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## The Politics of Pan-Arab Networks

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### Abstract

*Middle Eastern politics changed forever as digital media took over the ultimate control that Arab regimes had over broadcasting systems. The new media environment determined dramatic changes in the balance of power of social and political forces, with the result that pan-Arab television networks represent regional and global political interests. The research argues that the new political surrounding is dominated by governments and media organizations. It demonstrates that the political landscape in the Middle East is influenced by governments who own media organizations with the purpose of imposing their agendas. The main pan-Arab media services that have become directly involved in Arab politics are Al-Jazeera which is connected to the Qatari government and Al-Arabiya which represents the interests of Saudi Arabia. Global political interests are also supported by global media: Al-Hurra is funded by the United States and British global interests are represented by BBC Arabic and Sky News Arabia.*

**Keywords:** Middle East, Politics, Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, Al-Hurra

### INTRODUCTION

Media-state relations changed fundamentally in the Middle East, as the main forces that determine political issues have changed. For decades, government-sponsored or politically allied media services having a monopoly over the information provided to the public dominated the Arab World, although things changed with the advent of digital media – the Internet and pan-Arab satellite services. The

impact of the people and digital media became transparent in the new politics of the Middle East, based on two major developments which have collided into a tremendous upheaval in world politics: the social revolutions that took place across the Arab World and the dominance of new media services in this transformation. As evident in the events that took place in the Arab World in the last decade, these two major forces have become paramount and took over the dominant role that Arab governments and mainstream media services occupied for decades.

To examine the changes in the way that global media operates, we need first to look at the social and political situation prior to the events of the 2011 Arab Spring. Until that time the people in the Arab World were kept away from outside world information since mainstream media were controlled and influenced by their governments. The ruling administrations were mostly dominated by military regimes that controlled the region since the end of the colonial era (Frantzman, 2018). Traditional media services were subject to state laws and governments controlled public agenda. Arab TV channels were both state-owned and government-controlled and promoted the project of nation-building as a means of social development (for example: Boyd, 1993; Sakr, 2007; Mekay, 2011; Ouidyane, 2013). Governments maintained tremendous influence through traditional media sources (Shishkina and Issaev, 2018), arguing that state control over the broadcasting system was necessary to preserve the common cultural heritage and secure national unity and political stability (Rinnawi, 2006).

The role of the people in determining the new political landscape demonstrates that social revolutions are based on economic inspirations that lead individuals and groups to demand political reforms. It also shows the changing role of the media, since the influence of new media increases the likelihood of protest participation which turns to political upheaval. In this way the power of the people played a central role in shaping political debates during the 2011 Arab Spring and since then throughout the decade (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari and Maziad, 2019). The protests were a series of pro-democracy uprisings, mainly in Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Bahrain. They were organized by activists which used digital media as a dynamic vehicle to maintain broad based support in the streets. Although the nature of each pro-democracy

uprising varied wildly from country to country, the power of digital media was felt across the Middle East and around the world (Shearlaw, 2016).

The media always played an important role in the Middle East, but their role changed dramatically in the digital age. Significant changes occurred with social media and satellite networks which were used by the revolutionary forces to advance their cause in the Arab Spring. The role of new media, implemented through digital services, was influential in spreading ideas of freedom and democracy to the people and motivating them to take their protests onto the streets. New media assisted in the planning and organization of demonstrations, communicating with the outside world and contributing to the proliferation of a young generation that had the technical means and the social enthusiasm to demand social and political changes. The new media landscape allowed the people to spread news and information regarding the uprisings, as opposed to the traditional reporting via mainstream media outlets that dominated and manipulated the news in the Arab World for decades (for example: Kassim, 2012; Duggan, Maeve and Smith, 2016).

In contrast to the old political establishment and culture, the Arab population was young and educated but with no clear prospects for the future. They turned to new media to express their frustrations and dissatisfaction with problems that they faced daily, such as unemployment, tough economic conditions and government corruption, and utilized the Internet to rally the populace to their cause in the protests (Mourtada and Salem, 2012). When social unrest in North Africa and the Middle East began, the revolutionaries combined the technology of the Internet and social networking with satellite TV. They used these new media services to organize and encourage the people to demonstrate and posted videos and pictures of the turbulence on social networks. TV satellites then transmitted those images around the world, spreading the social demonstrations and the revolutionary fervor across the Arab World. Dajani (2011) claims that although social media is credited for playing a huge role during the revolution, many people did not have access to the Internet and without satellite TV most Arabs would not have seen the demonstrations or the response of their governments. Lynch (2011) also argues that although social media had a significant role, it was

not enough to maintain a social movement without pan-Arab satellite services.

