

ARAB MASS MEDIA

Newspapers, Radio, and Television in
Arab Politics

William A. Rugh

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TELEVISION IN ARAB POLITICS*

WILLIAM A. RUGH

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Preface

The flow of information between the United States and the Arab world is overwhelmingly one way, West to East. Arab audiences know much more about America than Americans know about Arabs. Every day, 24 hours a day, Arabs have access to CNN and other American television channels that are relayed to them via satellite. The language barrier is crossed for news going West to East because information from and about the United States is carried almost every day on the front pages of Arab newspapers published in Arabic, and discussed in editorials. Because the United States is the world's only superpower and is involved in many aspects of life in the Middle East and North Africa, and because its foreign policies affect the lives of Arabs in many ways, Arab media editors constantly report on what the United States is doing. Arab television stations typically broadcast reviews of the world's press every morning, and American news is regularly featured. *Newsweek* now appears in an Arabic version that is available throughout the Middle East.

In sharp contrast with the Eastward flow of information, the Westward flow is meager. Americans know relatively little about the Arab world, and almost nothing about Arab media and what newspapers and television are saying. Part of the reason is the language barrier, since most Arab media are in Arabic and probably fewer than one percent of Americans can read that language. There are a few Arab newspapers printed in English, but they are intended for non-Arabs living in the Middle East so their news and editorial content are quite different from the media in Arabic which

most Arabs see every day. As a result, Americans have no idea what is being said about the United States or anything else on a daily basis in the Arab mass media, and they have no way of understanding the nature of Arab mass media.

Mass media in any country reflect their particular social, cultural, and political environments. Anyone who wants to understand the Arab world should therefore know its media. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, Americans have paid much more attention to the Arab world, trying to understand it better, and they have been puzzled by fragmentary reports of what has appeared in Arab media. Journalists, politicians, and others have talked much more about Arab society and its institutions, including Arab media but most people have little solid information about the subject, and some of their observations have unfortunately been rather superficial. Hopefully this detailed study, which is based on a variety of well-informed sources, will help meet that need.

This book describes and analyzes Arab print media, radio, and television, and is a study of the role that the mass media play in the political process in the Arab world. The mass media are newspapers, magazines, radio, and television that originate from a single source and which are aimed simultaneously at a mass audience. They still have a greater impact than the newer communication media such as Internet, cell phones, and fax, because they reach much larger audiences, especially in the Arab world where access to the newer devices is still limited. Web sites, it is true, are somewhat similar in function to the mass media and may at some time in the future develop into true competitors for print media, radio, and television, but that has not happened yet, certainly not in the Arab world. The Arab audience for Web sites in fact remains very small, and is likely to continue to be small in the near future, for reasons that are discussed in the book.

After an introductory overview, the book analyzes print media. They are not uniform in structure or function across the Arab world, which but can be divided for purposes of analysis of the mass media into a typology of four categories. One is the "mobilization" system to which Syria, the Sudan, Libya, and pre-2003 Iraq belong; another is the "diverse" system to which Lebanon, Kuwait, Morocco, Yemen, and post-2003 Iraq belong; a third is the "loyalist" system to which Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Oman, and Palestine belong; and the fourth is the "transitional" system to which Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, and Jordan belong. This book will describe and explain each of these types of system, giving examples of how they deal with news and commentary, and what role they play in the political process in those countries.

As this book was being completed, a U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 was already leading to significant changes in Iraqi media. It will take time for a new structure to settle down, and it will probably

contain some characteristics from the past system. The book therefore analyzes the development of Iraqi media in detail up to 2003 in Chapter 2, and developments after that in Chapter 5.

The book also describes and explains a relatively new phenomenon of “offshore” pan-Arab print media, published in Europe and distributed throughout the region, with generally more editorial freedom than local newspapers have.

