

A Comparative Study on the Pan-Arab Media Strategies: The Cases of Egypt and Saudi Arabia

CHIBA Yushi*

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to review the historical development of pan-Arab media with particular focus on their host states and how they control the pan-Arab media discourses. With this aim, I start by narrating the history of Arab media going back to the 1950s. After the Egyptian revolution in 1952, Egypt started to export cultural media contents assertively and broadcast the influential radio service, the Voice of the Arabs, which was the first Arab media that appealed to the whole Arab world and not just to a handful of Arab elites. It generated a kind of shared sense of brotherhood, or an imagined community, that made the Arabs aware of sharing a common language, space, time, and even destiny.

When we look back at the history of Arab media, we can easily observe that Arab media have been strongly affected by and put under the control of the state authorities. Hence, when we talk about the Arab media, we can't ignore the relation between the media and these authorities; and then, we have to ask which states had media and how they have controlled the Arab media discourses. Historically speaking, the countries that have had the strongest influence on pan-Arab media must be Egypt and Saudi Arabia; the former influenced pan-Arab discourse through its radio service, the Voice of the Arabs, during the 1950s and 1960s, and the latter, through its incredible oil revenue, has had a strong influence on the major pan-Arab presses and pan-Arab satellite channels since the mid-1970s. Hence, I will contrast the Egyptian pan-Arab media strategy with that of Saudi Arabia, and would like to clarify the differences between each state's 'pan-Arab media strategy.'¹

Until the 1990s, the media in Arab countries were regarded as the propaganda tools by which their authoritarian regimes maintained their power. However, after the appearance of satellite television in the 1990s, some believed strongly that this new media could nullify state control over the media and become a sweeping power for democracy, just as '*Glasnost*' had done in the USSR. As a result, many scholars started to shed light on the media's role in Arab democratization and its impacts on Arab politics.

In the early 1990s, the problem many scholars investigated was whether the new

* Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University, Japan; Research Fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (DC); E-mail: chiba@asafas.kyoto-u.ac.jp

¹ There are numerous previous studies that deal the media strategy of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, though they argue the cases of both countries separately. For example, Boyd [2001] argues the Saudi's international media strategy in an article in 2001. And Yamani [2008], Hammond [2008], and Mellor [2008], also argue the recent Saudi media strategy closely. As for the Egyptian case, for example, see the studies of Guaaybess [2005] and Najjar [2008]. Fandy [2007] and Kraidy [2010] also argue the relationship between the Arab regimes and media.

media could be a means to bring democratization to Arab countries. However, if we consider the expectation that the media could bring democratization an ‘optimistic view,’ the resulting scholarly opinions were quite the opposite. In fact, many scholars came to the conclusion that: “Having satellite television and an Internet presence will not in itself open the door to statehood, virtual or otherwise,” and “There must also be strong political leadership and widespread resolve among constituent groups if the tools of cohesion are to be effectively used” [Seib 2008: 72]. That is, many scholars reached the conclusion that employing the media alone was not enough to bring about democratization in the Arab world. Rather, they considered that other strong incentives such as strong political actors were indispensable. Moreover, other scholars even considered that the new media had an adverse on democratization or political liberalization because contemporary Arab media was diverting the Arab’s eyes from Arab politics and moderate Arab dissents by giving them the opportunity to absorb themselves in the television screen or virtual world.²

Compared with those early scholarly works, recent Arab media studies have shed more light on the mechanism authoritarian regimes use to exert their influence over and control media discourses. Consequently, many studies have revealed that the Arab authoritarian regimes still maintain a strong control over the media while the commercialization of the media industry is challenging these regimes’ ability to control it and forcing them to change their media policies. Although a series of political upheavals in the Arab world since the end of 2010 have shown us that new media such as the Internet and the mobile have brought about a qualitative transformation in political movements and their way of mobilizing the masses, we cannot overlook the fact that a number of Arab regimes still manage to control the media effectively. Therefore, as well as investigating how the new media has opened up the political frontier, an investigation on states’ strategies for trying to control the media and minimize its impact is also needed.

Therefore, what I attempt in this paper is to consider chronologically how Egypt and Saudi Arabia, both of whom are Arab media superpowers, have tried to control the pan-Arab media and its discourses since the mid-twentieth century. I would like to make it clear what differences lie behind the previous Egyptian regime’s media strategy and that of contemporary Saudi Arabia.

