

## Arab Satellite Broadcasting: An Alternative to Political Parties?

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Thinking about Arab Satellite Broadcasting (ASB), I soon realized that there is no theoretical base for it. Hannah Arendt, the great German political thinker, argued that theory is for weak brains-but I have Max Weber the even more famous sociologist on my side who said that without theory and without clear-cut criteria there can be no scientific explanation.

This lack of theoretical orientation can be felt in the current debate on Al Jazeera and ASB Proponents applaud these media for opening up the public discourse; but critics argue that they are doing quite the opposite because they resonate and perpetuate intrinsic biases of Arab political culture.

Whether you are with the critics or with the sympathizers depends much on your theoretical point of view. It is absolutely naive to measure the performance of Arab broadcasting according to Western mainstream standards because they operate in an environment that is in many regards different from that of developed democratic systems. Their function, to say this in advance, is not just objective and balanced reporting but also, at least partly, to take over tasks that are usually fulfilled by political parties. To articulate the people's will and be able to mobilize for political activism and change is part of the fascination of ASB. The reason why we are here at this conference is that we feel that ASB is-in fact-much more than simply a mass medium: it can be an agent of change, and its role is in many ways not comparable to Western media.

But saying that it can be does not answer the question if it really is! And I have my doubts at this point.

### **Theory**

Let me say a few words about theory before we measure if ASB are up to it.

The state of political affairs and role of media in Arab societies is contrary to many lessons of history and ridicules mainstream transformation theory

That theory holds that political parties were created as a reaction to modernization processes, mostly as class parties like the German Social Democrats or English Labour. The more middle-class Western societies became, the more the political parties reflected the interests of ever larger parts of the populace-they developed

from class parties to popular parties integrating broad underlying values of societies, for example conservatism versus social equality ideals. Parties aggregate and articulate the political will of large fragments of a society, they design political programmes, and in the end they create governments and recruit political personnel for leadership. To put it in a nutshell: non-revolutionary political reform and democratization has always been the privilege of political counter-elites and oppositional parties-but not of mass media.

On the contrary, although many general social scientists consider the media important for political change, the theoretical debate in political science about democratic transition has never done so! The small media like the Internet might be considered important - but the big mass media have always been considered to follow rather than lead democratic change. The struggle for media freedom is considered important for democratization-but TV is not, mainly for two reasons:

1. Transformation theoreticians believe that the media are acting according to a primacy of organizational goals; politics or market forces seem to dominate the media, and the organisation of the media constantly fights for its own survival; and, especially, TV is an industrial process that can be easily controlled by the state;
2. The media were never considered primary social actors, but rather they seemed determined by actors like the government, lobbies-or political parties

For all these reasons mainstream transformation theory has never considered the big mass media a vanguard of democratization. It is only after system changes to democracy occur and electoral democracy is established that TV is considered important for a democratic society to formulate the public agenda and represent civil society. Theoreticians say that the mass media, TV, and the big press are not as crucial in the authoritarian phase as certain dissidents, artists, and other freedom fighters might be, and that it is only in the phase of consolidation that the media are effective.

However, this theory was written for nation-based media but not for the new situation of satellite TV that crosses national borders. In this situation state control over TV is regressing and big media are gaining a lot of freedom-a freedom they can use to play a role in early democratization processes. It is not so much globalization and Western media, but regionalization and the geo-linguistic unity of regions like the Arab world that create new challenges at the crossroads of regionalization and democratization. Interesting enough, at the same moment that Arab TV has gained more freedom, it has created a pan-Arab dialogue on democracy and reform; we will come back to that later.

The new situation of TV in the Arab world is from a theoretical point of view one of growing freedom, but also of new problems. If you

think of the two reasons why TV was never considered a democratic vanguard, only one-state control-is less important now. The other-the reactive character of the media vis-à-vis primary social actors-is still effective. In the Arab world, the media are operating in a vacuum of political mobilization because political parties, if they exist at all, are hardly ever relevant or representative. Many political institutions of society are weak, and the reason is that while political parties in, for instance, England or Germany were created on a class basis in the process of modernization and social change, that socio-economic push is non-existent in the Arab world. Social change heads, if at all, in a different direction of ethical and religious groups that captured non-state areas like Imbaba and Ain Shams in Cairo. Like it or not, the Islamists are the most effective opposition in the Arab world-but they are not necessarily democracy-minded.

