

5. Media Literacy in MENA: Moving beyond the Vicious Cycle of Oxymora

PhD Ibrahim Saleh
Department of Journalism & Mass Communication
The American University in Cairo (Egypt)
librasma@gmail.com; librasma@aucegypt.edu

ABSTRACT

At a time when the region of MENA (Middle East & North Africa) is full of potential for capacity-building, social unrest, political agitation and poor civil liberties are still plaguing the population. The status of media education is low in MENA countries, preoccupied by many other vital issues, and yet the lack of it is detrimental to civic engagement... Current literacy practices in MENA countries have poor standards for critically assessing the media and research findings show a widening gap between the general public and the journalists, which further impairs media literacy. The analysis deals first with MENA countries and their «mal-media situation», using the metaphor of the cycle of oxymora to explain the various tensions and contradictions that characterize media literacy in the region. It then attempts to provide a political and media-related context to explain the current situation. It also uses research data to explore the challenges and opportunities to change the current dim picture in MENA, and concludes with several crucial implications for policy-making about media literacy in MENA.

KEY WORDS

Media literacy, civil liberties, collective fraud, journalism, freedom of expression, civic engagement, democracy, Arab identity.

1. Setting the Scene: The Mal-Media Situation in MENA

The current media literacy arena in different parts of the Middle East & North Africa (MENA) is marked with a weak economic base, high costs of production and diffusion, heavy political patronage, cultural fragmentation, centralized geographic concentration, and very low media credibility and low prestige of journalism. Besides, laws and regulations are not clearly stated with regard to media content and other professional values. Hence, it is rational to relate the internal socio-political and economic problems with the external cut-off from the world, which characterizes the MENA region. This situation is made even more complex by a combination of heavy consumerism, religious conservatism and military presence.

Most of the people are unimpressed and unmoved, and less concerned than ever about their governments' policy directions, as they are victims of a sort of media fatigue, due to the persistent feeling that double standards for information persist, that civic engagement is subject to too many hurdles and that rhetorical commitment to democracy and freedom often serves the personal priorities of the chosen few. The main challenge remains on how to educate the members of the public and empower them to ask for their civil rights and hold their governments responsible for their public obligations.

How can media literacy bring support to liberty and identity? How can the vertical hierarchy of news be changed into horizontal networks of communication? How can a better understanding of the region's media complexities be developed for civic engagement? To study the media culture in MENA, it is necessary to apply a comparative, interdisciplinary research strategy and to adopt a problem-oriented contextual perspective rather than a single media research focus. This analysis uses comparative research findings to consider the way audiences relate to the media in MENA, to try and explain the mal-media situation and the growing gap between journalists and their publics.

This analysis reflects upon the current media literacy situation as it functions like a vicious cycle of oxymora. The term oxymoron is a figure of speech, by which a locution produces an incongruous, seemingly self-contradictory effect. It is used here to describe a situation that reflects the contradictory status of media literacy in MENA¹. This status is oxymoronic because, on the one hand, media pay lip-service to democracy and its obligations to people and, on the other hand, they are subject to the control of authoritarian regimes that create double standards among the people. Such status has led to a persistent malaise in the relation between the media and the public, a «mal-media» situation, where the two parties feel there is little shared interest. This mal-media situation has caused a cohort of veteran political activists and media personnel to express regret and concern over the future of political and civil liberties in the region. At a time when MENA is full of potential for developing its human resources, the oppressive political systems, the lack of awareness and the absence of strategic vision have caused social unrest, political agitation and a setback of civil liberties, not to mention a severe brain drain.

The oxymoronic situation comes from the gap between the proposed reforms couched on paper in the recent years and the lack of implementation of such policies and goals in real life. In recent years, the MENA governments supported artificial reform that was not based on profound mechanisms or a concrete vision for sustainable restructuring. There are a number of problems related to the flagrant gap between the rhetoric of liberty and the reality of double-standard policies. This perpetuates the governments' lack of credibility and debilitates the will for profound social change.

Four main criticisms have been expressed by professionals and activists. The first is the marginal endorsement of freedom of expression and the press, while also ignoring other basic human needs. . The second is the superficial approach to freedom and democracy, which results in the marginalization of the interests of the majority to preserve the ruling minority's interests. The third problem is the governments' subjugation to major regional issues such as the invasion of Iraq, «Islamophobia» and the «resentment and tyranny» motivated by hatred for the Arab-Israeli conflict. And the fourth problem deals with the official simplistic analysis of multifaceted complexities that gave way to a perception of fear from the Green Danger, or the establishment of a Muslim State in Egypt and other MENA states (Saleh, 2006).

In such a context, media education and literacy come at the end of the priority list, because media are used as a platform for fabricated reality, for rationalizing the government's own iron-hand. To reinforce their politicizing solidarity, Arab governments have never allowed media to evaluate critically national domestic policies, or those of friendly governments. Media nearly never delve into national or local issues because these are the issues that most threaten their governments' authority and legitimacy.

Besides, media literacy is only possible if there is basic literacy. The average basic literacy rate in the overall region is 66%, which is relatively low, though the absolute number of adult illiterates fell from 64 million to around 58 million between 1990 and 2000-04 (Hammoud, 2005). The gender disparity is very high in this region, and women account for two-thirds of the illiteracy rate while the literacy rate is higher among young people than adults (Hammoud, 2005).

Such a bleak picture of reality is a logical result of the long years of the usual practice of the state «turning a blind eye» to finances and budgets related to human resources and education. It had an impact on media literacy because the state also turned a blind eye on media freedom and circulation claims, as long as it retained control over media content in its favour. This situation has brought about very poor media literacy rates, especially as no special policies addressed this issue. Media literacy also remains dependent on the state of the media, a situation which is not favourable to formal or informal media education.

Though a detailed characterization of the region goes beyond the scope of this analysis, though the political, cultural and economic settings of the regional fabric are very heterogeneous in nature and direction, MENA states share something in common regarding the state of their media: according to William Rugh, it is impossible to fit the media in the region with any of the «Four Theories of the Press»².

In MENA, ministers of information execute the agenda of their patron states in controlling the media and shaping their content, by enforcing harsh laws backed up by imprisonment and physical violence. The recent media explosion has complicated their former easy-to-do jobs, by widening their tasks, but they have adjusted to them. These tasks now include how to monitor the messages of the mushrooming new media scene, especially on internet, how to block the emerging activism of the expanding population of a predominantly poor, illiterate youth and how to stop the growing audience of radical Islamist groups in media, especially on TV.