2. The Era of Egyptian Media: the 1950s–60s

2.1. Egypt as a Leading Regional Actor

Since the end of the nineteenth century, Egypt has been playing a central role in the circulation

² Imad Karam considers that the contemporary plethora of entertainment channels in satellite television is not just a pastime for the Arabs, but it offers “a brief chance to escape from reality, to imagine themselves in roles and situations unattainable in their real lives” [Kareem 2007]. In contrast to the arguments of critical theorists, Marwan M. Kraidy sees the entertainment-politics nexus in contemporary Arab reality TV. While he admits that the entertainment is “often described as having a corrupting impact on politics,” he considers that reality TV programs, through providing an idiom of political contention, can “cross the bridge towards politics” [Kraidy 2007: 45].

of information and cultural products within the Arab world, as well as Lebanon. This is well reflected in the traditional saying, 'Egypt writes, Lebanon prints, and Iraq reads'. However, the Arab literacy rate has always been generally low and thus the broadcasting media has been regarded as having more influence on the masses and a more profound impact on societies than the printing presses. As to broadcasting, it wouldn't be going too far to say that Egypt has been the dominant country in circulating the information.

The beginning of Egyptian broadcasting history goes back to the 1920s. 'Abd [2008] argues that numerous amateurs each started radio services by 1926 at the latest,³ and the authorities stopped all the private stations and started their own radio service from 1934 with the help of British Marconi Company. This was the earliest national radio service. And after the revolution in 1952, the charismatic Nasser started to increase the apparatus for broadcasting and set up a more powerful transmitter so that it could reach a wider area. In addition to their promotion of radio services, the Egyptian government also supported talented film directors who sympathized with its political dogma, that is, its Arab-socialist policy. A great number of Egyptian media contents were exported to the other Arab countries. Consequently most scholars would agree about Egypt's dominant role in the circulation of information during the 1950s and 1960s.

In the Nasser era, Egypt had a relationship with the Soviet Union, and took on its socialistic policy enthusiastically. On this point, Kashima [2003: 74–75] attributed the reason for Egypt's inclination to socialism particularly to the failure of approaches with the U.S. Egypt's socialistic policies didn't cause any confrontations with other Arab monarchies the beginning of Nasser's presidency. However, when Egypt urged several socialistic reforms in the 1960s, then manifested its socialistic principles clearly in the National Charter in 1962, and then began assertively propagating their message through the national radio to other Arab countries, the confrontation between Egypt and the other Arab monarchies couldn't be avoided [Dalacoura 2003: 117]. As a result, the Arab world experienced an era of socialist revolution, and there was antagonism between the revolutionary states that aimed to unite Arab countries and the threatened monarchies that were opposed to these revolutionary ideas.

2.2. Egypt as a Producer of Media Contents

The characteristic of Egypt in the Nasser era can be properly described as an 'authoritarian state with a populist character' [Dalacoura 2003: 118]. Nasser wished to propagate his ideology, Arab socialist ideology or Nasserism, not only to the Egyptians but also to the other Arab countries. For this purpose, he utilized the radio services and aired his ideology on the

³ According to 'Abd [2008], there are several opinions about when radio started in Egypt and he produces the most possible consensus on it.

radio waves, which even reached as far as Morocco. The purpose behind such an assertive expansion of propagandistic radio services came from Nasser's recognition that the expansion of Egyptian influence on the regional scene would eventually be beneficial for Egyptian security, and in order to maintain Egypt's position as a hegemonic regional power, this media policy was crucial for Nasser. Furthermore, in addition to these obvious political purposes and top-down media policies, the production of media contents that could propagate these political ideologies was also supported by the media producers [Schochat 1983: 22]. The following remarks of Ṣalāḥ Abū Sayf, an Egyptian cinema director who represented the Arab cinema scene in those days, shows how the media producers in this era and the revolutionary images were closely related.

