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Global or Local? Arab Mediascape in the Information Age
Towards the New World Communication Order?

Introduction

In the contemporary world characterized by the dynamic progress of technology and easiness with which the media transcend the national boundaries, the historical communication peripheries seems to gradually disappear. Instead, we are witnessing the emergence of new regional media realities tied by, and embedded in, socio-cultural context. As different studies of so-called global media clearly show their share in as well as impact on the international mediascape are marginally.

In this light, it seems legitimate to put some necessary questions about a validity of the concept of global media village built upon a historical communication hegemony of the West. It is also clear that the recent launch of the BBC Arabic Television will not influence the Arab media environment in such an extent as CNN did it in the region in early 90s. What has changed in the Arab mediascape in the last twenty years? Are we witnessing the emergence of new global communication order? Finally, how should we consider the new Arab media?

There is any doubt that the analysis relying upon the Western theories and approaches cannot provide a fully comprehensive and accurate image of the Arab media environment. As Abdelrahman argues, such a dependence tends to neglect the possibility that the regional media express the specific historical, political and socio-cultural context of the Arabic-Islamic World.[1] In order to unveil these bias, this paper explores the main characteristics of the Arab media in the new world's communication order that

[1] A. Abdelrahman, *Studies in Egyptian and Arab Press: Current Issues*, Al-Arabi, Cairo 1989.

Iskandar describes as a post-taxonomic era in media studies.[2] The communication environment in every part in the world have to face the pressures coming from 'globalization'. Nevertheless, we also have to be aware of the fact that these processes cannot be limited only to an abstract term of 'globalization' that includes the multiplicity of meanings. Neither can it be contained within the simple dichotomy of global and local. Instead, the new regional markets exceeding beyond the Western hegemony in communication field should be taken into particular consideration.

One of the most evident examples related to these new regional realities can be found in the Arab media pattern. As this paper explore in the first section, this particular mediascape has to be seen as a product of specific context of a highly politicized region that results in structural and economic characteristic of media institutions. In the second section, based on the revised concept of commonness in the Arab world, it will be explained how the notion of transnational identity affects the regional media. Finally, in order to understand the changes in international mediascape, following the discussion that has remerged recently in media scholarship, this study will question what is truly global about the Arab media.

1. Media within the context: Exploring the background

It is hard to understand the Arab mediascape without going deeper into the contexts that surround and permeate this environment. An accurate analysis of this sphere should confront the normative assumptions of media functioning with a particular reality in which they operate. As Anabelle Sreberny remarks, an effective approach in Arab media studies should first of all explore the competing pressures of conservatism, tradition, cultural maintenance and "other pressures towards change and modernization which exist within every society and are pronounced across the regions".[3] This issue has been formulated in similar way by Marwan Kraidy and Joe Khalil. According to scholars, a balanced analysis of the Arab media sphere is needed particularly within highly politicized context of Middle Eastern governance, tense relations between Arab and Western World, and within

[2] A. Iskandar, *Lines in the Sand: Problematizing Arab Media in the Post-Taxonomic Era*, arabmediasociety.com, May 2007.

[3] A. Sreberny, *Mediated culture in the Middle East: diffusion, democracy, difficulties*, "Gazette: The International Journal of Mass Communication Studies" 63 (2-3), 2001, p. 101.

the terrorism reducing the space for dialogue.[4] Following these suggestions, it is legitimate to claim that the Arab media need to be analysed: as institutions that may contribute to national and transnational processes of political liberalization and democratization (even if this approach needs to be revised in order to be taken into more careful consideration); as potential agents of national and regional solidarity, of cultural convergence and of social transformation; and finally, as actors within wider processes of economic globalization, market expansion and rationalization of employment and labour relations".[5]

Moreover, such analysis also require a particular awareness of the regional complexity and existence of many different kinds of variables, mixed legacies, influences and discrepancies. Abu Bakr et al. divide for instance the region in three communities based on geopolitical assumptions. According to scholars, the Arab World contains: the North Africa subregion (Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia), the Nile Valley region (Egypt and Sudan); and Asian-Arab countries known as the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula).[6] As Alterman observes, between these countries there are great disparities in many different aspects: from illiteracy level, demographics and ethnic composition of society, to forms of political and economic system.[7] The Arab World is also a region of a hugely disparate economic status including the countries with the highest GNP in the world like United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, and those with among the lowest, like Yemen. Finally, this diversity results from different political and economic tradition in which republican revolutions in Iraq, Syria and Egypt in 1950s highly contrast with stable and resilient to turbulent changes autocratic monarchies in Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Kuwait.[8]

These remarks points out the need of new approach. It seems thus necessary, as Nick Couldry suggests, to abandon the Western-biased approaches and turn to alternative theoretical paths able to take into account the par-

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[4] M.M. Kraidy, J.F. Khalil, *The Middle East: Transnational Arab Television*, in L. Artz, and Y.R. Kamalipour (Eds), *The Media Globe: Trends in International Mass Media*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York 2006, p. 79.

[5] Ibidem, pp. 101-102.

[6] Y. Abu Bakr et al., *Development of communication in the Arab states - Needs and priorities*, UNESCO, Paris 1985.

[7] J. B. Alterman, *Transnational media and social change in the Arab world*, tbsjournal.com, Spring 1999.

