Egyptian Media History and Politics

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Abstract: *Egypt provides an interesting Case Study as it has a long history of early and active involvement with media technologies, media systems and media content. From the early 1950s (so for over 60 years), successive governments in Egypt have given their people significant chances to "get ahead" by developing new forms of media as soon as they became available. The Governments did this because of the powerful role the media can play in developing a sense of national identity and nationhood that they saw as crucial for their people. The country took an early initiative and was quick in not only realising, but also harnessing the potential of radio, television and the new media - internet for strengthening the political and cultural ethos in the country as also linking the media technologies with the communication needs of its citizens. This paper traces the history of media – radio, television and internet and examines how their growth is tied to national objectives.*

Keywords: Egypt, Media, History, Politics, Media history, Egyptian Media

1. Introduction

It is now common knowledge that the social media has facilitated a change in regime in Egypt a few years back. But a closer look at Egypt provides an interesting case study as it has a long history of early and active involvement with media technologies, media systems and media content. One will have to concede that Egypt has been quick in not only realising, but also harnessing the potential of radio, television and the new media - internet for strengthening the political and cultural ethos in the country as also linking the media technologies with the communication needs of its citizens. This paper traces the history of media – radio, television and internet and examines how their growth is tied to national objectives.

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As Abdulla explains:
"When radio was introduced in the early 1950s, it was a welcome alternative to newspapers, which served an elite population of literate individuals. In this traditionally oral culture, radio receivers provided much needed functions of information seeking, entertainment and companionship. When television was introduced to Egypt in 1960, the government was quick to realize its potential power in positioning Egypt as a leader, both culturally and politically, in the Arab world" (2005, p 150).

This close relationship between the media available for people and the policies and goals of government has also been shown in the development of satellite television in Egypt. Here we can see how the needs of the people - the link to oral culture – were met by a series of government policies and initiatives that, in turn, led to the speedy and relatively painless introduction of a "newer" technology (in this case, television). In the late 1950s, following the 1952 revolution, Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser realized television's potential for helping to build Egypt into a new nation. Egypt signed a contract with Radio Corporation of America (RCA) to provide the country with a television network and the capacity to manufacture TV sets. After the RCA contract was signed, Egypt began construction of a radio and television centre. This was completed in 1960, and the first television pictures appeared on 21 July 1960, using the 625 - line European standard.

From the beginning, Egypt did everything on a grand scale. Thus, while most nations began their systems modestly with one channel, Egypt began with three. The entire system was initially totally subsidized by the government, receiving a direct grant every year. In 1969, however, an annual license fee of $15 per set was introduced and after 1979, revenue from advertising and from the sales of programmes to other countries also helped in financing the system. At present, a surcharge, which goes to the broadcasting authority, is added to all electricity bills and provides additional funding for the system. Egyptian television began its multi - channel operation under the control of the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, an organization that figured prominently in the Nasser regime from the start. This Ministry also used radio and television broadcasting for propaganda to support the ruling regime.

Television's role in the culture was heightened following the June 1967 war with Israel, which resulted in a defeat that was militarily, economically and psychologically devastating for Egypt. Immediately after the war, there was a decrease in the amount of foreign programming shown. The third channel, over which much programming had been telecast, was eliminated, and the British and American programmes that constituted the bulk of imported programmes were deemed unacceptable due to the break in diplomatic relations with those countries. Almost all forms of programming on television placed less emphasis on Egypt's military capability, tending instead, toward the nationalistic, the educational and the religious.

Moving closer to the country's new military supplier, the former Soviet Union, television began showing films about Soviet and East European life. These programmes were

either provided free of charge or were inexpensive to purchase or lease.

The general technical quality of Egyptian television declined between 1967 and 1974 when there was less money for new equipment. Generally, however, the change in government after Nasser's death and Sadat's ascendancy to the presidency in 1970 did not appear to have much effect on television programming or the structure of the federation.

