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Mass Media in the Arab World and Beyond – Politics and Ethics

Internationale Konferenz, 19. – 20. Februar 2005, Ramallah

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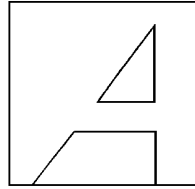
Dr. Canan Atilgan

**RESIDENT REPRESENTATIVE TO THE
PALESTINIAN AUTONOMOUS TERRITORIES**

Mass Media in the Arab World and Beyond – Politics and Ethics

*International Conference
February 19-20 2005, Grand Park Hotel, Ramallah
Goethe-Institut Ramallah and Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation*

Arab mass media have changed tremendously over the past decade. While the period before the advent of satellite broadcasting and the internet characterized by a blatant state control and censorship, the new technologies have opened a sphere for a new Arab debate on public affairs. However, authoritarian regimes in the region are trying to cope with the new situation, and they are not helpless. Even in times of so-called "globalization", the state still matters. Media policies in many Arab countries have been adapted to the media developments. New censorship laws introduced and regimes have extended their influence to the satellite realm. The global environment after 9/11 and the Iraq war 2003 has created new challenges to the Arab media. In such a complicated situation the international conference, "Mass Media in the Arab World and Beyond – Politics and Ethics" seeks new perspectives.

Is there a chance for the Arab media to contribute to political development in the Middle East? Arab satellite broadcasting, which has been applauded to have opened up a new public sphere conducive to democratization, has also come under severe critique after 9/11. Especially, the style of reporting on regional conflicts in Israel/Palestine and in Iraq is criticized as being one-sided and mobilizing for conflict, not for peace. While Al-Jazeera was one of the first channels to broadcast original Israeli voices to Arab audiences, the question remains justified whether Arab satellite has lived up to its promises. What is the future of Arab news networks and other Arab broadcasters beyond the current Al-Jazeera model especially after channels like the Saudi financed Al-Arabyia search for a reform of news reporting? What are the ethical challenges inherent in the current situation?

While because of Al-Jazeera's critique of many Arab governments, Arab television has been labelled by some observers as being a virtual Arab "political party", media can surely not compensate for the lack of civil society organization and the weakness of the existing opposition. The stagnation of the Oslo peace process seems to have influenced the Israeli and the Arab media. However, this raises the question of whether the media should play the role of mediating the conflict or reinforcing the existing political and psychological cleavages?

While worldwide attention is granted to a few Arab news networks, national and local media – TV, radio as well as the press – get out of focus. However, one must bear in mind that national television and other national media have bigger audiences than trans-national networks, although some pan-Arab satellites, like MBC or Al-Jazeera, have made strong inroads. For national mass media, globalization has only just begun. Arab governments have opened up new opportunities in the last decade that gave more room to private competition in the press as well as in the broadcasting sector. However, the legal situation is still characterized by flagrant insecurities for journalists and other media workers. The Arab world is still far behind the global trend for more freedom of opinion and heightened media freedom that has occurred over the past 25 years. Is the Arab Middle East a bulwark of authoritarianism, or is change for the better merely slower and not always easy to discern?

While pointing to deficits of Arab media is justified, change can only come about in the context of regional and global changes that seem direly needed. It is not only that Israeli and western media have to reflect their style of reporting on the Middle East and the Islamic world. The attacks of 9/11 and the much-contested Iraq war in 2003 have also reinforced the US administrations' broadcasting initiatives in the Arab world, and radio stations like Al-Sawa and TV channels as Al-Hurra were design to make inroads into Arab public opinion and improve the devastated image of the US in the region. While foreign broadcasting in the form of BBC World Service has attained great merits that are even acknowledged by critical observers in the Middle East, the US efforts represent a rollback to the propaganda approaches of the past. Most critics maintain that US foreign broadcasting is one-sided, pro-US foreign policy and pro-Israel, with no support at all for the democratic opposition in the Middle East. Is US foreign broadcasting helping to drive Arab media into the wrong direction of conflictual worldviews? On the other hand, is it a legitimate device of a democratic country like the US to promote its policies?

Fundamental issues of ethics are raised at this point. How can media ethics with its traditional concerns for concreteness and piecemeal approaches be related meaningfully to the momentous changes afoot in the Arab world? Are media councils or in-house controls (media ombudspersons) more suitable for the Arab media?

