Theorizing ICTs in the Arab World: Informational Capitalism and the Public Sphere

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The concept of the public sphere has become a commonly used paradigm for understanding the impact of contemporary Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) on the political spaces of the Arab world. This article aims to explore the multiple understandings of this evolving public sphere and their shortcomings. A survey of recent research on the Arab region demonstrates inconsistencies which have arisen from an abstraction of the concept from its theoretical roots. By returning to the discourse surrounding Habermas’ original ideas, including the debates which have articulated concerns arising from the possibilities of multiple and non-virtuous publics, the (re)mediating effects of contemporary ICTs, the possibilities for the social construction of new identities, and the universalism of the normative underpinnings of the public sphere, the emerging Arab public sphere is located within its global counter-part, high-lighting those of its features which represent opportunities for new forms of communicative action which have emancipatory potential. However, the article acknowledges the mutually constitutive functions of structure and identity by further locating the new landscape of intra-regional communication within the context of the global spread of informational capitalism. The evidence here suggests that the emerging Arab public sphere is already penetrated and diminished. The key to reconciling these apparently contradictory tendencies lies in the porousness of the boundaries which delimit the Arab public sphere and the manner in which it retains some autonomy from its global counterpart.

ICTs and the Public Sphere in the Arab World

The public sphere in Europe, as envisaged by Habermas (1989), was a bourgeois phenomenon, arising from the growing autonomy of professional classes (capitalist achievers) from both state and religious power, notably in the eighteenth century. The increasingly developed “traffic in commodities” which characterized mercantile and then industrial capitalism (and which moved economic activity well beyond the confines and vertical relationships of the household economy) was accompanied by the growth in “traffic of news,” which required ever more reliable and speedy systems of communications (such as postal

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services). Correspondingly and starting with literary salon-type debate, the realm of public communication, the public sphere, became a progressively more political arena, free from partisan economic forces, in which rational, reasoned debate took place subjecting the state to critical scrutiny (communicative action). In the twentieth century, this idealized arena in which public opinion was formed and contested, began to diminish under the weight of self-interested capitalist intrusion. Habermas describes this as the aggrandizement of capitalism, which progressively took over the state itself and turned its back on its agitational or oppositional role. News was itself commodified and the state began to harness the infrastructure of communication to influence the realm of public communication for its own ends. The autonomy of the public sphere was compromised, as biased (mis)information was “aimed” at the public by the capitalist state, or agencies which purported to be oppositional but which had adopted the “language of adaptation.” There were progressively fewer genuinely oppositional groups who contested the capitalist base in its entirety or who were entirely autonomous from capitalist interests. Thus the information in the public sphere was of a degraded quality and the debate less rational and more “interested.” Gone were the critical-rational values, the notion of an objective truth, value regardless of the status of the speaker, and financial disinterest in engagement. In the meantime, however, the public sphere had played a crucial role in establishing the role of public opinion in holding government accountable.

Habermas’ idealized public sphere has not gone uncontested, nor has it entirely stood the test of time, but has been developed and advanced in a range of fields. An extensive literature has evaluated the utility of the notion in analyzing the complexities of state-civil society relations, the nexus of politics and culture, the mediating role of modern communications media, the social construction of identities and norms, and even the carrying out of international relations (IR). This paper attempts first to outline the historical manifestations of an Arab public. It is argued that this never previously equated to a public sphere, but a survey of recent research on the Arab world suggests that the concept is now a useful conceptual starting point for examining the impact of modern (and particularly media) information and communications technologies (ICTs) on the politics of the region. Generally, however, this existing research does not link substantively into the wider academic debates but rather assumes a static and regionally abstracted understanding of the public sphere. The paper begins therefore by indicating where connectedness to discussions in the disciplines of critical theory, IR, and sociological theory might offer explanatory assistance in evaluating the emergence of a contemporary, ICT-based public sphere.

The Arab Region in Historical Perspective

The Arab countries did not follow a comparable capitalist developmental route to that of democratic Europe and thus had no obvious parallel experience that might be considered as a public sphere. Modern forms of capitalism were introduced by imperialist European powers, and the region as a whole has struggled to counter the disadvantages of both the consequent structural impediments to development and the problems of late-development in general.

The nation-state is a relatively new phenomenon and the appropriation of the role of mass communicator by the state under the developmental paradigm which emerged as nation-states were formed or gained their independence, precluded the kind of open, autonomous debates which purportedly characterized Habermas’s public sphere. Indeed, the Arab countries in the second half of the twentieth century became renowned for the censorship and curtailment of free debate and public scrutiny of government, for authoritarianism and a severely limited, captive, or even non-existent civil society. The notion of distinct public
and private arenas, the former defined by legal-rational notions of citizenship and superceding tribal, familial, sectarian, religious, or patrimonial affiliations in determining the relationship of the individual to the state, has not been firmly embedded in the modern Arab region, and the autonomy of what public debate there is from cultural and religious intrusions is severely limited. In short, not only was a public difficult to identify, but so too was the possible boundary between the public and the private which might have defined it. It was not surprising then that academic debates on the utility or otherwise of the concept of the Habermasian public sphere made few inroads into scholarship on the Arab region.