On 13 August 1970, radio, television and broadcast engineering were established as separate departments under the Ministry of Information. The new decree formally established the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU) and created four distinct sectors - - Radio, Television, Engineering and Finance - - each of which had a chairman who reported directly to the Minister of Information. Egypt began its television system, considered one of the most extensive and effective among all undeveloped countries of Asia and Africa, in 1960. Due to a well - financed radio service and film industry already in existence Egypt, unlike other Arab countries, was able to start television production without importing engineering staff from abroad. Even with this beginning, however, the development of television was complicated by many other social and cultural factors.

Media and Politics
Egyptian information media have always been closely tied to politics. Television in Egypt is, typically, a monopoly under direct government supervision, operation and ownership. There are several reasons for this. First, the minimum cost of establishing a radio or television system is far greater than the minimum cost of establishing a newspaper, for example, and thus far beyond the capability of nearly all private persons in a developing country. Secondly, this high cost encourages the pooling of resources, or a monopoly. And because these media reach beyond borders and literacy barriers, the government has a much greater interest in controlling them or at least keeping them out of hostile hands. Anyone with a printing press has the technical capability of reaching the literate elite, and while this is seen by the government as a potential threat, it is not nearly as great a political liability as a monopoly radio station broadcasting to millions.

Radio and television, which have the potential of instantaneously reaching every single person in the country and many outside it, were regarded by the Egyptian government as too important to be left interests. Thirdly, radio and television are newer media, and the trend is toward greater authoritarian control over all media. the beginning, Egyptian television has had a strong tie with Arab culture. Historical, religious, geographical, political and linguistic bonds tied Egypt to the Arab countries. Egyptian television was influenced by Arabic literature, religion, philosophy and music. The producers of the first programmes, influenced to some extent by the example of contemporary programmes from the East European countries and the Soviet Union, which were heavily cultural in content, quite naturally regarded Egyptian television programmes as a proper vehicle for Arab literature and the arts. Egyptian television, then, performs the function of reinforcing and enhancing Arab culture, which is defined as a heritage in creative endeavour and thought. Its programmes also raise the cultural level of the ordinary viewer by presenting refined items covering scientific, literary and artistic fields as well as a great deal of Arab music and drama on traditional themes. Television is an ideal medium for disseminating family oriented Egyptian culture and tends to centre much of its education and entertainment around the home. Nevertheless, the content and style of television broadcasting available to these viewers changed over time. The government still owns and operates the medium and sometimes uses it to convey political messages, but programming is now characterized by somewhat less politically motivated programming than was characteristic in the 1960s and 1970s. It contains more entertainment and popular culture and the Ministry of Information is trying to stress these aspects and reduce the amount of political content.

News is an important aspect of programming in Egypt because of the country's regional position and the fluctuating nature of political alignments in the Arabic - speaking area. As previously suggested, the 1960s, especially the events surrounding the 1967 war, was an era of crisis. Egyptian television penetrated the region. It was important for the government to maintain a strong news front to present its particular point of view. Newscasting in Egypt included a segment of official "commentary," when there was some special concern to be articulated. From these news broadcasts, as well as other p rogrammes, the policies of President Nasser were clear to the viewer, as were the identities of those who were considered the enemies of those policies.

As compared to the beginning of the 1960s, there was a significant increase in the emphasis upon "education" at the beginning of the 1970s. It took almost the previous decade for the Ministry of Education to be convinced of the value of educational programmes. Moreover, the educational programmes were run first under the initiative of the broadcasters, who resisted turning any time over to the ministry. But enlightenment programmes remain important in the schedule of Egyptian television and have increased measurably through the years.

Religion, of course, carries great weight in Egypt, an Islamic centre. Readings from the Koran have always been broadcast on a regular basis by Egyptian television and religious commentaries or advice on proper moral and ethical behaviour are featured. Coverage of the rituals of the Muslim Holy Day is presented as part of the attempt to maintain Islamic traditions and values. During the Muslim Holy Month of Ramadan, Egyptian television is exceptionally active in religious programming, exhorting the faithful and explicating the pertinence of Islamic history. In the period from 1980 to 1985, a close observer could notice an increase in religious programmes.