Such increasing accessibility to new outlets, together with the general commercialization of all media, old and new, establishes a competition for audiences. It occurs in a highly saturated market which, combined to low media literacy rates, has driven investors to seek the lowest common denominator of heavy entertainment. But commercialization and privatization don't necessarily set media at a distance from government control: most media organizations are owned by and scripted under the watchful eye of their oppressive governments. Hence they are instruments of the government's agenda rather than authentic, independent vehicles for news.

Such perpetuation of government control across media has led to a sense of misinformation and suspicion among the public. It has perpetuated a general feeling of falsehood, that some have termed «collective fraud», which is a systematic and knowing suppression of unwelcome truths by a set of experts who either «shade» the truth or acquiesce to such shading³. This prevalent situation in many parts of MENA has resulted in media distortions, untruths, evasions, and biases collectively produced and maintained by willing journalistic lies. They contribute to the mal-media situation and to the public's feeling of being caught in a vicious cycle of oxymora.

Within this social fabric, communication and trust are reduced, hence force and violence are used to convince those who have doubts about what to believe in, especially when the public's dependence on the state news is paradoxically creating periodic «crises» of acute form. Such crises can take the form of a moral panic or an alarm over security; or they may be part of a longer-term, more diffused sense of crisis over Arab or Muslim identity.

An example of such manipulation of panic can be found in «The Economist» on September 18-24, 2004. The foreign publication describes how Egypt's leading newspaper, the government-owned daily «al-Ahram» on September 1, 2004, buried deep inside its pages the brutal massacre of twelve Nepalese kitchen workers by Iraqi guerrillas, who claimed to be doing God's work by executing Buddhist invaders. A day later, on its front page, «al-Ahram» featured rioters in Kathmandu, the Nepalese capital, attacking a mosque, without any cause-and-effect explanation. This asymmetric treatment of information is illustrative of the oxymoronic functioning of news, with unequal treatment of people and events, so that it is impossible for the public to come to an informed opinion. Patron states always justify their manipulation of media by referring to the need to prevent a return to the anarchy and violence of earlier times.

Considering the current «mal-media» situation in MENA states, media literacy becomes a contradiction in terms. The cycle of oxymora can be generally characterized

by a combination of oversimplification of terminology and concepts on the one hand, and lip-service rhetoric to freedom of expression and diffusion on the other hand. The vicious cycle encompasses the media's internal subjection to governments on the one hand, and their external separation from other regions of the world on the other hand, as many stereotypical negative images accuse MENA populations and governments of savageness and barbarism.

During the second half of the 20th Century, the MENA region aimed at unifying the general framework of its respective legislative processes, particularly through multilateral cooperation within the League of Arab States. In 1981, at the Second Conference of Arab Ministers of Justice in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, the «Sana'a Strategy» unified the domestic legislation through a series of integrated codes, including civil law, civil law procedures, penal law, penal procedures, juvenile law, prison standards, combating information technology crime, and matters related to personal status, and judicial organization and regulation.

The League of Arab States also formed a committee to unify legal and judicial terms, structures, and processes to achieve a more integrated and harmonized legal system. Concurrently, to implement the recommendations of this committee, the League of Arab States also established the Arab Centre for Legal and Judicial Studies in Beirut, Lebanon.

It is also noteworthy that, during the session of the 2005 Arab Summit in Algiers (Algeria), the Pan-Arab Parliament in Damascus (Syria) was established to demonstrate that the consecrated Islamic Shari'a represents a solid foundation for Arab jurisprudence, while utilizing other legal systems employed in the region, such as the Latin system in Egypt and other North African states and the Anglo-American system in Sudan.

Egypt, the most populated Arab state and one of the most important geo-political countries in MENA, is a case in point: the Egyptian Constitution and international human rights instruments became part of Egyptian law upon ratification by virtue of article (151) of the 1981 Constitution. Article (47) of the Egyptian constitution also promises that «freedom of opinion shall be guaranteed». Furthermore, article (19) of the «International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights», to which Egypt became a party in 1982, guarantees the right to freedom of expression, including the «freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media». A new press law was introduced in 1996, stating that «journalists are independent and not under the authority of anyone». But this did not change the «mal-media» situation because other structural and functional problems were not addressed at the same time.

In practice, the Egyptian presidents have always manipulated the judiciary system since judicial appointments are a presidential prerogative. Judges were considered functionaries of the Ministry of Justice, which administered and financed the court system; it is headed by the president, himself the head of the Supreme Council of

Judicial Organs. But the rule of law relatively expanded in the post-Nasser era, and judges became a vigorous force defending the legal rights of citizens against the state.

The whole political life thus has been ridden with a series of oppressive laws such as the «Riotous Assembly Law 15» (1914), the «Meetings and Demonstrations Law 14» (1923), the «Emergency Law» (1958) and the «Police Organization Law 109» (1971) of the Egyptian Constitution. Many journalists and editors have since been interrogated, charged and sometimes sentenced by lower courts as these laws haven't been changed during the Nasser era (Kienle, 1998: 223).

Between 1993 and 1995, Egypt experienced a dark period. In 1993, the «Law to guarantee democracy» within the professional syndicates was enacted due to the increasing influence of the Islamist movement. This law requires a minimum voter turnout of 50% of the members in professional syndicate elections, or getting 33% in the second round. Voting results are voided and syndicates fall under the supervision of a group of judges appointed by the government if these electoral thresholds are not met. These thresholds give the regime greater powers to invalidate elections in the professional syndicates (Kienle, 1998: 228). In the same year, the Egyptian government amended the Journalist Syndicate Law, so as to manipulate the promotion of the journalists, or their transfer to another post in the same organization.

To that end, the law made the employees of the Ministry of Information, who far outnumber professional journalists, members of the journalists syndicate (Cassandra, 1995: 15-16). Two years later, the press law was passed to impose heavy sentences on publication crimes such as printing misleading information, false rumours, or defamation, in particular if these were directed against the state, its representatives, or its economic interests, or endangering public order. The penalties were increased to five years of imprisonment and payment of exceedingly high fines.