That is not to say that there was no tradition of public political debate per se in the region. The 1908 “Young Turk” revolution, combined with the possibilities offered by the introduction of print news in the nineteenth century, and the broadening of (previously traditional) elites to include the professional classes, had inspired public discussions “about civilization, political legitimacy, social reform, the place of the peoples of the Ottoman Empire in the passage of history, and, ultimately, what it meant to be modern” (Watenpaugh 2006:2). The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed a flourishing of voluntary associations, literary circles, and even political parties which initiated and sustained various emancipatory discourses. What is more, these discussions were not confined to national borders (since such borders did not exist in the Westphalian sense until the post-WWI era and even then bore little relation to sub-regional identities) but were diffused widely (at least geographically) among Arab audiences via newprint, pamphletting, radios, and even cinema, and interpreted at the local level through the mediation of local intellectuals and professional classes.

However, unlike Habermas’ European public sphere, the object of the critique, although fundamentally about the nature of the political community itself, became centered on the inability to stand up to the weakening or predatory influences of external communities (either the Ottoman Porte, or the European colonial powers). Ironically, the language of the discourses (both literally and figuratively) were frequently imported: secular educated elites often spoke and wrote in first Ottoman Turkish and later European languages (although the revival of Arabic as a modern language became a principal topic for literary discussion), whilst their ideological frames came from the nationalism, liberalism, and later socialism of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. For Muslim intellectuals like the Egyptian Muhammed ‘Abduh or later the Syrian Rashid Rida, the influences of Europe were found in their attempts to modernize Islam, to assert its compatibility with reason, progress, and modernity (Hourani 2002:304–7). Consensus between the groups was formulated around the anti-imperialist struggle, and for this the masses could be recruited and mobilized. Through mosque, party, trade union, and then military structures, these larger populations eventually seized power in large parts of the region, only to once again be subordinated to the discursive confines of corporatist political structures. Thus the cultural manifestations of a nascent Arab public were bluntly curtailed. Media freedoms were progressively eroded, and the state monopolized both the print and other media, determining the usually restrictive parameters of debate. Crucially, the private sector was quick to align itself with the state, not against it, advancing its interests through those same corporatist structures which subordinated the workers’ unions to the logic of collective nation-state building. This corporatism, whether of the radical thawri or wealthy tharwi variety (Ayubi 2001) served to fragment whatever region-wide political debates were previously being had by consolidating the primacy of the nation-state and reducing “Arab” affairs to rhetorical position on Israel and Palestine, collective Arab nationalism, radical versus conservative leadership, and positioning vis-à-vis external superpowers.
John Waterbury (1994:30) has argued that this was not a consequence of structure only, but that Arab intellectual elites, in perpetuating discourses of nationalism, Arab nationalism, and national solidarity, became the rhetoricians of authoritarianism rather than its critics, whilst Hisham Sharabi (1988) has argued powerfully that neo-patrimonial Arab political culture produces and endorses patriarchal patterns of political authority, limiting the space for, and credibility of, critical discourses. A final ingredient in the uniqueness of the absence of a critical bourgeoisie in modern Arab politics is the role played by Islam and Islamic institutions. There is insufficient space here to list the variety of (often contradictory) arguments as to what this role has been, not least since Islam is manifested in both formal and informal associations, and has served the function of both legitimizing rulers and providing their harshest critics (Al-Sayyid 1999; Lewis 2004). It must suffice here to note that this congruence of historical, structural, cultural, and religious factors resulted in an early eclipse of public debate within the modern region and the absence of a phenomenon comparable to Habermas’ European public sphere.

When contemporary ICTs began to make their mark, however, a new body of research on the Arab countries began to suggest that society was now able to evade the censorial controls of the state and could begin to engage in reasoned, oppositional, and critical debate via the Internet, mobile telephone technologies, and satellite television. Early indicators of this possibility might perhaps be considered to have been the use in the 1980s and 1990s of visual and audio tape recordings and fax machines to spread Islamist critiques of authoritarian government following the trend set by Ayatollah Khomeini and his adherents in the 1970s. Although it can be argued that this reintroduced the possibilities for an inter-Arab dimension to critical political discourse, there was still a monodirectionalism to these communications which implied assumed superior authority on the part of their initiators incompatible with the normative equality of participants in a public sphere. However, with the new technologies like satellite television and the Internet, a much broader range of voices could be heard.

More crucially perhaps, the new technologies could enable associations to develop autonomously from the state. The modern Arab region has never been short of non-governmental or nonstate associations; the problem was that these did not previously constitute a civil society in so far as they were either primordial (based on kinship, tribe, ethnic, or religious communities which are necessarily exclusivist) or they were so constrained by the state, that they were not autonomous. Thus they did not fulfill Gellner’s criteria for civil society of a “cluster of institutions and associations strong enough to prevent tyranny, but which are, nevertheless, entered freely rather than imposed by birth or by awesome ritual” (Gellner 1995:42). Now it was suggested that civil society could develop autonomously from the state and that the technologies of the new media could enable a public to emerge, the discourses of which would expose the authoritarian (or at least un-democratic) Arab states to critical scrutiny.

Subsequent research has highlighted a number of characteristics of this ICT-based public and its media-based discourses, and in some cases has asserted that this public has been able to effect political change. There remain divergencies, however, in the interpretation and meaning attributed to this public and, specifically, whether the spaces in which it is active constitute a new public sphere.