[8] A. Sreberny, op.cit., p. 102.

ticularities of the Arab media and the Arab world.[9] In this light, the Arab media should be explored according to critical paths in global media studies that "places communication within broader political economic and cultural processes and treats communication research as an inherently integrative exercise that cuts across disciplinary lines".[10] These studies has to put a strong emphasis on such issues as public sphere, meaning-making, identity formation and reinterpretation, telecommunication networks and information technologies, social development and modernization, economic production and community formation. They must also express what Kraidy calls 'critical transculturalism', a framework of different fields from cultural and media studies to economic and political science that puts dual focus on both structure and culture. [11]

Through more careful analysis of the context that interplay in, shape and affect the Arab media sphere[12], in order to follow the changes in the Arab mediascape, this paper will look at this environment from different angles: political and economic to introduce its background; from socio-cultural, regional and global to explain its operational dimension.

Political context

The political context of the relations occurring within the Arab mediascape is a key point in understanding these structures. Many scholars point out the particular interconnections between media and power in the Arab world. As Kirchner observes, a dynamics of changes in the Arab media is limited by restrictive state policies resulting from a lack of acceptance of the new media by the authorities.[13] In spite of relevant changes in the Arab

[9] See N. Couldry, *Researching media internationalization: Comparative media research as if we really meant it*, "Global Media and Communication" 3, 2007, pp.247-250.

[10] P. Chakravartty, Y. Zhao (Eds), *Global Communications: Toward a Transcultural Political Economy*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York 2007, p.10.

[11] See M.M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2005.

[12] See P. Krzysiek, *Kontekstualne ujęcie mediów. Nienormatywna koncepcja analizy struktur medialnych w krajach rozwijających się na przykładzie arabskich środków masowego przekazu*, "Studia Medioznawcze" 3 (34), forthcoming.

[13] H. Kirchner, *Internet in the Arab World: A Step Towards 'Information Society'?*, in K. Hafez (ed), *Mass Media, Politics and Society*, Hampton Press, Creskill (NJ) 2001.

mediascape determined by the satellite revolution, the nation state still remains a remarkable player. As Naomi Sakr remarks, even a decade after start of this revolution, the Arab governments still had the upper hand over the majority of media practices.[14]

The political context affects almost every aspect of Arab media sphere. The governments retain a high degree of media control through various legislative mechanism, such as emergency laws, ownership laws and official content restrictions. Private undertakings are led on a leash by financial obligations, personal dependencies and privileges. Despite the emergence of new Arab media players such as broadcasters, licensing commissions, professional alliances, audience research agencies, advertisers' trade associations, training bodies, and media watch groups, these institutions do not run away from being subjected to a certain degree of government pressure.[15] As I have suggested in my latest article built upon the Oliver Schlumberger's approach of the political transition in the Arab world, it is still difficult to acknowledge that the Arab regimes are subject to the process of democratization. Contrarily, the empirical findings at both political and media levels indicate rather that these regimes have successfully adjusted themselves to the new global conditions without a substantial loss of the power.[16] As Da Lage confirms referring to the liberalization of media law in Qatar, although the country abolished the Ministry of Information and repealed censorship, the new measures do not mean necessarily that journalists are completely free. In practice, such a thaw has even proven to be a real headache for local journalists who are no longer sure where to draw the line. "The main difference, Da Lage argues, is that now, instead of knowing with certitude where the red lines are drawn they have to guess".[17]

One of the obvious signs of this process is the omnipresent censorship. Undoubtedly, in the last years the Arab media have undergone the remark-

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[14] N. Sakr, *Arab Television Today*, I.B. Tauris, London 2007, p. 2.

[15] Ibidem, p. 3.

[16] P. Krzysiek, "Testing legal boundaries within Arab media hubs. Reporting limits within three Media Cities", Paper presented at the conference "Journalism Testing Legal Boundaries: Media Laws and the Reporting of Arab News", University of Westminster, 20 June 2008; See also in broader perspective O. Schlumberger, *Transition in the Arab World: Guidelines for Comparison*, EUI-RSC Working Paper, Mediterranean Programme Series No.2002/22, European University Institute, Florence (2002); O. Schlumberger (Ed), *Debating Arab Authoritarianism. Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2007.

[17] O. Da Lage, *The Politics of Al Jazeera or the Diplomacy of Doha*, in M. Zayani (Ed.), *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon: Critical Perspectives on New Arab Media*, Pluto Press, London 2005, p. 53.

able alterations in this field. The ties of the traditional forms of media control has been loosened significantly and the media, particularly pan-Arab news outlets, enjoy now the higher degree of editorial independence. Nevertheless, as Amin remarks, many more sophisticated methods of controlling the cultural production have emerged. As a result, the press freedom and the performance of Arab journalist are still threatened by the overt censorship and self-censorship that are commonplace not only in the Arab news media but also in the journalism education and training programs.[18]

Despite the proliferation of new media – transnational satellite television and the Internet as the most dynamic of them – the freedom of expression is still notoriously restricted in the Arab world. As El Gody argues in his study of new mechanism of Web censorship, although Internet technologies cannot be controlled so easily, the Arab governments are applying different measures to control this medium".[19] El Gody provides also some examples of these new forms of control such as restrictive laws and licensing requirements, content filtering, tapping and surveillance, pricing and taxation policies, and software and hardware manipulation. Furthermore, in addition to such technical and legal means, Arab governments practice a 'social responsibility censorship' by creating an atmosphere of fear in order to intimidate Internet users and prevent them from using the medium for political purposes.[20] These acts are often justified by the arguments relating to social peace, political stability, and needs to protect the moral values.[21] In Jordan for instance, threats and intimidation techniques are used to stop inappropriate discussions in chat rooms.[22] In Saudi Arabia the imprisonment without charge of the bloggers and reform advocates criticizing the rulers is a regular occurence[23] In Egypt, the national Facebook website administrator was arrested and detained on charges of helping to organize the political manifestation.[24] In Lebanon, considered as the most liberal

[18] H. Amin, *Freedom as a Value in Arab Media: Perceptions and Attitudes Among Journalists*, "Political Communication" 19, 2002, p. 125.

