

# **Media Report 2004**

**Egypt**

## Introduction

Over the course of the last five years, the landscape of Egyptian media has changed in all four main segments – television, radio, printed publications and the Internet.

Firstly, there has been a degree of liberalization in terms of what can and cannot be covered by the local media. This is primarily the result, first of domestic pressure to free up the journalistic environment (Egypt has a relatively strong tradition of liberal media dating to the time of the monarchy) and also of foreign – mainly US – pressure to liberalize politically.

Secondly, rapid changes in regional media, which have come in the wake of globalization, have forced Egyptian media to become more competitive in the face of increasingly tech-savvy rivals in the gulf and Lebanon. This can be seen mainly in terms of television, especially with the introduction of satellite TV, which brought such Arabic-language challengers as the revolutionary Qatari station Al-Jazeera and the Dubai-based Al-Arabiya. For this reason, and thanks to the launch in the late 1990s and 2000 of Egypt's – and the region's – first communications satellites, the private sector was allowed to make considerable advances in the satellite TV sector.

Radio, too, was changed profoundly last year with the launch of the country's first two private FM stations, suggesting that, even in this vital sector – long controlled entirely by the Communications Ministry – the state is ready to make compromises.

What's more, last year also saw the launch of a small handful of private newspapers, offering political coverage and commentary from different perspectives than those found in the "big three" state-run papers, which have traditionally the nation's readership.

Thirdly, the spread of technology has aided, to a certain degree, the access of the average Egyptian to alternative sources of information. While radio and newspapers have been ubiquitous in Egypt for generations, the advent of satellite TV and the Internet has brought a host of new media forums. The number of satellite dishes has multiplied exponentially over the last several years, and Internet penetration rates, while still miniscule, are growing, with the help of the government's "Free Internet" initiative and a more recent ADSL initiative.

While all of these things add up to a relatively positive – if unhurried – trend towards media reform, it should be added that locally-manufactured content in all four media segments is still closely watched, and ultimately controlled, by the state.

Currently, all local television stations are provided by the government. These include eight free-to-air terrestrial stations and about a dozen additional satellite-based stations. According to Egyptian law, the state is the sole authority allowed to establish and broadcast TV or radio channels locally. Private terrestrial TV channels are still not allowed, and attempts to establish them have been thwarted repeatedly. Foreign-

licensed TV or radio channels may hire air time and transmit their programs from Egypt, but Egypt cannot be the headquarters of local or foreign private-sector TV channels.

With the launch of its two Nilesat satellites, one in 1998 and the second in 2000, Egypt became the first Arab country to boast its own media satellites, which cover the whole of the Arab world, as well as parts of Africa and southern Europe.

The introduction of satellite television to wider and wider segments of the population over the course of the last five years, as well as the introduction of regional Arabic-language news channels, has dramatically affected the landscape of local TV. As regional competitors pulled market share away from Egyptian state news channels, Cairo had to liberalize in order to maintain its audience.

This was probably why Cairo allowed the launch of the private sector Dreem TV station in the late 1990s by business tycoon Ahmed Bahgat. The station – and its outgoing talk-show hostess Hala Sarhan, dubbed the Oprah Winfrey of the Arab world – quickly became known for broaching such taboo subjects as homosexuality, premarital sex and masturbation. The station also occasionally hosted political guests who would speculate on the presidential succession, a topic generally considered “off limits.”

While the station has, to a large degree, toned down its content in the face of criticisms from conservative critics, the advent of Dreem and the talk shows of Hala Sarhan represented a high-water mark in terms of freedom of discussion.

Now, along with the relatively progressive Dreem, the average Egyptian viewer has access to a host of regional alternatives for television news, including – along with Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya – Saudi giant MBC, and Lebanese channels LBC and Future TV, to name a few.

Egyptian radio – the first radio service in the Middle East – has long played a vital role in the state’s history, airing its first broadcast in 1934. Under President Gamal Abdel-Nasser, the government used radio extensively to influence public opinion, employing the medium most famously in 1956, when it played a role in the nationalization of the Suez Canal. When the service launched its first transmission, it had only two radio broadcasting stations – today, it has eight.

With Nilesat’s 1996 arrival, radio’s reach expanded into nine national radio networks, with transmissions covering all Arab countries, most of Africa and Europe, and some Asian countries, as well as the United States – a total of 252 stations with a total broadcast capacity of 12,583 kilowatts.

Since the early 1960s, all radio operations, along with those of television, have been controlled by the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), which falls under the auspices of the information ministry. The state retained a total monopoly on radio broadcasting until mid-2003, when two privately operated music stations – one in English, one in Arabic – were launched by the Nile Production Company. A privately-

owned company, it has launched two stations: Nugoum FM and Nile One, which broadcast, respectively, Arabic and Western pop music.

Omar Batisha, head of the Egyptian Radio Union, told *Al-Ahram Weekly* in June 2003 that, even with the vast increase in the number of media outlets available to Egyptians today, "Radio still plays a major role, in collaboration with other media, in the formation of public opinion."

Print media in Egypt, meanwhile, is dominated by three state-owned publishing houses – Al-Ahram; Al-Akhbar; and Al-Tahrir/Al-Gomhuria – each of which channels the government line while maintaining a distinctive identity. Each house claims to circulate between 900,000 and 1 million copies per day of its flagship newspaper inside Egypt, with a few thousand more going to other countries. Unofficial reports within the industry, however, suggest that the true figures are much lower – as little as 100,000 copies per day for *Al-Ahram* and perhaps only a quarter of that for third-place *Al-Gomhuria*.

Besides the dozens of state-run publications available, a small number of officially sanctioned opposition papers exist, representing Egypt's few small and powerless opposition parties, along with an equally small handful of "independent" papers, all of which are watched by the government for offensive or dangerous content. Circulation figures for the state-sanctioned opposition press – whose distribution is handled by the Al-Ahram Establishment – must also be treated with caution. Daily circulation of *Al-Wafd* (named after the political party of the same name), for example, was said to be 300,000 the last time an official figure was released, in 1989.