Another medium that has been highly debated is the internet. While the number of internet users in the Arab world is still very low, differences between various countries are observable. For example, Jordan has prided itself to host the longest street with internet cafés in the world (documented in the Guinness Book of Records). In general, young, middle-class Arabs line in front of internet cafés from Casablanca to Baghdad. For many Palestinian youths living under occupation the internet is often the only door to freedom and to the world. However, the question remains to what degree the internet is already a political tool. Has it improved political networks and enhanced the manoeuvrability of Arab civil society?

Abstracts

Naomi Sakr:

"Arab Satellite Television: Has it Lived up to the Promises?"

The early days of Arab satellite broadcasting prompted optimism about trans-national television's potential to unblock information and facilitate political change in the region. Ten years later, however, many viewers and media professionals were disappointed at a perceived lack of change and pessimistic about the future of the medium. This presentation, neither optimistic nor pessimistic, argues for a more complex account that pays attention to structural changes in the regional media landscape. It weighs evidence of an impasse in overall development of the satellite television sector against evidence of irreversible transitions in certain aspects.

Dana Suyyagh:

"Beyond Al-Jazeera: New Trend in Arab Television"

There is a new trend in Arab television coverage, one that, at first would make any journalist cringe, the commercial News Channel. The success of Al-Jazeera showed clearly that there is a market for news channels, and with the volatile situation in the region intensifying in recent years, people became increasingly glued to their TV sets to watch the news throughout the day, and advertisers started to approach various outlets to guarantee product placement in their primetime slots. Al-Arabyia, a pan Arab channel that launched shortly before the War on Iraq in 2003, is one such channel, owned by a group of investors, and trying to cover costs through advertisements. However, how do you maintain objectivity and journalistic excellence while looking out for the needs of advertisers? And how do you deal with political adverts without compromising the journalistic integrity of the channel?

Mohammad Daragma:

"The Coverage of Mass Media in the Arab World to the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict"

The confrontation between Palestinians and Israelis was a comprehensive one. It was between not only the occupation forces, their settlers' allies and the Palestinians but it was also between the Palestinian Media and the Israeli Media.
The Media should not have gone into this direction, it should be bias only to truth, it should have covered news in a decent, subject and neutral manner but that was not the case. From the first days of the confrontation both media, in Israel and Palestine, were bias to their nations whether they were right or wrong, exactly as it happened in U.S.

after September 11, 2001 when the slogan "Rally around the flag" appeared against the foreign enemy.

Waleed Omari:

"Political Conflicts in the Arab World and their coverage by the Mass Media"

Mohammed Dajani:

"Censorship and the Future of Media Freedom in the Arab World"

The Arab media follow both the "authoritarian" as well as the "social responsibility" models. Formal and informal relationships determine the interaction of politics and media both on the institution wide (macro) and interpersonal (micro) levels, including laws, censorship, sanctions, leaks, and social ties. One of the most significant developments is the decentralization of the media and the move toward more privatization.
Technological changes including the internet, audiocassettes, fax machines, printers, scanners, and photocopiers have had great effects on liberty of the media the media. However, there is a long way to go before the media can exercise much freedom in the Arab world.

Daoud Kuttab:

"Palestinian Media in the Abbas Era"

Fathi Natour:

"The Independent Visual Media Means in Palestine – Reality and Ambition"

In his paper, he discussed the difficulties, obstacles and the imposed regulations from the official Palestinian Authority that local media are facing especially the visual media. In addition, discussed the role of the visual media in developing the Palestinian society and ended by giving his recommendations.

Dr. Oliver Hahn:

"Modern Arab and Western Satellite Newscasters between Cultural Commitment and Propaganda Dialogue"

This is an analyses on the structural transformation in the global media market in the context of post-9/11 crisis communication. The so far leading Western broadcasters now

compete with a young generation of Arab Satellite Broadcasting (ASB) to provide information, especially about the Middle East. Arab TV channels such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabyia, and Abu Dhabi TV are considered by many Western news media to be reliable and credible sources. This fact suggests that inroads are being made into the global monopoly hitherto held by Western news organisations. The paper questions whether the new interdependencies between media occident and orient increase the quality of crisis communication. Applying anthropological conclusions on cross-cultural communication, the presentation also investigates the foundations for different conflict perspectives conveyed by both sides modern Arab and Western satellite newscasters against the backdrop of their own respective political and cultural baggage. Finally, the paper examines in how far this cultural commitment paves the way for governments to exploit media as instruments of public diplomacy within a Cold TV War.