**An Emerging Arab Public**

The evidence of an evolving public and its formulation of opinion seems clear. For a start, the state no longer has a monopoly on media communications, either in their production, content, or in determining viewer reception. Jon Anderson (2000:39), in discussing the new media in the Muslim world, has
argued that the range and number of interpreters of information has expanded massively as barriers to entry to discursive arenas are lowered by the growing accessibility of electronic media and as messages migrate between media. The same may be said to be true of the Arab region, where—from a scenario of few senders to many recipients—we have moved to a scenario of many senders to many receivers, and authority has consequently become more diffuse and popularized. One could argue that in Habermasian terms the modern Arab state is unable to formulate the consensual basis of its own hegemony unchallenged. However, arguably it has never really been able to do so; Ayubi (2001:447–59) argues potently that Arab states can generally be best understood as “fierce” rather than “hard” or “strong” entities, in which the appearance of consensus is a function of corporatist, and at times, populist political structures, underpinned by a fundamental reliance on coercive centers of power.

Whether the existence of this new public constitutes a public sphere, or whether there is indeed a lone public as opposed to multiple publics, are further questions that need answering.

The notion that there is one Arab public arises not from its bourgeois (or other) character but from the transnational nature of the media-based ICTs that facilitate public discourse in the region. Marc Lynch (1999, 2006), has pointed out that the new technologies allow Arabs to talk to and amongst themselves, across national borders, and to redefine their identities (as opposed to the nation-state-based identities that were fostered by state policy in the postcolonial era) through the lively conflictual debates and “Arabized” news coverage of satellite television channels like al-Jazeera. Lynch talks of a new, self-conscious Arab public, beyond the control of national governments, which has confronted the restrictions imposed by authoritarian states as well as social taboos based on traditional or religious norms and identities and allowed critical debate to emerge at an Arab, rather than just a national, level. Lynch has highlighted one set of conversations—those that are taking place amongst an Arab public, in Arabic, and about Arab issues and identities. However, Lynch has to ask whether such conversations equate with a public sphere when they are transnational and there is no corresponding executive or legislative institution to act on the consensus that may be formulated within it.

To some extent Lynch (2006:212–46) answers this himself by pointing to the Kefaya movement in Egypt and the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, arguing that they owe much to the mobilization of this new Arab public and its roots in the contemporary ICTs. As social movements, he suggests that they display a phenomenal ability to utilize ICTs to mobilize popular support and contest official narratives, and to challenge local state dominance despite the non-territorial location of the technologies—and the audiences—their. For Lynch, this Arab public constitutes an Arab public sphere with a particular relevance and cogency which, for historical reasons, trumps domestic public spheres in terms of its importance in defining identities and challenging political authorities.

Lynch draws upon social constructivist understandings of the function of media debate. The possibility of public discussion allows the validity claims of contesting normative understandings to be challenged through argument and a consensus reached, in this case of what it means to be Arab. The accessibility of the new media enables the structures and hierarchies of political power to “recede into the background,” (Risse 2000:7) but at the same time the emergent consensus acts upon the definition of the rules of the game, in other words helping to establish what constitutes legitimacy (Payne 2000:3), both in terms of individual interests and regime behavior. Thus the normative attributes of identities are vocalized, mediated, and tested against one another, and in doing so have a constitutive impact upon the structures within and by which they are framed (Lynch 1999).
Lynch inadvertently makes two assumptions here: that there is a single unitary Arab public sphere and that the Arab participants are engaged in an ideal speech situation, both of which are contestable. For a start, not everyone accepts this notion of a unitary Arab public. Noha Mellor (2005:17–24) highlights the heterogeneity of the Arab national experiences, arguing that it is fallacious to suggest that the Arab region is a homogeneous unit which has undergone a unified experience with ICTs. Moreover, while not disputing the media revolution per se, she points out that censorship, while diversely exercised, nonetheless remains a very real obstacle to free debate both within individual countries and across the region. Whatever media-based ICTs offer by way of new, transnational conversations, they remain limited in the impact they can have. For Mellor, controversial news coverage or political contests on television cannot replace genuine political institutions to serve as catalysts for democratization in the region on their own. Functioning economies, secure middle classes, and more knowledge (as opposed to information) are required as well to translate communication into communicative action. Mellor (2005:146), despite her own rejection of the possibility of a Habermasian public sphere might actually be identifying the existence of multiple publics in a broader public sphere, a concept which Habermas himself was forced by his critics to acknowledge was closer to reality than his idealized unitary public sphere (Eley 1992). Nancy Fraser (1993) has explained well the implications of revisionist histories of the European experience which have demonstrated that the bourgeois public sphere was an exclusive domain which marginalized the voices of subordinate social groups regardless of its normative claims to be inclusive and cognizant of the communicative equality of all participants. Habermas accepted that the exclusionary practices of the bourgeois public sphere, in frustrating the very principle of open discussion which they purported to serve, constituted a degradation of the public sphere (Huspek 2007:821–43). Nonetheless, he maintained that they represented a challenge to which marginalized groups were forced to respond, thereby creating the very discussion that was needed to enhance the political project. Fraser calls these subaltern counter publics since they are the voices of subordinated social groups who are less equal and less able to penetrate the public sphere with representation of their own views and interests. She does point out that they are not necessarily themselves “virtuous” in so far as their own interests might be anti-democratic and exclusionary; that they need not necessarily have signed up to the normative component of the public sphere. There is much in current research on the Arab media to support this paradigm. For a start, a crucial feature of the new media-based public discourse, for Anderson, is the infiltration of “folk” (by which he means mass, non-literate) as opposed to “high” (super-literate) culture. This can be seen in the use of vernacular language, in media programming that reflects the everyday lives of ordinary people (rather than idealized elite lives), and in participatory opportunities (like telephone voting, text messaging, and emailing) which encourage non-elite participants. Barriers to entry in political or cultural debates are low and participation is accessible for anyone with access to the technology in question. The suggestion in Anderson’s analysis is that the new media ICTs democratize both what it held to be the relevant public and the content of the communications themselves. But for Mellor, the assessment is very different. The new Arab media offers chaos and fragmentation of the public. For example, the majority of middle- and lower-class viewers watch entertainment channels with films, soaps, reality TV shows, music, and sport, while news programming remains a preoccupation of the intellectual elites. If one looks at the viewing figures of the iconic news/documentary channel Al-Jazeera, for example, of its 40 million viewers the station claims that 67% of viewers are urban-living, 67%
are educated to high-school diploma and above, and the majority (66%) are male (Al-Jazeera 2007).