Given the lack of believable statistics, readership is thought to have remained fairly steady in recent years, though down from what it was in the 1960s and 1970s. Rapid population growth, however, may have helped some publications maintain their readership in terms of absolute numbers.

While the state jealously guards this medium from the depredations of the private sector, there have been a couple of exceptions to this rule recently, with the launch last year of two new private Arabic-language dailies, *Al-Misri Al-Youm* and *Nahdet Misr*, both of which take editorial positions distinct from those of the government press.

While profit motives generally don't drive the state press, newspapers and magazines compete with each other for readership and advertising revenue. Private publications – of which the minority are locally licensed – take revenue more seriously. But even then, some magazines are set up for self-promotion by leading businessmen or, as in the case of the recently-launched *Nahdet Misr*, to represent a political trend without being tied to a political party.

As for the Internet, this mode of communication has become increasingly accessible over the course of the last five years, but the number of citizens online is still relatively miniscule, estimated at some 4 percent of the population (although accurate numbers,

like most statistics in Egypt, are notoriously difficult to verify). The government, meanwhile, in line with its recent tilt towards “modernization,” economic integration and foreign investment, has aggressively promoted Internet use, first with the launch of the “Free Internet” Initiative in 2001, then, more recently, with an assertive ADSL-line campaign.

The country’s ISPs, meanwhile, have – after a number of recent local acquisitions – fallen into the hands of four main providers, the biggest of which, Linkdotnet, is part of the Sawiris business empire, which also controls one of Egypt’s two mobile-phone networks. While the government repeatedly claims that it doesn’t censor or block objectionable content on the Internet, there have been cases of harassment and closure of websites originating in Egypt (*see below*).

### **General Conditions**

Egypt has done a relatively good job combating illiteracy over the course of the last half-century, bringing the number of its citizens who can both read and write from 12.5 percent in 1960 to more than half the population currently.

Despite these positive indications, though, Egypt’s explosive population growth (which rises by some 2 percent every year) tends to make illiteracy ever harder to confront. For example, while between 1980 and 1995, the adult the illiteracy rate declined from 60 percent to 50 percent, the total number of illiterate Egyptians grew from 16 million to 19 million over the same period nevertheless. According to the 2004 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report, illiteracy “has been the second reason, after population growth, for Egypt’s lagging behind in human development on the international level.”

Currently, the adult literacy rate, which includes all citizens from the age of 15 and up, stands at 55.6 percent, according to the UNDP. According to the latest figures from the US Department of State, the number stands at 57 percent.

This general figure can, however, be broken down further, given the roles traditionally assigned to two of the country’s largest demographics: women, and rural families reliant on time-consuming agricultural labor for employment.

According to the UNDP, women comprise some two thirds of the Arab world’s illiterate people. This discrepancy is no different in Egypt, where the illiteracy rate is much higher for women than for men. Needless to say, much of this can be attributed to the roles traditionally assigned to women in Arab or Muslim societies, where, in conservative households, women are expected to marry, bear children and keep the home. The gender discrepancy is wider in the rural provinces of southern, or Upper, Egypt, which are generally much more conservative than the urban centers of Cairo and Alexandria.

In 2002, adult illiteracy was an average of 40.3 percent in the governorates of rural Upper Egypt, and only 31.4 percent in the governorates of the Lower Egyptian Delta. In the provinces of the Cairo governorate, meanwhile, percentages were all in the 90s.

The generally poor condition of the state-run education system is another obstacle to universal literacy. Despite the educational revolution engineered by Mohammed Ali Pasha in the nineteenth century, Egyptian educational standards have dropped dramatically since. The state – struggling to transform its unwieldy, command economy into a globalized, private sector-driven one, while attempting to accommodate some 600,000 additions to the labor market annually – has strained budgets to the breaking point. This has inevitably been reflected in the generally shoddy nature of state education, although, again, quality varies widely between various governorates.

The generally very high pupil-teacher ratio in state schools is an oft-quoted indicator. Elementary school classes in most non-urban governorates, for example, usually have more than 40 students per teacher. The UNDP attributes to this to the fact that there is an insufficient number of school buildings for the number of eligible pupils. While private schools tend to have better student-teacher ratios, these generally remain out of the reach of the average citizen, who can't afford the much higher tuition.

## **Local media**

There are a large number of local radio and television stations, as well as numerous newspapers available to the Egyptian consumer.

Today, eight radio-broadcasting networks, all run by the ERTU, transmit the Egyptian Radio Service, which is broken down into a multiplicity of different stations. The eight networks include: a "Public Programs" network; a "Holy Koran" network; a "Middle East" network; a "Youth & Sports" network; a "Voice of the Arabs" network (which comprises three stations); a "Localities" network (11 radio stations); a "Culture" network (three stations); and an "Oriented Radio Stations" network (45 stations). The state also boasts eight terrestrial, free-to-air TV channels, broadcast from the countries principle *muhafizat*, or governorates, including three Cairo-based stations, an Alexandria-based station, and four others for other major governorates.

The launch of Egypt's two NileSat communications satellites brought a number of additional government free-to-air stations, oriented towards different themes, like sports and religion. The NileSat launches, however, as mentioned above, also dramatically increased the number of regional and international stations available to those Egyptian households with satellite dishes, estimated to at 10 percent of all households country wide.

Egypt, with its long affiliation with the printing press and political broadsheets, also boasts an enormous number of printed, Arabic-language periodicals. These are

dominated by the state's three flagship dailies – *Al-Ahram*; *Al-Akhbar*; *Al-Gomhouriya* – but also include a host of other, smaller state-run publications and a substantial number of opposition and independent publications, the most prominent of which are *Al-Wafd* (the only opposition daily, put out by the political party of the same name); *Al-Arabi Al-Nassiri* (Nasserist Party weekly); *Al-Ahali* (the leftist Tagammua Party weekly); the secularist *Al-Sout Al-Umma*; along with a handful of others.