[19] A. El Gody, *New Media, New Audience, New Topics, New Forms of Censorship*, in P. Seib (Ed), *New Media and the Middle East. Palgrave*, New York 2007, p.224.

[20] Ibidem.

[21] P. Krzysiek, *Testing legal boundaries….*

[22] The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, *Jordan: New restrictions on Internet cafés and violating privacy of users*, "Press Release", 11 March 2008.

[23] *Reformist Saudi blogger freed*, "Middle East Times", 27 April 2008.

[24] L. Kasinof, *Egyptians use Facebook to deter censorship*, "Middle East Times", 29 April 2008.

country in the Arab world, state censorship affects any topics that touch upon Israel or sensitive issues including religion.[25]

These and many other cases prevailing in the contemporary Arab world result from a long tradition to use the media as a tool for achieving various political goals, to increase a country's significance at the regional stage, and to promote the certain policies or ideologies. As Mellor notes, Saudi Arabia established its television broadcasting service to distract citizens from foreign media programs and to provide them with a sense of community.[26] Media were also seen as a symbols of national modernization. As El-Sherif remarks, some small emirates could exist without army as long as they could afford their daily newspapers, radio and television service as a signs of economic prosperity and integration wit the modern world.[27]

The media in general, and the Arab satellite television in particular, are also seen as the diplomatic tools in hands of the Arab states. According to Andrew Hammond, since the Gulf crisis in early 90s, when the United States used Saudi Arabia as a launch pad for a campaign to evict occupying Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the Kingdom has used the Arab media as a key area for responding to perceived threats to the leadership's legitimacy and stability provoked by the alliance with the United States.[28] A Qatari network Al Jazeera can constitute another example of such practices. The observations drew on the recent station's coverage may suggest that the channel has pulled in its horns in covering Saudi Kingdom. Al Jazeera's attitudes towards Saudi Arabia are accused to be politically determined. As one of the station's employee claims, any issue affecting the Saudi should not be exposed without referring to the higher management. Moreover, all dissident voices has recently disappeared from the screens. This strategy can be seen as a result of the new priorities in foreign policy of the Qatari rulers. One of the possible explanation is that Qatar, that established Al Jazeera as a forum of critics towards the Saudi rulers, realized that in the face of the Iranian threat, the Saudi Arabia as a fellow Sunni nation cannot continue to be isolated.[29] This

[25] R. Moussaoui, *Lebanon may be liberal, but...*, "Jordan Times", 18 April 2008.

[26] N. Mellor, *The Making of Arab News*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham (MD) 2005, p. 34.

[27] M. El-Sherif, *The Arab attitude to mass media*, "Intermedia" 8(2), 1980, pp. 28-29.

[28] A. Hammond, *Saudi Arabia's Media Empire: keeping the masses at home*, arabmediasociety.com, October 2007.

[29] R.R. Worth, *Al Jazeera No Longer Nips at Saudis*, "New York Times", 4 January 2008; See also O. Guitta, "First target for Iran: Qatar?", Middle East Times, 26 November 2006.

intrinsic function of Al Jazeera seems to be confirmed by Zayani who notes that in spite of the guarantees of freedom and pan-Arab current that runs through it, Al Jazeera is first and foremost a Qatari channel.[30] These examples expose that despite several alteration that have allowed the Arab media to entry into international competition in media sphere, even today these media remain strongly related to the power and are treated as a political tools in cases of 'absolute necessity'.

Economic context

The political context described above affects the economic dimension of the Arab media industry. Although also in terms of ownership the Arab media have experienced significant structural changes in the last decade, it is hardly controversial to state that they operate under the full and healthy market economy. To understand the economic context of these structures, it is rather necessary to take into account the assumptions of critical political economy that Mosco defines as "the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources".[31]

These assumptions can be found in many of well known Arab media ventures. As Zayani remarks in relation to the political economy of Al Jazeera, on the one hand the situation of Qatari station corresponds with an interesting global trend of favouring a marriage between media ownership and politics.[32] On the other hand, the station presents the very clear characteristics of a longstanding regional tradition of operating under control either of governments or some rich owner in many cases associated with the ruling elite.[33] The outcome of such a tradition is an interesting interrelation of two contradictory models: the public and the private; and the ideological and the commercial. As Zayani argues: "On the one hand, governments are ideologically inclined to more commercialization and privatiza-

[30] M. Zayani, *Al Jazeera and the Vicissitudes of the New Arab Mediascape*, in M. Zayani (ed.), *The Al Jazeera Phenomenon…*, p. 11.

[31] V. Mosco, *The political economy of communication*, Sage, London 1996, p. 25.

[32] This trend could or still can be observed for example in case of the former Thai PM Thaksin Shinawatra, his Italian counterpart, recently re-elected, Silvio Berlusconi, and assassinated in 2005 Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.