Mellor suggests that the public space created by the new ICTs is divided into areas accessible to intellectual and elite classes with a grasp of the English language, and areas to which those with only Arabic language skills are confined. Individuals are included or excluded to and from communities on the basis of language, social status, and literacy rather than nationality. Only those who are proficient in English as well as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) can access the full range of Web and other media sources of information, or act as interpreters or mediators of much of the externally derived information available therein. Thus, says Mellor, the new Arab public, if it exists, is fragmented and only partially inclusive. Access is not just about ability to pay, or ability to access the technology itself, but about the pre-existing skills of the individual. Existing social differentiation may only be exacerbated by the new technologies, serving to consolidate multiple publics who, whilst not sharing a unitary message, are in their multiplicity, diversity, and transnationalism, still sharing the function of challenging state monopolies over communicative politics.

The divergence between Anderson and Mellor’s interpretations can gain from reference to larger debates about the emancipatory potential of Habermas’ public sphere. It can be argued that, as the public sphere was progressively enlarged to be inclusive of non-bourgeois elements, its democratic and emancipatory potential was enhanced despite a degradation in the quality of the debate (Calhoun 1992:2). This was an inevitable process given the scale and nature of contemporary social organization and the requirements of normative aspirations for democracy.

It is worth adding, however, that Fraser’s analysis goes some way to recognizing that not all the publics of the Arab world, or indeed the broader Muslim world, sign up to the normative aspects of communicative equality and rational discourse. Augustus Richard Norton, in his seminal Civil Society in the Middle East, meant much the same thing when he spoke of civility, “the willingness of individuals to accept disparate political views and social attitudes; to accept the profoundly important idea that there is no right idea” (Norton 1994:12). Norton argued that this concept was conspicuously absent from Middle Eastern civil society, profoundly weakening its ability to function as a forum for critical political debate. While much of the sensationalism of new Arab television has derived from its willingness to air controversial figures and their opinions, and to deal with culturally sensitive issues such as female mutilation, unemployment, or domestic violence, even the most ardent of al-Jazeera supporters have had to admit that Arab audiences often feel uncomfortable when traditional cultural values or religious customs are attacked (El-Nawawy and Iskander 2002:25–26). Arab regimes have been able to co-opt their publics in filtering Web sites, monitoring Internet traffic and offering culturally inoffensive programming on terrestrial television which has successfully competed with more controversial satellite channel programming (Mandaville 2001:152–77). Equally, the lack of civility can be seen in what Gary Bunt (2003) terms e-jihad, Islamist efforts to “hack and crack” across the Web to disrupt alternative messages or in Islamist television shows like Hamas’ The Pioneers of Tomorrow which encourage children to pursue martyrdom (Middle East Media Research Institute 2008). One could argue that, whilst Habermas’ dominant bourgeois public sphere was exclusivist on the part of class interests, the wider Arab public sphere (within which diverse Arab publics contest for space) is exclusivist by virtue of (traditional) cultural and religious norms.

We are faced here with two problematics which need to be teased out of the Habermasian public sphere: on the one hand, when publics are non-virtuous, (that is, when they do not accept the possibility that their normative position can
be altered through rational argumentation) can they still be effective participants in a public sphere and does the process of argumentation nonetheless have an educational effect upon them and therefore ultimately serve its purpose in generating a consensus? This is crucial when examining the Arab region because here we must deal with the second problematic, the possibility that argumentative rationality is itself not a universal norm, as Habermas would have us believe, but rather a culturally (and therefore, geographically) bound virtue which is irrelevant for communities which do not sign up to the post-enlightenment secularism or the individualism of Europe.