The last year has also seen the introduction of a couple of new private dailies, including *Nahdet Misr* and *Al-Masri Al-Youm*.

All state-run television, radio channels and broadsheets, meanwhile, are de facto mouthpieces for the long-ruling NDP party. These include the above-mentioned “big three” state dailies, along with a number of weeklies and other periodicals, and the ERTU-dominated television and radio stations.

It should be borne in mind, however, that, while Article 209 of the constitution states that, “The freedom of legal persons, public or private, and political parties to publish or own newspapers is safeguarded in accordance with the law,” this stipulation is negated by the fact that the establishment of new political parties has long been considered nigh impossible. (It should be added, however, that there are occasional exceptions to this rule. One example is the liberal Al-Ghad Party, which this year – despite expectations – was granted a license confirming it as a legitimate political party.)

In addition, a number of independent local Internet newspapers exist, covering a large variety of local issues. These include websites devoted to news, entertainment and religious issues. Such local websites, however, will avoid agitating the government – i.e., steer clear of the “red lines” – as they are still susceptible to harassment, bureaucratic or otherwise.

While Egypt does not have an official policy of “censoring” the Internet, it would appear that, at least on some occasions, state authorities have taken steps to block or disrupt certain websites, particularly those – like the Muslim Brotherhood website – that tend to be highly critical of the government. In a few isolated instances, local sites perceived as being pornographic have also been shut down (*see blow*).

As was stated above, the introduction of the Internet has brought a range of new information outlets available to the small segment of the population that has access to the World Wide Web. Foreign news sites – many of which, like the BBC, now offer Arabic-language news – provide alternate sources of news reporting. Locally based Internet sites, however, susceptible to government intimidation, must conscientiously avoid material which could be perceived as overly critical of the government or inflammatory.

Meanwhile, technically, the country's Internet infrastructure – especially after the recently appointment of a technocrat as prime minister – continues to improve. While Internet penetration rates remain modest, the government has invested much time and

money promoting the medium, and connectivity has become increasingly viable for average citizens. The average monthly cost of an ADSL connection, for example, is now LE 150, or about \$22 – do-able for most urban professionals, but hardly an option for the majority of the rural poor.

Government figures put the number of Internet users in Egypt at about three million (compared to only 300,000 four years ago), representing approximately 4 percent of the population. As for the percentages of the population with access to general media outlets, the following can be said:

- Nearly all households have radios – there are an estimated 14 million radio sets in a country of 70 million.
- Nearly all households have access to television, which has an estimated 96-percent penetration rate.
- Satellite penetration in Egypt currently stands at around 10 percent of households nationwide.
- Newspaper readership among literate Egyptians is low, with regular readers constituting less than 20 percent of the adult population.
- Government figures put the number of Internet users at about three million, representing approximately 4 percent of the population.

While Egypt suffers from a high illiteracy rate, the ubiquity of TVs and radios (almost every household in Egypt has at least a radio) more than offsets the disadvantage in terms of media penetration. The Internet, which offers the most diverse spectrum of opinion – even in Arabic – is also used very often, but only by the approximately 4 percent of the population that have access.

Ultimately, Egypt continues to be a word-of-mouth culture. Verbal exchange probably still accounts for the vast majority of information transfer. This proclivity has been aided by the relatively recent introduction of new modes of local communication, such as email; mobile phones; SMS messaging; etc.

## **Public opinion**

The mass media has a significant influence on the formation of political opinion. Given Egypt's long experience with mass media (relative to other countries of the region), along with the deep penetration of almost all forms of mass communication, it comes as little surprise that radio, television and newspapers inform the vast bulk of the public, and have a significant influence on the direction of public opinion. While alternative sources of information (via satellite and Internet) have become increasingly accessible, the vast majority of Egyptian citizens still get their news from state information organs.



The state's long acquaintance with – and jealous guardianship of – the national communications apparatus has made it adept at steering popular perceptions, primarily vis-à-vis domestic issues, to its own advantage. Obvious examples of this include ambiguous reporting or news blackouts about critical issues of national security, as happened two times recently when questions about the president's health – bearing in mind that Hosni Mubarak has never named a successor – arose. Another recent example of this was state media coverage of the October terrorist attacks by unknown assailants on a number of tourist spots, frequented by Israelis, in the Sinai Peninsula.

Other obvious omissions, like government interference in local elections (*see below*), are also common.

Coverage of Israel, particularly of its stepped-up aggression against the Palestinian populace, is also subject to a certain amount of manipulation, given the impact of the Palestinian issue on popular emotion. State media will occasionally play down Israeli aggression, especially when the aggression is happening on Egypt's borders, as was the case recently in Rafah.

State media has also been employed to play up the political prospects of President Mubarak's son, Gamal, currently the head of the NDP's powerful Policies Secretariat and an oft-mentioned potential successor to the presidency. Over the course of the last year, state coverage of most political events and meetings will prominently feature Gamal, portraying him as a powerful and respected member of the ruling clique.

It must be added, however, that the state has been losing its grip on viewership, with the advent of satellite TV and, to a lesser extent, the Internet.

### **State media**

As mentioned above, all local television stations, the vast majority of local radio stations, and a large proportion of Egypt's newspapers are state-owned.

As stipulated in the Constitution, the press is meant to be "a popular, independent authority," which "...shall exercise its vocation freely and independently in the service of society through all the means of expression." In practice, though, the longstanding domination of the government by the NDP – and by virtue of the fact that practically all national media organs come under the exclusive purview of the state – has led to a situation where news coverage in state papers is inevitably pro-NDP.