The combination of social movement and technology changed the political environment. New media played a key role in mobilizing the Arab uprising, contributing to social polarization, popular discontent and the resurgence of old regimes. With new media, public agenda changed, and information is not a monopoly of a limited number of influential sources, as used to be, since it is unfiltered and not censored (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic, 2015). New media increased the role of the public, who could influence political issues by bypassing the monopoly of the political establishment and traditional media on the political discourse. Using new media became embedded in the culture of the young Arabs, as global media focused heavily on young protesters with smartphones mobilizing in the streets in political opposition (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari and Maziad, 2019). The importance of social and global media was in communicating their messages to the rest of the world and informing audiences and mainstream media in the Arab World about the unfolding events (Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides and Freelon, 2012).

The main forces that dominate Arab media today are pan-Arab satellite services which have become directly involved in regional politics. These are two rival services representing conflicting interests of influential Arab governments. Al-Jazeera is connected to the Qatari government and directed by the Qatari royal family while representing their opinions and political goals. Al-Arabiya is a news channel based in Dubai that represents the interests of Saudi Arabia and the Saudi royal family. Other satellite services aimed at the Arab World that are examined in this research are dominated by Western interests and culture. Al-Hurra is a network that is funded by the United States. The interests of the United Kingdom in the region are represented by the public broadcasting service of BBC Arabic Television and the private enterprise of Sky News Arabia.

The research examines the way that these pan-Arab media forces dominate the Middle East and the way that their media dominance is influenced by Arab and Western governments. It is argued that regional policies changed completely as a result of the dominance of global media services, and state organizations now face democratic challenges upon actively creating media content and gaining political influence through satellite transmissions and

Internet websites. The research contends that governments today - democratic administrations as well as undemocratic regimes, including autocratic or authoritarian systems that still dominate Arab countries – are involved in securing regional and global political influence by using digital media.

## **THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

The relationship between the mass media and politics is commonly known, and today political and communication scholars are highlighting the increasing connection between digital media and politics around the world. According to Sanghoo (2014), the main way in which the media can shape social conflicts is by inflaming the discourse around them because of the global political and cultural nature of these conflicts. According to the World Economic Forum, governments should look at global issues since the diffusion of knowledge and technology worldwide brought important changes to the global innovation landscape (Canuto, 2018). Manyika and Lund (2019) explain that in the new global environment the role of governments is to make sure that the marketplace continues to work competitively for businesses and consumers. Anderson & Coletto (2017) maintain that much of the political upheaval that has been seen around the world has to do with the impact of globalization and technology on the economic confidence of people. Beissinger (2017) explains that the politics of the region changed as non-democracies have witnessed how the rapid growth of digital media became a vehicle for civic activism. This conclusion is supported by Garrett (2019). He explains that the digital landscape provides enormous opportunities for governments to engage with new policies involving digital technologies.

The Middle East is now dominated by global television services and influenced by the involvement of regional political powers in these services. The role of governments in advancing technology has become crucial for the political influence and economic development of countries since the use of information technologies can help to carry out diplomatic objectives. With the changes in the digital media landscape, governments today play an important role in the development of new media and use digital media to rally domestic and foreign support for their policies. In this way, social and digital media

have major weapons in modern conflicts and in the competition between countries. Digital diplomacy involves using the Internet and digital media platforms by governments to communicate with citizens, promote national values and build public support for policy goals or strategies. Adsina (2017) explains that when used properly, digital diplomacy is a persuasive and timely supplement to traditional diplomacy that can help a country to advance its foreign policy goals, extend international reach and influence people who would never set foot in any of the world's embassies. As explained by Fisher (2013), the advantage of social and digital media provides governments the opportunity to reach citizens of other countries while bypassing the restrictions of traditional media.