Nancy Fraser (1993:15) suggests that in stratified societies (which can certainly include the Arab countries) the emancipatory potential of subaltern counterpublics lies in the dialectics between their dual functions, on the one hand acting as spaces for “withdrawal and regroupment” and on the other as “bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward the wider publics.” Their engagement with argumentation does not necessarily have to be rational or virtuous in order to contribute to the democratization of the public sphere. Critical theorists have also suggested that recognizing the validity of cultural diversity (whether nationally manifested or not) is a crucial component of the democratizing and emancipatory potential of the public sphere. Linklater, for example, argues for a “historically self-conscious universalism” which is difference-sensitive, and which opens up its own ethical principles to critical scrutiny by cultural “others” (Linklater 1996). As to whether participation in the public sphere by a non-virtuous public can have an educational effect, it is worth reflecting on the work of Peter Mandaville (2001). He has argued cogently that the new media acts as a space in which ever-increasing numbers of voices claiming to represent authentic Islam are themselves engaged in argumentation and identity construction, amounting to communicative action and consequently impacting upon structural configurations (within Islamic hierarchies of power). Others like Asef Bayat go further, suggesting the existence of post-Islamism as a normative project: “a conscious attempt to conceptualize and strategize the rationale and modalities of transcending Islamism in social, political, and intellectual domains. Yet post-Islamism is neither anti-Islamic, un-Islamic, nor is it secular” (Bayat 2005:5). Post-Islamism attempts to reconcile modernity, pluralism, and inclusiveness with Islam, and, for Mandaville has a progressive, transnational, trans-cultural, civil-society agenda which conforms well to notions of a global public sphere. In other words, the non-virtuous nature of some Islamic or other local publics need not necessarily prevent them from engaging in the public sphere in ways which enhance its emancipatory functions. That having been said, there remains an inescapable tension between the presumed normative universalism of rational argumentation and its Western intellectual origins, not least given historical and current structures of political power which can lead to accusations of imposed cultural imperialism. Habermas’ project was unashamedly of the critical liberal variety, not unlike David Held’s more recent notion of cosmopolitan democracy (Archgibugi and Held 1995; Held 1995), and it shares similar challenges in reconciling the vitality engendered by critical acknowledgment of cultural diversity with the normative aspirations for equality, universal rationality, and discursive morality, or what Calhoun terms “the class consciousness of frequent travelers” (Calhoun 2001).

One must first, however, establish that any wider Arab public does in fact operate as a public sphere, a forum for communicative action to challenge established political authority and hold it accountable. A new generation of researchers who have focused on audience responses to ICTs in the Arab world are convinced that it does. Lina Khatib’s work on television and public action in the Beirut Spring (Khatib 2007), Marwan Kraidy’s study of Star Academy in Lebanon and Kuwait (Kraidy 2007), and Giovanni Maiola and David Ward’s research
on media coverage of the Palestinian elections (Maiola and Ward 2007), all argue strongly that “new” television has played a significant role in prompting political action. Interestingly, however, while they focus very much on domestic national arenas and challenges to the state which are formulated through audience responses to new media, Dean, Anderson, and Lovink (2006:xvxxix) take a different line which has much to offer this discussion.

They have argued that the nature and dynamics of new transnational public spheres require that we change the way we think about democratic imagery (everything from representation to accountability and legitimacy) and that oppositionalism in this context is not dependent on a binary between freedom and coercion, nor is it directed only and specifically at the state. Rather, it involves engagement in a new type of activism with less direct techniques for leading, directing, opposing, and controlling. (They draw upon Foucault’s concept of governmentality which articulates a particular kind of political knowledge, knowledge as part of the practice, systematization, and rationalization of the field to be governed). The agency in this activity is less likely to be the individual, but rather civil society organizations who use ICTs “to challenge previous configurations of power and influence and produce new ones.” This version of Habermas’s communicative action (in which ways of “leading, directing, and controlling” are more efficacious than direct confrontation and contest) recognizes that political communities are no longer territorially based, they are engaged in communication with more than just the state and its agents, they are not directly representative (elected), and they are formulated around identities rather than socially interactive communities. Their objectives and their activism are not (solely) tied to offering a rational critique of the state and its policies, but are more diverse, and less politically tangible.

At this point it is crucial to recognize, as Mellor did, that any public sphere which is facilitated through the contemporary technologies is not just about individual voices pitted against the power of the state. It was pointed out earlier that Mellor believes that institutions are needed to translate communication into communicative action, not unlike Dean et al.’s (2006) assertion that civil society organizations collate, mediate, and represent the voices in the new public sphere. Equally, the targets of the critical discourse are not just the state and its agents, but a broader range of corporate, capitalist institutions which are not confined to nation-states. Finally, the medium through which the public articulates its opinion, the technologies themselves, are owned, managed, and regulated by organizations which may be understood as fundamentally interested institutions. The space in which the public and political centers of power enact their critical dance is one in which a whole range of geographically diffuse, more or less unitary institutions are increasingly usurping individuals as the primary actors, despite the fact that engagement with the technologies begins at the level of the individual and the formulation and expression of his or her particular identity.

This fits well with Lynch’s earlier assertions that contemporary ICTs offer a forum for discussions about Arab interests and identities and somewhat gets round his own concerns that these cannot be mapped against specific executive institutions. Communicative action in this understanding (Habermas’ “life-world” perhaps) has value by virtue of its ability to make power visible, as opposed to instrumental action which derives its relevance from the capacity to actually challenge structures of power (in the so-called “system world”) (Calhoun 1988). Thus there exists a tension between the system-perpetuating function of the public sphere, and its nonetheless transformative potential which arises from the construction and re-construction of identities, and their engagement in new forms of activity targeting new types of institutions and structures.