In this situation we have two intellectual alternatives:

One is that we consider the media revolution dead before it has been effective in helping to create new democracies, because there is no effective link between media and political parties;

Or two, we accept that media take over the leading function in democratization themselves and substitute for at least some of the tasks political parties do not fulfill.

In principle, TV can take over at least some of the functions of political parties. It can integrate, aggregate and articulate the political will of the people; it can mobilize people for non-parliamentarian political action; and while it might not be able to work out political programmes, it can help a society to open a dialogue on democratic reform. The most important function of the mass media is to uphold the agenda of democratic change by being the people's voice and letting the "repressed" express themselves in the media. In taking over the role of mediators between state and society, the media's democratic agenda could eventually lead to mobilization and a democratic system change.

Prof. Telhami rightly argued at this conference that mass media are mostly effective where people have no first hand experience and therefore must rely on the media. But is "democracy" a primary or a secondary issue? It is certainly both. It is primary because many people in the Arab world feel that regime corruption and others problems need to be changed. And it is also secondary, because most people who have lived in autocratic systems all through their lives have no direct experience with democracy and therefore the media are effective in providing information on democratic developments elsewhere and in the Arab world. The media have a high potential of shaping public opinion on matters related to democratic reform.

What sounds a bit of an illusion at first is a natural consequence of the nature of politics and society in our days. In the West we are

already debating the impact of the so-called media democracy on traditional institutions like political parties. We are in the era of "mass democracy," of "mass communication," and of "media democracy." Although there is certainly too much hype about that: why should it be impossible that the character and composition of institutions that are relevant for democratization change over time? If social classes are less relevant, due to the change from the traditional model of the industrial society, characterized by manufacturing, to the information society, and due to the growing importance of professionals or even of "the masses," why should not the media take over the lead rather than follow political parties?

I argue that the decline of political institutions corresponds with the rise of the authoritarian Arab state in the 20th century and-most recently-with the rise of the mass media as mediators between state and society.

But before we can announce such a change in paradigm there are more hurdles to surmount:

1. Media cannot solely be the mirror of the people or the people's "party," but must at the same time value their primary function of information objectivity and balance old and new functions in the context of democratic theory.
2. Mobilization and change can only occur when political parties and institutions that do not exist start to develop.

Media must not only mirror the people but must inform them, correct them, educate them. If they don't, the danger is inherent that a political culture that has never experienced democracy will merely reproduce itself and that the old populism of the regime merely be replaced by some kind of "techno-populism." The kind of democratic partisanship of the media that is needed for democratic change is not in contradiction to objectivity as long as it seeks to compensate for the lack of articulation people suffering under authoritarian rule. But it conflicts with objectivity if it does not reflect all of the important voices from the opposition as well as the government.

At this point conflicts between the role of the media as "political parties" and as "informers" and "educators" are inherent. What do you do if the political culture of those whom you are trying to articulate is not in itself pluralist, is not balanced? How can you be attractive to people if you tell them unpopular truths? But from the viewpoint of systems theory it is absolutely clear that one function of the media-partisanship-cannot replace another function-objective information-and that both must coincide, in domestic as well as in international news. Otherwise they will lack the basis for political information and political opinion that is needed for any electoral democracy or political mobilization, because being a party for democratization means accepting that democracy is first and foremost based on the principle of the non-violent competition of all

legitimate interests - and that is the intrinsic educational function media have and must not lose.

If, as media without professional standards of objective reporting, you are mobilizing people, the media might actually be a party to the wrong cause, not for democracy.

But unfortunately, if you are mobilizing with the right agenda and based on professional standards, the same thing can happen to the media.

Why? Because the media can never lead alone. They can take over a part of the political parties' functions but they are only effective on condition that the link between the media and social and political movement, which is weak in the beginning, becomes stronger. "TV democracy" can never fully replace the function of political parties because societies need acting institutions. In contrast to the classical three powers, the media are not at the same time in the parliamentary and the executive spheres, but they are merely a "virtual parliament." TV talk is useless if the agenda is not conveyed into action. ASB will remain ineffective if the movements, organizations, and institutions of a democratic body politic do not develop. If they do not, it will be absolutely possible that the current mobilization of Arabs by ASB might not lead in the direction of democracy but to more confrontation between Arab regimes and non-democratic parts of the opposition-a situation which would perpetuate authoritarian rule in one or the other form.