In May 1999, the Egyptian parliament passed a law encroaching upon the NGOs' freedom to organize and act, which banned private groups from working to influence government policy, or union activity. It gave the Ministry of Social Affairs power to disband boards of directors. NGOs must seek permission from the government before accepting foreign donations. The new law sets prison terms of up to two years for violations of vaguely formulated offences such as «threatening law, public morality, and order and national unity». Following a wave of protests by both Egyptian and international NGOs, the law was found unconstitutional by the «Constitutional Court» on procedural grounds and suspended. The country's older law on NGOs (Law 32 of 1964), which is seen as equally repressive, remains in force (Saleh, 2008).

The story of broadcasting is no different, as it has been always in the hands of the state as a political instrument from the start of the republic in 1952, through Law 13 of 1979 and Law 223 of 1989 that gives the Egyptian Radio & TV Union (ERTU) a complete monopoly over broadcasting. It is thus clear that the person running the ERTU that is regulated by the Ministry of Information and is headed by the minister of information, detains an enormous power over news and content (Saleh, 2003).

A further deterioration took place in February 2008 with the new alleged «code of ethics» monitoring the media performance of the satellite channels that was initiated by Egypt and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This code of ethics can be used as a censorship document that may have a chilling effect on press freedom initiatives in Egypt. Another example is the arrest, for the second time, of Howida Tahah, a female journalist working for «Al-Jezzer» in Cairo, as a result of being accused of fraud and defamation.

Beyond the Egyptian case, all MENA states have similar laws and legislations restricting freedom of expression and diffusion. Yet the problem goes far beyond the law's content to deal with codes related to publishing cases and issuance of newspapers that can be found in «Imprints law, Penal Code, Journalism regulation law, State documents law, Civil servants law», banning army news and military decisions, parties law, and the intelligence law⁴.

2. MENA and the Risk of «Psychic Numbing»

In this political context, what is perhaps most disturbing is the unfortunate rise of a soft-form of destructive self-censorship in media practice among journalists. For example, basic information such as demographic statistics is treated as if it were a state secret, and it is almost impossible to report on the inner working of governments. This is reinforced by the fact that most of the media personnel and journalists lack professional training. Knowledge is not valued, and there is a reckless use of power by senior bureaucrats.

It is thus very common to find that journalists and editors are frequently co-opted by officials and business interests, while others who expose their governments' corruption, or heavily criticize their regimes' practices are often subject to arbitrary arrests or threats or acts of violence. The fear of such retribution leads to poor government transparency, allows corruption to remain ingrained, and serves to prevent any meaningful discussion of issues that could lead to policy reform.

Faulty information endangers the whole of media literacy, where 24-hour news networks willingly spit out unsubstantiated hearsay and indulge the whims of camera-ready «expert» pundits / gossip-mongers who care little about truth and more about their own individual leanings. Real journalists must take care to guard their reputations by not participating in such programmes.

This mal-media situation of the region has stimulated a new spirit of cultural revolt that embraces both conservatives and liberals in the media profession. They object to poor media performance and deliberate ignorance of the public's interests. They feel that the hawkish climate of extremism reinforces a growing sense of alienation in the general population that is detrimental to progress. They think that it causes a real brain drain as professional journalists leave the country. It sets the whole region back, causing what Robert Jay Lifton called «Psychic Numbing»⁵, a feeling of exclusion and disconnectedness that hits the journalists and the population alike.

Such government manoeuvres are symptomatic of «scare and confusion» (Shaheen, 2006). The regional media environment suffers from brutal enforcement of censorship, and assiduous self-censorship on the one hand, while, on the other hand, the public view themselves as victims of two forms of media colonialism: one imposed by their own national governments and the second by the United States and its allies. Oppressed populations see their national and international oppressors working hand in hand to threaten their livelihood and to humiliate them. As a result of such a cycle of oxymora, the underground voices of dissent are channelled into and through radical Islamist movements. These movements are not favourable to media freedom either, though they try to use media to promote their cause.

As stated by Michael Vlahos: «The [radical Islamist] insurgency is an authentic Islamic renewal movement and central to change». Accordingly, «a successful Islamist revolution today is possibly the best way to diffuse ‘radical’ Islam –because of necessity it will do the defusing itself» (Vlahos, 2002: 26-28). In the media, Muslims put up a front of peaceful behaviour but, in private, some may consider having large number of casualties as a success for their cause. This twofold attitude in turn legitimizes the government’s censorship enforcement.

An unprecedented spate of mass protests swept the region in 2006, which was perceived in some progressive and radical circles as a public awakening after long years of stagnation. It was also interpreted by the government as proof of the infiltration of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in different civil activities and syndicates. For example, Al-Zawaheri, the second-ranking man in al Qaeda, became radicalized while jailed in Egypt (Shahine, 2006).

In contrast with its legislation frozen in past practices and political scare, the media in the region are in the midst of a highly dynamic transition, fuelled by the emergence of low-cost, accessible satellite broadcast technology, including both the regionally located media and the diaspora media. They create the so-called «pan-Arab market».

This de facto media reality provides an ironic twist to the non-aligned pan-Arab political rhetoric of the fifties and sixties that was ushered in by Gamel Abdul Nasser, according to whom nationalized Egyptian media purported to speak for all Arabs. In the post-Nasser period, pan-Arab rhetoric was left to journals and newspapers located in London or Paris (off-shore media), where a Western-educated intelligentsia debated post-Marxist or post-modern constructs rather than pushing for individual rights and freedoms in their own country.

The cycle of oxymora then extends beyond the production values of news, the high-tech use of equipment, and controlled market competitiveness. It is related to the media continuous act of suppressing unwelcome truths via collective fraud and of pandering to the emotional and political sentiments of their audience in order to maximize their market share. And yet, such market share is not guaranteed and does not provide media independence. Despite all the attempts to commercialize media activity with advertising revenues, the shortfall is formidable. Media advertising revenue

in the whole of the Arab world totals a mere \$1.5 billion a year, while the annual operating costs, however, are around \$16 billion, which means a \$14.5 billion net loss each year (United States Institute of Peace, 2005). This imbalance makes it difficult for commercial media to gain independence from the patron states, as they are the ones that compensate the loss.