[33] M. Zayani, *Al Jazeera and the Vicissitudes…*, in M. Zayani (ed.), op.cit., p. 15.

tion; on the other hand, they still conceive of mass media as a state-controlled public service".[34]

Political economy of the Arab media might be also a reflection of what Chakravartty and Zhao describe as "asymmetric structures of power within the media systems".[35] Over the past seventeen years the Saudi establishment has used its financial resources to influence the region's media, "morphing from an approach that paid off and intimidated media that ran negative reports on the kingdom, to become one of the Middle East's most influential media owners".[36] From this perspective, it is possible to acknowledge that although both the Arab media and the Middle Eastern regimes seek to adjust themselves to the conditions of global media industry, it is a vision and an implementation of these adjustments that differ relevantly among the Arab regimes.

The latest developments in Arab media, particularly in the satellite television industry, may indicate the growing integration of Arab television into the global media structures, and some signs of the slow and restricted liberalization. However, taking these processes into deeper account, it is rather clear that also from this perspective the Arab media present some particular characteristics related to the environment within which they operate.

First of all, according to Kraidy, "it is not precise to speak of deregulation per se, since the Arab television industry was never regulated to begin with".[37] In this light, the term 'liberalization' may indicate the partial relinquishing of control over broadcasting by Arab regimes and a clear breaking of state monopolies over regional television sector. Nonetheless, at the level of implementation o these changes and their real significance, it is rather disputable speaking about the media independence. Some obvious examples seem to confirm this thesis. Egypt for instance has opened the satellite broadcasting sphere for the private capital in 2005. However, as in the case of its 'free' Media Production City [38], the government has maintained a share control over these private undertakings through the state-controlled

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[34] Ibidem.

[35] P. Chakravartty, Y. Zhao, op.cit., p. 11.

[36] See Said K. Aburish, *The Rise, Corruption and Coming Fall of the House of Saud*, Bloomsbury, London 1994, p. 216.

[37] M.M. Kraidy, *Critical Transculturalism and Arab Reality Television: A Preliminary Theoretical Exploration*, in P. Chakravartty, Y. Zhao, op.cit., p. 192.

[38] The Egyptian Media Production City is a 'free media zone' established to attract the talents, money and technology through special economic incentives and relative freedom offered to the media sector investors.

Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU). Also in Saudi Arabia, several private endeavours have been launched but they are usually tied to the royal family. In Dubai, although the 100 per cent foreign capital is allowed within Dubai Media City (another free media zone under the state administration), outside this area the quota decreases to 49 per cent. In Jordan, the launch of the first private Jordanian satellite channel ATV was being notoriously blocked by unclear and abstract requirements of the state-controlled regulatory body until the station was sold to 'more trustful' investor.

Considering these facts, rather than seeking the signs of liberalization in the full sense of this meaning, it is more appropriate to talk about the Arab mediascape that adjusts itself (or is adjusted) to the global media market requirements. The pressures exerted upon the private owners of the news media force them to escape from sensitive local issues and direct toward regional market. Also in reality television, the connections between the ruling class, the business elite, and the religious establishments bring out indirect methods of influence, control and deal making.[39] These overlapping economic, political, social and religious forces animating Arab entertainment television are even more evident in the relationship between the Saudi and Lebanese political-business-media elite that result in specific mixture of capital (Saudi) and talents (Lebanese). As Kraidy remarks, these ties point out the fact that, through the sponsorship, Saudi social, cultural and religious sensibilities can easily permeate the Arab satellite industry[40], thereby constituting another example of political influence on media economy.

2. What is Arab about the Arab media

Analysis of the new Arab satellite industry constitute an evident example of the notion of Arabness within the regional mediascape. It also provides an auspicious opportunity to explore issues related to the connections between the political and economic aspects in this sphere, and its cultural dimension. As it will be discussed below, despite the global (Westernized) formats and technological advancements, in terms of ownership and financial reliance as well as of content, style and prevailing standards, the Arab media relevantly differ from the Western (or Westernized) media outlets.

[39] Ibidem, p. 198.
[40] Ibidem.

Furthermore, within this sphere a remarkable interplay of various contexts characterized by technological trends and commercial purposes, that clash with the state's restrictions on Arab media, occurs. An expression of this complexity can be found in the Arabic version of the popular show "Star Academy". Based on the above-mentioned and classical in the Arab entertainment industry combination of Saudi capital and Lebanese talent, that includes the Western format of the programme and aims at the regional audience, the show mix Arab (regional), national (Lebanese), cultural/moral (Saudi) and global (international) legacies. Hence, to expose the particularity of Arabness in such a complex mediascape, two contexts – socio-cultural and regional – have to be taken into particular consideration.

Socio-cultural context

In order to understand the socio-cultural dimension of Arab media, it is necessary to look closer at a pan-Arab journalistic tradition expressing sense of common belonging as a response to foreign broadcasting and imperial media hegemony. This question, as Iskandar argues, is particularly urgent in the light of prevailing tendency to limit the commonness of the Arab region to geo-linguistic and cultural discourse.[41]

For a long time a commonly held reference to the language and the culture as a foundation of the media Arabness has been prevalent in the Western scholarship. In his taxonomic typology of Arab media, William Rugh for instance points out the "strong cultural and psychological ties" that spread across the Arab region through a single culture, language and religion.[42] However, as further studies have showed, these aspects often tends to be oversimplified. As Mellor argues in her analysis of linguistic aspects in the Arab news-making, albeit the region shares a common media language, mainly the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the diversity of regional dialects used in daily communication indicates that rather MSA's trans-nationalistic function.[43]

Paradoxically, the limitations of this linguistic argument come from the language itself. According to Iskandar, this implies a question whether the extensions of the regional Arab media that are broadcasted or published in

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[41] A. Iskandar, op.cit.

