

# Media Live Up to Name as Game Changers in Spreading Arab Revolutions

*On résiste à l'invasion des armées; on ne résiste pas à l'invasion des idées.*

*(One may be able to resist the invasion of armies, but not the invasion of ideas.)*

Victor Hugo

French author Victor Hugo must have been gazing through a crystal ball when he wrote these words some three centuries ago, because they resonate true in 2011 with the outbreak of popular revolutions across the Arab world, egged on, in great measure, by traditional and social media.

Unlike the era when news traveled for days or weeks before reaching its destination, events in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are literally exploding before

own territories. There are ample examples of Arab regimes trying to bar or completely stifle media covering the wave of revolts gripping the Middle East and North Africa region, notably in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Algeria, Syria, and Iran, to name a few.

As this publication goes to print, more unrest will be reported in the media, but what's certain is that print, broadcast, and, especially online outlets, will have an increasingly greater impact on the course of history. As Donald Graham, the late publisher of the Washington Post, once said: "Journalism is the first rough draft of history."

## The Role of the Media in Recent Revolutions

Media have become so ubiquitous, intrusive and demanding, they are hard to avoid, as a result of which, countries with oppressive regimes are devising countless ways to curtail them, or shut them up entirely.

The Egyptian authorities' decision to literally cut off the Internet and limit mobile telephone and message service in early 2011 when what became known as the "Youth Revolution," the "Facebook Revolution," the "Twitter Revolt," and the "January 25 Revolution" broke out, is a case in point.

Egypt under Hosni Mubarak may have allowed a certain amount of latitude with Internet use, but it cracked down hard on anti-regime journalists, bloggers and dissidents who expressed themselves through social media. It was slightly more tolerant than the regime of ousted Tunisian president Zine El Abdine Ben Ali, who literally stifled opposition and made press freedom impossible. In Tunisia, regime opponents either spoke out openly, thereby

There are ample examples of Arab regimes trying to bar or completely stifle media covering the wave of revolts gripping the Middle East and North Africa region.

our eyes 24 hours a day on satellite channels, on the Internet's various outlets, and in every conceivable converged media combination. Any invasion of armies today is being met with an equally hard-hitting invasion of media to cover unfolding events – often to the consternation of those who seek to suppress people, invade countries, change borders, or just defend their



Magda Abu-Fadil

Magda Abu-Fadil is director of the Journalism Training Program at the American University of Beirut. Previously she served as director of the Institute for Professional Journalists at the Lebanese American University and as Washington bureau chief of Events magazine. She worked for 40 years as foreign correspondent and editor with Agence France-Presse and United Press International, and wrote for several dailies. She taught journalism at the American University in Washington, D.C. and trains journalists across the Arab world. She regularly contributes to the Huffington Post.

ترحيب أميركي... والجنس العسكري ليس بديلاً للثورية... ودعوات دولية إلى انتقال ديمقراطي

## مصر بلا مبارك... والجيش يضمن التغيير



من بعد الثورة... والجنس العسكري ليس بديلاً للثورية... ودعوات دولية إلى انتقال ديمقراطي...  
**لبنان، عقدة عون تمدد أجازة تأليف الحكومة**  
**تجاوزات بار تفتاح الأسهم الخليجية... بعد الأوروبية والأميركية**  
**التحولات في مصر خلقت أممات الخادم والبور... برزعت الذهب**  
**كثيرون لما مع مقدماته وأياما يمدده في عهد الأعداء**  
**الجيونم، عقدا أول لثة الجسد التي تحولت حاسوباً**

### Pan-Arab daily Al-Hayat touts Egypt without Mubarak

Source: Magda Abu-Fadil

subjecting themselves to untold harm, or went underground to spread their message of defiance, with online access being one of the greatest obstacles they faced.

Cutting off Internet access in the new

A common thread running through the revolutionary wave sweeping the region has been the fast dissemination of information.

age of Arab revolutions has become catchy. Libyan authorities picked up where Egyptian counterparts had left off when demonstrators took to the streets of their cities, demanding a change in regime, freedom to express themselves, and better living conditions. While their leader of 42 years claimed Libya enjoyed prosperity and the rule of the masses (al-jamaheer), protesters demanded jobs, an end to government corruption and media freedoms,

where none existed. Despite the chokehold on Internet service, Libyan dissidents managed to get their message out any way they could. When it was difficult to disseminate from inside Libya, they crossed the border into Egypt or Tunisia and sent their reports from there.

