

ARAB MEDIA

Power and Weakness

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CHAPTER ONE

Political Opportunity Structures: Effects of the Arab Media

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"The state of research on media effects is one of the most notable embarrassments of modern social science."

(Bartels 1993, 267)

"Many broad and definitive judgments about the substantive content of mass media are still made without actual content analyses of these media."

(Graber 2003, 140)

Confusion about the political effects of the Arab mass media abounds. Sweeping claims about the pernicious or revolutionary impact of satellite television are easily found: the Arab media promotes democracy, washing away decades of authoritarian political culture; the Arab media fans the flames of radicalism, subverting liberalism and the forces of moderation. But such claims are routinely made based on superficial and impressionistic evidence, with little serious attention to the theoretical underpinnings or causal mechanisms underlying the contentions (Sakr 2007). These debates about Arab media in fact recapitulate earlier debates about the effects of the media in Western societies (Newton 1999, 2006). Early research saw massive effects "because the mass media permeate almost every corner of society, and have a strong impact on almost everywhere they touch" (Newton 2006, 209). These arguments seemed plausible in increasingly media-saturated Western societies, and were attractive both to conservatives who mourned the assumed decline of traditional society and leftists keen to expose the manipulation of the masses by corporate media. Social scientists seeking to document these alleged massive media effects found little supporting evidence, however (Zaller 1996). The "minimal effects" school which rose in its place argued instead "that they are generally a weak force in politics and government (...) they can and do exercise some direct and independent influence over some aspects of political life, and can even exercise as strong or crucial one under certain circumstances, but normally their impact is mediated and conditioned by a variety of other and more powerful forces" (Newton 2006, 210).

Most discussion of the Arab media today falls by default into the "massive effects" camp, despite the general dominance of the "minimal effects" school in the academic literature and the relative absence of systematic evidence to support the claims. The "massive effects" school of Arab media studies is given superficial plausibility by the seemingly simultaneous

rapid expansion of the mass media and political upheavals in the Arab world over the last decade. And just as “massive effects” were politically convenient in the West, the Arab media today makes a convenient scapegoat for a wide range of actors: Americans found it more convenient to blame the media for fueling anti-Americanism or the struggles in Iraq than to consider the effects of their foreign policy, while Arab governments preferred to blame Al-Jazeera for popular unrest than to look at their own failures. As in the earlier generation of Western media effects research, the absence of serious empirical research and under-theorized causal mechanisms allow a politically convenient and superficially plausible “massive effects” assumption to go largely unchallenged.

This chapter places the arguments over the political effects of the Arab media within these wider debates in order to lay the foundations for a practical research agenda. It highlights current deficiencies in the available empirical evidence on audiences, content and effect, as well as in the theoretical underpinnings of the claimed relationships. I then consider a set of hypotheses drawn from the wider literature which could conceivably be relevant to the Arab case, concluding that the most promising research avenue lies with media effects theories which emphasize framing and agenda setting. I conclude that there is relatively thin support for region-wide claims about mass media effects on political attitudes or behavior, with it being virtually impossible at this point to separate out media effects from other driving forces (such as actual policies, power struggles and social movements). There is stronger support for more specific claims about specific cases, with the media shaping political strategies and outcomes in particular instances. Given the data shortcomings and regional variation, the best way to make sense of the political effects of the Arab media is through detailed case studies which distinguish between the universal and the specific, and pay close attention to competing explanations. This suggests the utility of reconceptualizing the media as part of the “political opportunity structure” within which actors operate (McAdam et al. 2001, Tilly/Tarrow 2007), rather than as an independent variable directly causing outcomes. Finally, I offer brief illustrations of two issue areas in which the media is claimed to have a major role, one in attitudes (anti-Americanism) and the other in behavior (democratization).