Finally, the book describes and analyzes Arab television and radio. Since Desert Storm (1991) the most significant change that has taken place in Arab media is the emergence of Arab satellite television. This development has had a significant impact not only on Arab television but also on print media. Americans are aware of al-Jazeera Television that has had a revolutionary impact in the Middle East, but there are other television channels in Arabic which are also important but unknown in America.

The book includes some statistics, for example newspaper circulation data, but because of the great difficulty of obtaining accurate numbers of this kind, they should not be considered to be precise but only rough orders of magnitude for comparison purposes. Also, footnotes have been kept to a minimum, and omitted for some facts that are easily verifiable.

A large number of Arab and American experts in many countries have generously provided advice and information that has been invaluable in the updating of this book. Some are acknowledged in the footnotes while others have preferred to remain anonymous. Any errors of fact or interpretation however are the author's.

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Introduction

Why should we study the Arab news media?

The news media have taken on increasing importance in recent years everywhere in the world. The growth of television viewing and radio listening audiences has been dramatic, and newspaper readership has expanded similarly. One cause has been rapid technological innovation, in transistors and then in satellite communications, which have extended the reach of the media. Another has been the population explosion which, together with the trend toward urbanization has resulted in the concentration of large groups of people in places where they have easier access to mass media. Increasing literacy, too, has created a larger newspaper-reading public.

This book is about the mass media as they function in Arab society. Mass media are all the means of transmitting messages or meaning publicly to “large, heterogeneous, and anonymous audiences.”¹ The book describes and analyzes the organization of the press and its relationships to the government and the political process. We focus primarily on daily newspapers, radio, and television which reach a mass audience with messages that originate from a single point but reach very large audiences. We will make some references to other printed media such as weekly and monthly magazines. But non-news mass communications media such as motion pictures, and newer electronic means of communication such as the Internet and fax, have been excluded because their role in society is somewhat different, and they do not reach mass audiences in the Arab world. A study treating them in sufficient depth would be a book in itself.

The mass media play a larger role than other forms of communication in the daily lives of people everywhere, but especially in the Arab world. These media are consequently regarded by politicians and governments as having great political importance. In fact, the acquisition and distribution of news has been seen for a long time as a vital political function in society because the news items may have political impact very quickly on large numbers of people. Most societies have wrestled with problems of media controls and freedom, and have dealt seriously with questions of media-government relations. Indeed as the technical means of communication have improved, governments and political leaders have judged these problems as increasingly critical because they think the power of these instruments to affect the political process is growing. Thus the typical news-handling institution has been of great interest to the government and the public because it is a complex organization that involves great expense and because people regard it as politically important. The way government and society deal with this institution is significant for an understanding of that government and society as well as of the mass communication process.

A basic assumption of this book is that news media institutions do not exist independently of their environments but rather take on the "form and coloration of the social and political structures" within which they operate.² There is an intimate, organic relationship between media institutions and society in the way that those institutions are organized and controlled. Neither the institution nor the society in which it functions can be understood properly without reference to the other. This is certainly true in the Arab world. The news media there, in fact, are particularly interesting in this regard because of the roles they played since the middle of the twentieth century when most of the Arab countries gained their full independence and developed their own national institutions. Arab media systems have taken on their current institutional forms only recently, and these forms can only be explained by reference to the underlying political realities in the society as a whole.

The spread of communication facilities in the Arab world has been remarkable. By the middle of the 1970s, every Arab country, including even the poorest ones, had built its own television system, and a majority had satellite ground stations capable of transcontinental television transmission. By that time, all Arab countries were active in radio broadcasting for both internal and external audiences, and in many places the programming was extremely varied and rich. Egypt's international radio broadcasting services, for example, were by then designed for many different audiences, and their total hours of air time were the third highest of any country in the world, greater than any Western nation. And all eighteen Arab countries not only published their own newspapers and magazines

but each one has its own news agency. The amount of news, commentary, and other information and interpretation turned out by these media every day is enormous.