The tiny Gulf state of Bahrain, which caught the uprising fever, responded by restricting Internet use amid the growing unrest. Troubled Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula's southern tip, and the North African country of Algeria also had their share of anti-government violence, with resultant backlash against the media. Syrian authorities were equally hard on journalists and bloggers who reported unrest in that country.

### Only Media, or Part of the Political Event?

A common thread running through the revolutionary wave sweeping the region has been the fast dissemination of information, notably via Arab satellite channels like the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera and Dubai-based Al-Arabiya that are viewed in the remotest areas of most Arab countries. The two channels-cum-networks reflect their paymasters' political bents.

Al-Jazeera is financed by the Qatari government, and its Arabic news channel has drawn criticism from any number of Arab and Western governments about its coverage of unrest in various countries.

It first came to fame when it received and broadcast footage from Al-Qaeda, following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, and later was considered a serious competitor to the American CNN news operation. Since its debut, Al-Jazeera has also been charged with tilting heavily towards the Palestinian cause – it is no coincidence the director general and many reporters and correspondents are Palestinian – and with being anti-Israeli, anti-American, etc. While the channel's funders host Al-Udeid, the largest U.S. military base in the region, they also have close ties to Iran, Syria, and Hamas, to the dismay of policy makers in Washington.



### Sheikh and priest in Cairo's Tahrir Square

Source: Magda Abu-Fadil

According to a Wikileaks cable dated June 24, 2009, Qatari claims of supporting a free press are undermined by manipulation of Al-Jazeera.<sup>1</sup> Al-Arabiya, on the other hand, is part of the Saudi-owned MBC group of channels that is thought to be more accommodating to the U.S. and Arab regimes in general, and was established as a counterpoint to Al-Jazeera. It is also more financially independent and has more advertisers.

Other local, regional and international channels broadcasting in Arabic have jumped on the bandwagon in a bid to capture Arab audiences, but Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya hold sizeable pan-Arab viewership, with the former

Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera have both been accused by various governments or feuding groups of serving one side's interests against the other's.

claiming to reach the largest number of viewers. As such, their news coverage of unfolding revolutions has been instrumental in providing Arab audiences with information frequently hidden by their respective regimes on state-run media. Which is the reason that regimes like Libya's have attempted – and succeeded up to a point – to jam the channels' signals. Fame comes with a price. Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera have both been accused by various governments or feuding groups of serving one side's interests against the other's.

Egyptian detractors, for example, have charged Al-Jazeera with seeking to topple the then sclerotic Mubarak regime by focusing on police brutality, the crackdown on dissidents, government corruption, cronyism, misuse of power by the Mubarak family, and more. The regime paid back the channel by closing its Cairo bureau during the Egyptian revolution, harassing and jailing its correspondents, revoking their press credentials, and unplugging its transmissions from the Egyptian-controlled satellite channel carrier NileSat. Analysts attributed the causes of Egypt's response to lingering political differences between Doha and Cairo and Al-Jazeera's record of critical coverage of Egypt over the years.

The use of dramatic footage, repetitive provocative graphics and titles to special segments on the unrest in whichever country was being covered, as well as charged background music befitting the revolt, have invariably contributed to the unsettled mood in Arab countries. Cameras zooming in on demonstrators' catchy signs, or constant replays of citizen journalists' video footage from mobile devices of bloody scenes, panicked citizens, street violence, and general chaos, added to the dynamic of television with a combination of moving and still pictures. Sometimes they even surpassed analysts' or reporters' comments in coverage of unrest in North Africa and Yemen, as opposed to reporting of revolts in Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.

The signs carried by demonstrators in different countries were straight political declarations demanding regime change, while others were rhyming couplets, or jokes about the state of affairs, and their appearance on television, on websites, and in news agency pictures confirmed the saying "a picture is worth 1,000 words."