To examine the way that new media services changed traditional policies in the Arab World we need to look at the social transformation that the Arab population faced since 2011. In a region marked by political oppression and economic under-development on the one hand, and well-educated but unemployed youth on the other - classic conditions for revolution always existed. The uprisings spawned a wide array of new media, including television channels and online media portals which enabled citizens to challenge repressive security forces (Agarwal, 2016). In this environment, digital technology and online campaigns facilitated both the organization and the spread of Arab protests, which led to widespread enthusiasm about their alleged role for the mobilization of democratic resistance (Lynch, 2015). Public information that was supplied on social networks and Internet websites by ordinary citizens played an important role and successfully bypassed the traditional media and the old political establishment. Being capable to share an immense amount of uncensored information contributed to the cause of many activists, who could organize offline protests through Facebook and Twitter. Social networks successfully broke the psychological barrier of fear by helping many to connect and share information, providing activists with an opportunity to quickly disseminate information while bypassing government restrictions. After public outrage started on social media, satellite networks set the tone and determined public agenda as pan-Arab TV channels flourished and gained credibility by providing daily coverage of the revolutions. (for example: Wiest and Eltantawy, 2011; Kassim, 2012).

The role of digital media in the Arab Spring demonstrated the impact of technology and social movements on politics (Bessinger, 2017) and provided an evidence to the impact of global media on the media landscape in the Middle East. New media played a key role in mobilizing the uprising, contributing to social polarization, popular discontent and the resurgence of old regimes (Bakshy, Messing and Adamic, 2015). It increased the role of the public, who could influence political issues by bypassing the monopoly of the political establishment and traditional media on the political discourse. The importance of social and global media was in forcing mainstream media to relate to the authentic reports of ordinary citizen that provided to the rest of the world through Twitter and Facebook. The importance of global media was by airing the social demonstrations and the political reactions of governments through uninterrupted transmissions of Arab satellite channels (Aday, Farrell, Lynch, Sides and Freelon, 2012).

The revolution provided the initial and most important impact of new media on social movements worldwide and the growth of digital media usage changed the ways in which governments interact with societies in the region (Mourtada and Salem, 2012). The demonstrations throughout the Arab World demonstrated that the days of government-sponsored or politically allied newspapers having a media monopoly have been eclipsed by the advent and adoption of social media. Social networks informed, mobilized and created new communities – which were not limited to geographical differences (Dalacoura, 2012). Digital media allowed democratization movements to develop new tactics for catching dictators off guard (Howard and Hussain, 2011).

As the research shows, Arab politics changed as non-democracies witnessed the rapid growth of new media that became the vehicle for civic activism. The political transformations in the Arab World suggest that Arab culture is slowly changing, as young people are more inclined to take control and change their social, political and economic environment. They have become exposed to outside influence with the advent of smartphones and free to air satellite dish networks and as a result the political situation changed significantly. Governments are no longer in full control as to what their citizens can and cannot receive on the Internet or via satellite networks that can be accessed simply by purchasing a receiver and a

dish. These technologies exposed the Arab World to the outside world more than it has ever been before (Kalliny, Saran, Ghanem and Fisher, 2011).

## **AL-JAZEERA AND THE QATARI GOVERNMENT**

Before Al-Jazeera started broadcasting in 1996, Arab television news was based on totalitarian nature. The new pan-Arab satellite service was the first channel to air news that were not controlled by governments and allowed previously banned voices to be heard. Its motto – “the opinion and the counter opinion” — quickly won huge audiences in the Arab World, since the network provided balanced programming with high journalistic standards. Al-Jazeera transformed Arab politics and revolutionized television news coverage throughout the Arab World. It banished the monopoly held by governments on television news (Salhani, 2011). By shattering state control over information and giving a platform to long-stifled voices, the service challenged the public agenda that was manipulated by governments and mainstream media and allowed open debate about new issues such as Islamism and Arab identity, as well as other vital political and social issues (Lynch, 2006). Audiences responded positively, and the satellite channel quickly became the No. 1 Arabic language news channel. Al-Jazeera English also scores highly compared with alternative English-language news channels operating in the Middle East (Miles, 2017).

The main reason for the influence of the channel is since Arab citizens consider it as popular and credible news network (for example: Hashem, 2012; Lo and Frkovich, 2013). Al-Jazeera emerged as the most credible news source in the region, prior to 2011 and in inflaming the upheavals of the Arab Spring. Lynch (2015) argues that it helped to present national problems in each country as regional challenges that necessitate the involvement of every Arab state. The channel played an important role in covering the events, providing focused news and commentary related to the Algerian and Egyptian protests that consequently termed into a social revolution throughout the Middle East and North Africa (Campbell and Hawk, 2012). Its 24-hour television coverage of the Arab Spring was in English and Arabic and streamed live on its Internet website, with its Twitter feed regularly updating the events in Egypt and Tunisia. Network



journalists in Cairo, Suez and Alexandria stayed on the ground with ordinary Egyptians, documenting footage of demonstrators as they resisted authorities (Leight, 2012). Arabic audiences were able to get relatively independent information from an Arabic source, and even though its correspondents were officially banned in some countries and its camera crews were arrested and beaten, Al-Jazeera provided the authoritative record of events with impeccable minute-by-minute reporting (Lahlali, 2011). During the Arab Spring the whole world was watching Al-Jazeera, as it transformed the reality of the Arabic media and challenged dictatorships in the region (for example; Zayani, 2005; Miles, 2011).