Current Deficiencies

Jim Shanahan and Erik Nisbet’s recent work on the relationship between the Arab media and anti-Americanism exemplifies both the prospects and the problems with current Arab media effects research. Shanahan and Nisbet attempt to statistically evaluate a series of hypothesized relationships between the Arab media and Arab attitudes towards America, concluding that “media infrastructure, in terms of access to television and internet, was the strongest predictor of which countries had substantial increases in anti-American sentiment” during the period between 2002 and 2005 (2007, 2). Although their statistical analysis is solid, their analysis is hampered by the shortcomings in the available data upon which they rely: occasional large-scale public opinion surveys carried out by Gallup, Pew and Zogby, supplemented by content analysis provided by the German firm Media Tenor. Such data sources are deeply inadequate to the task of isolating the political impact of the media. This is not the fault of Shanahan and Nisbet, but rather an indication of the state of the field. Indeed, it is difficult to pinpoint particular deficiencies in the existing data about the political effects of the Arab media, because those deficiencies are global. The availability

of reliable measures of even the most basic data about independent variables can not be taken for granted in the case of the Arab media. Three particular areas of concern stand out: information about *audiences* for the mass media; information about the *content* of the media; and measures of the *effects* which the media is claimed to be having. Finally, data alone will not solve problems which are fundamentally theoretical. Any persuasive theorization of Arab media effects needs to precisely specify the *causal mechanisms* by which media affects political attitudes, behavior, and outcomes, and must balance the homogenizing impact of regional media with the highly variable domestic political configurations across the Arab world.

Audiences

Even determining the audiences for Arab media is surprisingly challenging. Anecdotal evidence abounds: travelogues of satellite dishes sprouting in squalid urban quarters, or vignettes of men in a café with eyes glued to Al-Jazeera's coverage of the invasion of Iraq. We can speak in general terms about the rapid growth of access to satellite television across the region, but the illicit nature of many of these satellite dishes—as well as the common practice of communal viewing in cafés and other venues—makes precise quantification difficult. Nothing comparable to the American Nielsen ratings exists for the Arab market which would allow for reliable tracking of media consumption patterns over time. Public opinion surveys carried out for other reasons have asked about media preferences and usage, but do not follow conventional television ratings methodologies and are not repeated often enough along the same samples to generate useful trend lines. There are studies carried out on behalf of advertisers or particular stations, but their findings are rarely made public and tend to focus only on certain markets (primarily Saudi Arabia, the largest advertising market). In short, even if there is more information available today than in the past, existing audience market data is of limited utility for academic research except for broad generalizations.

The most systematic, useful information about Arab consumption of mass media has been produced by Shibley Telhami's annual survey of six Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE).¹ His surveys demonstrate that Al-Jazeera is the overall dominant market leader, with very significant variations by country. In 2004 Al-Jazeera ranked as the primary station for 62 per cent of Jordanians, 54 per cent of Moroccans, 44 per cent of Lebanese, 44 per cent of Saudis, and 46 per cent in the UAE; and the secondary station for (on average) about 20 per cent more in each country. In the 2005 survey, only 10 per cent said they never watched Al-Jazeera, while 65 per cent named it as either their first or second preference. Again, there was significant variation by country: Al-Jazeera was least viewed in Lebanon (63 per cent) and Saudi Arabia (42 per cent), for instance, while dominant in Egypt and Jordan. In the 2006 survey, Al-Jazeera remained on top, with 54 per cent naming Al-Jazeera as their top choice for international news. Saudi Arabia was the only market in which Al-Jazeera did not lead, a finding reproduced in other market surveys as well. The Lebanese market matched Al-Jazeera against a number of popular local stations. Still, in its strongest four (out of six) countries, Al-Jazeera enjoyed an *average* advantage of over 45 percentage points (62 per cent in Egypt and 64 per cent in Jordan). In some (such as Yemen, Jordan and the Palestinian areas) the weakness of local media turns Al-Jazeera and other regional broadcasters into the primary platform for political news and debate.

In others (such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon) the regional broadcasters play an important but not dominant role in a more crowded domestic media arena.