Children's programming, which formerly was completely of foreign origin, has changed to suit the Egyptian culture. Almost all Egyptian programmes for youth and women and programs dealing with art and literature have been given increased time on the television schedule. As mentioned,

Egypt was one of the first countries to see the importance of satellite television in the Arab world, and was the first country to launch an Arab satellite channel in 1990. Later, in 1998, Egypt was the first Arab country to develop its own satellite system (NILESAT 101).

And in the last 10 years, the explosion of satellite content has been extraordinary. As Abdulla puts it, Egypt:
*...has launched several satellite channels, including eight digital Nile Thematic Channels: Nile Drama, NileFamily and Kids, Nile Sports, Nile Entertainment, Nile Educational, Nile Culture, Nile TeleText and Nile News. Egypt owns the only Arab satellite channel that broadcastsin English, French and Hebrew: Nile TV International. Egypt has also allowed three private satellite channels – Dream I, Dream II and El Mehwar – to broadcast to Egyptian and Arab audiences (*2005, p 151).

Satellite broadcasting made available global media opportunities for ordinary people to connect to the rest of the world by seeing content that they would not otherwise have access to. It's also important because the impact of the opportunity to see "new" content on satellite television is a forerunner of the impact of new information technologies, like the internet. So the Egyptian government has been able to shape the development of communication technologies to both help its people and further its own ends.

Following on from the advanced and sophisticated approach to broadcast media, the Egyptian government and people were very well placed to take advantage of new information and communication technologies in the 1990s and beyond. These new technologies were largely the result of the convergence (or "coming together") of computers and telecommunications so we start to see the first systematic digital (that is computer - based) mobile phone services in this period.

Across the Arab world as a whole, the level of telephony (and othertelecoms) services was initially relatively low, but after 1990 there was a massive increase.

Abdulla, quoting figures from a United Nations DevelopmentProgramme report, wrote:

*The average number of telephone lines in the Arab world more than doubled during the 1990s, with an estimated 81 telephone mainlines per 1000 people in 2002, an increase from 35 per 1000 people in 1990. Mobile phones were estimated at 85 per thousand in 2002. By 2002, Egypt had an estimated 110 telephone mainlines and 67 cell phones per 1000 people (*2005, p 151).

The government was very committed to improving the telecommunications available to the Egyptian people, and took two major decisions in 1998:
- Allowing private enterprise to develop in thetelecoms market so people would have more choice;
- Creating a new Ministry of Communicatiand Information Technology to replace the old Ministry of Transport and Telecommunications

These decisions indicate the resolve of the government policy. First, by opening the telecoms market to competition, the government of Egypt created the conditions for competition and innovation. Second, by replacing the Ministry of Transport and Telecommunications with the new Ministry of Communication and Information **Technology, the government sent a clear signal that the role of new information technologies was to be linked to the communication needs of its citizens.**

These policies had the following beneficial effects:
1) Digital technology improved service quality for customers
2) Prices were reduced through competition
3) Personal computer ownership increased. More than
4) 200, 000 new computers are bought every year
5) A local software industry developed that focuses on the
6) Several foreign telecom and computer companies established their local or regional offices in Egypt

Internet in Egypt
It's no surprise, then, that the internet developed very quickly and very thoroughly in Egypt. For instance, the government was actively planning for the internet to be an integral part of its communication strategies as early as 1993.

And the government was initially strongly involved in this development:
*In 1994, the Egyptian internet traffic was divided into three major sub - domains: academic, science, and government. The academic sub - domain provided free service for schools and universities. It was given the domain name '. eun', which stands for 'Egyptian Universities Network' (*Abdulla, 2005, p 153).

What's interesting here, of course, is that there was no "commercial" component to the internet in Egypt in this period. It was seen as an education and research tool, not as a money - making venture. As internet connections got better and, more importantly, faster, businesses became more and more attracted to the idea of going online.

The most interesting point was the remarkable decision by the Egyptian government in 2002 to decrease internet costs for its people.