Officially, all leading positions at state-owned newspapers (particularly the big three dailies) and media authorities (particularly the television and radio authorities) are appointed by the ministry of information. Practically speaking, though, no such appointments can be made without the tacit endorsement of the president.

Currently, the state controls the vast bulk of published and broadcast opinion. This ratio is, however, quickly tilting towards equilibrium, as satellite television becomes available to larger and larger numbers of citizens. As has been mentioned above, the

introduction of regional competitors – freely available via satellite dish – has dramatically affected the equation. Larger and larger numbers of Egyptians are getting their news from Gulf-based or Lebanon-based news stations, which are perceived as offering more objective news coverage.

It should be added, however, that this phenomenon has forced Cairo to liberalize its news coverage – incrementally, at least. The notion that “They’ll get it anyway from Jezeera” has, at least in some cases, persuaded the state media to report events that would have otherwise gone uncovered.

The coverage of state-owned media tends to be very friendly towards the government, although there is a discernable difference when it comes to treatment of the government and its policies in the three different branches of media.

Relative to broadcast media (television and radio), the press (even the state press) is considerably more liberal in its outlook. In the big state newspapers, and in the handful of opposition ones, a certain degree of criticism of the government is allowed. Certain well-known editorialists (who presumably know just how far they can go) will often offer light to moderate disapproval of certain state policies. The president, personally, of course, is never – under any circumstances – the subject of criticism.

The broadcast media is much more conservative. Criticism of the government and its policies is rarely seen or heard. Presumably, the fact that so much more of the population relies on radio and television for their news rather than on newspapers (given the high illiteracy rate) has emboldened the state to allow greater scope for criticism in the latter than in the former.

It should also be added that there is a notable difference between local news coverage in English and in Arabic, with news in the former tending to be more liberal. The state-run, English-language *Al-Ahram Weekly*, for example, is allowed notably greater leeway vis-à-vis coverage of traditionally touchy subjects, like government election-rigging and the presidential succession. The reasons for this are mostly demographic, as the state recognizes that only a very small percentage of the local population is literate in English, and, therefore, readership will remain limited.

### **Transparency**

The government has made serious attempts to become more transparent over the last five years, largely as a result of external pressures to liberalize from the US, the EU and, to large degree, foreign investors. Presidential speeches and press conferences are almost always broadcast or carried in newspapers, while cabinet ministers – especially the recently appointed raft of reformers holding economy portfolios – are regular speakers at numerous events, which are usually covered by the local press.

In another indication of Cairo’s efforts to at least appear more transparent, the government recently appointed a presidential spokesman, Maged Abdel-Fatah, who is

often seen on state television answering journalists' questions from behind a podium, along the same lines as US presidential spokespeople. The questions posed at these events are, however, no doubt filtered for approval.

State television also regularly broadcasts parliamentary sessions, where viewers can watch members of the Peoples' Assembly – the vast majority of which are NDP representatives – hash out legislative issues.

All journalists, though, are not given equal access to press conferences. Generally, journalists must get permission to cover senior-level press events with the information ministry's press center. However, in the case that a journalist doesn't have accreditation with a reputable media organization, or if he/she represents a media outlet that has written over-critically about Cairo in the past, permission could be delayed until the event has passed.

Particular writers, known for writing over-critically, will be blacklisted from events, and are often denied official press cards, certifying their profession as journalists. This is much more common, of course, with local journalists than with foreign ones.

While journalists will never be told "no" outright, the press center is expert in manufacturing bureaucratic delays. This generally applies only to local or less prominent foreign agencies – major media organizations and publications are seldom given this treatment, as Cairo recognizes the damage such a policy would have on its reputation.

Major press conferences at the presidential or ministerial level, meanwhile, are usually broadcast by one or more of the state television networks. While state media has enjoyed a monopoly on all press conference broadcasts, this has begun to change slightly. At the last annual party congress held by the ruling NDP, non-state media, including foreign regional networks, were permitted to broadcast segments of the event.

### **The legal environment**

Technically, freedom of opinion is explicitly defined as a right due to all citizens. Article 47 of the Egyptian constitution reads: "Freedom of opinion is guaranteed. Every individual has the right to express his opinion and to publicize it verbally or in writing or by photography or by other means within the limits of the law."

While freedom of opinion is nowhere restricted by any kind of subsequent amendment, however, it can, in theory, be challenged within the context of the Emergency Law, which has remained in effect ever since the 1980 assassination of President Anwar Sadat. The emergency law stipulates that, given the "state of emergency," the state can essentially override anything set down in the Constitution if it involves a threat – real or perceived – to national security.

The following article, number 48, guarantees the “Freedom of press, printing, publication and mass media.” It goes on to state that, “Censorship of newspapers is forbidden as well as notifying, suspending or canceling them by administrative methods.” However, this is immediately followed by an important qualifier: “In a state of emergency,” the document reads, “or in time of war, limited censorship may be imposed on newspapers, publications and mass media in matters related to public safety or national security in accordance with the law.”

The Emergency Law, in a word, has long since served as a handy excuse to stifle opposition opinion in the media, as it essentially allows the executive to do virtually anything it wants – without accountability to any other branch of the government. Ostensibly, the law is aimed at threats to national security, but such a general, unspecific mandate can be made to fit any circumstance. News reports about, say, Muslim-Coptic friction could be banned, theoretically, because such reports could potentially trigger wider interdenominational conflict – which itself could be perceived as a “threat to national security.”

Egypt’s defamation laws, meanwhile, which include prison sentences in the case of offenses, are a source of longstanding controversy between the government and the journalists’ syndicate. Given the government’s tight control of the broadcast media, defamation, or libel cases, are the most common.

In June 1995, the People’s Assembly passed a press law that increased punishment in libel cases from two to five years’ imprisonment. Following stiff opposition from the Press Syndicate, the law was repealed and another press law was passed in 1996, but it too provided for the imprisonment of journalists for publication offences, albeit for a shorter duration. Under this law, libel is punishable by a maximum of one year imprisonment and/or a fine ranging between LE 1,000 and LE 5,000. If the target of the offence is a public official, however, the maximum penalty is two years in jail and/or a fine ranging between LE 5,000 and LE 20,000.

