

Media in the Islamic World: Introduction*

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THE three papers in this section explore the media's role in shaping the public and private spheres in Islamic countries. Each paper approaches the issue from a different angle and each focuses upon somewhat distinct national and cultural contexts or units of analysis. Each paper raises a series of questions, some of which are addressed and some remain unanswered. In this brief introduction I will point to two questions in particular. The first is the question of the tension between the form and the content of the media in influencing the nature and the potentials of media technology as a public sphere. To what extent are these two dimensions marching in different directions in the Islamic world? Here we would want to explore the extent to which the form of the new media, particularly the Internet but also newspapers and satellite television, are pluralistic and decentralized and thus lend themselves to a democratic public sphere of ideas and communication, whereas the major content or use of this space is dominated by individuals and groups with non-democratically oriented ideologies. The second, more general question concerns the extent to which the terms public and private mean the same things in Western democratic and Islamic discourse. Each of the writers necessarily bases his or her analysis on certain assumption about the meaning of these terms, but it is possible to argue that Islamic discourse conceptualizes these terms somewhat differently than the way they are used in Western academic discourse.

*I would like to express my thanks to Charles Kurzman for commenting on a draft of this paper.

Jon Anderson's paper explores the role of Internet technology in shaping a public sphere of discourse in Islamic societies. He examines the use that Islamic or (to use the more politicized term) Islamist groups have made of the Internet to communicate with audiences and communities that transcend the physical confines of neighborhood or even nation, the latter often characterized by authoritarian regimes with very low tolerance for an open public sphere with a relatively free press and exchange of ideas, or for a private sphere of freedom of conscience. One of Anderson's interesting suggestions is that the current proliferation of Islamic-oriented websites are more akin to the coffeehouses and salons of early modern Europe as well as to the early print capitalism that helped create an imagined community of "co-readers" out of fragmented populations (as highlighted by Benedict Anderson) rather than the current Western manifestation of Internet technologies as mediums of information overload and (perhaps) causes of individual and social atomization. He characterizes the Internet as an "intermediate" sphere between official public discourse and "private" communications among intimates.

Two questions are prompted by the paper. Can these new virtual spaces of the Internet play a similarly transformative role in today's societies as the imagined communities of co-readers or the salons and coffeehouses played in the earlier societies analyzed by Benedict Anderson and Jurgen Habermas? On the one hand, the vast amounts of information available on the Internet, organized through a very decentralized network of producers, the relative ease of accessing it, the ability to communicate with often anonymous others, and the interactive quality of websites, give this virtual space—like its more "real" counterparts such as coffeehouses and other public spaces—the capacity to act as a forum for strangers to enter a sphere of "dialogue" and communication. On the other hand, the Internet appears to have a binary quality more marked than other public spaces. If you are logged-in, so to speak, you are immediately inundated with information, the volume of which, through the hyperlinks, expands in

an apparently exponential direction. Once logged out, however, almost none of the exchanges that occur there enter into everyday life. This contrasts with public spaces, which offer an individual many potential and indirect opportunities for different degrees of public participation (from sitting passively in a park to participating in a conversation with strangers). Indeed, sociologically speaking, the Internet is not without paradoxes. An intriguing example is suggested by Iranian sociologist Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi, who finds in the case of Iran that the dimensions of real and virtual identities are sometimes reversed: in the context of a highly controlled public spaces as well as highly ritualized public interaction, young men and women express their “real” identities in the virtual space of cyberspace, whereas in the real (physical) public spaces of society (parks, Internet cafes) their identities are less authentic.¹ Considerable research needs to be done on these types of effects; it is too early to tell what sociological dimensions characterize the Internet, and Anderson is correct to call for thicker descriptions of it.

Although not a central concern of Anderson’s paper, a second question prompted by it deals with the degree to which we should link our conceptions of the public sphere with a specifically democratic content rather than viewing it as a neutral space for the communication of messages and ideas. This is, of course, a question that concerns all societies not only those that are Islamic, and there is a growing literature on this topic.² But whereas in the Western democracies we may talk of the threat of the erosion of a democratic public sphere by the individualized and atomized nature of Internet use through personal computers, in the case of non-democratic societies, the issue is more a matter of this “virtual” public space being the only forum for communication relatively free from government control (although the ability of states to monitor and ultimately control Internet service providers located within their borders puts a limit on this freedom).