Understanding the forces that dominate the political landscape in the Arab World requires to examine the political impact of the channel. Researches argue that the most important change in the television news industry brought about by the Arab Spring was the editorial realignment of Al-Jazeera (for example: Lo & Frkovich, 2013; Cherkaoui, 2014). The channel functions as an independent satellite news network owned by Qatar, which seeks to offer dedicated coverage of stories and issues of importance and interest to the Arab World (Campbell and Hawk, 2012). Its approach of fearing no one gains the channel popularity among Arab publics but also makes it unpopular among moderate Arab regimes and Western governments. Lahlali (2011) explains that despite its endeavor to provide free and transparent coverage, the channel stopped short of achieving this goal because of its loyalty to the Qatari government, with the result that global reporting of the Arab Spring events was bias. Al-Jazeera was characterized by a supportive attitude towards the revolution and regarded by the Egyptian population as a significant contributor of the Mubarak regime's resignation. This contrasted with American channels, who took a directly opposite stance by negatively presenting the Muslim Brotherhood movement as dangerous for the Egyptian democracy due to its claimed terroristic nature. According to Alalawi (2015), Al-Jazeera was driven by the Qatari government's political views and by the Qatari family opinions and interests in the region. Maziad (2018) explains that Al-Jazeera was founded with the idea of giving Qatar influence in the Arab world and beyond, but the Islamist takeover within Al-Jazeera led to damage Qatar's political relations with its neighboring states.

Political science scholars refer to Al-Jazeera as part of Qatar's public diplomacy and state branding efforts (for example: Zayani, 2005; Lynch, 2006; Ulrichsen, 2011 and Salhani, 2011). Abdul-Nabi (2018) claims that given the long history of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, it can be argued that Al-Jazeera was founded partially to challenge Saudi Arabia and weaken its influence in the region since the Arabic channel degenerated to a propagandistic agent serving Qatar's policy and agenda. Although Al-Jazeera English (AJE) set out to challenge the dominance of Western-based organizations in international English-language news broadcasting (Bigalke, 2013), there is ambiguity surrounding the relationship between Qatar and Al-Jazeera and their role in the Arab Spring (Ayaad, 2014). Looking at the global, political and pan-Arab interests, Allmeling (2012) maintains that moderate Arab governments were particularly upset with the channel, accusing the network of being sympathetic to the protesters and as a result responsible for the escalation of the revolt. Criticism continued after 2011, as Al-Jazeera covered the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt favorably and continued to report critically about other Arab countries. According to Miles (2017), the network raised political awareness across the Middle East, and there is no wonder that Qatar's enemies want it shut down.

The geo-political changes resulted in new alliances that changed the history of the region and reflected the growing connection between pan-Arab channels and regional political interests. The policies advanced by moderate countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Jordan endorse political ties with Western governments and oppose the extremist policies of Iran (Franzman, 2018) which has close economic and diplomatic relationship with Qatar. The relations of these conflicting political alliances are at their lowest point since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, since Gulf states are Iran's neighbors and feel threatened and exposed by its respective visions of international security and its nuclear plans (Esfadiary, 2019). The conflict escalated in 2017, when four Arab states – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt – declared a soft war on Qatar. They had a long list of demands, ordering Qatar to weaken ties with Iran, expel Turkish military forces from the country and take other steps that would reduce Qatar's influence in the region – including closing Al-Jazeera. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan kicked Al-Jazeera bureaus out of their countries,

claiming that the Qatari-funded media network is critical of moderate Arab governments. Saudi Arabia has also banned hotels from offering the channel (Ketchell, 2017).