Now that the revolution has expressed in the National Charter a global vision of history and of the future in a solid revolutionary context, it is imperative to see how weak our films are on the analytical and political level. It is now the task of the state to create on the basis of the [National] Charter a mature cinematographic world where man's struggle against fatal social conditions and his striving to change his destiny are expressed. [Shafik 1998: 29]

Here, we can clearly observe that Abū Sayf had undertaken the role of what Gramsci calls an 'organic intellectual,' in other words he had become an integral part of the prevailing ideological message to society. It is true that the underlying political purpose was a strong drive for propagating and exporting the Egyptian cultural contents to the other Arab countries. At the same time, the people who were involved in these cultural industries identified themselves as subjective to the promotion of the official Arab socialist ideology. This complex paradigm is crucial to understanding Egypt as the cultural supplier in those days.

2.3. What Did Sustain the Egyptian Media Hegemony ?

After the 1950s, Egypt promoted the policy of exporting cultural contents such as films and television programs, as well as airing its radio programs beyond its borders. This begs the question: Why did so many Arabs welcome these Egyptian cultural products even though their contents were frequently recognized to be propagandistic?

The first and most important reason derives from the fact that Egypt was superior to the other Arab countries in producing qualified cultural contents. As I have shown, Egypt was the first country to begin national radio services and so they had had more time to develop their production quality. In addition, Egypt also had some very popular talented singers such as Umm al-Kulthūm, Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhāb and 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ. Some gulf

countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar did not even start broadcasting until more than twenties years later, as they had not cultivated sufficient techniques to compete with the Egyptian radio service. As well as radio, Egypt boasted of itself as a center for cinematic productions. The Lumière brothers, who were the founding fathers of cinema, screened the first film in Paris in December 1895, and some months after that, cinema was brought into Egypt and some privileged people experienced this new technology. In 1906, a French company established a cinema studio in Cairo to screen films periodically [Shafik 1998: 10]. Further, in 1923, Egypt published 'al-Šuwar al-Mutaħarrika' (Motion Pictures), the first cinematic magazine in the Arab world, and it was exported to Syria, Iraq, Sudan and other Arab countries [Mar'ī 1996]. The films produced in Egypt overwhelmed the other Arab countries in number and quality. Hence, Egyptian cinema was welcomed by the other Arab countries who simply couldn't supply the masses with enough interesting contents to equal these Egyptian films. Egypt's expertise in film production also contributed to its production of television programs that were exported to the other Arab countries. Television broadcasting in Egypt began in 1960, comparatively late when compared with other countries. However, thanks to the accumulation of technical expertise cultivated by its cinema and radio services, Egypt succeeded in positioning itself as the supplier of television programs to the other Arab countries [Amin 1996: 109–110].

The second reason for Egypt's media hegemony can be explained in terms of the sense of Arabs' solidarity. That is, in the 1950s and 1960s, some political figures in the other Arab countries who sympathized with Nasser's pan-Arab ideology were allowed to use the airwaves of the Voice of the Arabs in order to propagate their own revolutionary messages to overthrow their monarchies' governments. For example, in Yemen, the Voice of the Arabs played an important role during the civil war between the monarchists and the republicans from 1962 to 1970. Particularly, 'Abd al-Raħmān al-Bayḏānī, who later became vice president of the Yemen Republic, propagated the message that called for toppling the kingdom of Yemen through the Voice of the Arabs. In actual fact, the day revolution broke out was September 26th 1962, just one day after the final program in which the revolutionary group called for the uprising through the Voice of the Arabs was broadcast [Kosugi 2006: 340–341]. This shows that the ideology that the Voice of the Arabs propagated was shared by many Arabs who sympathized with the Arab socialism movement, which called for Arab unity and the unification of the Arabs. In other words, it can be said that the tone of the Voice of the Arabs was in tune with the mood in an era when state borders were still fluid and many Arabs did not fully identify with the nation in which they found themselves, but could still identify themselves with the transnational affiliation of 'Arab unity'.

3. Transitional Era: the 1970s-80s

3.1. Egyptian Media after the 1970s

The Voice of the Arabs was one of the most famous radio services during the Nasser era, and it was listened to not only by Egyptians, but also by a wider audience in other Arab countries. However, during the 1967 war, the Voice of the Arabs intentionally broadcast an incorrect report which made it seem as if the Arab military had succeeded in making the Israelis retreat, although the actual situation on the ground was quite the contrary. Once this deliberate false reporting became known to its Arab audience, the loss of the credibility of the Egyptian radio services was inevitable.

