuals in these private media entities must abide by the governments' interpretation of free expression in order to ensure their own safety. Ironically, Arab leaders frequently link the lack of press freedom and critical TV discussions of political issues to their concern of maintaining national unity and security. Accordingly, media laws in Arab countries are not only submitted to the governments' understanding of freedom of expression but these laws are constantly subjected to revisions and changes. For example, though Morocco was among the first Arab countries to encourage the involvement of the private sector in both electronic and print media, there is still a government law that allows the banning of any media materials considered as a threat to "the public order."

In addition, the social development projects promoted within different media bodies which deal with issues such as education, health, and the environment have been typically defined as "prescribed media participants" because they conform to the governments' dictated paradigms and thus do not touch on the social and political challenges that are truly at stake. The Arab league commission for the study of communication and information report states that media in Arab countries usually just cover timely events on a daily basis. As a result, it offers little attention to the governments' development strategies or presenting free and critical discourse of the degree of social and political transformations taking place in these countries (Ayish, 2001: 128). Also, the majority of Arab TV channels are believed to focus on urban

centers with little consideration to the precarious conditions of the rural areas and sustain general stereotypes about the situation of women with limited coverage of their important achievements in the social and economic fields. This actually drives Ayish to consider the growth of satellite transmission and privatization in Arab media as a form of plastic surgery due to its incapacity to create a space for critical social and political debates.

Similarly, Sakr argues that despite the flexible flow of capital and images across Arab nations as well as the increasing number of private satellite TV channels, having access to basic and trustworthy information still poses a problem in the Arab world. Sakr points out that the strong government censorship laws, basically related to the Saudi royal family and the previous Egyptian government, hinders development and democratization in the Arab world and restricted effective use of the Arab satellite transmission. However, unlike Ayish, Sakr acknowledges the crucial national role of Arab satellite television. She explains that the Arab media landscape has effectively experienced deterritorialization in terms of images given that satellite TV channels have allowed the Arab diasporas in Europe and the United States to be connected with their national media output. However, Sakr notes that state control of different types of media in the Arab world has never been deterritorialized.

In this context, Saudi Arabia is believed to have the most controlled media system despite its development of satellite transmission in the early 1990s. The government appoints a committee that consists of Saudi representatives from different ministries who examine the cultural and religious relevance of both national and imported media materials before they appear on air. Interestingly, while in the West, particularly in the United States, the right for a free press and limited government media censorship are considered basic rights by local citizens, the extensive government interference in both print and electronic media is expected by Arab citizens, and it is even seen as a necessary measure to protect the Arab cultural values and to ensure national unity (Amin, 2001: 39). Moreover, the majority of Arab satellite TV channels usually favor quantity over quality manifested in their considerable amount of entertainment programming, most of which are imported, along with heavily censored TV shows.[5] In fact, Said Sadek contends that Egypt has witnessed a waning cultural dominance in the Arab world, particularly in the realms of media and news-broadcasting. He attributes the declining number of local and regional viewers of the Egyptian TV channels to their lack of freedom and their limited coverage of national developments, which makes these channels basically "parrot official propaganda." He subsequently describes the whole communication system in Egypt as "extremely bureaucratic, heavily censored, overcautious, and slow in covering emergencies while it awaits a 'green light' from above" (Sadek, 2006: 164).

More to the point, there has been an evident partial coverage of the recent public protests that plagued the Arab world, particularly on Egyptian and Tunisian television. Egyptian satellite

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[5] Said Sadek asserts that most Arab satellite TV channels, particularly the specialized film and drama ones like Movie Channel and MBC4, import approximately 80% of their entertainment programming while the locally produced talks shows, soap operas, films, video clips and news broadcasting consist only of 20 %.

channels, headed by the state-run Channel 1, propagated a government-molded discourse depicting Tahrir protesters as claimers of demands that clash with Egypt's economic and political interests. Moreover, these channels alleged that the Tahrir protesters had been infiltrated by thugs or what is referred to as *baltagaa* in colloquial Egyptian, which would lead the country into instability. Also, live calls from ordinary Egyptians, providing personal disturbing experiences because of "the lack of security" served to reinforce the state's distorted reporting of unfolding events (Hugh, 2011).

More than that, while protests and occupied movements were still taking place, Egyptian TV aired old footage of normal traffic in downtown Egypt. Also, during the month of the revolution (January 2001), the Egyptian government dismissed Aljazeera Mubasher from the satellite transmission system, Nilesat, and ordered the closing down of Aljazeera offices in Cairo. This dishonest media coverage prompted some prominent Egyptian journalists and TV talk-show reporters to resign such as Mahmoud Saad who later joined the Tahrir crowds. Given the clearly partial approach of both state-owned and private TV channels during the January and February unrest, the Egyptian protesters carried a number of forceful slogans such as "Lies, exclusively on Egyptian television" (Abdel Rahman, 2011).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, after the successful overthrow of Mubarak, Egyptian satellite TV channels not only adopted the protesters' side but opened their space to previously stifled voices from the Muslim Brotherhood and the youth-focused activism groups. Al-Mehwar, for instance, which showed support to the ousted regime and vilified the Tahrir revolutionaries, declared later that it has been continuously supporting the protesters. This shift can be viewed as an attempt from these private TV channels to regain credibility; however, it proves these TV channels' consistent biased agenda because they rapidly turn of their shifts as the propaganda voice of the dominant regime. In fact, despite the emergence of new state-independent TV channels like Al-Tharir which aims to provide forums that "represent the young people who led the revolution" (Mekay, 2011) the enduring presence of politically bigoted private TV channels, such as Al-Faraeen, which has relentlessly portrayed the revolutionaries as "foreign agents" puts the credibility of a number of contemporary Egyptian private TV channels into question.

