

New Media, New Politics? From Satellite Television to the Internet in the Arab World

Dec 11, 1998



Brief Analysis

On November 24, 1998, Jon Alterman presented the findings of his new Washington Institute Policy Paper, [New Media, New Politics? From Satellite Television to the Internet in the Arab World](#), [\(templateC04.php?CID=2\)](#) at the Institute's Special Policy Forum. Mr. Alterman directs Middle East activities in the U.S. Institute of Peace's Research and Studies Program and was a 1997–1998 Soref fellow at The Washington Institute. Ibrahim Karawan of the University of Utah provided commentary on the publication. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

JON ALTERMAN

Over the last decade, new technologies have changed the way information is disseminated in the Arab world. International newspapers and magazines, satellite television stations, and the internet exist mostly beyond government control and allow the public access to a far wider variety of opinion than before. Over the last two decades, privately owned newspapers such as al-Hayat and al-Sharq al-Awsat have evolved into largely non-ideological and authoritative sources for information. Satellite dishes can be found across the region, giving growing numbers of Arabs access both to popular entertainment and hard-hitting news in Arabic. The internet is also beginning to gain in popularity, although a number of obstacles to its wide acceptance remain. Thanks to the new media, the Arab world is experiencing an increased flow of information -- within the region itself as well as with the outside world. Under the pressure of competition from the new media, many of the traditional national media sources are making efforts to improve their credibility and make themselves more lively. The flood of information favors the growth of more sophisticated and discriminating audiences. With access to multiple accounts of any one event, people can better evaluate which analysis they find most satisfactory, and some may reject the theses put forward by their own governments.

The new media also feed a growing sense of an Arab identity, as Arabs across borders increasingly read the same authors, watch the same films, and see the same news. In this environment, individuals' identification with individual states does not fade away, but rather is accompanied by a sense of connection with other Arabs, based on common language and shared interests forged by the media. Unlike the government-sponsored Arabism of the 1960's, this new Arabism arises within Arab societies rather than being imposed from above. In a world increasingly turning to regional blocs, the emergent Arabism could augur well for economic, social, and political cooperation in the future. The internet, satellite television and regional newspapers have also served to reintegrate the Arab diaspora with the Arab world. Utilizing new technology, Arabs living and studying abroad can more easily monitor and increasingly play a role in regional debates and dialogues.

> Another consequence of the new media is the reduced efficacy of state censorship. Rapidly multiplying sources of information and new modes of transmission far outstrip state censorship resources.

Two factors will influence the freedom and spread of the Arab media. The first is their ability to be economically self-sustaining. Marketing infrastructures in the Arab world remain weak, and unless consumption patterns more

closely resemble those of the West, independent media companies will not be viable. The second is the role of the state. Authoritarian Arab regimes have not yet resigned themselves to the loss of control over information. Although they are unlikely to be able to prevent a transformation to an open information environment, they can slow any such change.

Policy recommendations: Engaging the Arab world, and not just Arab governments, serves U.S. interests well. To that end, the U.S. government needs to court bilingual Arab elites (many of whom studied in the West) and reach out to the monolingual middle classes. Similarly, Washington needs to recognize the changing role of public opinion in the Arab world as publics become more sophisticated. What is needed is a public diplomacy strategy that recognizes the increasing importance of satellite television in the region and takes advantage of superior American capabilities in using images to tell stories to get the American message out to Arab publics.

IBRAHIM KARAWAN

This study provides detailed empirical information with a straightforward sociological, political, and economic explanation. It also combines analytic concepts, rich information, and policy recommendations. Some issues that are flagged bear close examination.

> The expansion of information and the proliferation of news outlets do not necessarily bring about revolutionary change in political thinking. Variables other than access to information seem more important determinants of social and political change. If the new transnational media had such a quick impact on political development, the regimes that have long persisted in the Middle East would have already changed. In fact, however, political systems and paternal traditions have remained the same and are likely to do so.

The impact of new media on state power is unclear. Increased sophistication of information technology does not imply a power reduction. The Arab governments have vigorous means to influence the reporting of the news. They impound or ban some international newspapers or exert control over some broadcasts. They can also make use of deterrence strategies -- that is, one government may threaten to have its television news program report unfavorable news about another government if the second government were to broadcast unfavorable news about the first. So it is premature to assert that censorship on news coverage is over.

> How Arab nationalism is changing needs a lot of testing. An expanding amount of information exchange across state borders may connect people at some level, yet it is unlikely to shape the emergence of a new kind of identity in the coming years. Despite a unifying effect of the new technologies, the Arab world is still diverse. It has never been a unified bloc. Neither shared language nor religion has been successful in uniting Arabs for the same cause. The question is, why would the new media be able to change this tradition and bind Arabs together, when little else has?

Lastly, turning the Arab media in favor of the United States by influencing it is not an easy task. Authoritarian Arab governments may never really appreciate the introduction of U.S. policy concerns, such as human rights in general or freedom of expression in particular. Public support, which can be heavily influenced by local governments, may end up not being as supportive of U.S. policy concerns as might have been hoped for.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Sulay Ozturk.



RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)