In addition, because of the lack of maintenance, the broadcasting equipment deteriorated after the 1967 war. Furthermore, RCA (Radio Company of America), which had supplied the equipment to Egypt, was boycotted by the Arab league because of its connections with Israel. As a result, Egypt had difficulty in restoring its broadcasting ability in the following years [Boyd 1999].

However, after 1974, President Sadat promoted the Infitāh (open market) policy, which infused commercialism into Egypt and provided a favorable environment for Egyptian cultural industries. Some scholars such as Hussein Amin emphasize the fact that the other Arab countries still had to rely on Egyptian media products after the boycott of Egypt in 1979 because many of them didn't have enough production capacity to supply their own internal demand [Amin 1996]. Therefore, countries such as the Gulf nations which had become dramatically rich through oil revenues were happy to invite some talented Egyptian media producers and actors into their countries to enhance their own domestic media production.

The money coming from those wealthy Gulf countries enabled the Egyptian government to have new broadcasting equipment installed. Although it is difficult to estimate how many companies moved from Egypt to other Arab countries and to what degree the economical effect had generated cooperation between Egypt and the other countries because of a scarcity of data, we should bear in mind that the Egyptian role in circulating the media contents in the Arab world was still quite huge. Nevertheless, the tendency that the previous Egyptian media had to propagate the common ideological message to the Arab masses, had dissipated. Arab Socialism, which was dominant in Nasser era and which called for Arab unity, was dismissed by his successor Sadat, and Sadat prioritized the national interest more than the Arab interest as a whole. After the 1970s, the tone of Egyptian media discourse which had been deeply connected with modernization and Arab unity was countered by other tones that reflected ideologies such as Islamism and Capitalism [Abu-Lughod 2005: Kraidy and Khalil 2009].

3.2. Era of the National Media

As I described earlier, in the 1950s and 1960s, the Voice of the Arabs was a feature of the

Arab media scene. This was also due to the informational inequality within the Arab world; Egypt, the supplier of cultural contents, assertively exported their cultural products and broadcasted their radio services, and the other Arab countries, unable to fulfill the internal-demand for media contents themselves, imported those Egyptian films and television series as well as listening to the Voice of the Arabs. Although some scholars warned of the information inequality, or digital divide, between the developing and the developed countries, particularly after the mid-1960s, a similar informational inequality existed not only on the global scene but also in Arab countries that tend to be categorized uniformly as ‘third world.’

However, since the 1960s, each Arab country tried to achieve informational independence by expanding their broadcasting capacities, and this tendency was in concert with the international movements that aimed to adjust the informational inequality between the developed and the developing countries. In particular, it is worth mentioning that the number of countries equipped with their own television services and the number of national news agencies doubled from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s in the Arab world. However, it was not as easy for television waves to transcend national borders as radio waves, and as television sets permeated the Arab masses, they came to watch their own national television services and became familiar with the news broadcast by their respective governments. Hence, most Arab countries, to say the least, had completed facilitating the broadcasting capacities required to increase their broadcasting time by the end of the 1970s.

At the same time, there were some attempts to share information and cultural products among the Arab countries. This regional collaboration resulted in the setting up of associated news agencies and associated information organizations. The former included the foundation of Maghreb Arab Presse (MAP) in 1959, Maghrebvision in 1970, International Islamic News Agency (IINA) in 1972, and Gulfvision in 1977; and the latter included the Arab State Broadcasting Union (ASBU) in 1969 and Arab Satellite Communications Organization (ARABSAT) in 1967. However, most of the trials were disrupted or malfunctioned for more than two decades mainly due to internal Arab political tensions. Hence, although there were several attempts to circulate shared information in the Arab world, the media boundaries of Arab countries shaped by mass media after the 1970s were solidified and segmented as most Arab countries prioritized the expansion of their informational capability towards regional information collaboration. So, in terms of information circulation, the period between the 1970s and 1980s can be called ‘the era of the national media.’

3.3. Pan-Arab Newspapers as a Recovery of pan-Arabness?

As I have described, the period during the 1970s and 1980s was characterized by the internal-oriented mass media. However, some printing presses seemed to have recovered the pan-Arabness which the Egyptian Voice of the Arabs previously had. Because they were edited

from headquarters in Europe, especially in London and Paris, they were named ‘offshore presses’ and their papers were circulated throughout the Arab world after the mid-1970s. While the influence of pan-Arab presses on the Arab masses were limited compared with radio and television broadcasting due to the low literacy rate, those pan-Arab presses contributed a lot to the Arab intellectual discourses.

