SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER: HOW AL JAZEERA IS CHALLENGING AND IMPROVING EGYPTIAN JOURNALISM

Abstract: Changes in communication technology that occur during the alignment of particular historical forces can result in changes to organizational forms and institutions that favor certain configurations of power over others. Constitutive choices about the social and political uses of a communication technology, the legal and regulatory framework adopted, and ideational factors influence the path of development taken, the institutions created, and the alignment of interests. Changes in the modes of communication in the Middle East favored the popularization of Al Jazeera because it adapted to a dispersed audience and fed the 24-hour news cycle with information that stood out because of its newness, opposition to the status quo, and transgression of traditional boundaries. Not only was it posed to take advantage of the emerging information environment in the last decade of the twentieth century, it reinforced the changes taking place and helped usher in a new era of competition and professionalism. Based on ethnographic research in Egypt, this paper focuses on how Al Jazeera influenced change in the Egyptian journalistic field. The principles of Einsteinian physics help explain how the satellite news media, but especially Al Jazeera, are distorting the logic of journalism as it has traditionally been practiced, and causing the political field to adapt to a new media logic of visibility and accountability. Although much has been written about the station from Qatar, little has been said about the mechanisms of change or the processes that link the channel to the major political changes envisioned for the region. This paper positions Al Jazeera in the field of Arab and Egyptian journalism, using empirical evidence to show how the imperative of competition and emphasis on professionalism have caused incremental changes in the Egyptian journalistic field with significant implications for state power and control over the public.

Introduction

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak rarely talks about plans for succession, Saudi Arabia’s influence in Egypt, or Egypt's responsibility in Darfur, yet last year he agreed to a wide-ranging, extensive interview with Al Arabiya in which he was pressed to explain himself on these and many other controversial issues. While presidential appearances in Egyptian media are certainly not new, in fact most of the content of Arab news until the turn of this century was protocol news, what was new was the journalistic style of the interview and the imperative to appear on a non-state-owned pan-Arab station. The fact that the interview at the Presidential Palace, which breached so many red lines and reached so many millions of Arabs, took place is one of the clearest examples of the new media logic that is challenging the political and journalistic status quo in the Arab world.

Using Egypt as a case study, this paper argues that Al Jazeera has provoked changes in the media ecology of the Arab world, creating a new imperative of competition in the news industry which has changed the nature of the Arab news media. Al Jazeera’s influence has been instrumental in terms...
of altering the rules of journalism, increasing professionalization, and modifying audience expectations. In adapting to these changes Egypt is developing a media logic that has put pressure on the political system to conform to it and elevated the importance of news as a form of soft power. Based on ethnographic research in Egypt, interviews and focus groups with Arab media professionals, academics, and advocates along with participant observation and content analysis, I analyze transformation in the journalistic field and the mechanisms and processes that link changes in the media system to major political changes envisioned for the region.

**Distributional change and a new media ecology**

As you fly into Cairo, straining to catch a glimpse of the pyramids, it is hard to miss the satellite dishes the crowd the roofs as far as the eye can see. Prior to 2003 there was one 24-hour news satellite station, Al Jazeera, today there are dozens. Al Jazeera first began airing in 1996 as rapid technological advances and increasing economic interdependency seemed to be shrinking the world into a globally interconnected information system. Al Jazeera instigated ecological changes in the Arab media system that took root in the fertile environment created by globalization, where neoliberal imperatives like privatization, liberalization and democratization coincided with the ever-increasing integration of global media markets and the Internet. Changes in communications technology, especially the proliferation of satellite television and the Internet, have meant that the average Arab citizen now has instant access to hundreds of private, independent information sources that were once reserved for the privileged bilingual elite.