These media have become quite important in the lives of most of the nearly three hundred million people who live in the Arab world. Growing literacy has given many access to the printed media, but television viewing and especially radio listening have burgeoned as cheaper transistorized receivers became available. The story is told in Saudi Arabia of an American oil-company geologist, crossing a barren expanse of desert in 1969, well before the oil boom and dramatic Arab economic growth, who encountered a lone bedouin tending his flock of camels and stopped to try out his own Arabic. When the bedouin asked where he had come from, the American solemnly pointed to the sky and said, "I've just come from the moon." Without hesitation, the bedouin replied, "Oh, then you must be Neil Armstrong." The story may be apocryphal, but it is certainly true that the details of the American lunar landing became known even by the least educated people in the remotest parts of the Arab world by means of transistorized radios. At the same time, large numbers of Arabs in urban areas enjoyed color television as well as magazines and newspapers printed according to high standards.

Specialists who observe political and other trends in the Arab world follow the Arab media closely. Foreign correspondents reporting on the area use Arab media as a resource for their stories. Foreign embassies in Arab countries depend heavily on the local press for their reporting back to their home governments. The United States government spends millions of dollars annually monitoring Arab radio broadcasts twenty-four hours each day, a service that Washington officials and analysts cull for useful information on Arab policies, ideas, and perceptions. Merely looking at headlines of the daily newspaper, in fact, can often give some indication of local concerns and preoccupations. To cite one example, the Arab press on May 28, 1973, reported on the same meeting of the Organization of African Unity chiefs of state under the following different headlines: "General Gowan Elected President of African Summit Session" (*al-Saba*, Tunisia); "Gowan: We Must Control Our Own Resources to Liberate Africa Economically" (*l'Opinion*, Morocco); "Arab African Split Within OAU Because of Somalia and Ethiopia" (*al-Madinah*, Saudi Arabia); "Soviets Congratulate Sudan on 10th Anniversary of OAU" (*al-Sahafa*, the Sudan); "Africa Concern for Mideast Problem" (*al-Dustur*, Jordan); "New Step to Liberate Palestine" (*al-Sha'b*, Algeria); "Results of Sadat's Contacts Appear in Strengthened African Decision Exposing the Position of Israel" (*al-Akhbar*, Egypt). There is, of course, much more in the press than headlines. Readers look for information, but they also seek nuances in language and even omissions in reporting, which they may detect if they

listen to foreign radio broadcasts. In an area of the world where public opinion polls and open parliamentary debates are rare, observers look at media content for indicators of political trends and probable future developments. Journalists, diplomats, and others typically make quick analyses on a daily basis rather than long-term systematic studies, and their conclusions are usually not made public.

This is not a study of media content, although examples of content are provided. This study examines the organization of Arab media institutions which shape that content, and it analyzes the influences that are brought to bear on Arab journalists in writing their news copy, editorials, and other material. The Arab journalist, in order to succeed, must be highly sensitive to the political realities prevailing in his country, which constitute real constraints and incentives on his work. The organization he works for fits into his country's prevailing political system, and he must take that into account, as he must be aware of the ways in which his organization is linked with the government and/or the political system.

In other parts of the world, the relationship of the mass media to the government has been analyzed in detail, and several different types of press system have been described.³ Do the Arab media fall into any of these categories? The first chapter of this book answers that question in the negative, although there are some characteristics of the so-called authoritarian system which are found in most of the Arab countries. Arab media, however, has some characteristics which set it apart from systems elsewhere, so we have had to describe these with specific reference to the manifestations in the various Arab countries. The first chapter presents those characteristics of the Arab news media which are present in all Arab countries and which seem to be typical of the Arab press as a whole. The book then presents an analysis of the Arab daily newspapers which shows that they can be divided into four fundamental subtypes which have appeared and survived after independence. The Arab countries have organized their daily newspapers according to one or another of these four systems, but the organization is not necessarily static: some countries have gone from one system into another, depending on conditions which are described in Chapters 2 through 7 that discuss these subtypes, and Chapter 8 analyzes the relatively new phenomenon of offshore-based pan-Arab print media.

