

Egypt's Media Deficit

Author(s): Adel Iskandar

Source: *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Winter/Spring 2006, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 2006), pp. 17-23

Published by: Georgetown University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43133656>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Georgetown University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*

JSTOR

Egypt's Media Deficit

Adel Iskandar

Cautious optimism pervades the Arab world's most populous nation, as forthcoming political transformation seems inevitable. Egypt—one of the birthplaces of populist pan-Arabism—is at a historic crossroads. President Hosni Mubarak, the country's "last Pharaoh," took an unprecedented step this year by allowing the country's first multi-candidate presidential election. Despite his victory in the 7 September 2005 elections, Mubarak's underwhelming voter support (he was supported by only 18 percent of eligible voters) invited contention, increased his vulnerability to potentially fervent political criticism, and dissolved his public image as an infallible leader. The president's electoral reform set a precedent in contemporary Arab political history, but lack of progress in liberalizing the state's media apparatus ensures the election will be less than transformative. Although changes to Egypt's press appear substantial in recent years, a vibrant media system that encourages civil society, civic participation, and political empowerment remains a distant mirage.

Adel Iskandar is an expert on Middle East media and co-author of *Al-Jazeera: The Story of the Network that Is Rattling Governments and Redefining Modern Journalism*. He monitored the state of Egyptian media in summer 2005.

Egypt's Last Pharaoh? In a nation undergoing political metamorphosis, the press should act as a reliable measure of progress. "Truth above power, and the nation above government," the motto of Saad Zaghloul, the populist leader who defied British colonial rule and ushered in Egypt's first

indigenous nationalist party (al-Wafd), has long served as a slogan for political dissent. However, now his words point more directly to the failure of the nation's journalistic establishment. Many of the changes to the state's media landscape over the past half century have been merely symbolic.

Some of Mubarak's contenders, having drawn the attention of the Western press during the election, appeared to outsiders to pose a significant threat. However, the foreign press tends to magnify the Egyptian opposition's influence. In fact, few Egyptians can name the nation's twenty-one officially ratified parties. Without a radical remodeling of the Egyptian national media, particularly national television, this will continue to be the case.

Television is Egypt's most pervasive medium, but with most national television programming under strict state control, the opposition's televised time was minimized to ensure reduced visibility. Opposition candidates in the 2005 election received just enough airtime to suggest that contenders have a voice in Mubarak's Egypt. Furthermore, the president's ruling party (the National Democratic Party, or NDP) turned down an invitation to a televised debate between Mubarak and his opponents. The minimal television time afforded potentially threatening candidates (Ayman Nour, of the al-Ghad party, and Nomaan Gomaa, of the New Wafd party) secured a significant buffer for the NDP, ensuring that electoral victory would remain within its reach.¹ With deep-rooted, institutionalized support for Mubarak's NDP at all levels of the state, the president's opponents stood little chance. Furthermore, in a country whose public has always feared government

retaliation against dissent and where the national press is rarely critical of the state, few citizens demonstrate active opposition to the regime. They are generally loyal to it, apathetic toward it, or, at most, suspicious of it.

The use of websites during the 2005 campaign was another perfunctory nod to the democratic process. It was vital for the regime to sustain the impression, both domestically and abroad, that Mubarak was campaigning in a truly contested race. Thus, the president for the first time appointed a campaign manager, began a campaign trail, and launched a website to support his candidacy. His opponents launched similar websites, but with Egypt's low literacy rates and limited internet penetration, these sites were ineffectual at best, and mere publicity stunts for foreign observers at worst.

Paper Parties. There are three main categories of newspapers in Egypt: national governmental dailies (*kawmiya*), official party dailies (*hizbiya*), and independent and privately operated publications (*mustakila*). The *kawmiya* newspapers include the big three dailies—*al-Ahram*, *al-Akhbar*, and *al-Gomhouria*—and at least fifteen other weeklies, periodicals, and magazines. These state-run newspapers have impressive budgets and overpowering voices, while the opposition and the independent press suffer from limited funding, restrictive governmental licensing procedures, and occasional outright state intimidation.