Regarding the new online media in the region, a wider range of perspectives and messages exists than is available through conventional media. All players in the region attempt to use the on-line media with their unlimited possibilities and potential. Radical groups use the websites to address current and potential supporters with an objective to demoralize the enemy, by threatening attacks and by fostering feelings of guilt about the enemy's conduct and motives (Wiemann, 2004).

Thomas Hegghammer said that the Internet will play an increasingly important role for militants as they intensify their campaign in Saudi Arabia, which hosts several Muslim holy sites. «I think [Internet videos are] most certainly aimed at the Americans or the Westerners in general»⁶. However the internet is also subject to censorship once a site becomes popular or «noticed». A visit by the Egyptian state security forces to the site's office will always result with the toning down of the rhetoric.

Though it is difficult to assess the patron states' intentions, the fact remains that regional media tend to violate internationally recognized journalistic ethics and norms. In fact, the tension between the propriety of showing gruesome images on the one hand, and the protection of freedom of speech and the right to know on the other hand, will remain unresolved, unless effective media education policies for journalists and for the general public are put in place.

Regional audiences are put off by the current media market, as they feel deprived from any communication within their countries, and cannot but express their desperation at the lack of coverage of national problems or at the distorted coverage of terrorist proclamations and acts. The status of media literacy in MENA needs to be improved for confidence to be regained. This implies an assessment of the differences in expectations and possibilities, via research, in a pattern similar to other regions of the world, like Argentina or Korea, that have implemented reform based on scientific reports.

3. Evaluating the Challenges and Opportunities for Change

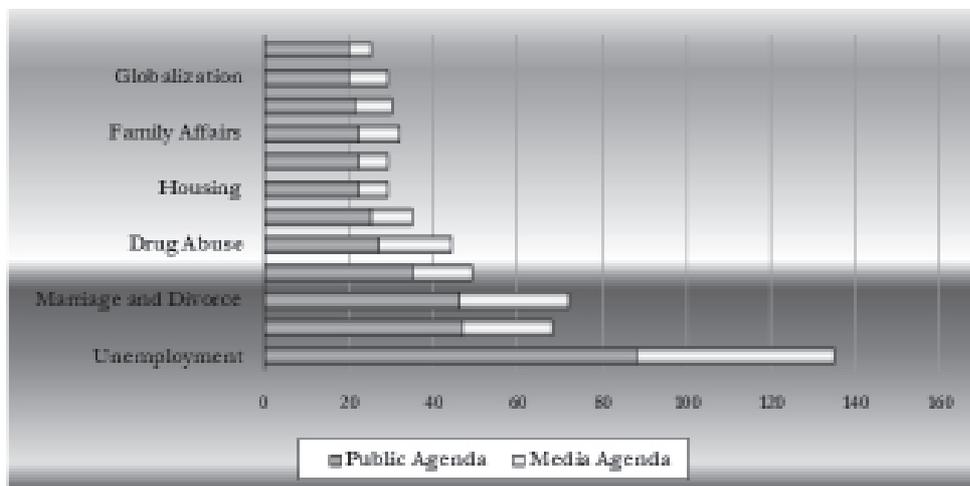
To explore the challenges and opportunities to change the current dim picture in MENA, and to evaluate the current constraints to see how they can be overcome, independent and adequate research results are necessary. These can be drawn using data collected by the «British Council in Cairo Project», «Media & Society», conducted by AC Nielsen in 2005. This research provides a general picture of the perspectives, values and attitudes of professionals and how they can be compared to the perspectives, values and attitudes of the public. It was conducted within six countries of the MENA region (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the Palestine), and allows for comparative analysis.

The research is based on a qualitative approach of extensive interviews with a total of 1210 personal face-to-face interviews (200 interviews per country). Interviews lasted for about 35-40 minutes; they were conducted with media professionals and with media university students from August 11 to September 22, 2005. All sample members resided in major cities in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan or Palestine. Each had a minimum regular (every other day) readership of one or more of the major daily Arabic language newspapers and watched TV regularly.

3.1. Demographics of the Sample Studied

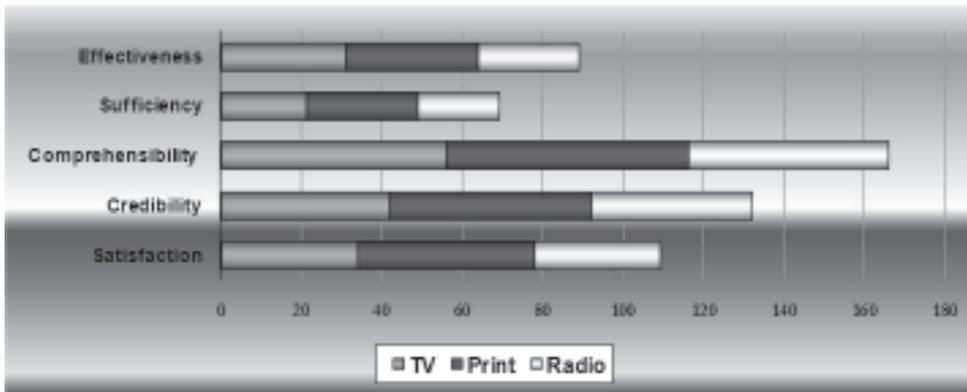
Media Professionals	Media Students	Unemployed People
Journalists, TV presenters, radio presenters.	Second, third or fourth year at faculties of Mass Communications.	Educated (having a high school or university degree).
Specialized in reporting social issues.	Males and females.	Currently unemployed.
Educated (having a university degree).	SEC. A/B and C1	Age: 18-25 and 26-35 years old.
Males and females		Males and females.
•26 years+		SEC. A/B and C1.

3.2. Chart 1: Comparison between Media Agenda and Public Agenda



As Chart 1 indicates, according to the public agenda, unemployment ranks first (88%) in the list of social issues currently faced, followed by poverty (47%) and the problems of marriage and divorce (46%). This is in contrast with the media agenda, which reveals a different list of problems. Quality of education (47%) seems to be the main social issue that the media focus on, while unemployment (9%) comes at the end of their list of priorities.