### Media as Extensions of Political Interests?

To answer this question, it is worth considering journalist Fadia Fahed's take entitled "Arab Media and the Lesson of the Street" in the pan-Arab daily Al-Hayat: "Arab media, long

noted for their coverage of wars, news of death in Palestine, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iraq, and their specialization in disseminating official pronouncements from their sources, are unaccustomed to covering popular movements and transmitting the voice of the street and their sons' daily tribulations."<sup>2</sup>

She was on target. Reading government-run newspapers in most Arab countries or watching official television channels' newscasts is not only tedious, it's misleading, and extremely banal. Official Arab media's *raison d'être* is focused on personality cults of the respective Arab leaders and their cronies. Running afoul of these leaders usually means trouble, or worse.

Watching state-run Nile TV, a viewer could easily be misled into thinking the upheaval was one-sided, simply a plot to undermine the Egyptian regime, and totally lacking in context. At first it reported the outbreak of anti-

Official Arab media's *raison d'être* is focused on personality cults of the respective Arab leaders and their cronies. Running afoul of these leaders usually means trouble, or worse.

government demonstrations as limited action by a few dozen protesters demanding social and economic changes. It also referred to widespread popular rejection of the actions of "the few who claim to represent the Egyptian people." As a result, Nile TV reporter Shahira Amin walked out when she refused to continue broadcasting the official lies and was hailed for her courage. Likewise, Libyan TV sidestepped the popular uprising by airing totally inane entertainment programming or videos glorifying Muammar Gaddafi.

Egypt's leading newspaper Al-Ahram – like all government-run media – was in complete denial of the raging revolt in the country that finally ousted 30-year dictator Hosni Mubarak as president. But it did an about-face when



**Al-Ahram front page proclaiming the people's revolution**

Source: Magda Abu-Fadil

the revolution proved stronger than Mubarak and headlined with "The People Toppled the Regime."

So it has caused major confusion in Arab media, leading to hesitant, fearful and late coverage of events, Fahed wrote. Adding to the confusion is the people's simple and painful demands: "Arab media may have to change the meaning of journalism, give up fashionable ties and shiny shoes, go down to the street and convey the people's simple and painful concerns, with absolute loyalty to simple facts, and to return to their basic role as a mirror of the people, not the rulers," Fahed argued. She added that the lesson came from the street.

While Internet access has made incredible inroads in recent years, its availability and use has depended on literacy levels – still rather low in the region – and the ability to afford the needed technology. Echoes of people yearning to live free, in dignity, and with a better future for themselves and their families have reverberated across the blogosphere in recent years, and picked up steam since the latest series of Arab revolts broke out. As revolutionary fever

grips the Middle East and North Africa region, more regimes are turning to knee-jerk extreme measures of clamping down on social media and access to the Internet, as well as controlling traditional news outlets.

But there are ways of circumventing governments' efforts to silence bloggers, tweeters, journalists and civil society activists. The more regimes tighten the noose, the more creative dissidents become in trying to loosen it. According to the Menassat's Arab Media Community blog, "Avaaz (an online service to circumvent censorship) is working urgently to 'blackout-proof' the protests – with secure satellite modems and phones, tiny video cameras, and portable radio transmitters, plus expert support teams on the ground – to enable activists to broadcast live video feeds even during Internet and phone blackouts and ensure the oxygen of international attention fuels their courageous movements for change."<sup>3</sup>

And that is just one avenue. Countless others exist. Peter Beaumont of Britain's Guardian newspaper wrote that social media have unavoidably played a role in recent Arab world revolts, with the defining image being a young man or woman with a smartphone recording events on the street, not just news about the toppling of dictators. "Precisely how we communicate in these moments of historic crisis and transformation is important," he argued. "The medium that carries the message shapes and defines as well as the message itself."<sup>4</sup>

The flexibility and instantaneous nature of how social media communicate self-broadcast ideas, unfettered by print or broadcast deadlines, partly explains the speed at which these revolutions have unraveled, and their almost viral spread across the region, he said. "It explains, too, the often loose and non-hierarchical organization of the protest movements unconsciously modeled on the networks of the web," he added.