In the late 1990’s there were several high-profile libel cases, the most prominent featuring three journalists from the now-defunct Islamist-oriented labor party mouthpiece *Al-Shaab*, who were accused of libeling then Agriculture Minister Youssef Wali. All of them received two-year prison sentences and LE 20,000 fines.

The Press Syndicate strongly opposes the law, and continues to try and reverse it, calling on the government to replace imprisonment provisions with fines only. In a 1999 editorial in government-run *Al-Ahram Weekly*, even the state-appointed editor-in-chief, Ibrahim Nafie, said: “The demand to cancel the imprisonment penalties for publication offences tops the demands of Egyptian journalists.”

In February, President Mubarak informed the Press Syndicate that imprisonment sentences for publication offences would be abolished. Shortly afterwards, however, a

journalist at the independent weekly *Al-Osbou'*, was sentenced to the maximum penalty of two years in prison, also for libeling the agriculture minister.

Later, representatives of the Press Syndicate and government representatives reached an agreement on the drafting of a new press law to be submitted to parliament in the current session. High-ranking officials have promised that the draft law would be both in accordance with journalists' requests, and similar to legislation in other countries, with jail terms being replaced with hefty financial fines for offending publications. Some observers, however, express doubts that jail terms for press offenses will ever be eliminated altogether.

The implementation of general media coverage is also set down in the constitution. Article 207, under the "New Provision" (amended in 1980), which, in its second chapter, deals with the Press Authority, states: "The press shall exercise its vocation freely and independently in the service of society through all the means of expression. It shall thus interpret the trend of public opinion while contributing to its information and orientation within the framework of the basic components of society, the safeguard of liberties, rights and public duties and the respect of the sanctity of the private lives of citizens, as stipulated in the Constitution and defined by law."

As was mentioned above, however, the emergency law ostensibly overrides elements of the Constitution.

### **Censorship**

As seen in the above-referenced article 48, censorship through state authorities is, in a state of emergency, permitted, with "limited censorship" being imposed on mass media "in matters related to public safety or national security in accordance with the law." Obviously, the term "limited" could be applied to any circumstance, while "matters related to public safety or national security" could be applied to almost anything.

In some cases, coverage of certain groups – or issues associated with those groups – is restricted. As was mentioned above, coverage of potentially divisive religious issues is forbidden, and at least one newspaper was closed down within the last five years because it ran an article implicating a Coptic priest in forbidden sex acts. This was seen as incitement against the country's large Coptic community, estimated at some 20 percent of the population (although this figure might be higher.) Essentially, Cairo knows that Muslim-Christian fighting would inevitably lead to foreign – probably US – intervention, a circumstance it wants to avoid at all costs.

Additionally, the state will not allow a forum for its traditional enemies, the Islamists, whose ultimate goal is the foundation of an Islamic Republic. More recently, the ranks of the anti-Israel/anti-US/anti-globalization activists – which are quickly coalescing in the post-9/11 order – have also been barred from opinion-making. This is a result of the dramatic demonstration-riots of the spring of last year, when anti-war sentiment very

quickly became anti-regime sentiment: hundreds were arrested and the state has brooked little popular dissent since.

Recently, as well, the Egyptian media – both public and private – has come under strong pressure from the US to refrain from publishing material, including newspaper editorials, deemed “anti-Semitic.” This was seen most recently when the US embassy demanded a printed apology from the state-run *Al-Liwaa* newspaper, which had run a story perceived as offensive to Jews.

No particular people, groups or organizations are excluded by law from working as journalists, but certain groups are given less opportunity to air their complaints via local media. These groups are generally determined by their religious affiliations, and include Egypt’s substantial Christian population, the tiny Bohari community, and, of course, extremist Muslim groups.

One of the things the state is most sensitive to is the potential for inter-religious strife, particularly between Christians and Muslims. For that reason, interdenominational frictions are quickly dealt with by the authorities – and played down in the state media. This has to do with the state’s longstanding fear of foreign intervention, with the “protection” of a given religious minority as a pretext. The government is particularly fearful of such an outcome in light of recent instances of foreign intervention elsewhere in the region, or what could happen in Sudan’s Darfur region.

For this reason, while minorities aren’t officially banned from the journalistic profession, writing on sectarian issues remains sensitive.

In most cases, media reports must be examined and approved by state authorities before publication, except in the case of self-censoring publications (*see below*). The government employs official censors whose job it is to peruse all printed materials registered abroad before they are printed locally. Content deemed offensive to the state or to religious sensibilities is removed.

While news coverage has liberalized incrementally in the past few years for the reasons mentioned above, though, the legal implementation of media coverage – while receiving plenty of attention, particularly from the Journalists’ Syndicate – hasn’t seen any de facto improvement.

The events of 9/11, meanwhile, totally changed the rules of engagement for Egypt as well as the United States. While no new anti-terror legislation was passed restricting the freedom of media coverage, none was really necessary, as the emergency law was already in place (which, in turn, allows the state “limited censorship,” as mentioned above).

The one thing 9/11 did do is push the cancellation of the emergency law – which some observers had thought was imminent – into the distant future. Since 9/11, in which several Egyptians allegedly participated, the state has been in no mood to revoke the state of emergency. The subsequent rise in regional terrorism (in Saudi Arabia, Yemen,

Morocco, Turkey, and even Syria), along with the deteriorating circumstances in both the occupied Palestinian territories and Iraq, has made any de facto lifting of the Emergency Law nigh inconceivable at the current juncture.

Essentially, all state-run media practices self-censorship, as the editorial staffs of these institutions are well-versed in what can and cannot be covered. Foreign publications printed in Egypt, on the contrary, must be shown to state censors before printing and local distribution.