Satellites have become less expensive to produce and launch, while bypassing the need to lay expensive cable or fiberoptics and other infrastructure to connect remote areas to the main communications system (Bassiouni 2006). Receiving technology has similarly become cheaper and easier to make, and government policy aimed at making television sets as available as possible
Speaking Truth to Power: How Al Jazeera is Challenging and Improving Egyptian Journalism

(Boyd 1999, 7) means that even the poorest slums on the outskirts of Cairo boast numerous satellite dishes on each building. Satellite dishes are cheaper and more prolific than Internet connections, although the Internet is increasingly popular and levels of connectivity are rising (World development indicators 2006). With more than 4 million Internet users, Egypt has the highest rate of Internet access among non-oil Arab states (Eid 2004; World development indicators 2006). The Internet, like satellite signals, is diffuse and knows no national boundaries, meaning that the state exerts less physical control over its information environments than in the past. Egypt also began experimenting with broadcast deregulation, loosening its grips on the media system and revising legal structures to permit greater press freedom (Sakr 2001). Thus it is the convergence of technological changes with permissive historical and societal forces that have favored the emergence of new organizational forms and institutional configurations. The media logic emerging from these configurations is premised on open, immediate, communication.

Furthermore, constitutive choices about the social and political uses of a communication technology, the legal and regulatory framework adopted, and ideational factors influence the path of development taken, the institutions created, and the alignment of interests. Thus constitutive choices create path dependency that can facilitate and accelerate the pace of distributional change in communication technology. Egypt’s decision to build a dispersed Internet infrastructure as opposed to having all connections go through a central node like in Saudi Arabia, create certain choice sets that constrain the political and journalistic fields even as they open new avenues of negotiation. In an attempt to link national development to global forces through information communication technologies (ICTs), he created a new Ministry and adopted policies designed to make computer and Internet access more affordable and widely available (El Sayed and Westrup 2003; Mubarak 2000a, , 2000b; Eid 2004, 57). Mubarak’s goal of integrating information technology into
socioeconomic development (El Sayed and Westrup 2003, 14) is reinforced by initiatives funded by the United States, the IMF and the World Bank that seek to expand internet access, decrease illiteracy, and create a workforce that can compete in the knowledge economy. Furthermore, in the past couple of years several private satellite stations and the first privately owned radio stations have been allowed to broadcast, suggesting a significant shift in government policy regarding control of electronic media. These regulatory changes reflect the dominant distributional and epistemological orthodoxy of neoliberal globalization- privatization and aversion to regulation (Hamdy, 2002). By looking at distributional change within its historically contextualized framework it is possible to show how orbiting satellites and a dispersed Internet have permitted new journalism practices to emerge that are changing the rules of the game and undermining political authority.

State-media relations

Whereas the convergence between the state and its media system could have been assumed in the past (Rugh 2004; Boyd 1999), technological diffusion, the development of a regional news system, and the forces of globalization have converged on Egypt's media system, altering the way journalism is practiced and what it means to be a journalist. This is not to say that the Egyptian journalistic field is completely unfettered by state intervention, censorship, legal and regulatory barriers. But the field is undergoing a change to its very nature as professional identities and practices, norms, and relations with other fields shift, altering the relative power of journalists in Egypt. Bourdieu defines a field as a structured social arena encompassing a system of social positions, laws, and practices in which people struggle for the field’s preservation or transformation (Bourdieu, 1998), or in the case of Egypt, its creation. The primary task of the Arab media has historically been to create public opinion and successful communication from the state to society (Hafez 2001, 2), and thus, until recently, most journalists were state employees and thus part of the
political field. Communication occurred directly from the state through its people without being filtered through an additional layer, represented by professional journalists in societies where media ownership and employment is independent from the state. But as Egyptian journalists construct a professional identity separate from the state they increasingly appeal to the audience for validation, elevating the importance of credibility and independence in journalism and creating a new filtration layer between the state and its citizens. Thus, like politicians in the political field, journalists in the journalistic field must now appeal to people outside their field— the public (Bourdieu 1991).

Journalism and new forms of citizen media benefit from the new media ecology, whereas secrecy and informational control do not. Although radio and terrestrial broadcasting are susceptible to jamming and frequency overload, satellite footprints do not respect the sovereignty of national borders and are prohibitively expensive to block. Perhaps this is why Mubarak agreed to the wide-ranging interview on the pan-Arab Al Arabiya; authority must be seen and narrated. Rather than allow the framing of the possible succession of his son to be wildly speculative, Mubarak interjected the official perspective into the story so that subsequent narrations would have to juxtapose speculation with the official position. But even as information crosses boundaries it also negates them. As the boundary between private and public disintegrates media bring matters previously confined to the private realm into the public eye, and the Internet allows the most intimate details of a person’s life and thoughts to become fodder for public consumption. Those institutions, forms of authority, and social forces that can adapt to the visibility, immediacy, and accountability of the communication system will thrive, while those that do not will whither away.