Alternatively, one could argue (as Dean et al. have acknowledged) that by reducing the relevance of the national community in favor of transnational
communities, the direct accountability of national governments is diminished while simultaneously unequal access to new technologies translates into new, hidden, hierarchies of power which are reinforced by this activism rather than challenged. The notion that CSOs are necessarily empowered by their use of ICTs has after all been substantively challenged. Mackay, Maples, and Reynolds (2001:12) have argued that even the Internet does not really allow for the formation of new, identity-based communities since movements do not emerge around experiences shared over a prolonged period of time “but of like-minded individuals who share only a small part of their lives with one another, and who are enjoying a short, transient, association with one another.” Such communities of interest are different from communities of social interaction and, by drawing activity away from social interaction, they can weaken rather than strengthen the public sphere. In the Arab world, this argument can translate into a diffusion of real oppositional politics aiming to contest the state and its policies, and a focus on the fact of having a discussion rather than making a tangible achievement from that discussion. Some commentators have noted that the quality of the debate on satellite television, for example, has been degraded by the growing competition for audiences and a tendency toward sensationalism, spectacle, or indeed commodification. Mellor goes so far as to suggest that the new Arab public sphere is symbolic rather than a reflection of reality.

The mismatch between appearances and reality is also evident in the work of Fandy (2000) who has pointed out what he calls the “anywhere but here” syndrome in the Arab media; the fact that “if Egyptians want to know about Egypt, they are better off watching al-Jazeera, while a Qatari is better served by reading Arab newspapers from outside Qatar to keep informed of what is happening inside Qatar” (Mellor 2005:145). Whether national governments can censor the Internet or satellite television is immaterial as long as the new media focus on foreign affairs, presenting an “Arab voice” or discussing reform in abstract. The inability or unwillingness to engage directly with local authorities amounts, in this case, to self censorship. Audiences are meanwhile satiated by the reassurance that, finally, the Arab region is findings its voice, while the reality is that the voice substitutes for action, action is deferred and regimes remain secure.

There are two, related issues here: has the fact that the Arab region is demonstrating the existence of a public become more important than the reality of that public itself, and if there is an Arab public, is it (or subordinate counter-publics within the public sphere) actually engaging in critical dialog with the state or just being seen to be doing so?

The fact that the states of the Arab region have initiated a variety of fighting-back strategies (including controlling ISP licensing, Web site filtering, working with captive or crony capitalist owners of satellite television stations, professionalizing its own media outlets to offer stronger competition, banning entire technologies, seeking to gain a greater role for national governments in international regulatory frameworks, and—as a last resort—taking retrospective action against those who are deemed to have transgressed the implicit and explicit censorial dictates of the state such as arresting and imprisoning bloggers and Web site owners) suggests that they do perceive themselves to be the targets of critical review (Murphy 2006:1059–84). In itself this suggests that a public sphere does indeed exist, but the challenge to state structures is undoubtedly diffused by the transnational nature of the technologies which facilitate it.

Global Connectedness

Any notion of an Arab public sphere has to be located within a global context which can be explored at a number of levels. One way to start such an approach
is by returning to the question of authority and the interpretation of the information made available as discourses migrate between the local and global. It is true that old preferences for Western media news coverage of the Arab countries, especially in times of crisis, as more authoritative and “true” than local media coverage have given way to a growing trust in Arab news outlets which project an Arab interpretation and voice. (Al-Jazeera’s coverage of the war in Afghanistan and the American invasion of Iraq were cases in point). However, it is worth noting the recent debates within Qatar (Middle East Media Research Institute 2007) about the virtual absence of Qatari nationals in either the editorial or presentational sides of al-Jazeera’s operations. The Qatari newspapers have led attacks on the station and its managers for preferring Western news presenters, Western styles of dress and even Arabs with Western facial features. They have been accused of promoting the idea that Western cultural presentations are necessarily more authoritative than Qatari, or even Arab presentations. More broadly, Arab satellite television can often be regarded as offering style management to Arab identities, promoting or creating a new Arab identity based on essentially Western life-styles, rather than reflecting the existing identities. The popularity of Pop-Idol type singing and talent shows, the import and mimicking of dramas and sitcoms (like the American show Friends) or Who Wants to be a Millionaire, indicate the progression of what is termed cultural hybridity or global convergence. Mellor (2005:5) calls this the regressive Americanization of Arab media culture. The new media promote what may be seen as professionalization, a raising of journalistic, editorial, and presentational standards—in doing so adopting styles, language, materials, and values from the West. Arab audiences become bombarded by mixed messages: the presentational aspects are derived from a Western, capitalist, globalized culture and the content itself is frequently managed, regulated, and reproduced in the West. At the same time, local cultural resistance is framed by censorship of advertisements, locally owned alternative sources offering “authentic” information and interpretation, and a dialog that seeks to rediscover local identities. The contradictions are mind-boggling. Saudi Arabia represents a massive market for advertisers and thus advertisements are strictly censored for cultural appropriateness. At the same time, Saudi-owned television channels offer some of the most culturally liberal entertainment. It is no coincidence that al-Jazeera remains dependent on Qatari government sponsorship and has been unable to generate enough advertising revenue to maintain any degree of financial self-sufficiency—while the Lebanese LBC entertainment channel, which offers what has been termed authenticated mimicry of Western entertainment, is the highest advertising income generator. Segmented programming, which aims to offer something for everyone, is inevitably partly responsible for this mixed messaging: MBC, for example, posts its popular programs as including Al Shamshoon (the Arabic version of the Simpsons cartoon), CBM (a satirical political and social commentary show), Corner Stone (a live Islamic personal advice program), Kalam Nazeem (a show specifically for and about Arab women), Who Wants to be a Millionaire with George Kurdahi, Style with Joelle (which presents current trends in international fashion), Khawater Shab (a program aimed at addressing youth issues in a specifically Saudi and Islamic manner), Harouf wa Aloof (a game show with cash prizes), and Danadana (an Arab musical celebrity show). Together they appeal to Arab, Muslim, gender and age-based identities, as well as introducing international fashion and other cultural influences.