Self censorship occurs in all segments of the state media, as well as in certain state-friendly publications, like those of the American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt. Generally, the “red lines” to be avoided in self-censoring publications are criticisms directed at the person of the president and his immediate family; and divisive religious issues. Dangerous areas also include: Egyptian cooperation with Israel, the issue of the presidential succession and political Islamism.

### **Slight improvement**

Within the last five years, it’s safe to say that free media coverage has improved, albeit slightly. This slight improvement can be attributed to two things. Firstly, pressure for democratic reform and greater government transparency – which tangentially includes improved press freedoms – has come both from home and abroad. This includes the Journalists’ Syndicate’s push for a better legal environment, as well as pressure – namely from the US and the EU – to liberalize politically.

Pressure to reform the mass media in particular – especially newspapers – has come mainly from Washington, with the US Ambassador in Cairo regularly criticizing local journalism for its lack of accuracy and objectivity, mainly in its coverage of US and Israeli policy. Again, Washington also tends to come down hard on anything broadcast or printed by the state media that could be construed as “anti-Semitic.” This could be seen in the row between Cairo and Washington caused by the airing two years ago of the Ramadan serial “Faris Bela Gowaad,” which was accused of “anti-Semitism” because of references made to the controversial “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” document. Secondly, the introduction of regional satellite TV stations – and, to a lesser extent, the Internet – to a substantial number of Egyptian homes has forced local media to make concessions in terms of what it does and doesn’t cover. Since citizens will see the news on Al-Jazeera, or on the BBC’s Arabic-language website, the thinking goes, state media might as well run it – if they don’t, they’ll just lose more credibility.

For these reasons – mostly the second – some aspects of Egyptian media have progressed, albeit slightly, in terms of reporting. One example of this was the daring coverage of traditionally taboo topics of Dreem TV, mentioned earlier. Still, the traditional red lines remain, well known to all journalists: contentious religious issues and the person of the president and his immediate family.

### **Red lines and repression**

In terms of local broadcast media, this is – with the exception of two music-oriented radio stations – entirely controlled by the state, and is, therefore, self-censored. Printed publications registered abroad, however, must allow government censors to check content before printing (which is done locally) and distribution.

State censorship falls into two main categories: the morally offensive and the political.

In the first case, the state will censor any film or pictures that would be viewed as offensive to traditional Muslim sensibilities. This is most often seen in Hollywood movies or foreign TV serials, when scenes with explicit sex or nudity end up on the cutting-room floor. Such moves largely represent an attempt by the state to please the powerful conservative Muslim demographic, which it hopes not to antagonize.

In terms of the political, censorship is also applied to these existence of certain religious groups. While Egypt has a small Bohari population, estimated at less than one million, the existence of this tiny community is regularly played down in the media, largely because the Boharis don't fit into the conservative Egyptian worldview, which sees only Judaism, Christianity and Islam as legitimate religions. The Boharis, by contrast, are an obscure branch of Shia Islam.

There is also a policy of downplaying the notion that Coptic Christians are officially discriminated against. While there are some elements of truth to this assertion, the government is highly sensitive to foreign criticism in this regard, and has therefore made a concerted effort to eliminate any alleged discrimination against the Coptic minority. However, as stated above, contentious religious issues are conscientiously avoided in the media.

While representatives of such groups aren't prevented by law from working as journalists, they would most probably encounter difficulties in this field, like bureaucratic vacillation.

If journalists or media organizations cross any red lines, they face a number of legal (and possibly extra-legal) consequences. If his/her reporting could be construed as an attack on an official figure, he/she could, as mentioned above, face fines of up to LE 20,000 (a bit more than \$3,000); prison sentences of up to two years; closure of the publication (as was the case with Al-Shaab); and unofficial bureaucratic harassment and intimidation.

### **Licensing, press accreditation and monopoly**

TV stations, radio stations and newspapers must be licensed by the state before publication or broadcast. Obtaining such licenses is, however, extremely difficult. For businessmen and companies, the likelihood of an Egyptian publication license is minuscule, as the authorities make the bureaucracy involved untenable. Some recent exceptions to the rule have been two music-based FM stations, and two Arabic-



language newspapers, both mentioned above. The authorities responsible for licensing new media organizations – including television, radio and newspapers – are entirely controlled by the ruling NDP.

Official press cards are given to journalists – local and foreign – by the information ministry’s press center, if the applicant works as a journalist for a state media organ or if he/she is the employee of a known and approved media service. Press cards gain the holder entrance to most ministerial-level press conferences, but a special “presidential card” is needed to attend events which the president will attend.

The activity of journalists – local and foreign – is controlled by this system of press cards. These will occasionally be refused journalists if they aren’t accredited with reputable news institutions or if they are deemed hostile to the state (i.e., they have written something in the past that could be seen as reflecting negatively on the regime). Generally, journalists with press accreditation (i.e., approved by the press center) can attend public meetings of the government and parliament. In the case of high-level meetings, at, for example, the ministerial level, special arrangements may have to be made in advance with the press center.

While the formation of private media monopolies is almost impossible, it is not, technically, prohibited by law.

Private media cartels generally don’t exist, as the state tends to keep the nation’s media organs under its control. There is one exception to this, though: the fledgling media group of the entrepreneurial Adeb family, which owns private business daily *Al-Alam Al-Youm* and also holds significant stake in the two new FM radio stations. Both of these, however, have little to do with formation of public political opinion, with the first concentrating entirely on business issues and the second focusing entirely on music and entertainment. The only thing that could properly be called a media monopoly is that of the state over government-run media organs.

The political position of media monopolies, if they were ever to become more formidable, would most likely be pro-business. This is the only political stance that would be tolerated by the current regime, which is itself quite pro-business/foreign investment.