Historically speaking, those pan-Arab presses were the outcomes of both the Lebanese civil war and increasing subsidies from investors in the Gulf. Particularly after the outbreak of the Lebanese conflict from 1975, many Lebanese journalists fled Lebanon and emigrated to the West. Having reestablished themselves in European cities, some Gulf investors who had benefited from the increased oil revenues invested their money to establish publishers within the Arab diasporas. As a result, in 1977, the Saudi Research and Marketing Group began publishing *al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ* (the Middle East) paper from London and distributed it to Arab countries through satellite technology. More dailies, such as *al-‘Arab* (the Arab) and *al-Zamān* (the Times) were published in 1978. Famous pan-Arab dailies, such as *al-Ḥayāt* (the Life) and *al-Quds al-‘Arabī* (the Jerusalem), also began publishing from London [Rugh 2004: 173; Rinnawi 2006: 35; Berenger 2006: 205]. In addition to dailies, weeklies and magazines such as *al-Majalla* (the Magazine), *al-Mushāhid* (the Observer), *al-Ḥawādith* (the Events) and *al-Mustaḳilla* (the Independent) were also published and circulated widely. Many other publishers also established headquarters in London. Thus, many Arab publishers flourished in London because the city provided a harbor of editorial freedom and a qualitative edge. Even though Saudi Arabia held influence over many of them through investors with close ties to the Saudi royal family, the benefits of publishing outside the Arab world exceeded the costs of publishing inside it. Basically, ‘It was the quest for political influence rather than commercial profit that was the principal driving force behind the expansion of the offshore Arab media’ [Jarrah 2008].

As for the political and cultural tone of pan-Arab papers, there are great differences from one to another. For instance, pan-Arab newspapers such as *al-Ḥayāt* and *al-Quds al-‘Arabī*, both of which are likely to focus specifically on political and cultural news, generally address a wider audience and their news has a regional perspective. In contrast, some émigré press such as *Arab Times*⁴ published in the U.S., which “Arab scholars prefer to call the yellow press,” put their emphasis on personal issues, or gossip, more than political issues [Mellor 2007: 71].

It is also true that the attitude of pan-Arab papers toward pan-Arab issues differs from one to another. On one hand, some papers such as *al-Ḥayāt* tend to defend the values of the nation states and criticize Arab unity. And on the other hand, others such as *al-Quds al-‘Arabī* tend to put more emphasis on the value of unity based on Arab and Islamic values. And

4 <http://www.arabtimes.com/>

sometimes these differences in attitude toward pan-Arab issues can be seen in the same paper according to who has written the articles [el-Oifi 2006]. However, even if each pan-Arab press had a different attitude toward unity based on its Arab or Islamic values, we should keep it in mind that those papers tended to address the entire Arab community, not just with regard to a specific country's issues, but on Arab issues as a whole. These pan-Arab papers played an important role in keeping their readers in touch with pan-Arab issues, and in compensating for a lack of pan-Arab news on the air. This fact should be emphasized when interregional collaboration for exchanging common news broke down and each Arab state tried to solidify its national borders shaped by its own obedient national mass media.

4. Arab Satellite Television and Pan-Arabism: the 1990 onwards

4.1. Increasing Saudi Influence on Pan-Arab Media

Since the Gulf war in 1990/1991 and, as its consequence, the devastation of Iraq, Saudis have monopolized many of the pan-Arab presses and this has led to a Saudi hegemony over pan-Arab media discourse. However, according to Muhammad el-Oifi, the situation has changed and the Saudi influence on the Arab media has been declining [el-Oifi 2006]. First, the new satellite channels such as al-Jazeera put an end to the situation in which Saudi investors and Lebanese journalists monopolized the Arab public discourses. Second, after the September 11 attacks, the U.S. paid more attention to Middle East affairs and required the Saudi government to undertake domestic reforms. As a result, Saudi Arabia had to prioritize its domestic affairs, and this resulted in a change in the tone of Saudi-Lebanese pan-Arab media discourses. Then, those pan-Arab media intensified their 'neo-liberalistic tone' and Lebanese journalists, who praised the nation-state, seized power over the editorials. Those 'anti-Arabism' Lebanese journalists generally tended to disdain Arab unity and ignore solidarity based on religious sentiments [el-Oifi 2006].