Most of Egypt's literate citizens reside in urban metropolises, and this reading population has made the three major dailies Egypt's most popular newspapers for the last thirty years. Decades of monopoly have turned these newspapers into massive institutions with budgets

rivaling the institutional grandeur of such publications as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Their exponential growth, combined with their long history of infiltration in state institutions, has ensured that they attract the brightest and most eloquent political commentators. *Al-Ahram*, which boasts the largest circulation in the Arab world, now operates a full-fledged university in cooperation with a consortium of Canadian colleges. While Egypt's opposition papers operate out of damp, single-suite offices and struggle to pay their employees, *al-Gomhouria* recently erected an extravagant multi-million-dollar building on costly downtown property.

While most of Egypt's state papers exhibit clear and consistent political loyalties, a few have some editorial latitude. The government's foreign-language newspapers—*al-Ahram Weekly* (English) and *al-Ahram Hebdo* (French)—tend to be far more liberal and even critical of govern-

the state in policy and approach, and those that distance themselves from the government and attack it on personal, rather than substantive, grounds. The former affirm the government line while posing as opposition, while the latter focus on moral scandals at the expense of policy issues. Both tend to detract attention from the regime's failures and thus fall directly into the hands of Mubarak's regime. They allow the administration to criticize the opposition press on the grounds of frivolity and obsession with negligible issues, and the opposition papers are also faulted for offering no meaningful alternative to the comparatively coherent government policies. The result is the absence of a true political spectrum: the opposition is left fragmented and vulnerable.

Still, the *hizbiya* papers as a group enjoy the second-greatest circulation. These include the primary party publications *al-Wafd* (New Wafd party), *al-Ahaly* (al-

Anticlimactic press reform laws have produced sensationalist yellow journalism camouflaged as legitimate political opposition.

ment at times. Their editorial freedom is protected by their predominantly elite and expatriate readership. Their small-scale distribution allows them to provide substantial coverage of the political opposition.

Press reform laws have produced sensationalist yellow journalism camouflaged as legitimate political opposition. The mostly de-fanged *hizbiya* (ratified opposition) papers tend to fall into two categories: those that compete for the government's favor and are aligned with

Tagammu party), *al-Arabi* (Nasserist party), and *al-Shaab* (al-Amal party). Over the past few years, *al-Shaab* has been a surrogate publication of the banned Muslim Brotherhood. Frequently harassed by the government, the paper has little public impact and a weak infrastructure. It employs a steady Islamist tone, focusing on Islamic military struggles in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Chechnya and is ruthlessly critical of Mubarak's regime.

Prominent newcomers to the party

press include *al-Ahrrar* (al-Ahrrar party) and *al-Ghad* (al-Ghad, the newest opposition party). *Al-Ahrrar*, supposedly an "opposition" paper, is published by the long-defunct al-Ahrrar party, which endorsed Mubarak during the presidential race. The paper predominantly covers entertainment and sports, with a sprinkling of municipal affairs. Since *al-Ahrrar* supports the privatization of most public sectors and a free-market economy, its support of Mubarak comes as little surprise. *Al-Ghad* is the official voice of its chief editor, Ayman Nour, who was a presidential candidate and longtime al-Wafd party member. The paper appears to have no comprehensive political agenda but instead focuses exclusively on the inadequacies and failures of the current regime while simultaneously boosting Nour's public image. The pages of *al-Ghad*—the most prominent of the new party papers—are filled with sharp-tongued attacks on Mubarak's government. One article in the 23 July issue described him and his family as "U.S. servants" and called for a popular front to defeat his "tyrannical and hereditary regime."

The third category are the *mustakila* newspapers which include mostly unaffiliated and privately operated publications with various political leanings, including *al-Maydan*, *al-Masri al-Youm*, and *al-Dostour*. *Al-Dostour* (*The Constitution*) is perhaps one of the only *mustakila* papers that directly addresses the government and Egyptian society. Produced by a group of young reporters, editors, and creative cartoonists, *al-Dostour* combines political satire with sharp, reformist commentary. The paper publicly demands explanations for corruption and attacks Egypt's system of political heredity—with direct reference to Mubarak's increasingly prominent son, Gamal. *Al-Dostour* is also one of the

earliest papers to publicly suggest names of presidential candidates. It has criticized Mubarak for taking credit for scientific and technological innovations in Egypt, reprimanded human rights and women's groups for inactivity and disengagement, and denounced the United States for interfering in the Egyptian electoral process. One of the few papers concerned with Egypt's minorities, *al-Dostour* features regular articles explaining the Coptic community's political and social demands.