---

1 Although there has been a non-state and even opposition press in Egypt, all broadcasting journalism was done by state employees.
Control of the media and other influencers of public opinion form a dynamic part of the ideological structure of state hegemony and therefore such informational control has been a key strategy used by the state to maintain its hegemony (Gramsci 1992). The power of Al Jazeera has directly challenged the power of the state to frame social reality and set the public agenda. The agenda set by the media gives primacy to the Iraq war, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Islam and reform, propelling them to the top of the political agenda. When an angry contingent of opposition MPs marched through the streets of Cairo to the doors of the Arab League demanding a meeting with Amr Musa, they could hardly be ignored since dozens of television cameras captured their demands for him to do something about the Qana massacre. Secretary-General Musa met with them and held a press conference afterwards. Later that week protests over the war engulfed downtown Cairo as hundred of demonstrators alerted by blogs, text messages, and phone calls converged on Tharir Square. News stations dispersed images of the protesting youth through the airwaves while photos and accounts of police brutality appeared online almost immediately. A week after the war in Lebanon started, President Hosni Mubarak, who had initially refused to condemn Israel’s military response to the kidnapping of its soldiers, made an about face and condemned the attack as unwarranted and extreme in the face of pressure from a public who formed their opinions and made them heard using a variety of communication outlets, from satellite television to the internet. Journalists had brought the war to the public, and the public responded to their government through the media. The institutionalization of the media within the state traditionally stabilized and perpetuated the political order, but as professionalization, competition, ICT development and momentum for reform increase, the logic of media is taking on a “life of its own” (Cox 1981, 219). Pressure for autonomy by journalists is shifting the relative power of sociopolitical forces in Egypt as a journalistic field distinct from the political field emerges and a journalistic identity develops.

2 The Qana Massacre is what the Arab media called Israel’s July 30th bombing of Lebanon that killed 30 women and children.
(Deibert 1997, 37; Bourdieu 1998). Journalists and media observers recognize this change and have sought to take advantage of it, which serves to reinforce and strengthen the power of the journalistic field.

With the development of Arabic transnational television and the Internet, journalism has seeped across borders and begun wielding its power against the state. Al Jazeera is the most powerful example, but the growing significance of citizen journalism, like blogs, is also undermining state control over the information environment. As one of the most powerful agents in the Arab mediascape, Al Jazeera has had a significant impact on journalists, who resoundingly credit the station with setting the competitive standards in their field and doing the type of watchdog journalism to which they aspire. Since the turn of the 21st century, competition among information producers has intensified as hundreds of new satellite stations began broadcasting, the press moved online, and citizen journalism on the Internet emerged as an alternative to the mainstream press, the sum of which represents a significant distributional change in the Arab media system. With a vast array of choices for news, journalists feel the need to provide better coverage in order to attract viewers who can so easily switch to another channel. Despite the lack of audience data or ratings (Fakhreddine 2006), journalists perceive the satellite stations as important competitors and act accordingly. Thus the perception of importance is as influential as quantitative proof. For example, after Al Jazeera appeared on the airwaves the Egyptian government created Nile News to compete with it using a similar style of news and more live coverage than was typical for state television (Bolok 2006). The imperative for the state is to figure out how to remain competitive when inexpensive and abundant satellite news is perceived as communicating directly to the people without the government as intermediary. With nearly 80 percent of Egyptians turning to Al Jazeera for their first or second news choice, citizens no longer need to rely on state news for their
information needs. Thus while the Egyptian Network continues to attract some viewers, only 10 percent say they watch it first for news, and 25 percent watch it second (Telhami and Zogby 2005), meaning these viewers likely compare government news with other sources. Thus it is critical that state news emulate the approaches of more popular stations, from live coverage to modern sets to breaking news.