It may be partly true that some channels such as al-Jazeera put an end to the monopolization of the Arab public discourses gripped by Saudi investors and Lebanese journalists. However, some critics such as Andrew Hammond point out that the situation is much more complex and Saudi control over the Arab media through monetary subsidies still continues. According to Hammond, since the 1990s, through their tremendous financial resources, the Saudi royal family and its allies have controlled the Arab media so that they wouldn't be so critical to the kingdom [Hammond 2008: 335]. While much attention has been paid just to al-Jazeera and its innovative aspects, al-Jazeera "cannot be understood except against the backdrop of creeping Saudi domination of the field" [Hammond 2008: 337]. This tendency may be relevant since satellite television appeared and dramatically increased its audience from the 2000s.

In the Arab world, the first Arabic satellite channel appeared in 1990 when the

Egyptian government launched the Egyptian Space Channel (ESC). This channel targeted Egyptian militants who had been dispatched to the Gulf area because those militants were “subject to intensive psychological warfare by Radio Baghdad” [Schleifer 1998]. While the establishment of ESC stimulated other states to launch their own state satellite channels to compete with Egyptian broadcasting, the permeation of satellite television in the Arab world was “dramatically accelerated by the progressive appearance of three privately owned Arab satellite television broadcasting systems, all three of which are owned by Saudi Arabian business interests and all three of which enjoy, to greater or lesser degrees, linkage to members of the Saudi royal family” [Schleifer 1998]. Those three innovative channels are Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), Arab Radio and Television (ART), and Orbit. While the Orbit channel merged with Showtime Arabia and became OSN network in 2009, all three channels have still remained influential channels under the control of Saudi businessmen. And through this funding, other well known satellite channels such as Lebanese Broadcasting Center (LBC), even if not directly, reflect Saudi intentions. As a result, Noha Mellor writes that “most of the so-called pan-Arab media outlets, whether satellite channels or newspapers, are in Saudi hands,” and “this situation has raised concerns over journalist’s self-censorship in order to avoid conflicts with the Saudi ruling family, thereby running the risk of losing lucrative contracts from Saudi corporations or even facing a ban in Saudi territories” [Mellor 2008: 353]. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Saudis started to influence pan-Arab discourses, but the circulation of those papers was limited to a handful of Arab intellectuals, so their influence was restricted. However, in the era of satellite television, it isn’t going too far to say that the Saudis have succeeded in controlling the Arab media, if not totally, at least as far as making Arab media discourses less critical of the Saudi royal family’s legitimacy.

4.2. Diverting the Arab’s Eyes from the Politics to Entertainment

So, how do the Saudis control the pan-Arab media so as to prevent them from begin so critical of Saudi polity? In answer to this question, I would like to discuss the Saudi media strategy to control the pan-Arab media discourse. To this end, I will clarify the differences between the Saudi media strategy and that of Egypt.

According to the statistics from the Dubai Press Club, the pan-Arab audience was fragmented across nearly 600 channels as of 2009. And in considering the Saudi case, for example, the top five free-to-air (FTA) channels make up 47% of all FTA Satellite channels, and the rest of the channels make up 53%. Those five channels include the MBC1, MBC2, MBC4, Saudi TV1, Al-Arabiya news channel, all being Saudi-related channels [Dubai Press Club 2010]. And the opinion poll conducted by the University of Maryland and Zogby International shows that, although Al-Jazeera is the most popular news channel in several Arab countries, channels such as MBC, Al-Arabiya and LBC-sat, which are all under the

control of Saudi entrepreneurs, are also famous among the many Arabs.⁵ If we were to turn our eyes to all the genres available on the Arab satellite scene, we would see that most people prefer to watch light programs such as entertainment and sports rather than news channels. Now most popular entertainment channels are, partly or completely, owned by Saudi entrepreneurs, so it isn't going too far to say that the Saudis have an influence over most of the channels which the ordinary Arabs are familiar with. Or, in other words, Saudi Arabia, through its incredibly rich oil revenues, has the advantage of being able to make the channels that Saudi entrepreneurs own more attractive than other satellite channels, thus catching the minds of the Arab audience.