This data, whatever its flaws, allows for some generalizations about the structure of the Arab media market. Prior to the 1990s, most Arab media was either state-dominated or else published abroad, with the mass electronic media primarily “mobilizational” in character (Rugh 2004). The launch of Al-Jazeera revolutionized the political arena with professional and independent reporting, an Arab nationalist and populist ethos, and diverse and contentious political opinion. By the turn of the century, Al-Jazeera enjoyed something like universal presence among Arab political society. This means that by roughly 1998 Al-Jazeera’s programming could be reasonably considered what game theorists call the “common knowledge” of Arab political society: every actor would reasonably expect that every other actor was aware of it. This status made it an enormously potent weapon, and hotly contested battlefield, in the aftermath of 9/11. Within a few years, Al-Jazeera’s near-monopoly had given way to intense market competition, with the market fragmenting (in some markets more than others). Al-Arabiya launched in 2003 with Saudi funding and quickly emerged as a region-wide challenger to Al-Jazeera. Egyptian stations (Dream and Orbit), smaller Gulf competitors (Abu Dhabi TV and Dubai TV), other Saudi stations (MBC, ART), and even Iranian and Western Arabic-language broadcasters played a role in specific contexts. Lebanese broadcasters such as al-Manar, New TV, Future TV, LBC—often tied to particular political parties—took on an explicitly political role in the heated events after the 2005 assassination of Rafik Hariri. The Arab media market has therefore gone through distinct phases, rather than remaining constant in its structure or political dynamics.

Content

The literature on Arab media effects also lacks basic information about its content (see Ayish and Nötzold in this volume). Serious content analysis of the Arab media remains very thin, leaving analyses to simply impute content to stations based on assumption or anecdotal evidence. Recent comparative work has attempted to include Arab media sources, but these studies remain very limited in their penetration or interpretive grasp of Arab media discourse (Aday et al. 2005, Falah et al. 2006). Even work which cites examples of Arab media content tends to select them on an unscientific and potentially unrepresentative basis, producing argument by anecdote rather than by systematic, representative content analysis (Fandy 2000, Ajami 2001). Virtually nothing in Arab media studies approaches the sort of empirically sophisticated content analysis formed on the Chinese media by Iain Johnston and Daniele Stockman (2006), to say nothing of the norms of empirical analysis of English-language media. This is a problem with statistical analyses which use “Al-Jazeera viewing” as a proxy for exposure to anti-American content (Nisbet et al. 2004, Gentzkow/Shapiro 2004); to the extent that Al-Jazeera’s content is more diverse and contentious, such inferences would not hold (Lynch 2005a, Miles 2005, Nawawy/Iskander 2002).

To show why the limited availability of content analysis matters, consider that one of the strongest findings in the literature has to do with the effects of “exposure to dissimilar views via the media” (Mutz/Martin 2001, 99) As Bartels (1993) puts it, “*Consistent, distinctive media messages favoring one side or the other in a political controversy are (...) likely to produce sizable opinion changes over time. Thus, studies of when and why such consistent, distinctive media messages get produced should be among the highest priorities for research on the political impact of the mass media.*” Does the Arab media reinforce balkanized views

or does it provide a diversity of views? Does the rise of Al-Arabiya and the fragmentation of the Arab media market offer Arab viewers a wider array of competing messages? Ajami and Fandy's presentation would suggest not: that the new Arab media is full of very similar, mutually reinforcing content. Others argue that not only does Al-Jazeera itself feature highly diverse content and multiple points of view, but that the rise of a fragmented market (which includes stations such as Al-Arabiya which have self-consciously set out to offer a political alternative to Al-Jazeera) means that a wide variety of political perspectives are now available to channel-surfing Arab viewers. Rigorous content analysis—whether statistical or more interpretive discourse analysis—would at least begin to fill in the empirical void.

Causal Effects

Finally, measures of the dependent variables of interest to political scientists are improving but remain limited and rudimentary. Part of the problem is conceptual: defining the political attitudes or behaviors of interest, and their relationship to political outcomes. Another part is empirical: the availability of reliable measures of those variables. The latter problem is beginning to change, to some extent. Public opinion survey research in the Middle East has taken off since 9/11, with a growing body of research of widely varying quality on Arab political attitudes (Tessler 2003, Lynch 2006, Moaddel 2006). As early as the 1990s, several governments and agencies were beginning to survey national public opinion in the region. After September 11, international research agencies such as the Pew Foundation, Zogby International and the Gallup Organization began carrying out major cross-national survey research on a wide range of questions of concern to American foreign policy. An upgraded Arab component of the World Values Survey and a number of National Science Foundation supported single country and multi-country studies. As a result, we now have a far more rigorous and useful set of data on Arab and Muslim public opinion than ever before, which is increasingly being exploited by statistically oriented political scientists.