But lawyer, journalist and media consultant Jeff Ghannam countered that in the Middle East, this was not a Facebook revolution,



**BBC Arabic coverage of Cairo street demonstrations**  
Source: Magda Abu-Fadil

and said one should not confuse tools with motivations. Social media, he explained, helped make people's grievances all the more urgent and difficult to ignore.<sup>5</sup> It is that viral spread and non-hierarchical organization that inspired a Chinese activist who tweets under the handle "leciel95" to translate everything he could about events in Egypt to English and Chinese after Chinese authorities barred their media from reporting on the Egyptian revolution, according to Mona Kareem, writing in the Kuwaiti daily Al-Rai, who encountered him on Twitter.<sup>6</sup>

### What is the Difference between Arab and Western Media Coverage?

Western media tend to have a shorter attention span when covering foreign events, notably in an age of severe budget cuts and more reliance on stringers, independent operators and the competition they face from Arab and other media. Unless Western media have Arabic-speaking correspondents, like CNN's Ben Wedeman, Rima Maktabi, and Mohamed Jamjoum, the New York Times' Leila Fadel, or the BBC's Jim Muir, for example, they have to incur extra expenses by hiring fixers, translators and others to get the story out.

While Western media may have bureaus and local staff, they have been cutting back on their operations in recent years. Depending on where these journalists are based, there's also the question of distance, logistics and insurance, all of which add to the cost of covering conflicts.

It is safe to say that Western media tend to be more dispassionate, more to the point, and

generally more aware of media ethics standards. But it should be noted that Western media have also demonstrated occasional carelessness, bias and lack of balance in their coverage – a charge often leveled at Arab outlets that lack freedom. American network Fox News is a good example of right-wing views completely shadowing hard news. Their reporters' and anchors' comments are laced with opinions, which override facts.

In early March U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testified in Congress that American channels did not provide news, whereas Al-Jazeera, whatever one thought of it, was a reference on solid reporting. She said:

“Al-Jazeera has been the leader in that are literally changing people’s minds and attitudes. And like it or hate it, it is really effective. In fact viewership of Al-Jazeera is going up in the United States because it’s real news. You may not agree with it, but you feel like you’re getting real news around the clock instead of a million commercials and, you know, arguments between talking heads and the kind of stuff that we do on our news which, you know, is not particularly informative to us, let alone foreigners.”<sup>7</sup>

Other than content, accuracy, fairness, balance and objectivity (whatever that means), there’s also the issue of finances. Without adequate resources, Arab and Western media are constrained in their coverage. Satellite uplinks are very expensive, TV crews cost a lot of money to transport, multimedia reporters still need a certain amount of digital equipment and facilities to operate, and travel is becoming prohibitive with rising oil prices.

In all fairness, some Arab media excel at particular stories, or under certain circumstances, but may inevitably flop at others. The same is also true of Western media.

## Conclusion

Media coverage in times of conflict should not be judged in the heat of battle. Far too many elements come into play when journalists are under tremendous pressure of deadlines,

competition, financial considerations, and, very importantly, their own safety or existence.

During the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, countless journalists were faulted for accepting to be embedded with Western troops which resulted in skewed reporting of events. Arab

**It is unavoidable for reporters to feel pulled in one direction or another. They’re only human.**

journalists working for their own countries’ state-run media, independent news organizations, or foreign outlets, have also received their fair share of criticism during the latest upheavals across the Middle East and North Africa.

It is unavoidable for reporters to feel pulled in one direction or another. They’re only human. It brings to mind the ethical question: Do you continue covering, shooting footage or taking pictures when bombs drop and people are being cut to shreds, or do you stop and help out? Can you do both? And, can you maintain your balance and sanity after that?

Therefore, journalists should be provided regular professional training to learn how to make sound and ethical decisions for whatever story they cover.

---

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> [www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/213692](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/213692)

<sup>2</sup> <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/237836>

<sup>3</sup> <http://community-en.menassat.com/profiles/blogs/blackoutproof-the-protests-in>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/25/twitter-facebook-uprisings-arab-libya>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/18/AR2011021806964.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://alraimedia.com/Alrai/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=258362>

<sup>7</sup> <http://middleeast.about.com/b/2011/03/06/hillary-clinton-on-al-jazeera-real-news.htm>