However, judging from the contemporary Arab media scene, it is not enough to mention direct intervention or monetary pressure. Nor does it seem that the Saudis want to broadcast their ideology or policy overtly as the Nasser did through the Voice of the Arabs during the 1950s and 1960s. Rather, the way the Saudis control contemporary Arab discourse through the media is much more subtle than that of the Nasser. That is, in contrast to Nasser's media policy that made all the Arabs' eyes turn to him, Saudi Arabia, more or less, succeeds in diverting the Arabs' eyes from political issues with entertainment such as sports, movies and music clips. The difference between the previous Egyptian media strategy and that of contemporary Saudi Arabia comes down to whether they set the media agenda or not. That is to say, while the previous Egyptian media strategy during the 1950s and 1960s was to set the media agenda and draw the Arab's attention to Egypt, the contemporary Saudi media strategy carried by each entrepreneur is not to set the agenda, but to divert the Arab's attention away from the core issues which could threaten the existing political entities. And, while the Arab media moguls may insist that they are not the minions of the Saudi royalty, their individual pursuit of economic profit finally benefits the Saudi family too.

In this sense, the commercialization and entertainment-oriented media is beneficial to Saudi Arabia in the sense that those channels keep the Arabs ignorant of serious news programs, but this is also the outcome of the people's popular demand and, except for a few channels such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Manar, this Saudi media strategy seems to be successful in creating "a sanitized zone where no news inimical to the realm of Al Saud can make its way through the purified information ether" [Hammond 2008: 337]. Under the contemporary plethora of pan-Arab satellite channels, this strategy seems to work in the Saudis favor.⁶

However, at the same time, there is an inconsistency in Saudi media strategy, that is, the inconsistency between commercialization and the legitimacy of their Islamic responsibilities. As the guardians of the two holy cities; Mecca and Medina, the government of Saudi Arabia

⁵ http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2008/0414_middle_east/0414_middle_east_telhami.pdf (Accessed on April 10, 2011).

⁶ Although the Arab spring since 2011 shows the impossibility of total controlling all the information, it seems that a real threat wouldn't happen in Saudi Arabia.

expects the Saudi media tycoons to spread the Islamic message through their media. However, Mellor argues that “many of these tycoons have done exactly the opposite: they seem to have abandoned this mission, or at least drastically departed from it in their business plans by launching a variety channels featuring women and men dancing, and relying on controversial TV hostesses and singers to attract wider audiences” [Mellor 2008: 359]. As we can see, this tendency of media commercialization and entertainment-orientation is to the Saudis benefit. However, this inconsistency is important when we think about the contemporary pan-Arab media strategy of Saudi Arabia.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued the historical transition of pan-Arab media with particular focus on the Egyptian and Saudi media strategies. Historically speaking, both Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been closely involved in the development of pan-Arab media, and have had a great influence on the pan-Arab discourses. However, through this analysis, I have revealed that the media strategy of both countries is quite different. On the one hand, Egypt had the informational hegemony in the Arab world particularly during the 1950s and 1960s through the exporting of its media contents and its influential radio service, the Voice of the Arabs. To put it simply, the media strategy Egypt followed was to set the media agenda and draw the Arabs’ attention to Egypt. On the other hand, the Saudis started to strengthen their influence on the Arab media scene after the mid-1970s through monetary subsidies and media moguls who benefited from the Saudi polity. As for the pan-Arab presses, Saudi Arabia has maintained its influence by controlling the discourses of Lebanese journalists who defend the value of the nation states and tend to criticize Arab and Islamic unity. As for the pan-Arab satellite channels, through its private media moguls, Saudi Arabia has for the most part succeeded in manipulating the popular satellite channels into being not so critical of the Saudi polity, or at least succeeded in diverting the Arabs’ eyes from politics to entertainment programs. In this sense, the Saudi media strategy is not to set any agenda, but to mask the actual media agenda that the Arab media is really supposed to provide. At the same time, the contemporary Arab media scene is changing dynamically and dramatically. The political turmoil since the beginning of 2011 has raised the question of the states’ abilities to cope with the free flowing tide of information, and it requires us to reconsider the role and meaning of media to the contemporary Arab political, social and personal experience.

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