Middle Eastern journalists resoundingly credit Al Jazeera with having opened up the media environment for other stations (Demerdesh 2006; Ghareeb 2000; Kassem 2006). They usually focus on the nature of the programming, radically different from that of government-owned terrestrial stations, which broke political and cultural taboos with coverage of the first Palestinian Intifada, call-in shows, Crossfire-format discussion shows, and critical coverage of Arab governments unheard of a decade ago. It also set the standard for Arab news in terms of being perceived as independent and critical of the governments in the region and abroad and by its emphasis on live reporting, coverage of ordinary people, and sophisticated aesthetics. Al Jazeera’s style and approach paved the way for more critical and creative news programming, a far cry from the traditionally dull formats of government-run news programs that featured routine activities of the head of state (Miles 2005). Furthermore, the content of the news includes public discussions of traditionally private issues that challenge cultural categories of public discourse and bring formerly subverted topics into the public arena (Lynch 2006). People routinely speak of the ‘Al Jazeera effect’, like the ‘CNN effect,’ and its competitors seek to compete on its terms by adapting similar formats and approaches. For these reasons Al Jazeera is uniquely positioned as a powerful actor in the journalistic field, exerting pressure that has served to reorganize the field in relation to itself.
The principles of Einsteinian physics help explain how “a very powerful agent within a field can distort the whole space, cause the whole space to be organized in relation to itself,” which is what has happened in Egypt (Bourdieu 2005, 43). Changes in the modes of communication favor Al Jazeera because it has adapted to a dispersed audience, fills its 24-hour news cycle with information that stands out because of its newness, opposition to the status quo, and transgression of traditional boundaries. Not only was it posed to take advantage of the emerging information environment in the last decade of the twentieth century, it reinforced the changes taking place and helped usher in a new era of competition and professionalism. Satellite news media, but especially Al Jazeera, are distorting the logic of journalism as it has traditionally been practiced. Thus independent newspapers like Al Masry Al Yaum have found a market in Egypt for an independent, professional “newspaper of record” that is challenging the press to keep pace with its coverage, professional salaries, and reputation (Kassem 2006). As the model below describes, certain powerful agents that adapt or thrive in a communications environment exert such force of attraction that other agents in the field reorganize in relation to that agent.

Figure 1: The Distorting Effects of Powerful Agents: The Relational Logic of the Journalistic and Political Fields in Egypt Pre- and Post-Distributional Changes
Until recently, the primary task of the indigenous Arab media was to create public opinion and transmit information from the state to society (Hafez 2001, 2). It has even been argued that television journalism in the Arab world did not exist prior to this decade (Schleifer 2006), although that is exaggerated and only accounts for a contemporary form of journalism. Television is one of the most important mechanisms for manipulating public opinion because of its overwhelming symbolic power and scope. With more than 40 percent of the population in Egypt illiterate (The world factbook 2007), the vast reach of television’s images, its de facto monopoly on information diffusion that transcends illiteracy and agenda-setting capabilities gives it a monopoly on what “goes into the heads” of most people, allowing journalists’ conceptions of the world to become the predominant frame of reality (Bourdieu 1998, 18). The framing of particular information as “news” indicates that it claims to veraciously represent truth and reality (Goffman 1986). Through the use of images, television creates a “reality effect” by showing things and making people believe in what it shows (Bourdieu 1998, 21). As Thompson argues, technically mediated communication, specifically television, changes responsive action and production of communication, is largely monological, and creates a “structural asymmetry” between producers and receivers that makes it relatively dissimilar from other forms of mass communication (Thompson 1995, 96). The Internet collapses this asymmetry by blurring the distinction between producer and receiver, public and private, reality and fiction. Although people can interpret and make what they want of media messages, the primacy of visual proof in contemporary society and a message framed as “news” yields significant power. Such power extends not only from television, but from Internet news sources as well, which similarly offer visual and narrative “proof” to support claims of facticity and truth. Given the relatively small percentage of Egyptians online, however, control of the airwaves is a significantly more important form of power today.
Controlling this symbolic power has been the policy of Arab governments ever since television’s introduction into the region. By the mid-1970s every Arab country had built its own terrestrial television system and many had satellite ground stations (Rugh 2004, xiv). State-owned media outlets have traditionally been used by their governments to portray the regime in a particular way. Since those in power depend on a mixture of coercion and consent to maintain their rule, they use the media, especially terrestrial broadcasting, to manufacture consent by reflecting the agenda of those in power (Gramsci 1992; Chomsky et al. 1992). Thus it is illegal and punishable by fines and imprisonment to criticize the government in Egypt. The ban against government (and religious) criticism has a long history that can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire’s first press law for the region in 1857 (Islam 2003). There is also “a long tradition of Arab states, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia, attempting to influence what is written about them in the Arab world press” that dates back to the Lebanese civil war (Boyd 2001, 56).