[42] W.A Rugh, *Arab News Media. Newspapers, Radio and Television in Arab Politics*, Praeger, London 2004, p.1.

[43] See N. Mellor, op.cit.

foreign languages can be still considered as "Arab".[44] This point may suggest that with its linguistic complexity deriving from the period of colonization, the Arab media should not be limited only to the linguistic coherence. The examples of English-language press as the "Jordan Times", "Gulf News", Egyptian "Al-Ahram Weekly", the "Yemen Observer" or French-language "L'Orient du Jour" confirm that also non-Arabic titles are widespread in the regional media market. Another paradigm of this geolinguistic insufficiency can be found in so-called 'offshore' Arab media category. As Najm Jarrah observes, despite the current reverse trends, for more than twenty years London was a central point to the emergence of a pan-Arab daily press and the proliferation of transnational Arabic publications, such as the well known titles like Saudi Arabia's "Asharq al-Awsat", the pro-Libyan "Al-Arab", the Palestinian Arab nationalist voice "Al-Quds al-Arabi", the renascent (and subsequently Saudi-acquired) Lebanese "Al-Hayat", and many others. The British capital was a primary destination of media that were escaping from home censorship and restrictive atmosphere. However, what is even more remarkable, as Jarrah writes: "it was the Arab world itself, rather than Arab expatriates, that the majority of these offshore publications saw as their principal audience".[45]

On the other hand, analyzing the Arabness of Arab media from the geolinguistic perspective, one should mention the international media undertakings broadcasting in Arabic. Considering the longstanding interest in the Arab world manifested by Western (and not only) countries, it should be also questioned the real "Arabness" of such media ventures as *Al-Ḥurra*, *Radio Sawa*, Arabic services of *France 24*, *Rusiya al-Yaum* or the newest BBC Arabic TV. These Arabic but not Arab outlets fit exactly into geolinguistic category but explicitly fail in their goals, approaches and perception by the regional audience. In the light of the diversity of the region with 300 million people (excluding the Arab Diaspora) and composed by twenty three countries, the idea of shared linguistic and cultural experience appears thus to be abstract and questionable. What unify the Arab world today is rather a "notion of joint destiny"[46] that seems to be more and more related to the Andersonian concept of imagined community that in the context of the Arab world can be connoted with the notion of *umma* (Arabic nation).

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[44] A. Iskandar, op.cit.

[45] N. Jarrah, *The rise and decline of London as a pan-Arab media hub*, arab-mediasociety.com, January 2008.

[46] M. el'Nawawy, A. Iskandar, *Al Jazeera: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East*, Westview Press, Boulder (CO) 2002, p. 20.

Taking into account these remarks, one thing seems to be clear. Undoubtedly, along with a reconfiguration of Arab media landscape that has occurred in the last years, the concept of common identity has also changed. This reconfiguration can be seen as a result of two contradictory sets of factors. On the one hand, it is shaped by systematic repressions and intimidations exerted upon the Arab media, by censorship and self-censorship, and by the attempts to preserve the political and social taboos. On the other, it has to be seen as a consequence of the "end of silence" in Arab journalism, the developments of public discourse and successive breaking the existing taboos. Furthermore, as Ibrahim Saleh puts it: "In ongoing contemporary discourse about a question of social identifications, Arab identity is perceived as an alienated concept that lacks authencity even from indigenous people's perspective".[47] This derives from the twofold self-image of Arabs: first seen as the romantic and sentimental attachment to idealized beauties of Arab culture; the second, as the growing rebellion against the rigidity of the classic aesthetic. According to Saleh, this new spirit of cultural revolt, that came with the new dimension of Arab media, does not accept the former static framework of social norms. Different social forces seek to advance their own perspectives that entangles the news media in the struggle over the definition of the social reality.[48]

In this light, the central role played by media in seeking for the new notion of identity has to be analyzed from two different perspectives: firstly, as searching for a new media logic; secondly, as a re-imagination of identity transmitted to the public. Both dimensions seem to be crucially interrelated. As Iskandar remarks, this new logic of transnational Arab broadcasters expose an important division between pan-Arab media, as the new generation of Arab journalism on the one hand, and national and state-controlled media on the other. In creation of identity the nation-state is being bypassed by both media and audiences, and the transnational media construct dual narratives – one of the state, and one of the nation.[49]

With the use of new media logic the transnational media has also contributed to the emergence of the Arab public debate. The beginning of this process should be inevitably linked with the advent of Al-Jazeera. The Qatari station not only has turned to the Arab public and Arab issues in its novel programming, but also seeks to construct the new dimension of pan-

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[47] I. Saleh, *The Arab Search for a Global Identity: Breaking out of the Mainstream Media Cocoon*, in P. Seib, op.cit., p.22.
[48] Ibidem.
[49] A. Iskandar, op.cit.