As to the Tunisian case, national state-run TV stations, Canal 21 and Tunis 7, were for long under direct state control. This applied to the first private TV channel, Hannibal TV, launched in 2005, that basically aimed at providing a variety of entertainment programming. Both state-controlled and private TV channels were sensitive to what Ben Ali's government perceived as national and security interests. During the recent public protests in Tunisia, satellite TV channels turned a blind eye on the internal tumultuous situation. Tunis 7 and Canal 21 maintained a firm silence on the killing of university graduate students and the persecution of other civilian protesters during the first two weeks of riots. Instead, these channels portrayed the protesters as thugs who pose a serious threat on the country's national security. This method, also adopted by Egyptian television, was used to de-popularize the protesters and delegitimize their pro-democracy demands. In addition, the Aljazeera office in Tunisia, like its counterpart in Egypt, was closed down for fear that it would have access and air information deemed risky for

Ben Ali's regime. Even after Ben Ali left office, national TV stations remained cautious about uncovering the horrifying corruption that characterized his regime. However, they later opened their space to previously-exiled opposition figures while private ones, like Hannibal TV, took the liberty to criticize leaders from different political orientations (Owais, 2011).

While Tunisian and Egyptian satellite TV channels ignored covering the insisting public protests and occupied movements, Aljazeera's airtime was generously devoted to the revolutionary protests. Aljazeera's updated materials also came from Arab citizens who posted their personal footage on Aljazeera's site. In fact, Aljazeera's success is partly due to its "referencing Facebook pages and Youtube in reporting the raw events" (Miladi, 2011). Because of it supportive role in regards to the revolutions, Aljazeera was coined "the channel of the revolutions." However, both Aljazeera and Al-Arabiya provided limited coverage of the pro-democracy protests in Bahrain. This is due to the Qatari and Saudi foreign policy that necessitates loyalty to the Gulf Cooperation Council members.

For the partiality of the majority of satellite TV channels, social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, have been seen as the driving force behind the youth revolutions in the region. Social media networks served as "a mobilizing tool" for the Arab youth given that they facilitated their congregation and exchange of information. This has been made possible through the growing number of Internet users in Arab countries (in Tunisia four out of ten have Internet access and almost 20 percent of the Tunisian population are on Fasebook). In fact, these social media platforms allowed users from different Arab countries to publicly show support to the Tunisian protesters and to share the most updated information, making these social networks operate at a transnational level. Further, Albrecht Hofheinz states that these new media platforms helped to break the psychological barrier of fear as an increasing number of users felt confidence to freely express their opinions because they realized that their opinions are widely shared.

CONCLUSION

I have discussed three main reasons that thwart the impartiality of satellite private TV channels vis-à-vis the coverage of political and social changes in the Arab world. The first is the enduring connections of the TV channels' owners with political parties and ruling regimes, such as the case with Al-Manar and Dream TV. These close connections meant the absence of critical coverage of news that clash with the political interests of the dominant regimes. Second, Arab private TV channels have never enjoyed complete independence from the central governments. For instance, despite the Moroccan government's limited interference with the agenda of the half-privately owned 2M, this channel respects the will of the state and its ruler by presenting TV materials that do not contradict the national notions of morality and religion. Even Aljazeera, which is independent from the Ministry of Information, is reverent of the Qatari policy regarding the GCC members while Al-Arabiya, the second significant all-news Arab private channel is sensitive of the Saudi government's political interests.

Third, the way satellite TV channels covered the recent pro-democracy protests in different Arab countries further proves their clear political biased agenda. While satellite Tunisian TV channels, such as Hannibal TV, maintained a firm silence on the public unrest their Egyptian counterparts, Dream TV and Al–Mehwar, portrayed the protesters as thugs who threaten the nation's internal security. Moreover, the well-claimed Aljazeera and Al-Arabiya ignored the public protests in Bahrain and other Gulf states because of the Qatari and the Saudi governments' loyalty to the GCC members. Therefore, the move towards satellite transmission and privatization in Arab television has, in effect, helped mobilize public opinion and created an Arab public sphere highly critical of the political challenges in the region. However, this has served as a temporary outlet to Arab audiences for the lack of critical news broadcasting and the absence of neutral media agenda regarding the constant political and social changes in the Arab world.

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