Egypt's press "revival" has produced a plethora of opposition and independent publications that either support the political status quo or resort to careless, unconstructive bickering. As for the state media, reform has been a slow process. The national press and mass media are run by sluggish institutions that only respond to threats of foreign-based accountability campaigns and audience loss. The opposition's task has been to disrupt the giants of state media, with little evident success.

"Media Schizophrenia" and Egyptian Television. Egyptians today live in two parallel media worlds. This duality is evident on Egyptian television, where the contrast between non-state and national channels is stark. Unlike print media, where there is at least some criticism of the government, national television rigidly supports the regime and its party. Egyptian government television does little to disentangle the government as an institution from the NDP. And unlike its private competitors, state television is slow moving, under funded, and poorly presented. Characterized by sloppy transitions, endless repetition of programming, and outdated entertainment content, the

“medium of the people” appears hopelessly devoid of substance or style.

Officials in the Egyptian media are neglecting an important phenomenon. When audiences watch several newscasts from competing stations with differing viewpoints, they are engaged in source comparison. Egyptian audiences, who access a variety of domestic, regional, and international media, have become particularly adept at deciphering political agendas. Overall, this has led to brand disloyalty for Egyptian state television. In my conversations with some of Egypt’s

sion and radio stations, al-Jazeera has become one of the few venues for opposition groups to express their views on air. The de facto voice of dissent for the region, al-Jazeera has become a surrogate alternative press for nations in the Arab world.⁴ Until national media open up to the opposition, media schizophrenia is likely to continue.

Media schizophrenia has led to disenchantment on the part of Egyptian audiences. Unimpressive media content on national television, coupled with an overall distrust for the state, has led to

Principles such as objectivity, balance, and fairness have long been neglected by a press that is loyalist, “agendized,” or profiteering.

esteemed thinkers, writers, and intellectuals, I found a near consensus, regardless of political views and affiliations, that Arab satellite television has transformed audience perception of local politics. The discrepancies in news programming between state and private (satellite) media are so lucid that it can seem as if two distinct realities are being covered.

This state of “media schizophrenia” is prevalent in many Arab countries.² With audiences feeling increasingly estranged from their domestic media, there is the threat of the state media becoming obsolete and negligible. Faisal al-Kasim—host of al-Jazeera’s popular and controversial talk show *al-Itijah al-Muakis* (*The Opposite Direction*)—accurately explained that private Arab television channels “have widened the gap between the governments and the people.”³ With the absence of viable alternative voices on the national televi-

audience skepticism, while exposure to satellite television has resulted in an increasingly sophisticated media audience. Scholar Mohammed Ayish has described this phenomenon as the “politicization of Arab viewers.”⁵ For instance, the national media rarely report what Egyptians are witnessing. Growing economic disparity on Egypt’s streets is met with headlines about an economic renaissance. One fifty-three-year-old physician told me that once, when he picked up his son from school in the bustling Cairo district of Bab El Louk, large antigovernment demonstrations had kept him in traffic for hours. Once at home, he heard no mention of the demonstrations on national television. “How can I believe anything they say on Egyptian television if they’re not telling me what I saw with my very own eyes!” he exclaimed. Since then, he has turned to the satellite stations.

Contextual Objectivity. Part of the problem with most state-run media in Arab countries is the absence of coherent journalistic standards or ethics by which reporting is evaluated. Principles such as objectivity, balance, and fairness have long been neglected by the loyalist, "agendized," profiteering press. Only since the arrival of foreign and regional satellite television have these standards been renegotiated.

Satellite television has created a sense of anxiety about the media climate in the Arab world. The Arab media, like their counterparts worldwide, struggle to balance their fact-finding responsibilities with the need to cultivate and maintain audiences. This struggle often culminates in a complication at the level of news reporting and presentation that I have described as "contextual objectivity."⁶ Contextual objectivity is the dilemma which often results from strenuous attempts by news organizations to maintain independence and accuracy while tailoring coverage to the preferences of their respective audiences.⁷ While trying to report the news impartially, the Egyptian media—national, opposition, and independent—are always cautious not to offend predominant political, religious, and social values. In addition to the strict rules surrounding certain issues of national security—including criticism of the president and discussion of Coptic affairs—coverage is restricted with regard to particular social and cultural taboos. News providers try to ensure that audiences perceive their broadcast as objective and factual. If the balance tilts too much in any direction, it is likely that audiences will be turned off by the news content.