These discussions lead us once more back into the conundrum of whether Arab use of ICTs and the emergent Arab public sphere are fostering (multiple) identities among Arab populations which overlap or integrate with more global identities, and reconfiguring Arab notions of self and otherness. It has been argued (Constantinou, Richmond, and Watson 2008:5) that global
communications enable an undoing of “the othering of others,” whilst at the same time offering new visions of what emancipation might look like drawn from other socio-political communities. The latter has certainly been true of Arab public(s), to which the new technologies have introduced possibilities for a much broader and deeper range of discussions about what political structures and modes of organization might be more desirable and more legitimate than those currently exhibited within the region. It is also true that the engagement with a more global culture has had an impact on reconfiguring local identities. But it remains valid to suggest that the construction through the dialogical functions of the new media of new understandings about what it means to be Arab, include constructions about what it means to be other than Arab, particularly when it comes to assertions of predatory external interests emanating principally but not exclusively from the United States.

It becomes clear that any discussion of an Arab public sphere cannot be complete without reference to what is outside it, as much as what is inside it, and to the means by which content and action migrate across the boundary. This requires relocating the analysis once again from the level of the individual to that of organizations and institutions. For example, Naomi Sakr (2007b) has pointed out that the high costs of producing programming mean that Arab satellite and terrestrial channels are highly dependent on buying-in ready-made viewing (a commercial transaction between companies), constantly eroding the boundary between the outside and the inside of any Arab public sphere. Equally, the establishment of English-language versions of Arab media formats by Arab media companies is a clear effort to project the discourses of the Arab public sphere into the global arena whilst affecting a commercially oriented global profile for the company. Thus our challenge is not only to identify the discursive means whereby, and impact of, the messages that migrate between the Arab and the global public spheres, but to locate those processes within the structure of a globalized communications network.

The Positioning of the Arab Region in a Globalized Communications Network

To address this structural dimension we might usefully turn at this point to more generalized theoretical approaches to the impact of ICTs. Communications, particularly mass communications, have been at the heart of modernization theory since Daniel Lerner’s pivotal 1958 study (ironically) of the Middle East (Lerner 1958). For the best part of three decades, ICTs were understood to be central to the developmental project, enabling the propagation of new national and civic (as opposed to tribal, localized, or traditional) identities and cultures. Consequently for much of the developing world, monopolistic state control over the media and telecommunications infrastructure became a crucial pillar of development planning, and efforts to protect local media and communications markets from external financial or cultural influences were understood within the context of the casting off of Western cultural imperialism and the assertion of indigenous, albeit modernized, local identities, and cultural norms.

Since the 1980s, this understanding of ICTs as an instrument of development has been changing to one in which ICTs are themselves the latest stage of (specifically capitalist) development and their globalized nature has led to extensive consideration of how they impact the world economic system and the status of individual national economies within it. An early assessment was that of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who predicted the de-territorialization of human activity as a result of the space-time compressing effects of ICTs (Heidegger 1971). Critical social theorists like Herbert Schiller (Webster 2002:124–60) have updated Wallerstein’s world system theory (Wallerstein 1974) by identifying the contemporary commodification of information, the extension
of market dynamics into informational realms and the domination of corporate
capital as key features of contemporary informational capitalism, whilst others
like Giddens (1990); Robertson (1983) and Lechner (Robertson and Frank
1985) have stressed the societal and cultural aspects of the global system.