Khalil Assali:

"US Foreign Broadcasting: Personal Experience"

Throughout my personal experience with the Voice of America and now with Radio Sawa, I believe that there are similar words the international mass media used to employ. However, the Palestinian/Israeli conflict has among others one character which is the rapid change in these common words.
I still do remember when I worked with Voice of America that the chief editor was always asking me to have a balance in my style of reporting. For example, when I have an Israeli guest in my report, I should have an equivalent Palestinian one. If the Israeli is an academic then the Palestinian should be an academic too. They told us to avoid phrases that could be interpreted in a different way and to remember if the story we are writing is important for the Arab audience.

Anthony Löwstedt:

"Rights and Duties of Journalists with Regard to Dignity, Death and Dying"

The bewildering ethical problems with regard to dignity, death and dying, in conflict zones and elsewhere, are tackled with an attempt to combine Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative as a universalist approach to media ethics, and Michael Kunczik's intercultural journalistic ethics. Without claiming precedence over objectivity, truth, fairness, and balance, I would like to introduce Kunczik's idea of journalists having the duty to report human rights violations, regardless of consequences, and complement it with duties to report decreasing cultural diversity and decreasing biodiversity regardless of consequences. Further, the minimum human rights package according to Peter Singer, the Australian philosopher famous for his right-to-death and animal rights campaigns, will be discussed. It consists of the right to life, the right to freedom from torture, and the right to freedom of movement. These rights could serve as the most basic rights along with freedom of expression for journalists in the Middle East.

Nibal Thawabteh:

"Media Ethics in the Middle East: Any Differences to the Rest of the World"

Dr. Mashour Abudaka:

"A Door to the World? The Role of the Internet in the Palestinian Occupied Territories"

The Internet use in the Palestinian Territories has reached 12% of all population 10 years olds and above, this translate roughly to 250,000 people are using the internet in Palestine 16.2% (40,000) of whom are using it to read newspapers and other political literature.
Has this matched with increase in the utilization of the internet for purposes to obtain or disseminates information? The Author will argue yes and no!
The Palestinians have been successful in telling the world about their predicament whether this was through the dissemination of information through the internet or through other types of media. However, this was not the case when it comes to local discussion or debate or the dissemination of internal Palestinian news or information; the self-censorships apparent in the writings to local newspapers have also prevailed throughout the Palestinian websites. Exceptions are observed, some websites, no one knows its originators are reporting internal political and economical problems.
This paper will also report the history of the internet development in Palestinian and the impact of the internet on local institution activities and the public in general.

Samer Sabri:

"The Internet as a Political Communication Instrument in the Arab World"

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Conference Program
Mass Media in the Arab World and Beyond – Politics and Ethics
19/02-20/02 in Ramallah

Saturday, 19/02/05 10 to 5 p.m.
Conference at the Grand Park Hotel

9:30	**Registration**	
10:00	**Opening**	**Nabil Amr**, Former Minister of Information and a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council **Daoud Kuttab**, Director of Modern Media Institute at Al-Quds University
Chair: Hani Al-Masri		
10:30-11:30	**Session 1:** **Arab Satellite Broadcasting and Political Development in the Arab World**	
Presentation	**Naomi Sakr**, Professor of Communication at Westminster University, London "Arab Satellite Television: Has It Lived up to its Promises?"	
Presentation	**Dana Suyyagh**, Senior Producer, Al-Arabyia, Dubai "Beyond Al-Jazeera: New Trend in Arab Television"	
11:30	Coffee Break	
11:45-12:45	**Session 2:** **Political Conflicts in the Arab World and their Coverage by Mass Media**	
Presentation	**Mohammad Daragma**, Correspondent to Associate Press (AP) "The Coverage of Mass Media in the Arab World to the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict"	
Presentation	**Waleed Omari**, Director of Al Jazeera office in Palestine. "Political Conflicts in the Arab World and their coverage by the Mass Media"	
12:45	Lunch buffet, Grand Park Hotel	
Chair: George Khleifi		
14:00-15:30	**Session 3:** **The Future of National and Local Mass Media in the Arab World**	
Presentation	**Mohammed Dajani**, Director of American Studies Institute, Al-Quds University "Censorship and the Future of Media Freedom in the Arab World"	
Presentation	Daoud Kuttab, **Director of Modern Media Institute, Al-Quds University** **"Palestinian Media in the Abbas Era"**	
Presentation	Fathi Natour, **Vice president of Ma'an Net Work and Manager of**	