This potentially public character of the Internet co-exists with the opposite potential of privatizing Islamic discourse. This is so because the selectivity of users tends to create virtual sub-cultural groups (to paraphrase the sociologist Claude Fischer) whose claims for the universality of their world-views is thereby reduced and relativized. As Anderson recognizes, Habermas's key insight regarding the public sphere was that communication freed from status and social power "need not be limited to private spheres of conscience, the market, or intimacy but can take on a public life characteristic of a public sphere." This definition, however, carries an implicit democratic criteria. From this perspective, the political or democratic character (or at least potential) of the Islamic Internet sites becomes an important issue to examine further.

A good example of this is Mneimneh's analysis of the intra-Arab debate over the "What We're Fighting For" letter of U.S. intellectuals concerning the U.S. invasion of Iraq and in particular the role of Islamism in these debates carried on the Arab Internet and satellite TV networks. Compared to Anderson, Mneimneh examines a broader set of media (from newspapers and radio to satellite television, the Internet, and the new telephony) in a more defined unit of analysis: that of the Arab and Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East and North Africa. He analyzes these media in terms of their role in expressing different ideologies such as Islamism or nationalism, and their expression at three different levels of identity (pan-Arab, nationalist, and communitarian or subnational) in what he terms the new and emerging intra-Arab cultural space. Mneimneh's empirical analysis suggests that satellite television, followed by internationally distributed newspapers, is the most important media shaping a common Arab cultural identity. He observes that although Islamism dominates the content in these media, it is not uncontested and that a less ideological, less Islamist, and perhaps more democratic discourse is emerging (democratic in the sense of being more pluralistic, pragmatic, and tolerant of divergent views).

This is consistent with Abdo's claim that, despite appearances, the media in the Arab world is much more open and pluralistic than the current press in Iran. Yet, an important reason for this difference, and one that Abdo does not discuss—and which makes the comparison somewhat less compelling—is the fact that the multistate nature of the Arab world permits less control by one state or government over any particular media source, whereas in Iran the state can control the various media more readily. Abdo's paper on the role of the media (particularly the newspapers) in Iran's currently beleaguered reform movement gives food for thought about the links between the media, the public sphere, and democracy. Her conclusion that the media strategy of the Iranian reformists has failed—because it has easily been crushed by the clerical dictatorship—does suggest, in the absence of political parties or grassroots networks of support, the limits of the democratizing potential of this aspect of the public sphere and civil society, certainly for the case of Iran and perhaps for other Islamic countries.³ The extent to which the democratic potential inherent in the *form* of the public sphere (as a space shared by formally equal citizens) is compromised by a specifically Islamic *content*—which is a more complex way of describing the now notorious question of the compatibility of democracy and Islam—is still an unresolved issue.⁴

Making generalizations about the ability of the global aspect and reach of the new media—satellite television and Internet in particular—to act as a public space in authoritarian contexts such as the Arab countries described by Mneimneh and Anderson should be treated cautiously, as the Iranian case demonstrates. Actually, Abdo overlooks the number of anti-regime television stations available in Iranian homes via satellite from bases outside the country (despite the regime's attempt to punish ownership of satellite dishes)⁵ and this could have highlighted the different impact globalization and media technology is having in the Arab world (discussed by Mneimneh) and in the Iranian case.⁶ Still, Abdo's general interpretation would apply here in the short term:

in the absence of viable and attractive institutional means of political participation, what good is more information other than to make one feel more depressed and aware of one's powerlessness?