## **AL-ARABIYA AND THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT**

Before the establishment of Al-Jazeera, almost all major pan-Arab media outlets were Saudi-owned, ensuring that Saudi rulers receive generally favorable coverage. But things changed, since the channel dominated by Qatar's government was critical towards Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern governments and gained popularity and political influence. After years of failing to respond, the Saudi government realized that the only way to deal with Al-Jazeera was to follow its steps in the digital world, and in 2003 the Saudi royal family launched the rival service of Al-Arabiya TV (meaning "The Arabic One" or "The Arab One").

The channel is based in Dubai Media City, United Arab Emirates, and owned by Saudi broadcaster Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC). The company was founded by the brother-in-law of Saudi Arabia's King Fahd, with additional investment from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Gulf countries. The political strategy of the channel was not to challenge Arab regimes and not to attack Arab leaders or the governments of Israel and the United States. During the Iraq War, anchors and correspondents were instructed to refer to U.S. troops in Iraq as "multinational," not "occupying," forces. The channel is seen as a prominent voice of moderation in the Middle East, preferring calm analysis to what many see as its rival's more sensational coverage (Macleod, 2009). Lahlali (2011) explains that despite the political agenda it represents, the moderate independent coverage policy is evident in that the channel is open to providing a platform even for people of hostile views to the US government. It runs call-in shows, where the audience is invited to take part in the discussion.

Designed to be an independent voice, Al-Arabiya tries to provide multiple perspectives on news events, with a focus on news of interest to Arab viewers. But because of its Saudi ownership, critics of Al-Arabiya claim that its content is more controlled than Al-Jazeera because it reflects loyalty to both Saudi Arabia and the United States and since the station proved to be an attractive destination for U.S.

officials seeking to reach out to the Arab world (for example: Karam, 2017; Zayani and Sahraoui, 2007). The attitude towards the channel was evident when President George W. Bush was interviewed in 2004, 2005 and 2007 and President Barack Obama gave in 2009 his first formal interview as president (Macleod, 2009). The interview demonstrated the policy of the White House to advance American interests in the Arab World through new media. The President said: "We are going to follow through on many of my commitments to do a more effective job of reaching out, listening, as well as speaking to the Muslim world" (The White House, 2009).

Al-Arabiya tries to compete with Al-Jazeera, focusing on social media and producing more and more interactive content. The Arabic internet news service (alarabiya.net) was launched in 2004 and today it covers financial news and market data from the Middle East. An English-language service was added in 2007 and a Persian service in 2008. However, the major downside was in the Arab Spring, as the Al-Arabiya website was plagued with numerous technical difficulties. The site very often went offline with error messages as such as the following: "The website is down due to the heavy traffic to follow up with the Egyptian crisis and it will be back within three hours (Time of message: 11GMT)". In March 2012, the channel launched a new channel, Al-Hadath, which focuses exclusively on prolonged extensive coverage of political news. The English news version was relaunched in November 2013, featuring a new design and better video service, which offers fully searchable, subtitled clips from the Arabic TV station.

The competition between the leading pan-Arab television networks, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, proves that the political surrounding in the Middle East completely changed and digital media determined profound changes in most Arab countries while establishing clear political identities in the Arab World. Nisbet and Myers (2011) found that political attitudes are related to the choice of media preference, and exposure to Al-Jazeera or Al-Arabiya, in combination with political identity, influences individual opinions about the United States. They argue that those who are more likely to disfavor the United States select Al-Jazeera as their news source and those who are less likely to disfavor the United States select its rival Al-Arabiya. Accordingly, they conclude that while Al-Arabiya is accused of being favorable to the Saudi family and Western interests,

many people in the Arab World have attributed anti-American sentiment within Arab countries to a highly negative information environment propagated by Al-Jazeera.

The competition between these networks reflects regional political divisions. The Gulf states include Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, although tensions in the region have intensified. The biggest threat is military confrontation of Iran with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and both countries have urged the U.S. to take an aggressive stance toward Iran. United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are the two largest economies in the region with a combined economy of over \$1.2 trillion. They share foreign policy interests and extensive political and cultural ties, focusing on the use of advanced technology to foster economic growth as part of their broader development plans (Hayden, 2019).