	Farah TV Jenin **"The Independent Visual Media Means in Palestine – Reality and Ambition"**

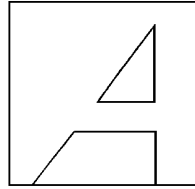|	
15:30	Coffee Break
15:45-17:15	**Session 4:** **The Global Media Landscape: Is it Conducive to Political Development in the Arab World**
Presentation	**Dr. Oliver Hahn**, postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Advanced Study in International Journalism at the *Journalism Institute of Dortmund University*, Germany "Modern Arab and Western Satellite Newscasters between Cultural Commitment and Propaganda Dialogue"
Presentation	**Khalil Assali**, Bureau Chief of Radio Sawa, Jerusalem "US Foreign Broadcasting: A Personal Experience"

Sunday, 20/02/05 10 to 2 p.m. **Conference at the Grand Park Hotel**

Chair: Khalil Shaheen	
9:30	**Registration**
10:00-11:00	**Session 1:** **Media and Ethics**
Presentation	**Anthony Löwstedt**, Media Consultant, The Palestinian Initiative for Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, *Miftah*, Jerusalem "Rights and Duties of Journalists with Regard to Dignity, Death and Dying"
Presentation	**Nibal Thawabteh**, Lecturer and TV Coordinator at the Media Institute in Birzeit University. "Media Ethics in the Middle East: Any Differences to the Rest of the World"
11:00	Coffee Break
11:15-12:15	**Session 2:** **Internet in Palestine-Breaking Through the Isolation of Occupation**
Presentation	**Dr. Mashour Abudaka**, Executive Director of the Palestinian IT Association (PITA) "A Door to the World? The Role of the Internet in the Palestinian Occupied Territories"
Presentation	**Samer Sabri**, Director of Palestine Online, Ramallah "The Internet as a Political Communication Instrument in the Arab World"
12:15	Discussion
13:00	Lunch buffet, Grand Park Hotel

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Abschlussbericht

"Mass Media in the Middle East and Beyond – Politics and Ethics"

*Internationale Konferenz
19. – 20. Februar 2005,
Grand Park Hotel, Ramallah*

Daoud Kuttab,   Hani Al-Masri,   Nabil Amr

Am 19. und 20. Februar 2005 fand in Zusammenarbeit mit dem **Goethe Institut Ramallah**, dem **Medieninstitut der Universität Bir Zeit** und dem **Institut für Moderne Medien der Al-Quds Universität** ein zweitägiger Workshop zum Thema Medienethik und Verantwortung von Massenmedien bei der Entwicklung einer demokratischen Gesellschaftsstruktur statt.

Insgesamt stieß die Veranstaltung auf enormes öffentliches Interesse. So wurden große Teile der Konferenz in palästinensischen Lokalsendern ausgestrahlt sowie diverse Berichte, darunter auch ein Leitartikel, zur Konferenz veröffentlicht. In Kürze wird ferner eine achtseitige Sonderbeilage in der Tageszeitung Al-Ayyam den gesamten Inhalt der Konferenz abdecken.

Insbesondere im Verlauf der Abschlussdiskussion machten die palästinensischen Medienvertreter deutlich, dass es unter der neuen Präsidentschaft eine aktive Partizipation der Medien am politischen Prozess geben muss. Auf Initiative der anwesenden Pressevertreter soll daher ein innerpalästinensisches Forum

eingerichtet werden, welches sich ausschließlich mit der Problematik der Medienpolitik und -ethik beschäftigen soll.

Inhaltliche Zusammenfassung

Die Medien der Arabischen Welt unterzogen sich in den vergangenen Jahren einem Wandel. Trotz Erweiterung der Legitimitäten kann heute dennoch nicht von realer Pressefreiheit gesprochen werden. Dies räumte auch der ehemalige Informationsminister der Palästinensischen Autonomiebehörde, Nabil Amr, ein. Amr führte dieses Problem auf die zu enge Bindung der Medien an bestimmte Parteiideologien zurück.