Chapters 9–11 describe and analyze the organization and function of radio and television institutions in the Arab world. These systems can be dealt with together because they are simpler organizationally and have much more in common than do the newspaper organizations. Finally, Chapter 12 brings together the conclusions of the analyses and offers some generalizations about the conditions under which the various organizational forms have appeared and will probably continue to appear in the Arab world.

NOTES

1. Charles R. Wright, *Mass Communication* (New York: Random House, 1962), pp. 11–16.

2. Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963), p. 1.

3. See, for example, Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, *Four Theories*, op. cit.; Wilbur Schramm, “Two Concepts of Mass Communication,” in Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz, eds., *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), pp. 206–19.

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Arab Information Media: Function and Structure

This is a study of all significant Arab mass media, which are spread across eighteen Arab countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. These countries cover an area from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf, with a total population of nearly three hundred million people. All are independent, sovereign states except Palestine, which has been promised international recognition but as of 2004 had not yet achieved it.

In some respects, these countries are quite diverse. Economic prosperity measured by per capita Gross National Product (GNP) ranged in 1998 from below \$300 in Yemen and the Sudan to a high of over \$20,000 in Kuwait. The level of education varies from Oman, where secondary schools were first opened in the 1970s, to Lebanon, which has several long-established institutions of higher learning and a literacy rate of over ninety percent. There are different types of government too—absolute and constitutional monarchies, presidential and one party regimes, and some representational institutions. Even their preindependence political histories varied considerably. To cite two examples, Algeria, for more than a century considered to be an integral part of France, liberated itself in 1962 after a traumatic war, while Saudi Arabia had only minimal experience with colonial rule and achieved full independence and unity well before World War II.

Nevertheless, the peoples of the eighteen Arab states feel bound together by strong cultural and psychological ties. The vast majority of them regard

Arabic as their mother tongue; most of them share a single culture, language, and religion, and their sense of a common destiny is very strong. Nationalism, both in the pan-Arab sense and as felt toward the newer individual nation-states, separate and distinct from Western or any other identity, is a powerful force. And despite the differences in wealth, the Arabs are all living in a developing world environment of rapid economic and political change in which high priority is given to modernization.

What roles do mass communication media play in these Arab societies? A basic assumption of this study is that a media system necessarily responds to and reflects its environment, particularly the existing political realities, but also economic, cultural, and other factors. Mass media facilities, of course, serve the function everywhere of disseminating messages from single originators to mass audiences, and their roles are circumscribed to that degree. But the precise function and structure of the media in a particular country can only be understood within the context of existing political and other factors in that country. Therefore, as there are some common cultural and other elements throughout the Arab world, there are some similarities in Arab media systems; and as there are political, economic, and other differences there are naturally differences among their media systems. In this chapter we will look at some of the general characteristics of Arab mass media, and then in the next ten chapters we will look at factors that make them different. First, how widespread are the mass media in the Arab world?

MASS MEDIA DENSITY IN THE ARAB WORLD

Newspapers and magazines are published in every one of the eighteen Arab countries, some of which have press traditions going back more than a century. The first Arab newspaper, that is the first periodical publication carrying news written by and for Arabs, was apparently *Jurnal al-Iraq* that began appearing in Arabic and Turkish in Baghdad in 1816. Two Arab newspapers were published in Cairo in the 1820s; Algeria followed in 1847, Beirut in 1858, Tunis 1861, Damascus 1865, Tripoli (Libya) in 1866, San'a 1879, Casablanca 1889, Khartoum 1899, and Mecca 1908. The first Arabic daily was published in Beirut in 1873.