## **Practice**

Therefore the question is not whether ASB fulfill general theoretical needs but if they can face the specific tasks of the media-plus-political-party-symbiosis that I have laid out.

*ASB - a weakened democratic agenda?*

Let us first see if there is a democratic agenda. Although ASB have been applauded many times for their ability to criticize governments and give people the chance to discuss matters that were previously taboo-sex, religion, politics-it is remarkable that almost no solid content analyses exist.

I did a very limited analysis of Aljazeera.net, which is not the same as Al Jazeera TV, but gives an indication of the way ASB acts as a party of democratization. Honestly, I was a bit disappointed because for the year 2004 I could only find about ten articles dealing with democracy in the Arab world, most of them polemics against American plans to democratize the area. The rest echoed the Arab League's opinions or even the Qatari foreign ministry's point of view on democracy.

I then changed my strategy and looked for an "Arab reform" debate,

because I thought Aljazeera.net was merely avoiding the term "democracy," and indeed I found a Special Report on Arab Reform, but again I was disappointed. Of the twelve articles I found, about 60 percent dealt with US plans for the Middle East. There was an interview with the US government, and the moderate Islamist viewpoint was well represented. But there were only two articles left that deserved to be called "advocative" of democratic change.

My impression is that democracy at Aljazeera.net currently tends to be pushed aside by international political problems with American and Israeli policy. There is only a very tiny number of articles that deal with democracy at all. "Reform," a vague concept that is very flexible and easily adopted by Arab regimes, is more central, but remains without any concrete references to specific Arab countries. It is not so much that Aljazeera.net reveals an ideological bias, because different voices can be heard but that the democracy agenda is very limited in scope and differentiation. Even in the central field of human rights, Aljazeera.net tends to focus on American, British, or Israeli rather than Arab torture, even though one occasionally one finds critical articles about countries like Morocco, Tunisia or Bahrain. In the current form, Aljazeera.net can surely not claim to be an alternative to Arab political parties.

Of course, there are many talk shows on Al Jazeera TV in which Arab governments are criticized and this seems to be the specific contribution of the network to the Arab political culture. It acts as a mouth piece for the Arabs' critique of their governments. But without a much more concrete democratic agenda that give people a vision of how to act and where to go on politically that criticism is in danger of leaving no real impact on the political development. Since 9/11 the democratic agenda seems to be increasingly absorbed by the occupation and resistance agenda- domestic political debates seem hampered by regional crises in Iraq and Palestine.

Other ASB like Al Arabiya or Abu Dhabi TV are even worse since because they are owned by Saudis or Emiratis and they do not allow for critique of Saudi Arabia or the Gulf states. The question whether ASB could be a vanguard for democratization has always focused on Al Jazeera, and it is all the more problematic if that debate starts to fade away. In such a situation, Arab regimes might be criticizing Al Jazeera. The network is, in fact, an element in the new, controversial, style in Arab countries. But we need more in-depth studies of Al Jazeera's agenda for democracy or "reform" to judge whether it will successfully contribute to democratization.

I am not arguing with Muhammad Ayish that ASB are too sensationalist in style, because I think that the style of "politainment" is in fact needed for Arab TV to be an advocate of democratic change and mobilization of people. Fatima Mernissi is right when she argues that ASB have opened up the door for critical journalism and Arab dialogue. But she is also wrong when she declared the "TV agenda" to be irrelevant, because for mass media to be effective

agents of democratization, the media must prepare people not only on the form, but also on the *substance* of democracy. Agenda matters!

And for the agenda on democracy to be effective in terms of political change, it seems that ASB should go the next step and create more and at certain points even better "Al Jazeera" that operate from a safe distance and escape national control. It is certainly positive for democracy when Al Jazeera covers the Western Sahara conflict as they did on one prominent occasion. But they are doing it once a year, and that is certainly not enough. Ultimately, the network is completely overburdened when shouldering the job alone. For the agenda of democracy to be relevant and effective, regional differentiation and continuity in the coverage of relevant issues is needed and this is something that no network alone can provide for the whole Arab world.