Arab news organizations have had varying degrees of success in their attempts to strike this balance of contex-

tual objectivity. In Egypt the national media have neglected the domestic opposition and censored any news that threatens the government's credibility, thus consistently failing to deliver newsworthy information. Elevating context over objectivity has hurt their credibility immensely. On the other hand, the few satellite stations that broadcast dissent against the regional governments' agendas are at times seen as overly ideological, and are treated with suspicion by Arab audiences. Al-Jazeera is the only network to fill the resulting void.

As the Egyptian media fail to maintain this delicate equilibrium, they are threatened with the loss of audiences. For years, the state press and television stations have privileged context over facts, in accordance with their audiences' sensibilities. While this may have sufficed in the past, Egyptians today are demanding facts and are holding the press accountable. The national media have not responded accordingly, leaving them hopelessly out of touch with their audiences.

Conclusion. One of the greatest ironies of populist revolt in Egypt is that, as the government responds to foreign pressures demanding accountability, opposition parties maintain their domestic character by denying foreign funding and support. Mubarak's administration prohibited independent election surveillance on the basis of unwarranted foreign meddling in Egyptian internal affairs, but many believe the elections were held in response to U.S. pressure. Nonetheless, the success of the Egyptian democratic experiment will depend in large part on the public's perception of its domestic character, a prerequisite for authenticity. Thus, foreign intervention may derail

this delicate process. The discussion of democratization by Kim Campbell and Sean C. Carroll suggests the greater impact of public action, rather than foreign intervention, on democracy in the region, claiming that the "Mossad and the White House" are not leading the Arab world toward democracy.⁸ As a result, it is imperative that the project of democratization remain indigenous since "only local actors can eventually fling [the door] wide open and walk through it."⁹ For this reason, the United States must remain at arm's length from the unique process now underway in Egypt. It must continue to acknowledge and complement positive developments, but from a careful distance.

Regardless of how it came about, Mubarak's move to open up competition for the presidency is a step in the right direction. In a step that looks like democracy, Mubarak appears to have stirred the stagnant waters of Egypt's

political bowl, thus invigorating public activism and expression. Inadvertently, this has also allowed the sediment from the bottom of the bowl to rise to the top, revealing Egypt's political dysfunctions. Historically ignored issues—electoral irregularities, falsified voter registration, coercion of political contention, worsening labor conditions, rising unemployment, and widespread economic corruption—are now at the forefront of Egypt's public agenda.

Despite incremental progress, Zaghoul's slogan, "Truth above power," remains farfetched in today's Egypt. The NDP's stranglehold on the media may be the last steadfast dam holding back the mighty stream of political activity and civil society in Egypt. Without an unhindered, unadulterated free press enshrined in the constitution and supported by an independent judiciary, this whirlwind is little more than a gentle stir in the murky bowl.

NOTES

1 For a detailed analysis of the political transformations of opposition parties, their popularity, ideological roots, and the judicial restrictions imposed on them by the state, see Ninette Fahmy, *The Politics of Egypt: State-Society Relations* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002).

2 Mohammed el-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar, *Al-Jazeera: The Story of the Network That Is Rattling Governments and Redefining Modern Journalism* (Boulder: Westview, 2003), 83.

3 Faisal Al-Kasim, "The Opposite Direction: A Program Which Changed the Face of Arab Television," in Mohamed Zayani, *The Al-Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2005), 102.

4 El-Nawawy and Iskandar, *Al-Jazeera*, 114.

5 Muhammed Ayish, "Political Communication on Arab World Television," *Political Communication* 19

(2002): 151.

6 Adel Iskandar and Mohammed el-Nawawy, "Al-Jazeera and War Coverage in Iraq: The Media's Quest for Contextual Objectivity," in Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer, *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime* (London: Routledge, 2004), 315–332.

7 Mohammed el-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar, "The Minotaur of 'Contextual Objectivity': War coverage and the pursuit of accuracy with appeal," *Transnational Broadcasting Journal*, Internet, <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Fall02/Iskandar.html> (Date accessed: 7 September 2005).

8 Kim Campbell and Sean C. Carroll, "Sustaining Democracy's Last Wave," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2005): 45.

9 *Ibid.*, 46.