Political attitudes as measured by survey research is only one component of the “political effects” of concern to political scientists, however. Consider two of the most widely studied issue-areas in Arab media studies: anti-Americanism and democratization. Anti-Americanism is an *attitude*, to be measured in opinion surveys and public discourse, whose manifestation does not necessarily lead to any particular political effects (which are mediated through all the various political institutions and processes through which public opinion might or might not matter politically). It is worth distinguishing between relatively transient opinions, which might change easily in response to changed circumstance, and more entrenched interpretive schemas which constitute relatively stable worldviews (Katzenstein/Keohane 2007). Democratization is a political process, whose manifestation can be seen in political behavior—elections, protests, Parliamentary maneuvering—which are not reducible to attitudes. There have been a number of fairly free, contested elections in the Middle East in recent years (Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestine etc.), which offers a chance to tentatively begin the kind of voting behavior questions which dominate much of the “political effects of the media” literature (Sheafer/Weimann 2005). There has also been a parallel explosion of contentious political behavior, which would lend itself to constructing data sets about protests, strikes, and other mobilizational activity. Distinguishing between attitudes and behavior is necessary for developing useful theories of the political effects of the Arab media.

It is important to note, however, that the problems are not simply data-related. There are also serious methodological, conceptual, and theoretical issues which have hardly begun to be resolved. The media effects literature has long struggled with disentangling the various possible explanatory factors driving political opinions and behavior. The sophisticated statistical analysis which goes into their efforts would simply be impossible in the data-poor Arab context. Any serious analysis of media effects, however, must at least attempt to go beyond correlation and specify causal mechanisms. How does the Arab media have the claimed effects? The mechanisms could be psychological (priming, agenda setting, motivated bias) or political (strategies, power resources, opportunity structures). The next section begins to flesh out some of these possible causal mechanisms, which should be elaborated even if the data problems remain a long-term agenda.

Hypotheses about the Arab Media

Research on the political effects of the Arab media should integrate theories of *agenda setting*, or how the media decides which issues become major themes in public opinion; *framing*, or how they are linked together into political narratives (Scheufele 1999; Takeshita 2005); and *political opportunity structures*, or how the media changes the prospects for these attitudes to be translated into political action (Tilly/Tarrow 2006). *Agenda setting* works by priming viewers, highlighting certain issues and identifying them as important, while neglecting others. Whether as passive recipients or as active learners, viewers infer from the media which issues matter. These are not solely media constructs, of course: the progression from the second Palestinian Intifada, through 9/11, the 2002 Israeli reoccupation of the West Bank, the invasion of and subsequent violence in Iraq, and the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war has meant that a steady stream of violent, bloody images—punctuated by moments of political enthusiasm, such as the Lebanese and Egyptian protests of 2005, has dominated the regional agenda. *Framing* refers to the normative evaluation of the issues built into the coverage, and the narrative into which the issues fit, which together construct the meanings which inform viewers about how they should be understood (Scheufele 1999). Framing and agenda setting can be integrated effectively into an understanding of the media's effects rooted in theories of contentious politics. Rather than a stand-alone variable, the media should be understood as a vital part of what Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2006) call the "political opportunity structure".

The key framing and agenda-setting contributions of the new Arab media, especially satellite television, have been to unify the Arab political agenda and to shatter the ability of states to control information or the range of permissible opinion. Whether for ideological reasons (residual Arab nationalism or Islamist pan-nationalism) or for market reasons (region-wide broadcasters need to emphasize issues of wide appeal), the main satellite television stations have structured a news agenda which emphasizes an overarching Arab identity (Telhami 2007). The transnational Arab media, it is often argued, promotes Arab identity at expense of national identity (Alterman 1998). The public sphere has a powerfully constitutive effect on political identity, so that the common news agenda and common political debates of Al-Jazeera and its regional competitors engage average citizens in the wider Arab identity.