Control over media production and dissemination, however, is made increasingly difficult by the distributional changes in the communication sphere and the growing importance of power that lies outside of traditional military or economic conceptions. This has been described as soft power (Nye 2004) or symbolic power (Barnett 1998; Bourdieu 1991) and is inherent in theories about attraction, framing, and agenda-setting (Entman 2003; McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver 1997; Lee 2004). The power to define the parameters of debate (Seib 2004/2005), to take away the status quo (Moe 2005) as Al Jazeera has, or to bring topics into the public sphere (Lynch 2006) gives the news media, and journalists as the creators of content, an increasingly important type of power. Thus in an era when soft power is increasingly important (Nye 2004), mass media provide means of accumulating symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984) and influencing public debate that are essential to leaders and opposition movements seeking public support, a public that can no longer be assumed to end at the
state’s borders. Such news undermines official authority by reporting facts on the ground, from protests to poverty, that challenge state authority and credibility. “The simple report, the very fact of reporting, of putting on record as a reporter, always implies a social construction of reality that can mobilize (or demobilize) individuals or groups” and thus in political struggles the “capacity to impose a way of seeing the world” is at stake (Bourdieu 1998, 21). As this power shifts from the state to journalists, the government must compete to have their versions of social reality accepted in the marketplace of ideas.

Through most of the 1990s the state and political parties were still able to use the media as a political tool and nefariously impinged on the development of an independent journalistic field, hiring journalists to convey their messages to the public so that they were mouthpieces rather than professionals. But as changing perceptions of the media’s role in politics, pressure for democratization and a free press, and new ICT technology took hold in the last years of the 20th century, competition among Arabic news channels skyrocketed. As stations compete to attract local and regional audiences with higher expectations than in the past, journalists have begun to define themselves in relation to audience expectations rather than state mandates. In the past, journalism was a function of state power and thus journalistic identity was contiguous with the political field. The government would “turn a blind eye” to everything from finances, to budgets, to circulation claims as long as it had control over media content (Kassem 2006). Control over the defining product of journalism, content, stunted the development of an autonomous journalistic field and professional habitus. Habitus refers to the dispositions and cultural structures that shape self-perception and identity and transmit social power, which are composed of structured social relations comprised of commonly understood rules, norms, practices and authority (Benson 2006; Barnett and Finnemore 2004)(Bourdieu 1998, , 1977). The journalistic habitus could not develop until the
journalistic field emerged. The notion of habitus helps explain strategies to maintain identity and power (Turow 1997), such as the strategy of professionalization. Until the imperative of competition permeated the media environment, the political field conditioned journalists’ cultural structures and practices, whereas today the emergence of a relatively autonomous journalistic field governed by its own relations of power and practices has given rise to a new generation of journalists that identify themselves according to a professional habitus and as distinct and separate from the state.

In today’s world of soft power and mediated communication it seems that we have indeed moved from the industrial era to a code-governed era in which reality is a frame of reference, a belief in truth that is performative (especially when performed as late-breaking news) but ultimately subjective (Baudrillard 2005, 3, 19). Communication systems are linked to one’s very understanding of reality, and thus changes in these systems are related to conceptual changes that influence intuitional changes in the political realm (Goody 1987, 3). The news, then, is an “imposition of a definition of the world,” constructed through interactions between social agents located in various fields who are dependent on the journalistic field to present their vision of the world to the public (Bourdieu 2005). If knowledge or “reality” is constructed through social interaction, in which communication is central (Searle 1995), then the media and journalists are critical actors in the production of reality. And if power derives from the structure of knowledge, people with knowledge or control over its communication, are especially significant (Strange 1988). Journalists, as the people on the frontlines of knowledge production and projection through the news media, are therefore especially important as “cue givers” in focusing attention on what is important in an information saturated context (Nye 2004). Events transmitted by television must first be translated into a story before becoming a “communicative event,” a process that privileges
the reproduction of dominant meanings by journalists and producers who operate according to a professional code (Hall 1973, 2-9). Hall contends that such professional codes tend to reproduce the hegemony of the state, but his analysis of Western commercial media does not hold in the Egyptian context. The professionalization of Arab journalists occurs in part through criticism of the status quo in order to build credibility with the audience. This does not in and of itself necessitate a challenge to state power, but since the discourse now includes Islamists, liberal democrats, and opposition movements, it challenges the hegemony of the state and its control over social discourse. Journalists, like the producers of Egyptian serials, are becoming “critical mediators” who work within their own professional codes and toward their own goals, which do not always parallel those of the state, (Abu-Lughod 2001, 13).