Arabism. As Zayani observes: "Not only are Arab issues prominent on the network's new and discussion programs, but the very issue of Arabness is paramount".[50] Al Jazeera thus has broadened pan-Arab interaction through what Donatella Della Ratta describes as "satellite pan-Arabism".[51] Although the Della Ratta's focus on the Arabic-Islamic religious identity requires further research, it seems to be true that Al-Jazeera has established new concept of alternative, regionalized and socio-culturally bounded style of international broadcasting, followed later by other Arab broadcasters. In relation to these remarks, it is worth precisely quoting the Iskandar's description of three principal ways in which Arab media alter the commonly understood paradigm of alternative media: "First, alternative media may reflect the political economic structure and institutions which they themselves critique; second, the label "alternative media" can be attributed without any regard for authentication by either the medium or the audience, in some cases becoming part of a corporate strategy; and third despite the previous two contradictions, alternative media can express alterity solely through content, coverage and programming that is perceived as counter-hegemonic. These conditions have forced alternative media researchers to reconsider the vernacular of alterity."[52]

From this perspective, as Mary-Denise Tabar argues: "Al Jazeera has reinvigorated a sense of common destiny in the Arab world and is even encouraging Arab unity, so much so that pan-Arabism is being reinvented on this channel".[53] The establishment of this identity has come with a deep reconsideration of the pan-Arab media logic dominated for a long time by Saudi concept. As a first (and not least) pan-Arab news media outlet, Al Jazeera has distinguished itself from the Saudi media style in three important considerations: location (within the Arab world and not outside); personnel (sociological diversification of journalists); and ideology (plurality of viewpoints and breaking the taboos).[54]

This newly established notion of Arab media identity has contributed also to the discussion about the new distinctive concept of journalistic

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[50] M. Zayani, *Al Jazeera and the Vicissitudes…*, in M. Zayani (ed.), op.cit., p. 7.

[51] D. Della Ratta, *Al Jazeera: Media e società arabe nel nuovo millenio*, Mondadori, Milano 2005.

[52] A. Iskandar, Lines in the Sand.

[53] Mary-Denise Tabar, "Printing Press To Satellite: A Historical Case Study Of Media And The Arab State." A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University, April 2002, http://cct.georgetown.edu/academics/theses/MaryDeniseTabar.pdf.

[54] M. Zayani, *Al Jazeera and the Vicissitudes…*, in M. Zayani (ed.), op.cit, p. 8.

objectivity that prevails within the regional mediascape. Through their more complex focus on the less covered areas on the one hand, and their 'Third World' background on the other, the Arab media have broken the myths of objectivity based upon the Western concepts of journalism. As Mellor argues, the conflict in terminology during the intervention in Iraq in 2003 has exposed that "the criteria journalists use for selecting the news vary from one culture to another, reflecting various ideological, political, and cultural realities".[55] This could be observed also during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. The Arabic channels—particularly Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya – provided more extensive coverage than was offered by other international channels. As Seib comments, the reports of these media often featured by graphic images of dead and wounded Lebanese civilians, affected the region's politics by stoking Arab anger toward Israel and the United States, and toward Arab governments that were slow to support Hezbollah, thereby pushing countries such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan closer to Hezbollah's cause.[56]

Being often accused of the favouring terrorism and spreading an 'Arab propaganda', in these examples, the Arab media unveil the rationale of the 'others' to be seen and heard. Such coverage was also featured by the acceptation of the audience towards which the message was directed. Iskandar and El-Nawawy describe this phenomenon as a 'contextual objectivity'—the notion shaped by, and strongly relied on, socio-cultural contexts. It is thus a contextualization, as they write, that "demonstrates a situational perspective, a means of creating collectivism among participants within the same context, allowing for sensitivity to cultural, religious, political, and economic climates".[57] Although the term sounds as an oxymoron itself, this concept relevantly contributes to the analysis of the media content on the basis of audience sensitivities. Journalistic standards seen from this perspective, although reflecting all sides of a story, still are related to the values, beliefs and sentiments of their audience. In this light, not only Al-Jazeera, but also a broader wave of the new Arab satellite media, seem to appeal to this audience, becoming a part of a particular socio-cultural context.

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[55] N. Mellor, op.cit., p.73.
[56] See P. Seib, op.cit.
[57] M. el-Nawawy, A. Iskandar, *The Minotaur of 'Contextual Objectivity'. War coverage and the pursuit of accuracy with appeal*, tbsjournal.com, Fall/Winter 2002.

Regional context

In order to explore the notion of Arabness of the Arab media, it is necessary to recognize a long tradition of transnationality and regionalization occurring within these structures. From historical perspective, the foundation of Egyptian Press by Syrian and Lebanese journalists, the changes determined by the expansion of foreign media outlets, finally, the attempts of oil-rich Gulf Arab countries to control the chaotic regional public sphere can constitute the examples that the Arab media in terms of structure, capital and ownership have always easily crossed national boundaries.

These processes can be explained also by the interplay of political, economic and legal contexts such as political media economy, complex relationships between media and power, and pan-Arab unification projects. In the Arab news sector, despite the above-mentioned "end of silence", the reason for which the television channels regularly focus on transnational issues is also to escape from restrictions imposed on politically sensitive local and national issues. On the other hand, in entertainment sector, the media benefit from linguistic and cultural similarities using the popular Western formats in order to extend their audience to other Arab countries. These strategies have led to regionalization of Arabic songs and the video "clips" industry, and, subsequently, to the greater public integration at the regional media level in terms of representation and participation. In this light, as Artz put is, these trends are compatible with globalisation in that it promotes industry practices that conform to the media market model.[58] The regionalisation of Arab media structures and content has to be seen thus as a result of both convergence of technological trends, Arab states media policy and the new logic of transnational Arab media.

Nevertheless, as mentioned already, although the Arab mediascape in general, and television sector in particular, is being modelled by global media practices, such as for example a format standardization resulting in increasingly sophisticated visual style, the dynamics of these changes as well as their characteristics relevantly differ from the global trends. According to Kraidy and Khalil, these broad patterns of development include "the regionalization of production and consumption of Arab television, the emergence of specialized thematic channels that cater to various

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[58] See Artz, L. (2003), *Globalization, Media, Hegemony and Social Class*, in L. Artz and Y. Kamalipour (Eds), *Globalization of Corporate Media Hegemony*, pp. 3–31.

niche media markets, and the recent emergence of multi-platform 'networks', where several channels under one owner combine audience segmentation and large-scale appeal".[59] From this perspective the Arab media structures can be seen as a result of a twofold transition affected by the process of regionalization.