Palestine and Iraq are the most obvious examples of this region-wide Arab frame. But issues of reform and democratization have similarly been cast as part of a wider Arab story.

Al-Jazeera's framing of the political agenda establishes a common, core Arab narrative which in the past had existed only in a more abstract sense (Lynch 2005a). It places events across the Arab world within a single narrative, drawing connections by implication (in the news) and explicitly (in the talk show discussions).

The common region-wide agenda has not led to the predicted detachment from local politics but instead has reframed local politics around wider regional themes. Elections in Egypt or explosions in Morocco become part of an overarching Arab narrative as well as political episodes of local import. When Egyptians protested in one part of Cairo, in the past other Egyptians would have heard about it only via word of mouth, since Egyptian television would not have covered it. Now, virtually any protest or election or political event is immediately covered by Al-Jazeera and its many competitors, rendering them visible and giving them meaning not only to other Egyptians but to all other Arabs. This points to one of the truly important political effects of the Arab media: its redefinition of the field of contention and its recasting of the political opportunities available to a wide range of political actors (McAdam et al. 2001). The contributions of the Arab media to both democratization and anti-Americanism, as discussed above, may be linked to this framing and agenda-setting mechanism: the rise in anti-Americanism in the region might be driven by a common narrative linking America as the common denominator for each of these otherwise distinct issues, while the rise in contentious democratic politics may similarly be supported by the same overarching Arab-media promoted narrative.

The transnational quality of the Arab media, with its very self-conscious invocation of a common political identity and attempt to maintain a coherent political dialogue across national borders, is one of its most distinctive qualities. Compared to even the European media, the Arab media has succeeded in establishing these genuinely transnational qualities in unique ways. Viewed at that level, it makes sense to look for region-wide political effects: for instance, heightened identification with transnational identities (Arab, Islamic), or the greater emotional response to events triggered by the power of broadcast images. At the same time, the concrete political effects of the Arab media are always mediated through local political and social structures. The transnational media will matter differently in a media-saturated, politically dense arena such as Egypt and a media-starved, relatively uninstitutionalized country such as Yemen.

Finally, the changing structure of the Arab media market discussed above offers the opportunity to test some of the hypotheses which follow from agenda-setting and framing models. For instance, as it has risen to prominence since 2003, the Saudi-backed Al-Arabiya has pointedly attempted to reframe and reprioritize the Arab agenda against the narrative offered by Al-Jazeera. It has self-consciously offered a more "moderate" alternative, promoting critics of radical Islamism and favoring the views of status quo Arab regimes (such as Saudi Arabia) over popular Islamist movements. This means that significant numbers of Arab media viewers in 2005 or 2006 are exposed to a different agenda and normative framing than they would have been exposed to in 2002 or 2003, offering a perfect opportunity for testing these hypotheses.

Attitudes: Radicalism and Anti-Americanism

The impact of the Arab media on anti-Americanism has been one of the most systematically studied issue domains (Chiozza 2007). Several correlational studies have been published

based on the 2002 Gallup Organization survey of nine Muslim countries. Nisbet et al. (2004) found that “attention to TV news coverage contributes significantly to anti-American perceptions.” They did not argue that Arab media caused anti-Americanism, but rather that it *amplified* pre-existing attitudes. But the study did little to determine whether the Arab media caused those attitudes, or whether people with such attitudes simply preferred to watch Al-Jazeera. Since the finding was correlated with TV news viewing, rather than with any content analysis of specific stations, it also seems plausible that those coded as higher consumers of the media were simply more politically aware. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2004), looking at the same data, found little impact of media exposure, but that those for whom Al-Jazeera was the first choice were less likely to consider 9/11 attacks unjustifiable and more likely to be hostile to the United States. But once again, they can do little to separate out causality. Finally, Chiozza’s (2007) cross-regional study of anti-Americanism found that watching an international channel for news (i.e. CNN or BBC rather than Al-Jazeera) was significantly associated with more favorable views of the United States but could not determine whether this represented cause or effect (i.e. those more inclined to like America watched Western stations).