As it turns out, much of the content produced by journalists often implicitly attacks the status quo via messages about liberalization, reform, and democratization on one hand, or the Islamist project on the other. The logic of abundance, instantaneity, and availability of information governing today’s modes of communication has favored the development of social norms premised on the production and dissemination of information across territorial and social boundaries and the vocalization of opinion in a public sphere that transcends these boundaries. The distributional change brought on by satellite television and globalization favors the immediacy and visibility as producers constantly seek new items to fill the news hole. The 24-hour news cycle must be fed. State new services have felt the pressure of deadlines and timeliness, forcing them to get to the scene quicker and on-air more reliably (Osman 2006). Thus journalists at state-run stations who said they have felt pressured by this competition end up covering topics they might not otherwise be inclined publicize. Competition has become so fierce that the state has even put up obstacles to prevent its competitors from getting the story first. For example, during the 2006 Dahab bombings,
Nile News wanted to get the story first so the reporters were flown there in a special plane and other stations were initially prevented from entering the area (Bolok 2006). Thus Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera rebroadcast Egyptian footage (Youssef 2006), lending credibility to the state broadcasters who got there first and whose coverage was deemed good enough for the independent stations to use. But although Egyptian state news may be increasingly competitive when covering breaking news like bombings, this competitive edge does not extend to opposition activities like protests (Youssef 2006). For the time being most state news try to ignore mass demonstrations, indicating perhaps the vested interests of those journalists who, in order to maintain their jobs and positions in the field, may be less inclined to challenge the status quo.

Most journalists nonetheless proclaim that the government can no longer ignore that something occurred and that lying has become increasingly difficult; but this pressure is not always acute enough to compel coverage. State media nonetheless continue to ignore some important events for both political and financial reasons. When a Nile News journalist was sent to cover the war in Iraq he had to stay at an inexpensive Amman hotel and travel five hours each way to the Iraqi border because the government-run station did not have enough money to pay for his expenses (Bolok 2006). The influx of foreign aid workers, journalists, and contractors has caused enormous inflation in the border region, pricing out those without the means to pay Western prices for hotels and supplies. Of course, the choice not to pay these reporting expenses reflects an economic influence on news decisions that could very well have a political stimulus.

Many news choices, however, more clearly reflect political rather than financial choices. NileTV, for example, did not cover the May 2005 protests in which security forces sexually assaulted women protesters (Osman 2006). Nor did it cover the huge demonstrations in downtown Cairo that
occurred during and Arab League meeting, just the official proclamation of the Arab ministers. A producer for that station who now works for Al Jazeera said she knew without asking that the demonstration “wouldn’t work” on NileTV so it wasn’t covered (Ghadban 2006). But they were shown on Al Jazeera and in the newspapers, so the public not only “found out” about them, but also found fault with the government channels for not telling them about them. By not covering the protests the state could not tell its story and thus left the framing of the news entirely to non-state media. Thus media professionals, rather than state officials, controlled the narrative and images that defined the protests as oppositional and widespread, a frame reinforced by the lack of a competing story from state media. And unlike the increasing polarization of news consumption in the West, where people choose to reinforce their beliefs by reading or watching the outlets that most closely adhere to those beliefs (Pew 2004), people in the Arab world, and Egypt in particular, are accustomed to comparing coverage from a variety of news outlets to figure out where the truth lies. Even taxi drivers, for example, say they read the state newspaper *Al Ahram* for the official viewpoint, *Al Masry Al Yaum* for the independent version, and watch *Al Jazeera* for “the truth.”