The first one involves the subsequent regionalization of the commercial model. The Arab media industry for a long time dominated by Saudi capital and Lebanese and Egyptian talents, has to be seen in the process of regional commercialization as a result of unpredictable mixture of radical Islam, oil wealth, foreign pressures and inter-Arab rivalries (Saudi-Egyptian, Saudi-Qatari, rivalries within Saudi ruling circles). This leads to a situation in which the Arab media commercial model is affected not only by purely economic and technological forces but also by political factors that express the struggle for control over, and prestige in, the Arab media sphere.

The second of these transitory dimensions has to be seen as a process of conversion from regionalization of the industry to the niche markets. On the one hand, by replacing terrestrial channels with satellite outlets of general 'infotainment' format (mix of news and entertainment), such as pioneering Middle Eastern Broadcasting Centre (MBC), Future TV and, subsequently, Al-Jazeera and Dream TV, a clear distinction between the new quality of television making and the official government television has been made. On the other hand, however, starting from the mid-90s these new "infotainment" channels characterized by "high production values, a level of sensuality, and narrative dynamism" have been challenged by the pay-TV networks, oriented to profits and niche markets. Such practices have determined the specialization of the existing pan-Arab channels in order to compete at the new regional media market. As a consequence, the big regional players, including state-controlled satellite networks, have started to diversify their *bouqet* through thematic niche channels. In the last years, MBC launched for instance the entertainment, news and movie channels. Al-Jazeera now offers two sport channels, one channel for kids, one live politics and one documentary channel. In the music sector, the Saudi-owned and Lebanon-based Rotana network transmit channels for various kind of music, such as pop music and classic Arabic songs. Finally, with proliferation of Arab satellite industry new distinctive niche channels, such as these focused on female audience (Heya TV and Nile Family), and shopping channels (Tamima TV) have b been launched to fill the gap determined by the commercial needs.

[59] M.M. Kraidy, J.F. Khalil, op.cit., p. 91.

3. What is global about the Arab media:
Beyond the technological context

An impact of globalization on the Arab mediascape has recently attract a great attention of media scholars. As it has been proved already, the Arabness of the Arab media is challenged by a progress of technology and reliance on the Western programming stylization. Many scholars seen this access to the new technologies and perception of Western formats by the Arab media as searching for their global identity.[60] Nevertheless, considering the Arab media push to re-imagine a concept of transnational community through their own identity and separate logic, this seems to be partly true only.

As Tarik Sabry remarks, in searching a 'global' in the Arab media, one should in the first instance critically consider it as a category within the particular context of the regional mediascape[61]. There is no doubt that, as Boyd confirm, the Arab television has predominantly Western style both in technological developments as well as the stylization and standardization of programming.[62] It is also true that globalisation forced the Arab countries to recognize the power of Information ad Telecommunication Technologies as a basic element in a successful development.[63] And, indeed, according to the Internet World Stats, the number of Internet user in the Arab world increased from around 1.8 million users in 2000 to over almost 33.5 millions at the end of the 2007, with an impressive Internet usage growth rate of 920.2 %. Internet penetration in this period rise from 0.1 per cent to 17.4 per cent exceeding the Asian, Latin American and African nations.[64]

Nonetheless, albeit these data indicate that the Arab world is successfully facing the challenges of globalisation in terms of technology, the cultural resistance of the Arab mediascape invites to reconsider the validity of the actual global media order. One of the most explicit evidence of such a need comes from the empirical findings by Jeremy Tunstall. Tunstall, who has recently reviewed its epochal thesis about the American hegemony within the

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[60] See I. Saleh, op.cit.

[61] See T. Sabry, *What is Global about Arab Media?*, "Global Media and Communication", 1(1), 2005, pp. 42-49.

[62] See D. Boyd, *Broadcasting in the Arab World: A Survey of the Electronic Media in the Middle East*, lowa State University Press, Ames 2001.

[63] A. El Gody, op.cit., p.214.

[64] Internet World Stats, *Internet Usage in the Middle East. Middle East Internet Usage & Population Statistics 2007*, http://www.internetworldstats.com.

global media patterns[65], points out in his latest book that the Western domination in international media industry has been replaced by national and regional media industries. "Most people around the world, Tunstall writes, prefer to be entertained by people who look the same, talk the same, joke the same, behave the same, play the same games, and have the same beliefs (and worldviews) as themselves".[66] Furthermore, as he argues, the communication world splits into major media regions based on geography, on religious and cultural tradition, and on one main language or one main group of languages, which are largely self-sufficient. Although Tunstall's regional division seems to be disputable requiring further improvements[67], his thesis about regionalization of media production illustrates well the changes that has occurred in the global media environment in the last years.