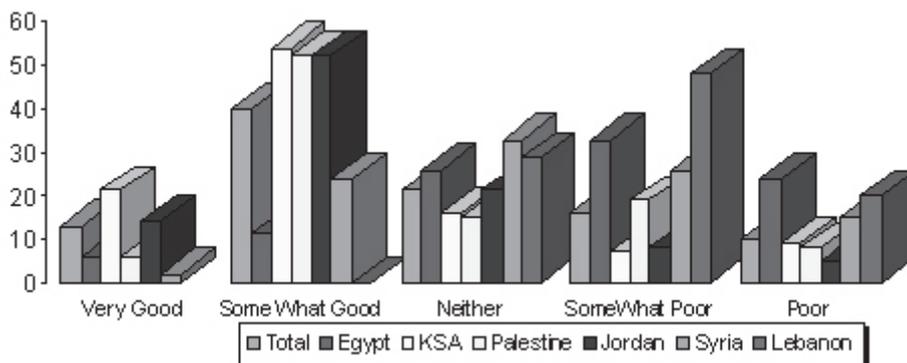
3.3. Chart 2: Cross Tabulation between the Main Variables of the Media Discourse



Reviewing chart 2, one finds some contrasting views in this cross tabulation. The highest levels of expectations –in different mass media– concern their comprehensibility with 60% in print, 56% in TV and 50% in radio. According to the statistical analysis, Arab audiences perceive print (33%) as more effective than TV and radio. They are more satisfied with its coverage (25%), and consider it is more comprehensive with its topics and issues (60%), more credible (50%) and more satisfactory (44%).

This result is in contradiction with the high rates of illiteracy that are widespread throughout the region, leaving only the elite to identify themselves with print with its multilateral approaches. It can be partly explained by the profile of the informants, that are predominantly urban and relatively literate.

3.4. Chart 3: Quality of Education in Schools

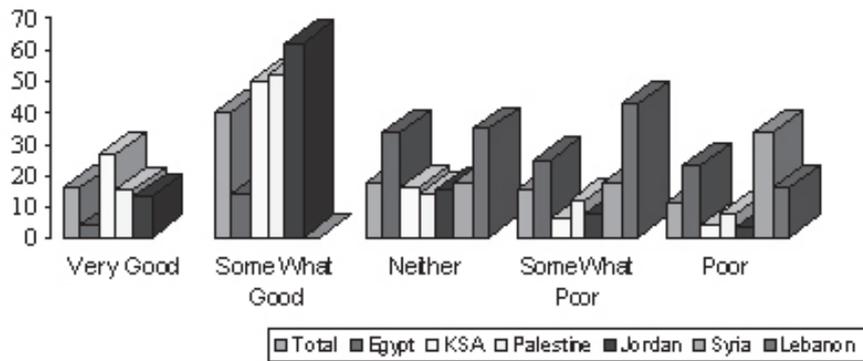


As chart 3 reveals, there is a great discrepancy between the countries under study due to many socio-political reasons, and sometimes due to the lack of awareness

and points of comparison about the situation of education worldwide. When it comes to the total views of the countries, 40% of the sample believes that education is «somewhat good». However, going to individual country cases, the results are quite different and even contradictory. For example, in Egypt, 33% of the sample believes that school education is poor, while only 6% of the sample thinks it is very good.

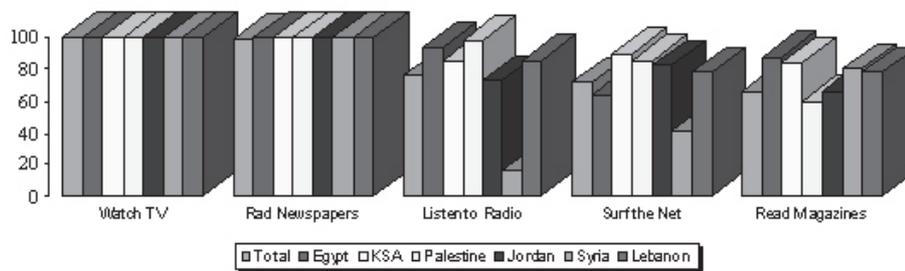
This might be a direct result of a relatively open and free society. In contrast, Saudi Arabia (54%), the Palestine (52%) and Jordan (52%) view that school education is somewhat good, while (21%) in Saudi Arabia and (14%) in Jordan claim that school education is very good. Another point of analysis is the direction of good or bad for education as one finds that in Egypt it reaches 55% (33+24) and in Syria 41% (26+15), while in Saudi Arabia it bottoms at 16% (7+9) and in Jordan 13% (8+5). Such discrepant perceptions may come from a combined manipulation of media and education in the three countries considered. Such findings cannot be explained in reference to the reality of school education quality but rather to a sum of cultural variables, including the right to criticize a system that is controlled by governments in all of these countries.

3.5. Chart 4: Quality of Education in Universities



As chart 4 indicates, 40% of the total sample thinks that university education is somewhat good, while 11% of the sample thinks it is poor. In Egypt, the direction points towards poor education (25%), somewhat poor and (23%) poor. In Lebanon, the situation is reversed with 35% agreeing that university education is very good and 43% agreeing that it is somewhat good. Three countries favour the positive side of university education, including Saudi Arabia (50%), the Palestine (52%) and Jordan (62%). Surprisingly, these countries neither have the history nor the infrastructure for university education. The discrepancy here again can be explained by the difficulty in expressing one's views that the members of the sample might have felt, leading to self-denial or distortion of the true situation, not to mention the fact that the sample tends to reflect the views of an urban relatively literate population.

3.6. Chart 5: Activities regularly done by Media Professionals



As for chart 5, there is a consensus among media professionals to watch TV and read the newspapers. However one has to remember that the sample population opinions cannot be generalized to the whole population in MENA. Besides, there is a chance that some of the answers are «prestige» answers: self-reports tend to increase consumption of media, as it is seen as a sign of modernity and professionalism. Such general results that give priority to listening to radio as a second option (73%) can be misleading because part of the sample population is composed of professionals who need to monitor all news outlets. Other sources show that in reality, only 3% of the general public still listens to radio (Saleh, 2008).

One of the major findings is the fact that Syria has the least percentage of listeners (16%), and the same scenario is repeated with surfing the net (42%) and reading the magazines (30%). Such situation could be explained in the light of the widespread poverty and the strict governmental control. But the findings are not justifiable in the Palestine with its continuous conflict with Israel and the weakness, if not the absence, of infrastructure.