There are obvious problems with blaming the Arab media for anti-Americanism, such as the parallel rise of anti-Americanism across the world, in places that do not watch Al-Jazeera (Lynch 2007). Beyond such critiques, it is necessary to separate out “bias” arguments from “amplification” arguments: “bias” would mean that the Arab media is creating anti-American anger based on misleading or false presentations of American policies; “amplification” would mean that anti-Americanism is driven by the Arab media’s relatively accurate presentation of American policies. The Arab media’s airing of the Abu Ghraib scandal or the detentions in Guantanamo angered Arab audiences, but each was rooted in very real American actions. Determining what is “fair” and what is “biased” brings the researcher deep into the heart of political controversy, unfortunately, with little solid ground upon which to stand. But the two different mechanisms would lead to very different prescriptions: “bias” would point to changing the Arab media, while “amplification” would point to changing American policies.

Perhaps the most extreme charge against the Arab media is that it incites violence—particularly in Iraq, where American and Iraqi officials routinely blame Al-Jazeera and other Arab media for the horrific violence. In the past, Palestinian suffering was something abstract and distant, but today Arabs are daily bombarded with graphic images of bloodied Iraqis and Palestinians. This direct, immediate visual access to political developments abroad arguably made politics more real and reactions more intense. The graphic images of bloodshed from Palestine and Iraq, televised day after day into living rooms all over the Arab world, may well drive viewers to anger and political mobilization or to disgusted apathy and political withdrawal. As with other media effects, research on the social effects of televised violence are at best inconclusive: “people are affected by media in highly individualized ways (...) the social factors underlying aggression and crime are influenced by far more than violent media” (Trend 2007, 2). In the Arab context, some viewers of televised carnage in Iraq may be inspired to set off to fight a violent jihad—but most will not, and explaining why some are radicalized and others are not requires more than looking at their common media viewing habits. To this point, there has been no empirical research to support either case.

If direct effects of televised violence are difficult to ascertain, there is more evidence of the media as a key part of the political opportunity structure: shaping the political strategies

and opportunities of insurgents and other violent actors. Alterman (2004) described the kidnappings and beheadings in Iraq as “made for television events”, designed for an impact on the mass public rather than directly on the local scene (although it is worth noting that no Arab satellite television station of which I am aware, including Al-Jazeera, ever aired a beheading video). Al-Jazeera’s coverage of the battle for the city of Fallujah in April 2004 demonstrably hampered American military efforts there. The rise of sectarian Iraqi media, with Shia and Sunni and Kurdish stations each playing to communal prejudices, may have more responsibility than the pan-Arab stations—certainly, in other contexts the rise of sectarian media has been seen as a key explanatory variable for the outbreak of violent ethnic conflict. Al-Qaida has exploited the violence in Iraq in its propaganda, primarily disseminated on the Web but often seeping into televised media coverage. But once again we run into the need to consider competing explanations. The distinctive characteristics of the Arab media may have shaped the political strategies of the Iraqi insurgency, but it seems implausible to leap from this to blaming the Arab media for the existence of the insurgency, as American and Iraqi officials were too often wont to do.

Set against claims about the radicalizing effects of the Arab media should be the prevailing conventional wisdom at the global level: that transnational media tends to be depoliticizing (Bennett 2004). Indeed, Monroe Price argues that globalization of the media is “virtually synonymous with a tendency toward depoliticization” (1996, 17). As Lance Bennett summarizes this critical consensus, a market-oriented transnational media tends to “increase generic programming in both entertainment and public affairs”, creating “a reconstructed political media space that excludes much of local politics, citizen activism, public policy analysis, and deliberation.” The “emphasis on low-cost, attention-getting sensationalism” tends to promote “discouraging antisocial and antipolitical images,” creating a passive citizenry focused on consumption rather than on politics (Bennett 2004, 126-127). Against this consensus, some argue that Arab media is not truly “globalizing”, but regionalizing (Kraidy 2002). The distinctively political focus of Al-Jazeera and its competitors, and their elaboration of a pan-Arab political frame, likely cuts against the depoliticization found in other settings.