The constitutive rules of journalism are changing as competition with regional and international media intensifies and new activities like blogging challenge traditional conceptions of journalism (Ryfe 2006). What it means to “do” journalism and “be” a journalist is shifting as new publication forums emerge, and professionalization and independence from the political sphere increases. And it appears that with an increasing array of news choices based on a variety of sociopolitical models, journalists and publics are less inclined to perceive state-directed journalism as legitimate. The regulative rules of journalism are also shifting as professional journalists express disdain for the traditional way of doing journalism in the Arab world and aspire to what they see as universal professional norms like accuracy, balance, double-sourcing, and using a variety of sources.
Egyptian journalists routinely cited respect, balance, accuracy and finding “the truth” as the primary goals of good journalism and the objectives for which journalists should strive. Although a 1988 cross-national study found disagreement on norms and standards of journalism and concluded that there were not emerging universal standards (Weaver and Wu 1998), Egyptian journalists contradict those findings. They expressed a belief in universal journalistic ethics that were not particular to the West, indicating that an increasingly interconnected world of information and communication technology favors a convergence of news values across political and national cultures. Or as one journalist put it, “the standard of the media in the Washington Post and New York Times is the same as here, but the targets and subjects are completely different” (Sheheem 2006). In fact, a more recent study on cultural communication values found that the divide between Western and Islamic journalism is closing because of an emerging intercultural consensus on journalism ethics (Hafez 2001). The values professed by Egyptian journalists today sound similar to the common ethical principles that emerged from this study – truth, respect for another person's dignity, and no harm to the innocent. Thus traditional practices of journalism such as being paid for story placements, parroting government leaders, and covering up sensitive issues are disadvantaged by the new open media environment and a journalistic identity premised on professionalism.

Of course practice may lag behind pronouncements. Journalistic standards are currently invoked discursively more than practically, but the fact that journalists profess these ideals and identify them as legitimate indicates that they constitute what it means to do good journalism. Such regulative discourse controls the practice of journalism from within the field and restricts the right to speak with journalistic authority (Foucault 1981). There is minimal slippage between what is meant by balance, accuracy, and sourcing in Egypt compared to the West. Many journalists have worked for

3 The idea of respect, however, is problematic, since it implies that some type of higher authority can determine whether coverage is respectful, and what topics are deserving of this respect.
Western news outlets and therefore use the same vocabulary. The syllabi and books used in journalism courses at American University in Cairo, for example, address these concepts in a way comparable to such courses in the West. The convergence of professional standards, like accuracy and balance, and competitive criteria, like engaging program formats and live coverage, indicate constitutive and regulative rules of journalism that transcend national boundaries and political systems. As information becomes more accessible, easier to find, un-tethered from location and nationality, and increasingly subject to public feedback, the producers of information are competing for credibility and legitimacy in order to gain audience share at the local, national, and transnational levels.

A primary responsibility of the press from the perspective of the Arab journalists I interviewed is to bring the voices of ordinary people into the public arena. Women, opposition members, Islamists, dissidents, youth and other traditionally absent voices increasingly appear in the mainstream media as news programs compete. The content of Arabic news is far more representative now compared to when official ceremonies and the minutiae of official life comprised the bulk of news content. Satellite news stations attempt to differentiate themselves by the emphasis they place on “the people,” meaning that by definition good journalism cannot solely rely on government. The competition is especially fierce among Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, both claiming to prevail in their attention to average people. For example, Al Arabiya’s Cairo bureau chief said that she believed the greater emphasis her station places on average people distinguishes the station from its competitors (Abul-Azm 2006), but Al Jazeera claims the same (Musa 2006). This emphasis on bringing diverse voices into the public sphere is challenging notions of public and private, global and local, often demonstrating that such concepts are in fact co-constitutive and socially constructed. A new rule is emerging as the public plays a more active role in journalism, from demands placed on news
sources to representation of public views to participation in the production of news. The new rule is giving voice to public opinion. Search engines, blogs, interactive news sites, and other features of the Internet, coupled with increased competition from private, state, and foreign media are raising professional criteria throughout the field, while putting a premium on public participation via representation in the media. The state is no longer in control of media content, losing control over one of the most important tools in the creation of public opinion and the most dynamic element of the state’s ideological structure. (Gramsci 1992, 52-53).