According to the cross examination of media professionals and media students, there are three major challenges facing the region of MENA. First, there is a need for balancing the media playing field, by enabling the media to play a meaningful role in providing quality information to the public. This has to be supplied through less restrictive laws or practices, less government interference, and better protections for journalists who cover controversial issues. The second challenge is to empower the civil liberties' activist efforts, by changes in the law that will protect them from police encroachments. Third, there is the need to solve conflicts of interests, which requires the establishment of independent sound institutions and democratic governance through accountable and responsive laws and regulations.

4. Implications for Civic Engagement and Media Education

One of the crucial difficulties for media literacy in MENA is the fact that the region is still suffering from unlimited challenges. Some are related to the mediascape itself, others to basic social issues, like unemployment, education, health... However, it is getting more robust and functioning as a genie that is let out of the bottle, willing

to explore and develop social change around Arab identity, and its potential openness to the rest of the world. But, liberating the genie out of the media bottle may prove difficult, as MENA governments may realize how little they know about the reality of the situation and as a result misjudge the extent of what needs to be done to solve the oxymoronic situation they have either inherited or helped to create. The current situation cannot be expected to end in the near future, unless actual implementation of reform takes place.

The ordinary citizens feel that there must be «something wrong» with them, as they are incapable of changing the situation. To make the confusion bigger, most MENA governments have a lot of wealth at their disposal, and use incomprehensible terminologies such as «Mushrooming Terrorists» to avoid or block any serious attempt of change. As a result of public fatigue, citizens in the region still prefer to pay high taxes, to have the government take care of social services and to enjoy subsidization in almost every aspect of life.

The views of the people on the streets of Cairo, Beirut, Amman, Riyadh, Gaza, and Damascus are very different and usually at the extreme opposite of the views of their remote leaders. In the research, they all agree that there is a serious discrepancy between official bilateral relations between states and governments on the one hand, and the views of the public on the other hand. The lack of civil liberties and the dichotomy of fear from secular state to religious state deepen the perceptions of threats of fundamentalism and terrorism. This situation results in an increase of public fatigue instead of civic engagement, as citizens are weary to deal with the lack of media governance and citizenship in a democratic context.

Radical voices use media effectively because they structure a discourse that is simple and easily transmitted in visuals, especially in the current context of media fatigue and of media failure as a social force since the public is still powerless to set the political agenda. Media distort reality and compete with each other to exaggerate this distortion, while bureaucrats and practitioners still refuse to change their familiar «safe» practices. This is a cultural impediment that needs time to be redefined and a political environment that develops the adequate reforms to restore trust (Saleh, 2006).

On the audience level, the public perceive themselves through a prism of individual and collective humiliation and resentment. Such a malaise tends to marginalize the «rule of law» as a political condition, as it has not worked to their benefit. To heal the region of this dilemma, public and elites alike need to admit that the «problem is within us». A deep-rooted introspection may never occur in the region, unless the public recognizes itself as a full-fledged civil society and a change-agent.

Undoubtedly, the development of media literacy in the region has a critical role to play in this transformation but it is not at all clear whether it has the wherewithal to transform itself, and much less the citizenry of its respective countries. The worrying point here comes from the endless split between the media agenda and the public agenda and the gap between publics and governments. An additional alarming point is the nature of change, as it might come through the turbulence of a revolution that

could be bloody and confusing, –bloody because so much is at stake for the regional actors, be it government, radical islamists or progressive activists, and confusing because nobody is quite sure who the actors really are and what interests they represent.

In a region where many people are still suspicious of change and resist innovation, even if it implies basic rights like political participation, the oxymoronic situation is magnified. This is not to say that agents of change don't exist: there are many progressive civil movements, like «Kefaya» (Enough) in Egypt, that are still fighting against governments' corruption. But the extreme, radical voices are also becoming louder and louder. As a result, the «third sector», or the marginal discontented public, is a world onto itself, largely detached from other sectors in society and loath to engage with them.

Another doxa in that regard is the absence, or at least the ineffectiveness, of laws allowing the practice of the right to expression and free opinion. This allows governments to close many newspapers, and put many journalists in prison, accused of insult and defamation for the most part. Many administrative obstacles are still at work. They stand in the way of those journalists who try to have access to official information. They hinder the practice of fair and independent journalism; they also lead some journalists into the «false information» trap, which makes them subject to imprisonment or sanctions such as fines.

The 2007 decision of the Cairo Misdemeanour Court to imprison the Editor-in-Chief of «Al Dostour» (Constitution), Ibrahim Essa, and the journalist Sahar Zaki, along with a citizen from Warak accused of insulting the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, stands out as a case in point of the cycle of oxymora. Beside many other lawsuits filed against «Al Fajr» (The Dawn) newspaper, headed by Adel Hamouda, another illustration is the case of the executive editor-in-chief of «Sout Al Omma» (Voice of the Nation), Wael Al-Ibrashy. He was referred to the criminal court in the judges' crisis, when they felt used and aggrieved by widespread electoral fraud during the first presidential elections. Because of legal irregularities, such as unfair trials of opposition figures, attacks on members of the judiciary also escalated⁷.

5. Key Elements for Building up Civic Engagement, Identity and Media Literacy

For almost a decade now, MENA has been launching new media policies and expanding its cultural agenda to meet the challenges of deregulation and greater global competition. One aim has been to focus on the perspectives offered by the digitalization of media, to transform all aspects of culture, such as education, work, etc. But it is not just a question of changing the media policy and the cultural policy or the technological and economic aspects, it is also a question of relating to the much bigger issue of the regional integration and gradual fragmentation of national cultures and identities in the light of globalization. Indeed, MENA is going through a transitional change from a traditional national mass society to a marginal global embedded-ness of mass media into the «interactive society». In this new context, there is a decline or

transformation of traditional organizations and institutions and the rise of a more complex structure of sub-networks for the individual, based on other criteria than national identity.

Culture, media, communication and information technologies, however, are part of the strongest growth sectors (culture, education, entertainment, information) of the new economy of the information society. The development of MENA's media and cultural policy is placed between two tendencies: the liberalization and homogenization of a regional market for media (that allow more free flow of products and players, also enabling regional conglomerates to develop into power-players on a global level) together with the strong tradition for public support and protection of a cultural art tradition and a public service culture, that has so far been a national obligation trying to create synergies and networks in production and distribution of regional media products and know how.