Finally, one variant of the radicalization thesis is what might be called the “frustration thesis”: that the new Arab media generated great expectations for political change, the failure of which has soured newly empowered citizens on politics and given birth to an ugly new populism. This thesis has the virtue of offering a specific mechanism for attitude change—raised and then dashed expectations—as well as the suggestion of a clear sequence which could be measured through iterated survey data.

Behavior: Democratization

Arguments about the impact of Arab television on democratization concern institutions and behaviors rather than attitudes. Here, I argue that an approach based on political opportunity structures makes more sense than does a search for unique media effects. “Political opportunity structure” is a fairly elastic concept, which generally refers to how the institutional and political environment shapes the incentives and opportunities of political actors: “Changes in political opportunity structure shape the ease or difficulty of mobilization, the costs and benefits of collective claim making, the feasibility of various programs, and the consequences of different performances in the available repertoire” (Tilly/Tarrow 2006, 75). While Tilly and Tarrow do not include the media in their most recent elaboration of the concept,

the media appears in many of their *examples* as something providing new opportunities to previously ignored actors. The new Arab media described above clearly makes an impact at these levels: making mobilization easier and giving it greater potential impact, thus lowering the costs and increasing the potential benefits of contentious politics (Hafez 2005).

Above, I outlined a succession of shifts in the structure of the Arab media realm. Each of these phases offers a distinctive political opportunity structure. In the first, pre-Al-Jazeera phase, regimes were largely able to control the flow of information and opinion; even if elites could access Western media or the London-based Arab press, these had only limited wider political impact. Control over the media represented a key part of the authoritarian structure of politics, denying regime opponents the ability to be seen or heard by most of the citizenry. Opportunities for political activism were thus sharply limited, since activists had few means by which to gain access to the public realm. The second phase, the "Al-Jazeera era" spanning 1998 to 2003, decisively overturned this situation, offering significant opportunities for political action and conveying real power on sometimes quite small political movements. Al-Jazeera cameras conveyed power and protection, at least for a while, as the regime initially shied away from overt repression when the cameras were rolling. Small rallies which in the past would have been easily ignored by the state media now became important political events. As much as this created new opportunities, however, it also created vulnerabilities for these political activists. By initially exaggerating their importance, the media coverage unrealistically raised expectations which were inevitably frustrated—while also triggering the fears of the regimes and likely fueling an inevitable repressive crackdown.

In the third phase, the period of intense competition dating from roughly 2003, the greater number of competing media outlets provided more opportunities for coverage, but the fragmentation of the media market had some countervailing effects in other areas. The political significance of this fragmenting, hyper-competitive media market remains almost completely unexplored. One argument might be that media fragmentation limits the ability of any actor or movement to dominate the agenda due simply to the dizzying diversity of available outlets and agendas: where bin Laden could monopolize the public realm after 9/11, no movement or actor is likely to regain such ability. At some points—such as Nasrallah's prominence during the Israel-Lebanon war—the agenda regained coherence, but much of the time the media fragmentation has meant that viewers are more exposed to mixed messages and competing frames than in the past. Another possible difference lies in the incentives created by market competition. The intense need to attract audiences might drive competing satellite television stations towards a more sensationalist approach (coverage of Iraqi bloodshed, for example), or towards heavy coverage of populist issues (like the Danish cartoons crisis, for instance).

Enthusiasts for the new media argue that Al-Jazeera and the new Arab media are contributing to building democracy in the Arab world by undermining state power and encouraging new forms of political activism. But in the Arab case, the media can not yet provide such foundations. As Lynch (2005b) put it, "*satellite television alone will not suffice to overcome entrenched authoritarian regimes. (They) can not stand in for the hard work of politics: party organization, mobilization, bargaining, and negotiation.*" The attention of the transnational media is fickle and unsustainable, and tends to force domestic processes into grand regional narratives in which they might not comfortably fit.