Digital media is a main instrument for Gulf States to maintain political influence in the Middle East, although the sentiment towards Al-Arabia is still hostile. 53% of the Arab people lists Al-Jazeera as the first source of news with Al-Arabiya trailing way behind at 9% (Hammuda, 2018). The political identity of the channel and the involvement of the Saudi government in its operations lead to global confrontations. Since the start of the Arab Spring, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have actively intervened in Middle Eastern politics, mainly by helping Egypt to secure the economy, ensure a smooth transition to the military ruling and supporting President Sisi. In order to control the flow of information in the Arab World, Saudi Arabia conduct numerous instances of censorship or prosecution of newspapers and journalists from Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Gulf countries for unfavorable coverage of Saudi affairs. In April 2017, Al-Arabiya was censured by the UK broadcasting regulator, OFCOM, after it committed a "serious" breach of British broadcast rules in broadcasting an interview with an imprisoned Bahraini torture survivor. Ofcom found that it infringed on the privacy of imprisoned Bahraini opposition leader and torture survivor Hassan Mushaima, when it broadcast footage of him obtained during his arbitrary detention in Bahrain (Merrill, 2017). In October 2019 Iraq suspended Al-Arabiya and its sister network Al-Hadath and banned them from operating in the country.

## **AL-HURRA AND THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT**

For decades U.S. government conducted public diplomacy programs to try to reach public opinion in the Arab World. Much of the negative opinion of the United States in the Middle East was because of dissatisfaction with its foreign policy. Arab public criticism reached unprecedented levels after September 11, 2001 (Clark and Christie, 2012) and American disconnect with the region was further encapsulated by animosity towards Al-Jazeera over its position on the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (Nisbet and Myers, 2011). As a result, the region became a priority for U.S. broadcasting efforts. After the war in Iraq the Bush administration felt that it had to act fast to explain American policy to the Arab world (BBG in the News, 2004) and in 2004 Al-Hurra - a satellite network funded by the United States, was launched (Fahmy, Wanta and Nisbet, 2012).

Al-Hurra ("the Free One") is a United States-based Arabic channel that broadcasts news and current affairs programming to audiences in the Middle East and North Africa. It is funded by the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), an independent agency of the US government which also supervises radio stations, including Al-Hurra Iraq and Radio Sawa, Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and Radio Free Asia. It receives around \$70 million a year from the US government and has a staff of 914, of which 650 work on television operations (AW Staff, 2018).

The station was launched to influence American public policy and image in the Arab world as part of the 'War on Terror' in Afghanistan. It included a massive public diplomacy campaign with advertisements and documentaries to mark the inauguration of Al-Hurra. The objective was to counter anti-American media campaigns by accurate news reporting and explain U.S. policies to the Arab people. Through the channel, the United States asked to maintain friendly relationships with countries such as the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) and limit damage in other countries that were hostile to the United States, such as Iraq. The UAE is one of the few countries in the Middle East that maintains close ties with the United States and has actively assisted in its attempts to fight terrorism. The UAE has been an important target of the U.S. government in its attempt to provide its perspective on news and information in the Middle East (BBG in the News, 2004).

Al-Hurra first operated between 2004 and 2006 as a counter voice to a perceived anti-US media bias among some Middle East networks. In its mission statement, the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN), defined the role of the network as one that “tackles topics not found in other media outlets and connects with Arab audiences”. It was the first Arabic news channel to air an interview in which President George W. Bush apologized to the Arab world about the Iraq war. Many in the Middle East saw that as a confirmation that the channel has a US government agenda, and the apology via Al-Hurra was unpopular with many US citizens and in the Arab world (Ahmad, 2019).

Despite the substantial amount of money poured into it, Al-Hurra's success was strongly questioned among US policy-makers experts (Dabbuss and Nasser, 2009). The effectiveness of the policy to broadcast in the Arab World diminished during the Bush administration when Congress passed a law putting the Voice of America and other broadcast channels under a separate Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). The BBG then cancelled the Arabic Service of the VOA, which was an effective means to reach audiences in the Arab world. In its place, it created Sawt al Arab radio and Al-Hurra Television, both in Arabic, which were intended to be helpful with Arab audiences. However, both were badly managed and many regular Arab listeners to US government broadcasting were lost (Rugh, 2006). In early 2019 the channel re-launched its news outlets, ahead of the Trump administration re-imposing key sanctions on Iran. The re-launch included the opening of new studios at Dubai Media City, in addition to the bureau in Baghdad, where it operated Alhurra Iraq. The channel hoped to boost its presence across the Arab world (Ahmad, 2019), but in September 2019 Iraq suspended the license of the channel after it ran an investigation alleging corruption within the country's religious institutions.