According to Hafez, in many fields of cross-border communication it seems also to be less true that the global interactions are increasing. As he argues: "Media production and use are proving conservative cultural forces in many part of the world".[68] According to data provided by the Arab States Broadcasting Union, an argument for deeper regionalization appears to have the strong foundations. A regional trend indicates that the biggest Arab media player tend to produce a majority of their programming locally and in collaboration (or in reliance on) the other Arab media. The data expose also that the most significant Arab satellite media dependence on the foreign production is marginally. Al-Jazeera and Lebanese LBC produce locally 80 per cent of its programming, in 5 per cent relaying on the other Arab broadcaster and in 15 per cent on foreign production. Hezbollah-owned Al-Manar, Syrian Arab News Network and MBC broadcast approximately 60 per cent of Arab programming (local and regional together) and 40 per cent of foreign production while ART Networks channels production (despite Sport and two children channels) comes totally from the region.[69]

This evidence has been confirmed also by other research. According to John Sinclair, Elizabeth Jacka and Stuart Cunningham, neither in the Middle

[65] See J. Tunstall, *The Media are American*, London, Constable 1997.

[66] J. Tunstall, *The media were American: U.S. mass media in decline*, Oxford University Press, New York 2008, p. 3.

[67] According to Tunstall, the new world's communication landscape can be divided into four main regions: Euro-America, China, Southern Asia and the Arab world. However, scholar appears to overlook some other emerging regional realities such as Latin America.

[68] K. Hafez, *The Myth of Media Globalization*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 2.

[69] Arab States Broadcasting Union, *State of production of satellite channels*, http://www.asbu.net/www/en/directdoc.asp?docid=120.

East, nor in Asia, nor even in Latin America, where the American influence was consider as relevant, do Western television programmes dominate.[70] Furthermore, as many studies have exposed, television is now more influenced by regional centres as Saudi Arabia, Egypt Brazil, Mexico or India that forces to reconsider, reinterpret and research all notions of cultural imperialism, hegemony and globalism within the world's mediascape.[71]

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore the factors influencing the Arab media in the so-called Information Age. A study of specific conditions prevailing within this sphere exhibits a distinctive and complex regional media reality balancing between the commercial tasks and political limitations. On the one hand, the Arab media seek for adjusting themselves to the commercial requirements of the new global media industry. On the other, the political context that shapes, influences and restricts the this sphere still plays the relevant role in the regional mediascape.

Specific nature of Arab media environment forces also to critically reconsider the character of liberalization (or as many scholars claim, democratization) of Arab media reality. Instead, a particular interplay of political, political-economic and socio-cultural contexts at both regional and global stages indicates a consequent consolidation of regional mediascape. This sphere, spread between various market-oriented practices and led by political and societal values that express a particular socio-cultural context, appears to be a unique experience in the global media sphere. Moreover, although the Arab media are still seen as a tool for achieving various political goals, they also have contributed relevantly to the socio-cultural practices in the recent years.

Such an impact is particularly evident in relation to the Arab public sphere. Through a new logic introduced by Qatari channel Al-Jazeera, the

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[70] See J. Sinclair, E. Jacka, S. Cunningham, "Peripheral Vision", in J. Sinclair, E. Jacka and S. Cunningham (Eds), *New Patterns in Global Television: Peripheral Vision*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996.

[71] See J. Galtung, R.C. Vincent, *Global Glasnost: Toward a New World Information and Communication Order?*, Hampton, Cresskill (NJ) 1992; J. Curran, M.J. Park, op.cit.; D. Yong Jin, "Reinterpretation of cultural imperialism: emerging domestic market vs continuing US dominance".

Arab media consequently challenge this sphere. As commonly agreed, it is still too early to consider it in terms of Habernasian concept. It seems even more appropriate to seek for a new unique idea of the societal practices mediated by the media, that would take into consideration the end of global world's communication peripheries. Nonetheless, it seems also clear that through the Arab media appeal to the regional public, this media contribute to what can be called the new satellite pan-Arabism.

Nevertheless, although Arab media might be seen as an expression of new unification project, this pan-Arabism paradoxically leads to division rather than to consolidation of the Arab audiences. The further analysis of the new media unification projects exhibit a progressive fragmentarization of the Arab public, enforced by the new satellite channels and the remarkable differences in media freedom between various types of media. In this light, the situation that emerges seems also to be unique. On the one hand, the Arab media, especially the pan-Arab news outlets, bring the Arab audience together proposing the new quality of journalism. This journalism, although still remarkably linked to the political environment, has been able to introduce the new trend of covering the regional events, basing on participation of the public, investigative orientation and more critical approach. Providing the alternative perspective, the new Arab media attracts their audiences' attention through a higher degree of independence, their mass-orientation, linkage to the particular set of values and a strong interest in the life of ordinary Arabs (and not only of the Arab regimes). On the other hand, a development of the Arab mediascape in the last ten years has led to the situation in which these media, covering different dimensions of the Arab daily lives has contributed to the fragmentarization of the Arab public sphere. Although Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya are still the widest watched stations in the region, their popularity is incessantly challenged by new, more localized and thematic, satellite channels.

Despite these new trends, a reconfiguration of Arab media as well as their impact on the regional public, indicate a particular character of the regional mediascape. This implies the closer attention that has to be put on the new dimension of the world's communication order. As many studies have exposed, the general trend within this mediascape points out a gradual disappearance of the global communication village based upon the Western hegemony. Instead, this environment seems to become a multi-structured global 'metropolis' with the growing and more and more influential media 'districts' such us Arab, European, Asian, Australian, Latin or Northern American. These distinctive media realities, although interconnected among themselves in their technological dimension, maintain and seek to

preserve their own professional logic and identity. In order to understand the new world's media structure further research on regional emerging communication realities seem thusto be particularly needed. As Hafez questions: "How is one to interpret the fact that while nowadays a significant chunk of humanity has the technology to access foreign broadcasters at its disposal, it almost never makes use of it?"

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