### *Professionalism or Pan-Arabism?*

What about ASB's ability to merge, as theoretically required, democratic partisanship with the function of professional neutrality and objective reporting? It is remarkable that when it comes to Al Jazeera's reporting on regional conflicts, not only the United States and the British government but also many Arab journalists criticize Al Jazeera and other ASB. There is no doubt that ASB offer to the world images of Arab victims that were unnoticed and ignored by Western media. It is equally obvious that especially Al Jazeera is able to integrate "the other opinion"-Israeli, American and many other different voices are to be heard, something you cannot find on the leading US news network, Fox.

However, critics bemoaned again and again that there is a clear pan-Arab bias in the selection and interpretation of news on ASB. Injustices against Arabs are dealt with much more critically and intensively than injustices done to Israelis whose victims are hardly present on screen. The role of Arab regimes and even sometimes of Arab terrorists is underestimated because it disturbs Arab emotional mobilization that is intended by ASB. The French Panos Study, Muhammad Ayish from Sharjah University, or Mamoun Fandy from Georgetown University and many others agree that objectivity is absent from ASB when they report about the big regional conflicts in which US and Israeli are involved.

Is that the way ASB interpret their role as a party or mouth piece of the people? ASB seem to compensate for the decline of Arab national institutions, of the Arab League, and of nationalist aspirations. But ASB are more than a mere continuation of pan-Arab institutions. While traditional Nasserist pan-Arab policy was based on single-state national interests, ASB lend themselves as platforms for public emotions and pro-Palestinian and other national identities. The lack of objectivity in the field of regional conflict reporting qualifies ASB as mediators and mouth pieces for many Arabs, but it

disqualifies ASB as a source of political information and an agenda heading for democratic international relations. In spite of the ability to integrate American and Israeli voices I consider most ASB's reporting on regional conflicts to represent a techno-compatible and globalized form of populism rather than a contribution to international dialogue. In search of a balance between professional journalism and the will to pose an alternative to political parties, ASB has got completely off track. I totally disagree with Mohammed El-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar who defined this obvious deficit as "contextual objectivity," because they say Arab media must compensate for opposite biases in the Western media.

### *ASB - mobilizing for democracy or radicalism?*

Theoretically the aim is that ASB compensate for some of the deficits of Arab political parties in helping to mobilize for a newly developing link with civil society. This media-civil society-alliance could then pave the road to democracy. Honestly, however, we must say that after 10 years of ASB there has been no significant development for democracy in the Arab world. Although critical elites and NGOs are heard on TV, their real political impact remains rather weak. However, conclusions are rather tentative at this point because there probably are, as Saad Eddin Ibrahim rightly mentioned at this conference, latent effects on public opinion that might turn out to be important years later.

On the other hand, Erik C. Nisbet, Matthew C. Nisbet, Dietram A. Scheufele, and James E. Shannahan revealed in an article in the Harvard International Journal that ASB can contribute to anti-Americanism among the consumers. Whether such views are toned down or fueled is dependent on how ASB covers regional conflicts. Extensive reporting on the burial of Shaykh Yasin, the radical leader of Hamas, or the playing of video messages by Usama Bin Ladin, echo terrorist messages. While it is true that most Western media show the same commercial interest in the phenomenon of terrorism, ASB operate in an environment that lends itself easily to violent mobilization.

However unethical their treatment of the phenomenon of terrorism might be, the mainstream ASB are not "hate media" supporting terrorism against the US or Israel, as some critics of Arab media have argued. Most of the reporting is neither anti-American nor pro-terrorist and a quite regular mix of news and entertainment. US resentment or the closing down of Al Jazeera's office in Iraq is therefore inappropriate and rightly criticized by human rights organizations. ASB, in a lot of regards, are a mere reflection of US networks, in style as well as in the biases they reveal.

### **Conclusion**

For ASB to face the challenge of becoming vanguard of democratization and to take over the functions of political parties in

the fields of articulation and mobilization of the populace would take a revision of certain trends in the current broadcasting culture. The democratic agenda, it seems, should be elaborated, objectivity in regional conflict affairs reintroduced and the link between the media and extra media elites, organizations, and movements should be improved.

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