The only way to overcome the systematic distortion of communication causing cross-cultural violence is to use media and culture to (re) build the fundamental link of trust and solidarity between people, which is the goal behind media literacy, to build trust and fight fear and oppression.

Moving from terror to tolerance is the first step to get various people and cultures on the same stage at the same time so as to share a common field of interaction. However, tolerance has limits, depending on the stronger party in control position and how this stronger party decides on what alien practices will be tolerated in what Derrida describes «absolute respect» for the other (Balfour, 2007).

To overcome the current vicious cycle of oxymora in MENA and to achieve the move from terror to tolerance, there are five key elements to take into account and to address:

- The first key element is to acknowledge that efforts to reform laws stand a better chance when backed by broad sectors of society, even in dysfunctional political systems that aggregate power among a small elite. Legal changes may be insufficient, if not accompanied by efforts to change societal perceptions.

- The second coincides with the need to reconsider the current social contract between the governments and the publics, as a must. A situation with overwhelmingly negative stereotypes and attitudes is predominant due to the difficult implementation of basic human rights for people in the region. In addition, broad societal biases exist against women holding certain leadership positions in government and society and prevent this valuable section of the population to participate fully in civic engagement.

- The third is the necessity of changing the power flow direction of communication between the governments and the publics. Old notions of rule by control from above are still prevailing, instead of empowering consensus and democratic debate in which all members of society are engaged as equals, providing input from the bottom up.

- The fourth is related to implementing laws and reforms as a condition to expand rights, though the publics are very sceptical about the governments' ability to

.....
implement new laws and reforms. As many elite members perceive it, cheap cosmetic moves with no real stamina or will are not satisfactory for engagement.

- The fifth involves the engagement of the public in the process, by raising public awareness about their rights, especially within those with lower levels of education and those living in rural areas, generally less aware of their rights. Freedom in MENA still has negative connotations of licentiousness and degradation of moral values.

In the end, there should be a regional call for a serious charter to make the public airwaves truly public, and not just a state domain. There should also be a call to rewrite the corporate responsibility to contribute to the wellbeing of society and patron states should make it their own vision to promote the future of the region.

Without doubt, political reform toward classical liberal values is a step to engage with adequate media literacy and to foster good governance. Media literacy, among journalists and the general public alike, would also be a way of preserving the identity of the region in a non-menacing way. It would be a way of fighting stereotypes against Arabs amongst Arabs and a way of bringing modernity and openness while preserving a progressive Arab-identity. To a greater extent than the MENA people would like to acknowledge, most of the work toward that end is for the people in the region to do themselves, by establishing a new set of institutions to grapple with this reality, and new training methods to engage people in national self-interest and identity-construction.

Terms like «political unrest», «ancient history / religion», «treatment of women / foreigners», «Muslim / Islam» and «oil» are all related to the degree media literacy could help people cope with stereotypes, preconceptions and general lack of understanding. They could be set in the worldwide context of geopolitics and the economy of international media flows. Media literacy could thus be a long-term strategy to help people re-evaluate their mal-media situation. It could be of use for leaders and decision-makers to implement change without turmoil, with a progressive understanding of peace and human rights as a way of reclaiming Arab identity and pride.

The concept of regionalism itself is a changing concept that the media can help expand, within MENA territories, in the individual states, between regions in states, and between countries. At the same time, MENA is part of a changing global scene, a scene which individuals to a large degree experience through media, media that are themselves influenced by the global flow of money and culture. The development of media is part of the modernization and globalization of society.

MENA could thus build up civic engagement if it encompasses the current impact of all the mediated process of compressing time and space, and its effects on our new concepts of risk, tradition, family and democracy. Media literacy in the MENA region can potentially loosen the ties between the individual and the traditions and institutions that used to give solidity and predictability to the individual development. However, the move from traditional dependency to a more wide-ranging form of

individual freedom can be perceived as more demanding and insecure than older forms of tradition. A more reflexive form of modernity and individual identity is a vital part of the new horizontal networking and the process of building up engagement.

The challenges facing the transformation of media literacy from a governmental propaganda tool into collective innumerable local alternative movements, struggling collectively to develop strategies and philosophies, needs to encompass different affinity groups and transversal solidarities. Only so can media literacy build up engagement, and provide peaceful solutions to the conflict between a cosmopolitan worldview and fundamentalism in any shape and form. Fundamentalism is tied to the fanatic defence of traditions that bind the individual to national or religious paradigms and stories, whereas cosmopolitanism supports transnational globalization, expanding ideas of human rights and equality across national and regional borders and mental structures (Giddens, 1999).

The media in MENA, both traditional and new interactive media, can play an important role in this development towards a more and more technologically integrated media culture operating to a still larger degree beyond the former geographical borders and yet bolstering regional identity and pride. Arabs and Muslims need to develop their own cultural responses to globalization either through the introduction of a re-energized religion, or through overcoming the current impediments of real cross cultural dialogue, by engaging their counterparts in non-MENA regions. In this context, universalism could be realized, by opening up to the world, enriching instead of diluting or even erasing local identities. Hence, cultural revival built on firmly rooted infrastructure could unify instead of divide humanity (Levin, 2005: 204).

The media as a whole, seen in a larger historical perspective, can contribute to such cultural identity formation, as evidence exists worldwide of resilient local, regional, and ethnic identities. These identities are dynamic, adapting to modern changes in patterns of work, family structure, urban living and income distribution. In such a context, media at one and the same time, act as sources of symbols and ideas as well as important sites of debate, a role that complements their absorption of peoples' times and resources.

Notes

¹ «Oxymoron» is a rhetorical figure, in which incongruous or contradictory terms are combined, as in «a deafening silence» and «a mournful optimist» (Houghton, 2006).

² William Rugh (2004) describes four situations. Mobilization: Syria, Libya, Sudan and Iraq before 2003. Each experienced colonization and media developed political unrest, and their regimes directly control media and use legal means to attain their goals. Loyalism: KSA, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Oman & Palestine, experienced linear development along the traditional lines of government ownership, ups and downs of freedom, and marginal role of political parties. Media are owned by the government and accordingly, they play a crucial role. Transition: Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria and Iraq after 2003, where media are controlled by the government, and are manipulation through legal means, resulting with self-censorship. Diversity: Less authoritarian, where government influence over media is limited with strong advocacy of freedom of expression as the case of Kuwait, Yemen, Lebanon, and Morocco.