As Abdulla writes:
In 2002, the Egyptian government, through the coordinated efforts of then CIT minister Ahmed Nazif, embarked on one of the most ambitious initiatives in the Arab world to increase internet connectivity and user access. The government started a unique service, whereby internet connectivity, through any of the 68 ISPs then on the market, became free for all.

All users have to pay now is the negligible price of the telephone call while connected to the internet, a price they were already paying anyway. Telecom Egypt then pays 70 percent of the telephone revenues from internet use to the respective ISPs. As a result, ISPs competed to offer more access lines, free email accounts and better customer service (2005, p 155).

As part of the Egyptian government's ambitious programme to expand access to ICT, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), National Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (NTRA), Egyptian National Post Organization (ENPO) and Computer and Software Department at the Federation of Egyptian Chambers of Commerce signed an agreement to spread persona computers for every home in August 2008. The agreement is the second phase of a 2002 initiative and is part of the MCIT's strategy of increasing ICT use throughout Egypt, focusing on socio - economically disadvantaged communities. The initiative includes offering discounts on computers and 512 kbps ADSL subscriptions for three years.

Telecommunications companies also work to enable users to access Internet content. For example, Egypt's Vodafone, which has 15 million subscribers, announced in August 2008 that it will buy a majority share in Sarmady Communications (Sarcom) - an online and mobile content provider. The move was widely seen as part of a wider strategy to dominate Egypt's Internet market by providing both Internet service and content to customers. [5]

Telecom Egypt, which has a monopoly in the fixed - line telephone sector, owns a 45 percent stake in Vodafone Egypt and had 11.3 million fixed - line subscribers at the end of June 2008. Telecom Egypt leases parts of its network to other Egyptian mobile operators, who use it to provide calls between mobile to fixed - line phones, as well as international calls. In 2008, the government announced it would sell a second fixed - line license, ending Telecom Egypt's monopoly, but plans to do so have repeatedly been delayed.

Almost a million Egyptian households have access to broadband, thanks to sharing of ADSL lines. Of these, 63.4 percent share the connection with their neighbours; 81.9 percent of households that share lines share them with more than three other households. Egypt had more than 400, 000 ADSL lines by the end of 2007, 75 percent ofwhich are residential. More than one fourth of Egyptian Internet users visit Internet cafés to get online The number of blogs in Egypt has risen from just 40 in 2004 to an estimated 160, 000 in July 2008, according to a report released by the Egyptian Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Centre (IDSC).

More than three fourths of Egyptian bloggers write in Arabic only, 20percent write in both Arabic and English, and nearly 10 percent write in English only. More than 30 percent of Arabic - language blogs are Egyptian. Most Egyptian bloggers are young men in their 20s, while just over one fourth are female. More than half of Egyptian bloggers are between the ages of 20 and 30. This, again, is clear evidence of the role of government in deciding that internet access – and going online – is important for its people and taking practical actions to make that happen quickly, safely, and cheaply.

Arabization of internet content
A major issue, though, is the content that's available on the internet. In other words, what's the use of giving people access if they can only Arabization of internet content

A major issue, though, is the content that's available on the internet. In other words, what's the use of giving people access if they can only access English and American web pages?

Again, Egypt was a pioneer in the Arab world in trying to change the monolingual nature of the Internet - As Abdulla puts it: Egypt has led the Arab world in its growing efforts to Arabize internet content. This was done when Egypt's Information Highway Project put the first Arabic web pages on the internet in 1996. In the same year, the Egyptian Al Gomhuria was the first Arab newspaper to launch an electronic version. Al Ahram, Egypt's most widely distributed and respected daily newspaper since 1876, launched an electronic version of its content in 1998 (2005, p157)

Although this is a small start, it's more evidence of the way in which a committed government can help its people by tailoring the content of the web to better suit their lives. And the results have been very interesting. Although there has been limited research done on internet users in Egypt, it's clear that young people are especially keen users and that women are under - represented in internet users when compared to the majority of the population.

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