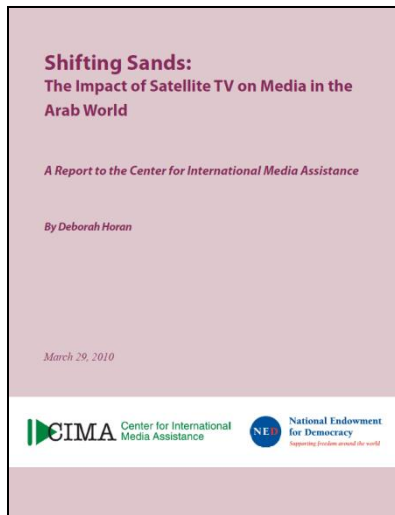


## Shifting Sands: The Impact of Satellite TV on Media in the Arab World



Media in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are freer than they were a decade ago, with a proliferation of satellite television news channels leading the way. Arab newscasts cover events in real time, sometimes scooping their Western competition with spot news coverage of regional conflicts. Talk shows regularly stir controversy by airing contentious views, breaking social taboos, and giving regional platforms to political opposition groups. Government-run media have been forced to compete or lose audiences. Yet most governments in the MENA region have managed to retain a tight grip on media, whether through the arbitrary application of restrictive and vague press laws, limits on media production, or a kinship, political, or business relationship with media owners. There are exceptions, and transnational news channels generally operate under fewer constraints than local broadcasts. But only three Arab countries, for instance, were ranked “partly free” for media by Freedom House in its 2009 *Freedom of the Press* index; the rest remained “not free.”

Equally worrying to some observers, all but two ministers of information signed an Arab League resolution in 2008 designed to regulate Arab satellite news channels. Arab governments, meanwhile, continued to temporarily close satellite broadcast news bureaus and detain and harass broadcast journalists, and several governments sought to silence print and Internet journalists as well, arresting and intimidating bloggers in particular. Media laws in most countries remained ambiguous and arbitrarily enforced, creating an uneasy environment and compelling journalists to censor their own work. Governments cracked down on journalists who dared to cross “red lines” in their reporting—covering taboo subjects that a government deems too sensitive for coverage, often because the issues call into question the legitimacy of the ruling regime.

Yet these measures belie what many Arab journalists and other observers say is a loosened media atmosphere in the age of transnational satellite television. The proliferation of satellite channels, they say, has opened up space for debate of issues once considered off-limits: everything from Israeli points of view on the conflict with the Palestinians to discussion of American airbases on Qatari soil has been broadcast on cutting-edge shows such as al-Jazeera’s *The Opposite Direction*. Spot news coverage of regional conflicts has conferred

legitimacy on Arab news once dismissed by audiences across the region as official propaganda. But while the satellite television revolution has raised the bar, generating higher-quality production as well as freer speech, the greater freedom enjoyed by a few transnational satellite channels has not always translated into greater freedom for journalists working in-country, particularly for local or state-owned outlets. Moreover, the satellite revolution has not prompted significant change in media laws in most MENA countries. With few exceptions, governments in the region continue to curb media freedom as it suits them.

*Shifting Sands: The Impact of Satellite TV on Media in the Arab World* explores the television landscape in the MENA region more than a decade after the rise of Arab satellite news channels. It examines both the positive effect satellite coverage has had on the media environment and the reasons why the region still lacks media freedom. The report focuses on television broadcast coverage but also considers the impact of satellite television on print, radio, and the Internet. Among its findings:

- The political landscape of individual countries, including their level of internal legitimacy and perceived vulnerability to political extremists,

influences the level of media freedom enjoyed in that country at any given moment. In many MENA countries, media freedom is a privilege bestowed by monarchs and dictators, not an immutable right enshrined in law, despite the existence of press freedom clauses in some constitutions. Therefore, Arab broadcast channels can be “unmade” as easily as they were made.

- The absence of media company consolidation in the region suggests that owners want to broadcast their own choice of content, including news content, which in turn suggests that media in the region are not viewed as a business venture but as a political tool.
- Television viewers in the MENA region are generally aware of broadcast ownership, particularly of the bigger stations, and expect a political slant to the news. The general expectation is that no one is broadcasting just for the sake of informing the public, so it is assumed that all the owners have agendas.
- Private television, whether terrestrial or satellite, is much more threatening to ruling elites than private newspapers, which are easier to censor in advance and to physically disrupt. Thus, governments have been very careful to vet owners prior to granting licenses to private television stations.
- The expense of producing high-quality news reports in the MENA region is often prohibitive and has led some smaller satellite television channels to scale back ambitious reporting projects that had competed with big channels, such as al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya.
- Despite the continued absence of legal protections for media in most MENA countries, the breadth of political debate and accuracy in news reporting is greater than before the rise of satellite news, and this improvement is directly attributable in part to satellite news.
- Satellite channels can often cover sensitive issues with greater freedom than local broadcasters

because of their transnational nature. The model of freer reporting that satellite television has introduced has not meant that local media can easily follow suit, either due to a lack of resources or because local media are constrained by restrictive laws. At the same time, the rise of satellite news has put pressure on state-owned television stations to compete or lose audience share.

- The rise of satellite news channels has provided better coverage of regional news but has not always provided better television coverage of local news in a particular country. Local news is still often left to state-owned and private terrestrial or satellite channels that operate under media constraints.
- While new media have gained in popularity in the MENA region, Web outlets still rely heavily on Arab satellite news channels: A survey by the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School found that the most common link found on the Web sites of 35,000 Arab blogs (except YouTube and Wikipedia) was to al-Jazeera, followed by BBC Arabic Television, with al-Arabiya close behind.
- Lack of training and low salaries in the MENA region compel the best journalists to seek work at al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya, and other big satellite channels. The result is often a marked disparity in the quality of news between the large satellite channels and local producers of news.
- Because most Arab countries are not democratic, even if media coverage of a particular issue compels people to push for change, there are few—and often no—political avenues available to make that change happen. Nonetheless, more access to reliable news sources for more of the region’s citizens can only advance the cause of democracy, however incrementally, and there are examples of politicians and public figures being compelled by the media spotlight to answer for their actions.

*Shifting Sands: The Impact of Satellite TV on Media in the Arab World* is a publication of the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA). The Center is an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy that works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA’s work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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