Radio listening began in the 1920s, but the size of the audience was small until later decades and only some of the Arab states began their own radio broadcasting in the period before World War II. Television viewing began on a small scale in the late 1950s in Iraq and Lebanon, when those countries established TV transmitters in their capital cities. The only other Arabs who could watch television in the 1950s were those few who happened to be able to see non-Arab television: French TV could be seen by some Arabs in the Maghreb states of North Africa; U.S. military-operated TV could be seen by Libyans living near Wheelus Air Force Base; and telecasts by the Arabian-

American Oil Company could be seen by Saudis living near ARAMCO headquarters in Dhahran. Indigenous electronic media developed rapidly in some countries, but not until 1970, when Oman opened its radio transmitter, has every Arab state had indigenous radio broadcasting, and not until the fall of 1975 when Yemeni TV went on the air has every Arab state had its own indigenous television capability. Despite the long head start by the print media, the electronic media in the Arab world had by the end of the twentieth century spread much farther among the population, as Table 1.1 shows.

In most Arab countries the people have relatively good access to radio and television, while the press remains primarily a medium reaching elite groups. This can be seen, for example, if we match the statistics against the minimum standards used by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which suggested that every country should provide at least the following media facilities per thousand people: fifty radio receivers, twenty television receivers, and a hundred copies of daily newspapers.

TABLE 1.1 Media Density in the Arab World¹

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Algeria	30	244	110	67	1,080	38	53
Bahrain	0.7	580	472	87	67	117	8
Egypt	64	399	189	55	2,400	38	99
Iraq	23	222	83	39	407	20	—
Jordan	4.9	372	84	90	250	42	9
Kuwait	2.0	624	486	82	635	377	38
Lebanon	4.3	687	335	86	435	141	17
Libya	5.3	273	137	80	71	14	—
Morocco	29	243	166	49	704	27	33
Oman	2.4	621	563	72	63	28	16
Qatar	0.6	450	404	81	90	161	15
Saudi Arabia	20	319	260	76	1,105	59	173
Sudan	31	464	273	58	737	27	11
Syria	16	276	67	74	287	20	17
Tunisia	10	158	198	71	280	31	20
UAE	2.9	318	292	76	384	170	49
Yemen	18	65	283	46	230	15	9

Key

A Population (in millions) for 2000

B Radio receivers per 1,000 inhabitants for 1997

C Television receivers per 1,000 inhabitants for 1997

D Literacy in percent for 2000

E Total circulation of daily newspapers (in 1,000s) for 1996

F Copies of daily papers per 1,000 inhabitants for 1996

G Gross Domestic Product (in \$ billions) for 2000

All of the Arab countries have surpassed those minimum standards for both radio and television. Some, such as the Sudan and Yemen, still have low receiver/population ratios, largely for economic reasons, although countries like Jordan, Yemen, and Egypt have surprisingly high ratios in view of their economic problems. Radio listening is nearly universal in most Arab states (assuming five to ten listeners per receiver) because of the availability of inexpensive transistorized receivers, the prevalence of group listening, and the great amount of international medium-wave broadcasting of interest to Arab audiences that takes place especially in the area of the Mediterranean and Fertile Crescent. Television, too, reaches a remarkable number of Arabs, probably well over 100 million, and has grown very rapidly in recent years.

By comparison to other developing areas of the world, the Arabs have kept pace in radio listening but seem to be ahead in the extent of their television viewing.

The wealthy petroleum-exporting states especially have achieved relatively high radio and TV audience densities as their citizens have spent more and more money on receivers to tune in to their own national and some foreign stations (see Chapters 9 and 10). The Arab print media, on the other hand, still reach only a highly select audience. As of 1975, not one Arab country had achieved the UNESCO minimum standard for daily newspaper circulation. By 1998, only five Arab states—Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—had achieved that standard, and all of them were wealthy states with small populations (the total population for all four was under ten million people), with fairly large numbers of literate, newspaper reading expatriate Arabs living and working there. Low literacy is a major factor in inhibiting Arab newspaper circulation, but there are others, such as distribution problems. Lebanon, for example, has a relatively high literacy rate, and a tradition of producing and consuming print media. But the long civil strife in Lebanon severely affected newspaper distribution in many parts of the country and helped depress circulation figures, while radio and television were able to cross these barriers.