In concluding, I would like to highlight two issues that are of more general relevance to understanding the public and private spheres in Islamic countries but should be considered in particular studies such as those of the media. First, the focus on "Islamic" societies should not lead us to overlook the differences between or within countries so labeled, differences that may not have anything to do with Islam as such. Anderson's paper covers all countries with a significant Islamic culture, Arab and non-Arab, Mneimneh focuses on Arab countries and Abdo on Iran, a non-Arab country. Thus care should be taken to clarify the degree to which the social phenomena under discussion are related to Islamic cultural patterns or to other national or regional characteristics.

Second, to the extent that we do focus on the changing nature of, and current tension between, the public and private spheres within Islam, it is important to recognize that *from the Islamic perspective*, the categories of the public and private derived from Western discourse (and indeed employed by this author) often mean different things. Discussing Islamic discourse in the Arab context, Nazih Ayubi has argued that public space or the public sphere is *not* conventionally equivalent to the political civic realm of public debate, conscious collective action, and citizenship as understood in Western democratic theory.⁷ Rather, Islamic authorities have historically interpreted the public *not* in contrast to a "free" privatized realm of conscience and religion, but instead as the space for "symbolic display, of interaction rituals and personal ties, of physical proximity coexisting with social distance" in contrast to a private sphere that is in effect defined as a residual—what is left over after the public is defined. The public sphere is above all a space for the "*collective* enforcement of *public* morals" rather than necessarily political.⁸ The private is what is hidden from the gaze of the sovereign rather than what is free. Popular wisdom reflects this reality. Referring to the Qur'anic

verse, a Persian proverb holds: "Happy is the ant that is hidden from Solomon's gaze."⁹

Of course an Islamic religious perspective is not the only cultural orientation to the public/private distinction in Arab, Middle Eastern, or Islamic countries. Nonetheless, future research on how Islamic groups and individuals are using and shaping the amorphous public sphere of media should be aware that their ideals might have marked differences with what Western observers assume to be a generally shared definition of the public and the private.

Notes

¹I leave aside for the present discussion the genuine difficulty of distinguishing between authentic and distorted identities, especially if we adopt the idea that identities are performative rather than essentialist.

²For an explicit (if controversial) analysis of the effects of media technology on democratic values and behavior in the context of the United States, see Putnam (2000), especially chap. 9, "Against the Tide? Small Groups, Social Movements, and the Net," and chap. 13, "Technology and the Mass Media." Also see the sources cited in Anderson's paper.

³Despite this failure, it is hard to deny the significance the reformist press has had on transforming public discourse within Iran toward a more urbane and democratic character. How and whether this can find expression in other institutional spheres of society is, for the moment, a question for the long or medium term.

⁴The literature on this question is now quite extensive. See for example the review article by Langhor (2001) and also Kurzman (1998).

⁵The regime's desire to outlaw satellite dishes has apparently been outweighed by a greedy desire to maximize income from the sale of imported televisions, satellite receivers and dishes, and other paraphernalia.

⁶To my knowledge there is currently no research data on the nature and extent of this viewership. Some of the participants in street demonstrations in Iranian cities in summer 2003 in support of the student movement's calls for democratization have been attributed to U.S.-based Iranian television programs. What is indisputable is that these U.S.-based stations did provide some information on what was happening in the country. In an unprecedented step this seemed to prompt the state-controlled TV to air programs covering the extent of the street demon-

strations and riots. What is clear, however, is that despite the fact that these out-of-country programs, in particular political and news programs, offer everything apparently lacking in the state-controlled media within Iran, they have little impact and support within the country. This is principally because these media are significantly out of touch with the problems and needs of middle-class Iranians. See the interview with a jailed newspaper writer and student leader at <<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero071503.html>>.

⁷See Ayubi (1995).

⁸Although the Islamic Republic of Iran is trying its best to put this religio-political convergence into practice.

⁹The story is that a group of ants, on seeing Solomon's approaching army, said, "Let us flee so that his soldiers do not (inadvertently) crush us underfoot." Another example: "A caliph in Baghdad is said to have said: 'The best life has he who has an ample house, a beautiful wife, and sufficient means, who does not know us and whom we do not know.' He knew. To know and be known by power was to ask for trouble." In Landes (1999: 395).

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