While a long-awaited draft “anti-monopoly law” continues to await passage in parliament, the issue continues to be a contentious one, and is seen as a threat by certain entrenched business interests. Such a law, however, if it’s ever passed, would be aimed more at real, industrial monopolies, like private-sector steel companies, rather than (non-existent) private media monopolies.

### **Political and demographic conditions**

There are certain demographic groups that have traditionally been excluded, to varying degrees, from having their issues covered in the mainstream local media. Such groups can be broken down into two general categories: religious and demographic.

The former include the Coptic Christians, who form a substantial minority of the national population (the government puts the figure at 10 to 20 percent, although this is generally thought to be too low), and have regularly complained that Christian affairs go relatively uncovered by government media. Additionally, as was mentioned above, Egypt's tiny Bohari population isn't given any media coverage.

It should also be mentioned that, in terms of newspapers, readership is thought to be heavily concentrated in the capital, reflecting an inherent bias in the media. The publishing houses for the three major daily newspapers – which also account for a large proportion of secondary publications – are located within one square kilometer of each other in the capital.

All printing is done in Cairo, with distribution to the rest of the country on a nightly basis by rail and bus or truck. More importantly, though, coverage is slanted towards issues relating to the central government or the country as a whole, with an accompanying Cairo-oriented slant in the perspective. There is hardly any such thing as a local newspaper, even in Alexandria, with a population of nearly 5 million, including affluent and well-educated segments.

As one former *Al-Ahram* journalist explained, the effect is to alienate large numbers of potential readers. Even southern cities such as Luxor and Aswan, though suffering from high illiteracy rates, would also have hundreds of thousands of potential readers who might be tempted to buy newspapers that actually addressed issues of local concern. However, no such newspapers exist.

### **State repression**

Today, the state has backed off from threatening or intimidating journalists – at least compared to the 1970s. Journalists are still occasionally subject to harassment by the state, although this is generally only seen when the government is on the defensive, as during parliamentary elections, for example. Generally, the only kind of state repressions contrary to the law that journalists or media companies might face would be low-intensity bureaucratic impediments or mild harassment.

While there have been instances of physical intimidation, this is much less common. For example, during the 2000 parliamentary elections, where a number of extreme voting irregularities occurred, there were numerous reports of attacks by security forces and plainclothes assailants on photographers, reporters and correspondents. In an example of the judiciary's helplessness in the face of state repression, the Ministry of Interior

went ahead with elections despite a number of rulings handed down by administrative courts regarding the irregularities.

More recently, in early November, the chief editor of Nasserist Party mouthpiece *Al-Arabi* was kidnapped and beaten. Although the identity of the culprits is unknown, the victim officially accused the Interior Minister in a complaint sent to the prosecutor-general. He linked the incident to a recent article in the newspaper alleging that the real culprits of the Taba attacks were not the ones arrested and identified by the Interior Ministry.

While the Press Syndicate condemned the attack on the editor (“This is a horrific and telling example of how some powers have exceeded all considerations and nationally-drawn limits...”), few observers expect the culprits – if they were, in fact, state agents – to face any legal punishment. This incident was, however, the exception rather than the rule.

The threat of state repression hasn’t changed over the last five years. Despite pressures – both internal and external – to reform, it is understood that, if the state feels threatened, it will not refrain from using extra-legal forms of repression and harassment.

This situation is not expected to improve in the short term, especially vis-à-vis Islamist dissent, as the US “War on Terrorism” has strengthened the hand of the government in its treatment of the Islamist opposition.

In the case of state repression, journalists can appeal to the Journalists’ Syndicate, which is quite activist, and will usually take up the cause of journalists suffering from manifestations of state repression. The power of the syndicate, however, is extremely limited vis-à-vis the state. The libel law is a good case in point: despite ten years of official disapproval of the current law (which includes prison sentences), the government has yet to revise the harsh legislation.

Generally, higher courts are helpless to stop state-instigated repressions, as the judicial branch of the government – like the legislative one – is ultimately controlled by the ruling party.

### **Internet access**

Egypt – unlike Saudi Arabia – does not have an official policy of blocking access to objectionable websites. However, there have been certain instances of state interference since the introduction of the Internet some five years ago.

A recent example of such interference was the blockage of the outlawed but tolerated Muslim Brotherhood's official website, which, in early September, suddenly became inaccessible in Egypt. While both the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology insisted they had nothing to do with the matter, many observers suspected that the government was, in fact, preventing local

access. According to some sources, the site had also become inaccessible to users in Saudi Arabia two months earlier.

According to brotherhood sources, this wasn't the first time the government had tampered with the group's online presence. In May, the site manager was arrested on charges of posting news that aimed to "incite the public against the government." The site's premises were also shut down at around the same time. The fact that the manager was released a few days later, some observers opined, suggests that the government's objective had merely been one of intimidation.

The authorities have made no public statement about whether or not the site has been censored, but several other Islamic websites also became inaccessible from Egypt at about the same time. Another local website, featuring criticisms of the government and advocating the implementation of Islamic law, was also reportedly shut down in mid 2004.

Another site, shaab.com, the online magazine of the Islamist-oriented Labor Party, was also allegedly subjected to government filtering. Although the printed version of *Al-Shaab* newspaper was shut down by the government several years ago, the website had continued to run until recently.

The government has also, in a few cases, closed down local sites deemed pornographic or "offensive to religious sensibilities."

Some observers suspect the government of using its technical control over Egypt's four main backbone ISPs to make sites inaccessible to Egyptian web surfers. Although the government consistently denies that it has any kind of Internet monitoring unit, like the governments of Saudi Arabia and China, IT experts say such filtering would be technically possible, since the majority of Egypt's Internet traffic flows into the country from one primary subterranean cable that could, theoretically, be accessed by the state.

### **Economic pressures**

Government influence on local private media institutions is done more with stick than with carrot. While the state doesn't subsidize private media by way of advertising revenue (Cairo has little cash to spare these days), it does use the powerful position of its print-media infrastructure to keep private media in line. This generally applies only to print media, as there is little private-sector radio and television (with the exception of those mentioned above).