Arab newspapers have always been written for an elite audience. Fifty-five years ago an Egyptian newspaper had the highest circulation of any Arab daily with 7,000 copies, and most dailies did not surpass 2,000. The total number of Arab newspaper readers in the early twenty-first century is still relatively small. Each copy may be read by an average of two to six people, depending on the paper and location, but many readers see more than one paper. Therefore, there are probably not more than thirty million regular newspaper readers in the Arab world, or roughly ten percent of the population. Some of the Arab states have only recently had enough newspaper readers to sustain indigenous papers; Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman did not have successful dailies until 1975, 1976, and 1980, respectively. Only five Arab countries have daily newspapers which distribute over 60,000 copies and some have dailies only in the under-10,000 range. Only Egypt has dailies which distribute more than a half million copies.

CONDITIONS AFFECTING ARAB MASS MEDIA

What special circumstances and conditions have affected the mass media generally in the Arab world?

Weak Economic Base

Arab information media have by and large been established on a weak economic base. Newspapers developed when the national incomes and populations were small, and the literacy rates were low. Thus both advertising revenues and mass-circulation sales, the two main sources of commercial newspaper income elsewhere, were restricted. Even after World War II, as the Arab economies developed, advertising did not become important enough to Arab businessmen, or promising enough in the modest-circulation press, to help newspaper publishers very much. In the following half century, as the Arab states became wealthier, the Arab media remained relatively poor. One Arab editor has calculated that by 2003, well after the oil boom and substantial Arab economic development, the total revenue of all Arab media is less than that of the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*, and that annually the combined incomes of all journalists in wealthy Saudi Arabia add up to less than Peter Jennings' annual salary.²

A few publishers, like Cairo's al-Ahram Publishing House, have been able to expand their operations into printing periodicals and books in their own plants, and also advertising and distributing foreign publications, but most daily newspapers have a far more modest financial base. The short supply of newsprint, other printing costs, plus the various limitations on distribution, such as political differences and poor domestic and international transport facilities, work against the publisher who is trying to make a profit from his newspaper. The daily newspaper is no longer an expensive luxury for the middle class throughout the area, as it was in the early 1950s, and in the 1980s newspapers in the Gulf states expanded rapidly as a result of oil wealth there, but price and illiteracy are still limiting circulation figures. High costs are even more restrictive in the case of the electronic media, which are considerably more expensive to operate, and in most cases private Arab entrepreneurs have not been able to afford such an undertaking. This is a major reason why most radio and television stations are monopolies owned by the government.

Politicization

Arab information media have always been closely tied to politics. The first newspapers that appeared in the Arab world were not private but official government publications intended to tell government bureaucrats and the public what the government wanted them to hear. The newspaper Napoleon printed in Egypt on his own presses starting in 1798, *Courier de*

l'Egypte, was intended to inform and instruct French expeditionary forces and improve their morale. The first indigenous Egyptian papers, *Jurnal al-Khadyu* and *al-Waqa' al-Masriya*, which began in 1827 and 1828, were published by the Egyptian government. They contained news and entertainment, such as stories from "A Thousand and One Nights," but they also contained official government guidance and authorized editorials. Similarly, the first newspapers that appeared elsewhere in the Arab world at that time also were official organs of the authorities. *Jurnal al-Iraq*, which began in 1816 in Baghdad, was issued by the government for the army, the bureaucracy, and the literate population. *Al-Mubashir* was started in Algeria in 1847 and was an official bi-weekly; *al-Raid al-Tunisi* was begun by the Tunisian authorities in 1861, *Suriya* by the authorities in Damascus in 1865, *Trablus al-Maghrib* by the authorities in Tripoli in 1866, *al-Zura* by the government in Baghdad in 1869, *Sana* by the government in Yemen in 1879, *al-Sudaniya*, by the government in the Sudan in 1899, and *al-Hijaz*, by the Ottoman representatives in Mecca in 1908.