Al-Hurra is struggling to find a distinct message and attract large audiences in a crowded field of Arabic satellite news networks. The network hosts several discussion programs that examine political and social issues of interest to the audience in the Middle East, airing viewpoints not often discussed freely in the region and protecting the professional independence and integrity of its broadcasters (Kline, 2018). According to Former US diplomat Alberto Fernandez, the head of the US-funded Middle East Broadcasting Network (MBN), Al-

Hurra's editorial line looks to expose the truth about Iran and its allies like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen (AW Staff, 2018). However, the channel is not fulfilling its core mission to counter Al-Jazeera's anti-American sentiment and provide Arabs with a different viewpoint. Due to exaggerated preconceptions about the capabilities and activities of the US government, many Arabs see a "hidden hand" behind local events in their countries that they object to and blamed the US government for unfairly interfering in their country's domestic politics (Rugh, 2017). Al-Hurra's code of practice restricts coverage of events that could be of great interest to the Arabic public since it cannot cover anything that conflicts with American foreign policy (Lahlali, 2011). Furthermore, Al-Hurra is regulated by a law that prohibits a government-funded news service dedicated to providing news to a foreign audience from broadcasting to the domestic audience of the United States. Khatib (2013) explains that for a media outlet to effectively act as a public diplomacy instrument, it must appear as independent from the foreign policy of a state. Abdul-Nabi (2018) further explains that Al-Hurra is not been able to compete with other media outlets in the region because it is widely looked at as a tool of US propaganda. Ney (2008) even suggests that the United States could get a better result from its investment if Al-Hurra was turned into an international C-SPAN that airs seminars, town meetings, and congressional debates.

## **BBC ARABIC, SKY NEWS AND BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY**

For decades the UK had deep and enduring economic and security interests in the Middle East. The region occupied a central position in the history of British external relations in the twentieth century. The vital interests included ensuring energy security, fighting terrorism, expanding trade, and maintaining British economic proliferation, and reflected investment in aid, military infrastructure and economic ties to the region. Two broad issues dominated Britain's approach from the colonial era to current days and will continue to do so for decades to come: the control of oil and the desire for regional stability (Sedgwick, 2017).

The Middle East is of great strategic importance to Britain's foreign policy and its global position, considered as an export and investment destination and a politically important region (Bicom,



2018). As British security interests became more closely interlinked with its regional policies, its economic interests have also expanded beyond oil and cooperation with Gulf countries is an integral part of the attempts to diversify British own energy mix (World Politics review, 2017). The prospect of Brexit has left the UK scrambling to set up trade deals and maintain relevance in global politics. The reasons behind Britain's engagement with the Arab World are the promise of lucrative economic deals and access to strategic bases in the region (Vagneur-Jones, 2017). A report of the UK Parliament that assess current British policy since the events of the Arab Spring has concluded that the Middle East matters for its commercial and security interests. In terms of commercial interest, the report claims that the interest for the UK in energy remains in securing stability of global oil supplies and securing its own liquefied natural gas supplies. It also relates to the significant Middle East investments in the UK and the major role played by capital investment from the region, particularly Gulf states, into the British economy. In terms of security issues, the report argues that as political authority is in turmoil in the Middle East, the UK has a practical interest in the stability of key states with whom it has shared goals, including counter-terrorism and the security of oil supplies through the Gulf. The report maintains that after Brexit the UK Government needs to work on arrangements that would ensure that the UK and EU continue to work closely on development policy in the Middle East (UK Parliament, 2017).

A new report by BICOM, "British Middle East Strategy after Brexit", which analyzes UK policy in the Middle East considering Brexit and shifting alliances in the region, concluded that the Foreign Office budget should be increased and defense spending maintained or increased, if the UK intends to expand trade and combat future security threats in the Middle East (Bicom, 2018). Another report by Middle East Institute concluded that Brexit will affect British diplomacy as the UK will be able to set new foreign policy priorities without diplomatic and economic limits set by EU (Osiewicz, 2019). However, according to a YouGov poll (2017), the Arab world is a mystery to most Britons, and only a minority want to find out more about the region.

In this environment of contradiction between official British interests in the Arab World and the attitude of the British people towards the region, the two main British television services that carry

pan-Arab media services are operated by the public broadcasting service of the BBC Arabic and the private enterprise of Sky News Arabia.