Other mechanisms linking the media and democratic outcomes are worth exploring. Lynch (2005a, 2005b), for instance, argues that the new Arab media has created the

foundations for a new public sphere (Eickelman/Anderson 1999). Increased access to information and opinion “opened up the realm of possibility across the Arab world, inspiring political activists and shifting the real balance of power on the ground” (Lynch 2005b). These new forms of engagement would represent a secular change independent of specific political events or outcomes. For instance, Lynch (2005a) proposed that “talk shows on Al-Jazeera and other Arab television stations have contributed enormously to building the underpinnings of a more pluralist political culture, one which welcomes and thrives on open and contentious political debate.” Hisham Sharabi (2003) similarly argued that the new media have raised the general political consciousness of Arabs, increased their ability to take political stands and has fueled collective action.

Against these claims that Arab television programs have increased political consciousness and engagement, critics see a depoliticizing dimension which would make this mechanism work in precisely the opposite direction. Rami Khoury (2001) has argued that “*Arab satellite stations (...) may be having precisely the opposite impact—they may be entrenching autocratic, top-heavy Arab political regimes, rather than loosening them and promoting democracy and accountability.*” Khaled Al-Hroub complains that in the 1980s “the people were not captive to their television screens, which have robbed them of their ability to act” (2006, 103). Critics of Al-Jazeera charge that it sets up falsely polarizing debates and emphasizes sensational, violent news for the sake of ratings (Zayani/Ayish 2006, Fandy 2000). Some of this skepticism builds upon common criticisms of the media’s claimed effects in Western democracies: spreading cynicism and alienation, undermining faith in democracy, spreading ignorance and incomprehension, and debasing public discourse (Newton 2006, 212–14). Here I do not endorse one view or the other, but I only wish to point out that such an argument over the impact of talk shows on political engagement offers competing causal claims and hypotheses which could be tested more rigorously than can broad sweeping claims about “democracy.”

The strongest argument for significant political effects of the Arab media is frustratingly circular: the opening of political discourse has, indeed, *dramatically* opened political discourse. The shattering of taboos in the Arab media is itself politically significant, but it is not at all clear how it translates into other, more “real” political outcomes. How can it not matter that people have become accustomed to contentious public discourse, public political dissent and protest? Although the extent of the transformation varies by country, and some governments have tried harder than others to maintain control, most Arab countries have seen their politics transformed in some way by the new media realm (Popkin 2006).←

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The impact of the media on democratization can best be described as shaping the political opportunity structure, transforming the strategies and repertoires of political activists. Under the glare of satellite television cameras, regime forces may be more reluctant to apply brutal repressive force. Satellite TV outlets can magnify the political power of relatively small groups by choosing to cover their rallies and demonstrations. And creative political actors can work the media (or even work with it) to take advantage of the new opportunities. But the attention of transnational media is episodic at best and tends to focus on some countries more than others. The proliferation of outlets would make it conceivable that these problems might be overcome: Al-Jazeera might cover Saudi politics even when they are ignored by Al-Arabiya, while Al-Arabiya covers Qatari politics which are neglected by Al-Jazeera. But even there market competition might well lead multiple stations to concentrate upon the same small constellation of headline stories.

Conclusion

The Arab media clearly matters politically, even if measuring those effects remains an infant science. Satellite television has reshaped the structure of political opportunities for activists and governments alike, empowering new forms of collective action (both peaceful and violent) and restricting some forms of repression. Al-Jazeera and its imitators have played a significant role in setting the Arab political agenda and framing events within a common narrative. At the same time, there is little evidence to support the assumption that the Arab media has “massive effects” on Arab political opinions, behavior or outcomes. Its impact varies by case and tends to interact in complex ways with a wide range of other political forces. Serious empirical research into audiences, content and precise causal effects may ultimately vindicate the “massive effects” view, but more likely such evidence would cast it into doubt as it has in Western societies.

Notes

1. These surveys are available for download at <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/SADAT/> and are interpreted in Telhami (forthcoming).

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