A very few newspapers were published by private individuals or families in the nineteenth century but these appeared only in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Morocco. Khalil Khuri printed *Hadiqat al-Akhbar* in Beirut in 1858; *Wadi al-Nil* and *al-Ahram* appeared in Egypt in 1867 and 1876, respectively, and *al-Maghrib* started in Morocco in 1889. As one student of the press has observed: "We can say that the Arab press [in the nineteenth century] was published officially except for a few places like Lebanon and Morocco, and the press was influenced by this official character in that from the point of view of the reader it expressed the opinion and biases of the government. . . . Arab journalists working under Ottoman rule realized it was a tool for battle and revolution."

Arab governments tended to control the early newspapers, and colonial administrations in the Arab world sought to do the same, also for political reasons. With the growth of Arab nationalism in the twentieth century, Arab newspapers were attracted to this cause in opposition to colonial rule; they were thus drawn into political issues, and the nationalism/anti-imperialism theme has remained strong in Arab media to this day. The fact that the British and French had a tradition of free press at home, in most cases made less of an impact on media development in Arab areas under their control than did the overriding issue of nationalism and politicization of institutions. As radio became technologically feasible for mass broadcasting, most of the governments recognized its importance also, and controlled it as well. In recent years, changing political conditions, differences over policy, changes of regime, and changes of political system have helped to focus attention on the value of the media for political purposes. Periods of tension and instability have made governments especially concerned about the influence of the media and their control. Radio stations and television facilities are prime targets of revolutionaries, who typically

seize them first in any move to take power. Consequently, Arab regimes take special care to protect them carefully with military guards against such politically significant eventualities.

Arab governments since World War II have increased their influence and control over the mass media in part with the justification that their newly independent nations face overwhelming external and internal problems requiring unity and purposefulness and a minimum of dissent in the public debate. The country cannot afford, so the argument goes, the luxury of partisan conflict, and the media must further the national interest by supporting governmental policies. This argument is used in connection with economic development and other domestic problems, but the most common focus of such reasoning has been the Arab-Israeli conflict. This conflict has been the single major political preoccupation for the Arab world since the late 1940s. Every Arab government has had to deal with it and has felt compelled to declare its support for the "struggle" against the Israeli enemy, calling upon citizens to sacrifice for the sake of this vital national cause. In this context, Arab governments have been able to justify explicitly and implicitly their influence over the mass media as necessary either while the country is "at war" with Israel, or politically confronting Israel's policies. Because of the degree to which the Arab-Israeli dispute has become the central issue in Arab foreign policy and a matter of Arab patriotism, this justification is difficult to oppose.

Cultural Influence

Historically, the Arab press has had a strong tie to Arab culture. Arab literature, including poetry, tales, and stories, predated mass media by more than a millennium and had developed a very rich tradition by the time the first newspapers appeared. The publishers of these papers, influenced to some extent by the example of the contemporary French newspapers which were heavily cultural in content, quite naturally regarded the Arab press as a proper vehicle for Arab literature.

CONSEQUENCES FOR ARAB MEDIA

Economic, political, and cultural factors have influenced the character and shape of the Arab mass media in several ways.

Political Patronization

The weak economic base of the newspapers has led many of them to seek financial support from a variety of government and private sources, and recognition of the political importance of the press has encouraged patronization. Many private newspapers throughout the Arab world have

been able to survive only because they have been subsidized, openly or otherwise, by outside elements. Subsidization may take the form of across-the-board payments by the government to all media, government ads, or material benefits such as low postage rates, contributions to specific publications from political parties, businessmen, or individuals, or secret payments from local or even foreign groups. Because some of this subsidization is kept secret, it is difficult to know the exact magnitude and nature of it, although attempts have been made to get some idea by calculating the budgets of individual newspapers and assuming that those in the red must receive hidden revenues.