BBC Arabic Television is run by the BBC World Service. In 2011 the British government cut funding to the BBC, forcing the BBC World Service to close its services in five languages, although the government simultaneously increased funding to the BBC Arabic service. The service transmits news, current affairs and documentaries across TV, radio and the Internet. It broadcasts 24/7 from London and Cairo to the Arabic speaking world, reaching people across all platforms throughout the Arab world and the global Arab diaspora (Fucas, 2018). According to the BBC, the two main pan-Arab networks - Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabia - disappointed many viewers in their glaring biases on the Middle East. It is argued that while Al-Jazeera represents Qatari foreign policy and Al-Arabiya has adopted the Saudi point of view, viewers need to get unbiased and accurate news. The BBC announced that whereas a viewer in the Middle East who watches the two Arabic networks needs to draw its own conclusions, the British-oriented channel can offer a service that the audience know and can trust. According to BBC Arabic, the editorial guidance is to maintain impartial, balanced and accurate reporting. The channel is presenting a variety of voices and that is what distinguishes it from other media outlets in the Arab world which promote political views and agendas. At the heart of BBC's journalistic efforts are breaking news stories, high quality analysis and accurate, balanced reporting delivered in a fast-paced environment and against tight deadlines. The BBC aims to provide access to information and ideas with emphasis on specialist knowledge, international newsgathering, documentaries and a broad range of news packages, covering current affairs, arts, science, sports, politics, and business. (Couri, 2013).

Another global British service is Sky News Arabia – a joint venture between UK-based Sky and Abu Dhabi Media Investment Corporation (ADMIC). It is owned by Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a member of the Abu Dhabi ruling family. The channel uses Sky News brand and was launched in 2012. It broadcasts to households in the Middle East and North Africa and is available globally in the UK and Ireland as well as in the United States, Canada, South America, Australia, New Zealand (Laughlin, 2012). According to the

channel, it is committed to independence and reporting without fear or favor while providing provide a fresh approach to television news with an independent editorial mandate. It also aims to transmit an impartial and independent breaking news channel for the Arab world across multiple platforms. At the end of 2019 it introduced studios that use the latest in virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technology for the first time in the region, since viewers are increasingly consuming news online and want more live news coverage as it happens.

## **CONCLUSION**

Digital media – through global television channels and social networks – changed the politics of the Arab World in a process that started with the Arab Spring in 2011. In most Arab countries, where people were used to watch speeches by their leaders or members of ruling families, new media enforced new standards on the way that the traditional media operated. The Middle East changed, as regional and global coverage took center stage and social networks provided instant and unlimited information from the people. Digital media became a pervasive force in politics, changing the dynamics between the old regimes and the public. The result of new media influence is that the political environment is no longer dominated by state-owned and government-controlled services operating in undemocratic societies. The political influence of satellite networks and social media demonstrates that the counter relations of new media and powerful regional political forces have taken over the local domination of the old establishment that identified the Arab World before the Arab Spring.

The research argues that pan-Arab satellite networks transformed the traditional political uses of old media and expanded the traditional roles of the media while operating in a digital and global landscape. The social and political changes in the Middle East and North Africa were enormous and made an impact worldwide. They show that we live today in a reality in which political independence and the spread of technology provide the options and means for social movements to achieve better living standards. Technology enables these movements to create digital public squares and connect with governments and global forces. The research

examines the relationship between pan-Arab media forces and Arab governments, claiming that the impact of satellite television on new politics caused concern for Arab governments, since the new media environment is dominated by pan-Arab and global media services that represent regional and global rather than local political interests. This issue is discussed by looking at the political implications of the dominance of Qatar through Al-Jazeera and Saudi Arabia through Al-Arabia. The research also examines the impact of Western digital services on Middle Eastern politics – Al-Hurra which represents American interests and the BBC and Sky News which represent British interests.

Following the political events in the decade since 2011, the question remains whether the social revolutions could continue to enforce political change to a region that has long been plagued by authoritarianism. As can be learned from the events of that followed the Arab Spring, the level of state effectiveness, aside from regime type, influenced political movements. As a result, the success of revolutions depends on the way that governments address demands of its people for political reforms and economic welfare. The events in the Middle East also proved that social movements encouraged by digital media were the catalysts for later events which provided the impact of structures and networks on the power of the social movements and on their ability to affect change. In examining the role that governments play, it is obvious that global coverage and new technology changed the way that the media and governments operate. Arab governments play today an important role in the development of new media and have direct links with pan-Arab satellite services. The involvement of Arab governments in the regional politics of the Middle East is executed to a large extent through digital media, as these services have become the new vehicle to influence global and Arab politics. These services also provide the arena for foreign governments to influence Arab politics, while the main pan-Arab outlets represent opposing political interests of the governments they are associated with.

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