For example, the state – which handles the majority of newspaper printing and distribution – can subtly threaten publishers with bureaucratic delays or unexpected tax increases for printing/distribution services if a private publication strays too far from the accepted guidelines of what can and cannot be published.

The subsistence of media with regard to the whole private media market is, however, as stated above, negligible.

One of the major economic disadvantages faced by media houses these days is also due to the recent devaluation of the Egyptian pound, which led to a wave of inflation, especially for imported items, like machinery and – in many cases – paper. The local printing industry is a glaring example. According to industry sources, between 600 and 700 print houses – representing 15 percent of the over 4,000 registered print houses – were forced to close down in the four months following last year's currency devaluation.

The local printing industry imports most of the raw materials and machinery used in paper manufacture from Europe. As the pound lost value to the dollar, importers began paying more for imported paper. The average cost of a ton of paper jumped from £E 2,500 to £E 4,000 between February and May of 2003. Qena Newsprint Company, for example, saw its outstanding foreign currency-denominated debts increase by 20 percent following the devaluation.

### **Non-state repressions**

Journalists and media organizations have – in the past – been attacked by non-state religious groups for broadcasting or printing content considered offensive to Islam or contradictory to Islamist perspectives, but there have been no incidents of this kind since the 1990s.

The non-state repressions seen in the 1990s were primarily the work of anti-state Islamist groups, such as Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya and the Islamic Jihad, both of which were largely destroyed by the government eight years ago, after the country was rattled by violent Islamist insurgency. The remnants of the two groups made a widely publicized peace with the government in 1998, and have been completely inactive since then.

In the past, the kind of topics that drew non-state repressions were generally anything that was perceived as being anti-Islamic or in support of normalization with Israel.

Now, though, there are almost never any non-state repressions against journalists or media organizations.

State authorities prosecute attacks against journalists, meanwhile, if it is politically expedient. If the attacks in question were instigated by the state, there is little chance of prosecution (*see above*). If they were perpetrated by anti-state groups, the culprits are persecuted to the full extent of the law.

In 1999, for example, a state-security emergency court sentenced two Islamic militants to life imprisonment after convicting them of leading an illegal group, *Al-Najoun min Al-Nar*, which made an assassination attempt on the incumbent head of the Press Syndicate for his liberal views.

In terms of non-state repression, there has been a strong improvement over the course of the last ten years. Despite rising discontent over aggressive US and Israeli policy in the region, there have been no Islamist-inspired attacks, on journalists or others, since the “Luxor Incident” of 1997.

The reason for the relative calm, after the Islamist insurgency of the 1990s, is generally attributed to two things: Firstly, the principle group in opposition to the government in the past, Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya, swore to forsake violence shortly after the 1997 incident. They appear to have remained inactive since then.

Secondly, after crushing the insurgency in the late 1990s, the state’s security apparatuses were boosted further after the 9/11 attacks in the US. Dissent in general effectively ended in March 2003, when an anti-war rally in Cairo got out of control and the regime itself quickly became the target of popular anger. Many demonstrators were arrested and allegedly beaten, and the security services have brooked no dissent since then.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

As has been mentioned above, the journalistic climate in Egypt, in terms of what subjects can and not be covered by the press, has improved slightly over the last five years. This improvement can be attributed both to pressure – domestic and foreign – to reform and to competition with alternative news sources provided by regional Arabic-language satellite stations and Arabic-language news-based websites on the Internet.

This improvement, however, has been modest, while further improvement is expected to be slow in coming – if it comes at all. Ultimately, one can say that local media is generally free but still suffers under major restrictions.

Most obviously, state monopolization and control of all domestic media organs is antithetical to the notion of free media coverage. As long as the government sets down specific “red lines” delineating the subjects that can’t be broached by the media, certain – highly relevant – topics will go uncovered.

Secondly, that the state is so sensitive to the religious sensibilities of the conservative Muslim demographic will also mean that news coverage of stories that could give an unflattering image to Islam will go unreported. The state will still go out of its way to avoid alienating this very formidable political bloc.

Thirdly, the journalistic environment in Egypt suffers badly from the influence of advertisers, who will often – successfully – try to influence the coverage of media outlets in return for advertising revenue. Locally, this phenomenon is rife; it is often implicitly understood that generous advertisers will receive positive coverage in whatever forum they advertise in.

Fourthly, because the government is such an avid monitor of what is being written or broadcast locally, many sources that would otherwise be quoted in the media are often afraid to go on record, fearing some measure of retaliation from the government if they were to say anything contrary to the state's wishes. This has the effect of making it harder for journalists to garner information for their articles, even if said articles are relatively innocuous or apolitical.

Finally, there is the long-held perception in Egypt that a career in journalism isn't necessarily a respectable profession; that journalists aren't necessarily responsible for fulfilling the function of a "fourth estate" in the western sense. In the state media, for example, journalists are perceived as government employees rather than reporters of news stories.

### **Summation**

Of course the authoritarianism of the state is the one overriding obstacle to free news coverage – this is undeniable. There are, however, some other factors as well.

In terms of religious sensibilities, I think this aspect of media manipulation is over-emphasized; this does not play as important a role in media control as some might contend. Looking at the landscape of Egyptian media over the course of the last five years, it is notable how much more – in terms of television content that could be seen as offensive to Islam, like overly suggestive music videos – is permitted now.

The quid pro quos that generally define the advertiser-journalist relationship, in my opinion, represent a much graver threat to free media coverage.

Additionally, the last two years have seen greater pressure from the US Embassy in Cairo to conform to certain parameters in Egyptian media coverage. This includes pressure to provide coverage of the US (and Israel) and its policies in a better light, and to avoid anything – editorials or otherwise – that could be deemed "anti-Semitic."