Conclusions
If we agree with Egyptian democracy advocate Saad Eddin Ibrahim that “Arab satellites have done probably for the Arab world more than any organized critical movement could have done, in opening up the public space, in giving Arab citizens a newly found opportunity to assert themselves,” (Ibrahim 2004), then one begins to see how lapses in state control could be exploited and distributional changes capitalized on. These apertures confirm the relative importance of soft power to create knowledge and truth, and the crucial role of the media in the production of reality. Since the Egyptian state no longer completely dominates the journalistic field, definitional power over the representation of reality on the screens of millions of viewers is no longer the state’s domain; it is increasingly the domain of journalists. Thus the new Egyptian journalism fundamentally challenges the hegemony of the state and its power to portray itself. It also gives power to the public at the expense of the state. The media no longer simply transmit information from the state to the people, but from the people to the state. Ordinary people figure more prominently on the news than ever before with a corresponding decrease in protocol news, and the public enjoys greater agenda-setting power through access to the airwaves. Similarly the importance of the audience, because of competition, gives the public a say in what constitutes news, “giving voice to the voiceless” as Al Jazeera’s slogan proclaimed (Musa 2006). Yet despite the visibility of
ordinary people, most news focuses on Cairo and national politics or foreign policy. There is little local news coverage or outlets devoted to covering communities outside of the capital. Thus while the state must adapt to a media logic at the national level, there is minimal accountability or visibility at the local level because journalists are so focused on the top. The regionalization of audiences may thus be a negative factor for local domestic coverage, since the media are competing primarily at a national and regional level.

Even as journalistic professionalism and independence continue to make strides, there are no guarantees. Whereas Al Jazeera played such an important role in putting pressure on the Egyptian and Arab information environment to open up, a disturbing drift may be underway. Al Jazeera appears to have moderated its criticism of Egypt and Saudi Arabia and shifted its emphasis on political reform to focus more on an Islamist agenda (Musa 2007). If Al Jazeera ceases to be the proponent of change it has been thus far, the competitive pressure it has put on other news outlets may diminish. Yet after more than a decade of leadership, Al Jazeera’s singular importance has been diluted by the emergence of respectable competitors like Al Arabiya and Abu Dhabi TV, and its continued economic ties to the ruler of Qatar. Egyptian and other Arab journalists have gotten a taste of freedom and professionalism, and they seem to like it. They have developed a vested interest in the new journalism, with the very nature of their identity intricately bound up with their role as professionals, making it unlikely that they will give up what they have won, even if it means confrontation with the state.

Furthermore, even as professional journalism is developing in Egypt and across the Arab world, the nature of journalism itself is changing with the proliferation of citizen journalism forums that are changing the construction of social knowledge. Mainstream journalism must increasingly compete
with alternative sources of information and news, even as these alternative sources feed back into the content of mainstream media. People are now not only part of the news in the Arab world, they are creating news and disseminating it via the Internet and mobile phones. The traditional separation between information producer and consumer is fading, and hierarchies of authority are breaking down as journalists worldwide lose their privileged status as purveyors of information. Thus even as professional media outlets are transforming the media environment and the nature of journalism in the Arab world, a revolution in the very role that information and communication technologies play in the lives of citizens is underway. Nonetheless, the mainstream media continue to play a crucial role in people’s daily lives, with television remaining the largest source of news in Egypt and playing a central role in political decisions. The advances in journalism made over the past few years have been critical to making the state more visible, more accountable, and less hegemonic as it adapts to a new media logic.
BIBLIOGRAPHY
Bassiouni, Amin. 2006. Personal interview. Cairo, 29 June.
Bolok, Mohamed. 2006. Personal interview. Cairo, 30 July.
Demerdes, Moataz. 2006. Personal interview. Cairo, 5 July.
Fakhreddine, Jihad N. 2006. Pan-Arab satellite television may be facing a drastic correction. The Daily Star, 1 March.
Ghadban, Lena. 2006. Personal interview. Cairo, 10 July.
Speaking Truth to Power: How Al Jazeera is Challenging and Improving Egyptian Journalism


Kassem, Hisham. 2006. Personal interview. Cairo, 3 July.


Osman, Dina. 2006. Personal interview. Cairo, 11 July.


The world factbook. 2007. C.I.A.

Youssef, Nabil. 2006. Personal interview. Cairo, 21 June.