Ähnlich sah es auch Waleed Omari von Al Jazeera. Häufig gäben die lokalen und nationalen Medien dem Druck der arabischen Regierungen nach. Als Folge bestimme eine verzerrte Berichterstattung die Wahrnehmung der arabischen Bevölkerungen.

Die international renommierte Medienexpertin, Prof. Dr. Naomi Sakr, und die Al-Arabia - Korrespondentin in Dubai, Dana Sayyegh, verwiesen außerdem auf die Problematik des Konkurrenzkampfes zwischen den verschiedenen Sendern bzw. Zeitungen. Blutige Bilder förderten die Quoten auf Kosten des Individuums. Das Geschäft um Sponsoren führe zur Abnahme des Humanfaktors im täglichen Kampf um Werbeeinnahmen.

Laut Mohammad Daragmeh, AP (Associated Press), sei vor diesem Hintergrund insbesondere in den Palästinensischen Autonomiegebieten während der Intifada Gewalt verherrlicht worden.

Nichtsdestotrotz spielen die Medien in der Arabischen Welt eine wichtige Rolle, wenn es um Meinungspluralismus geht. Ohne demokratische Basis könne auch der beste Journalist seine Aufgabe – eine möglichst objektive Berichterstattung zu liefern – nicht vollbringen, so Mohammad Dajani vom Institut für Amerikanische Studien der Al-Quds Universität.

Der deutsche Medienexperte, Dr. Oliver Hahn, erster Research Fellow am Wissenschaftszentrum für Internationalen Journalismus des Erich-Brost-Institutes, bestätigte die fachliche Kompetenz der arabischen Medien. Verlässlichkeit und Glaubhaftigkeit der kommerziellen arabischen Medien würden durch die große Nachfrage westlicher Agenturen nach arabischer Berichterstattung untermauert.

Darüber hinaus würden die gesamten internationalen Medien mit bestimmten, politisch vorgeprägten Ausdrücken arbeiten. Die arabischen Medien stellten dabei keine Ausnahme dar, so Khalil Assali, Radio Sawa. Auch Anthony Löwstedt, Medienbeobachter, kritisierte die internationale Medienbranche. Zu oft würden im Rahmen der Berichterstattung Grenzen überschritten und als Folge daraus Menschenrechte verletzt. In diesem Sinne stellten die arabischen Medien keine Ausnahme dar.

Ethische Wertvorstellungen würden laut Nibal Thawabteh, Medieninstitut der Bir Zeit Universität, erst im Laufe der Arbeit angemessene Berücksichtigung finden. Ethisches Verständnis sei in diesem Zusammenhang nicht erziehbar und entwickle sich vielmehr aus den persönlichen Erlebnissen des einzelnen Journalisten.

Fathi Natoor, Farah TV, betonte, dass in den Palästinensischen Gebieten sämtliche Medien bereit seien, ihre Funktion als kritisches Sprachrohr der Öffentlichkeit wahrzunehmen. Es mangele lediglich an einer akkuraten Gesetzgebung. Unter der Präsidentschaft von Mahmoud Abbas erwarte er nun den Erlass entsprechender Reformen im Bereich der Mediengesetze.

Das Internet als vollends unzensiertes Medium habe hingegen schon längst in der arabischen Welt Einzug gehalten. Gerade die jüngeren Bevölkerungsschichten würden sowohl arabische als auch westliche Internetseiten als freie Portale nutzen, um ungefiltert Informationen auszutauschen, so Dr. Mashour Abudaka, Direktor der palästinensischen IT - Assoziation (PITA).

Insgesamt hat die Konferenz verdeutlicht, dass innerhalb der palästinensischen Medien eine neuen Dynamik entstanden ist, in der internationale Standards immer stärker Anwendung finden.
Nach Arafats Tod üben nun zahlreiche palästinensische Medienvertreter offen Selbstkritik. Die lang erwartete Abkehr von der Instrumentalisierung der Medien für politische Zwecke leitet damit den Beginn der Professionalisierung der Medienbranche im Sinne einer objektiven Berichterstattung ein.