³ «Collective fraud» reflects intellectual dishonesty among scientists and scholars; it is, of course, nothing new. But scientific integrity has given little attention to the ways in which collectivities of scientists, each knowingly shaving or shading the truth in small but similar ways, have perpetuated frauds on the scientific community and the public at large. This urges the need to explore the social process by which many otherwise honest scholars facilitate, or feel compelled to endorse, a scientific lie (Gottfredson, 1994).

⁴ Cherif Bassiouni, Professor of Law and President, International Human Rights Law Institute, DePaul University; President, International Institute of Higher Studies in Criminal Sciences, Siracusa, Italy; Honorary President, International Association of Penal Law, Paris, France (Bassiouni, 2007).

⁵ «Psychic numbing», according to the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, builds on well-known defence mechanisms, such as repression, denial, and projection, to create a feeling of exclusion and disconnectedness. Aided by the surfeit of stimuli from television culture and media-manipulated images, people may tune out of those realities and possibilities that threaten their own sense of connection to the world (Shor, 2002).

⁶ The Internet is becoming an increasingly vital medium for Islamic militants. Whether through websites featuring videos of Americans being executed or texts inspiring attacks, the Internet has become a key tool for propaganda and for the exchange of ideas among militants. Thomas H. (2006) in an article on «terrorism.net» (June 16, 2004) cited by Jeffrey Donovan of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

⁷ The judges' crisis was a result of their attempts to distance themselves from various irregularities, by taking their case to the streets. Egypt's judges fought for their independence, their honour and public image. The question remains related to the implications of such crisis, whether it set the judges against each other, or whether it set the entire judiciary against the executive. One possible reason for the current crisis is that Law 46 of 1972 gives the Minister of justice extensive powers in running the judiciary. The minister has the right to move judges from one post to another and to discipline them. This kind of power should remain in the hands of the Higher Judiciary Council, as is the case in other countries (Amin, 2006).

References

- Alterman, J. (1998). *New Media, New Politics? From Satellite Television to the Internet in the Arab World*. Washington, DC (US): Washington Institute for Near East Policy.
- Amin, N. (2006). Soapbox: Judges in Crisis. *Al-Ahram*, 793. (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/793/op7.htm>).
- Arab Media: Tools of the Governments; Tools for the People? United States Institute of Peace, August 2005, Virtual Diplomacy Series (VDS); 18. (www.usip.org/virtualdiplomacy/publications/reports/18.html).
- Aram, I. (2003). Multilateralism: The Basis of a New World Order, Armenian News Network / Groong, (www.groong.org/ro/ro-20030325.html) (2003-03-25).
- Balfour, I. (2007). *Late Derrida*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bassiouni, C. (2007). *A Compilation of Legislative Laws and Regulations of Select Arab Legal Systems. Justice and Human Rights. Technical Assistance Projects in Afghanistan and Iraq Activities 2003-2006*, International Human Rights Law Institute at DePaul University (IHRLI) (<http://216.239.59.104/search?q=cache:qsKFzFQViUJ:www.isisc.org/public/BrocDesigned.pdf+A+Compilation+of+Legislative+Laws+and+Regulations+of+Selected+Arab+Legal+Systems.&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=6>).
- Cassandra, M. (1995). The Impending Crisis in Egypt. *Middle East Journal*, 49 (1); 9-27.
- Cosijns, L. F. (2001). *Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue Guidelines*. Fountain, 33; 10-14.
- Croteau, D. & Hoynes, W. (2003). *Media Society: industries, Images, and Audiences*. London: Sage.

- Demers, D. (2003). *Terrorism, Globalization and Mass Communication*. Washington: Marquette Books.
- Donovan, J. (2004). *Middle East: Islamic Militants Take Jihad To The Internet*. Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty (www.rferl.org/content/article/1053350.html) (16-06-04).
- Giddens, A. (2003). *The Progressive Manifesto: New Ideas for the Centre-left*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gottfredson, L. (1994). Egalitarian Fiction and Collective Fraud. *Society*, 31, 3; 53 (7).
- Hammoud, H. (2005). *Illiteracy in the Arab World, Literacy for Life*, Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006, Literacy for Life.
- Irving, J. (1972). *Victims of Groupthink*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Irving, J. (1982). *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascos*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Jandt, F. (2004). *An Introduction to International Communication: Identities in a Global Community*. London: Sage.
- Kienle, E. (1998). More Than a Response to Islamism: The Political De-liberalization of Egypt in the 1990s. *Middle East Journal*, 52 (2); 219-235.
- Levine, M. (2005). *Why They Don't Hate US: Lifting the Veil on the Axis of Evil*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications Limited.
- Miles, J. (2002). *Theology and The Clash of Civilizations*. *Cross Currents*, 51 (4). (www.crosscurrents.org/Mileswinter.2002.htm).
- McQuail, D. (2006). *Mass Communication Theory*. London: Sage.
- Oxymoron (2006). *The American Heritage ® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/oxymorn>).
- Rugh, A. (2004). *The Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics*. London: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Safi, L.M. (2001). *Overcoming The Cultural Divide*. *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 18, (4). (www.amssmnet/past_editorial).
- Saleh, I. (2008). *Sitting in the Shadows of Subsidization in Egypt: Revisiting the Notion of Street Politics*. *Journal of Democracy and Security*, 4; 1-24.
- Saleh, I. (2006). *Prior to Eruption of the Grapes of Wrath in the Middle East: The Necessity of Communicating Instead of Clashing*. Cairo: Taiba Publications Press.
- Saleh, I. (2003). *Unveiling the Truth About Middle Eastern Media: Privatization in Egypt: Hope or Dope?* Cairo: Cairo Media Center.
- Shahine, G. (2006). *Is the Fire Going Out?* *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 798; 8-14; June. (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/798/eg4.htm>).
- Shor, F. (2002). *Psychic and Political Numbing in Preparations for War*, *CounterPunch* (2002-08-12). (www.counterpunch.org/shor0812.html).
- Vlahos, M. (2002). *Terror's Mask: Insurgency Within Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Weimann, G. (2004). *Terrorism on the Internet, Special Report*, U.S. Institute of Peace (2004-03-17).