Subsidization may, of course, be directly related to media content. Many of the first Arab newspapers in the nineteenth century were financed by government and then political party interests, in order to promote the views of that particular interest. Even private newspaper owners, finding themselves in need of additional financial resources to keep their publication going, "shopped around among elements" in this community with which it agreed politically and philosophically, in order to find backers. Usually like-minded patrons were found, so the newspaper owner did not have to give up his principles and alter editorial policy to obtain funds, but occasionally that happened as well. Many newspapers were able to survive without patronage, and still others were party newspapers and openly labeled as such. The latter tended not only to follow party guidance in editorial policies, but to staff the paper with loyal party types also. Immediately after World War II the Arab press had many more truly "party" newspapers than it does today, and at that time observers compared it to the American press before 1860.³

The numerous, small enterprise, highly partisan newspapers that dominated American journalism in the years after the American Revolution were quite similar to those that appeared in the Arab world, as the Arab states emerged from colonial domination and wrestled with the basic questions of national political organization. Partisan journalism in the United States, which emerged after the American Revolution, increased during the thirty years before the Civil War so that every party schism or prominent new political leader brought with it a new newspaper: politicians arranged such newspaper affiliations with care, and considered them essential to success. The Arab world has seen such arrangements also. The proportion of party-affiliated newspapers has decreased over the last forty years, and there has been some increase in the information function of the press, aimed at a mass audience. But the press as a whole, and even more so the electronic media, have not developed in the direction of American big business, mass-oriented media as some observers thought they might. It is still true that "all Arab daily papers are partly business and party politics, but the politics is dominant."⁴

Patronization is still a major feature of the Arab press, but it has become primarily a function of governments. As we will see in subsequent chapters in many countries the regime and its agents have taken over the exclusive right to patronize the politically important newspapers, excluding political parties and other private groups from patronizing them. Radio and television, too, have been sponsored almost without exception by governments, because of their considerably higher cost, the limited number of broadcast frequencies, and broader (mass) political importance they are assumed to have.

In short, all of the media have been susceptible to political influence of one kind or another, particularly in recent years, by strong national governments. It must be remembered, however, that not all of the content of a newspaper or broadcast can be politicized; a large proportion of it, as we shall see below, is cultural and otherwise nonpolitical.

Fragmentation

Second, the factors mentioned above have led to considerable fragmentation in the Arab media. The development of the press in various periods of political conflict and competition, with the support of various political and individual factions, has led to a proliferation of newspapers in most Arab countries beyond the number warranted by literacy rates. Although the overabundance of newspapers was more of a problem in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, when political parties and factions were emerging more rapidly, it is still a problem in Lebanon, for example, and the tendency affects other Arab states as well. There are more newspaper conglomerates than there used to be (such as Cairo's al-Ahram Publishing House), but these are exceptional still, and many governments have attempted to consolidate the press in recent years.

In recent years, a few Arab newspapers based outside the region and aiming at a pan-Arab audience have emerged. Nevertheless, looking at the Arab world as a whole, most daily newspapers are still limited in circulation to one country because of restrictions on importation of papers frequently imposed by governments seeking to keep out hostile ideas, and because of the weakness of transportation and distribution systems throughout the area.

In addition, there have in the past been relatively high birth and death rates for Arab newspapers, although the situation has stabilized somewhat in recent years. It is no longer possible to start an Egyptian paper on a shoestring as it was in the late 1940s, but political change in the Arab countries has and still does bring with it turnovers in newspapers. The Arab states that went through the most political change after World War II experienced the rise and fall of so many newspapers that it would be difficult to chronicle them all. With greater political stability in the 1960s and