Perhaps the most significant assessment of the transformatory impact of ICTs
was that of Manuel Castells (1996-8), who has argued that we have entered a new
era of informational capitalism in which new forms of economic and social orga-
nization, based on information networks, generate the commercial activity of
contemporary capitalism. Crucially, the networked society is one in which capital-
ist activity takes place in real time, without the constraints of either time or
space. Old territorially defined concepts of North and South become redundant,
and are replaced with a hierarchy which, while still territorially located, is less
confined to national boundaries and which allows for a dispersal of the capitalist
center. In Castells’ world, power lies within the network, rather than in territorial
location. The closer you are to the heart of the network, and the more engaged
with it, the better your access to power. Equally, the less your access to, or owner-
ship of, the technology which sustains the network, the further you are from
power. Castells is not the only one to suggest that the core-periphery model of
the old dependency theorists has been regenerated through ICTs, with location
relative to network capitalism taking over from territorial considerations. The
core is located in the corporations which produce the networks (including the
latest generation research and technology, the licenses for reproducing technol-
ogy etc., the high value information labor centers) and which overlap with
national and international regulatory bodies and organizations (including
national governments) that promote the global expansion and diffusion of the
technology networks. Retort (2005) has argued that, in this, the state has indeed
become capitalism’s collaborator: they point to the emphasis in recent decades
on privatization of telecommunications, the constant facilitation of global invest-
ment in, and expansion of ICT networks, and the ideological and financial redi-
recting of international organizations to support this objective as a means of
equalizing the benefits of globalization. Likewise, Van Audenhove, Burgelman,
Nulens, and Cammaerts (1999) have identified the promotion of concepts such
as the Global Information Society (GIS) and the Global Information Infrastruc-
ture (GII) by Western governments and international organizations, which aim
to develop core services and applications and then extend them through globally
integrated networks, as well as mechanisms for developing liberalized global
markets, as a means of promoting not just the compensatory developmental
leapfrogging they nominally espouse, but an enabling environment for capitalist
expansion at the global level. Similarly Veva Leye (2007), has argued that the
“ICT for Development discourse” adopted by international organizations like
UNESCO disguises what is nothing other than the latest phase in capitalist devel-
opment (see also Preston 2001; Schiller 1999) in which corporate stakeholders
collude in advancing their own interests at the expense of less developed econo-
 mies, not least by suggesting the absence of any viable alternative discourse. For
Leye, the digital divide is a reflection of pre-existing structural inequalities
which can only be exacerbated by dependence on the hardware/software “arms
race” (Cisler 2005) going on in developed countries which outdates technologies
before they even reach the developing world. Likewise Morales-Gomez and
Melesse (1998) have indicated how developing country expenditures on ICTs
for development draw capital away from basic needs provision, increase external
debt, and subordinate developing economies to the market needs of trans-
national corporations.

It is not only the state/capitalism nexus which is altered by the new ICTs. Like
the industrial revolution before it, the informational revolution has transformed
social relations in general, notably dis-embedding them from their pre-existing
spatial and temporal roots. John B. Thompson (1990, 1994a,b, 1995) has consequently explained how Habermas’ dialogical model requires upgrading if it is to accommodate the massive growth in the communicative community offered by mass communications technologies, the mediatory role played by mass media technologies, and the monological quasi-interactive nature of much of that communication. While Habermas leads us to assume that the media provides a means whereby discursive activities between citizens and the state necessarily generate a dynamic for transparency in decision making (and thus democratization), Thompson argued that, in fact, the media select and process the informational dialog; they “filter, configure, compress, and render accessible for the lay citizen vast and complex networks of information and accountability” (Goode 2005:94). In the process, they produce citizens by selecting and diffusing the symbols that hold together the communities brought together by the ICTs. Early adherents to the discourse of the digital revolution suggested that the interactivity of the new ICTs, the ability to talk back, would counter this tendency, but as Goode points out, this notion of a digital fifth estate soon came under fire when more pessimistic analysts suggested that the individual was less an empowered citizen and more of a wooed consumer in the new world. Goode himself, using the Internet as his example, argues that information is now not only mediated, but re-mediated by “‘corporatized and methodologically opaque information guides (search engines, portals, ‘smart’ advertising tailored to individual profiles, commercially sponsored and carefully regulated online communities, and user-friendly interfaces)” (Goode 2005, 108). The pessimists (and here Goode refers to authors like Dan Schiller [1999]) indicate that convergence, the increasing interconnectedness of diversely functioning digital technologies, “has effectively shown how the digital mediascape can be read as the latest achievement of an always ready ‘hyper-linked’ consumer culture that works to nudge citizens ceaselessly along commodity networks, motivating them with the knowledge (and inducing the anxiety) that there is always more and better to be had” (Goode 2005:109). For Goode, this is a one-sided view, which ignores the possibility that the new ICTs bring with them cultural innovation and “unfinish,” a range of responses from the user or consumer which are transitional, incomplete, exploratory, challenging, and simultaneously subordinatory. They include a growing awareness of re-mediation and thus a reflective response against it, not dissimilar to Habermas’ own reflexive publicity and echoing Dean et al.’s (2006) conclusions regarding the evolving nature of oppositionalism. Calhoun, however, might agree with Schiller since he argues that Habermas recognized this constitutive power of structure over agency in Legitimation Crisis (Habermas 1975): “The public sphere becomes a setting for states and corporate actors to develop legitimacy not by responding appropriately to an independent and critical public but by seeking to instill in social actors motivations that conform to the needs of the overall system dominated by those states and corporate actors” (Calhoun 1992:26).

All this leaves us with an intriguing equation. On the one hand there is the proposition that the contemporary ICTs are not neutral facilitators of activity in the public sphere: they have the capacity to shape the content of the discourse within the public sphere, to be exclusionary, and to exert the interests of informational capitalism itself. They are interested, as opposed to benign, suggesting an inevitable degradation of the public sphere which might be understood as a seepage from the core toward the periphery as the network expands and embeds itself through the restructuring of social relations. On the other hand there is the possibility of resistance through new cultural forms which arise out of exposure to, and adaptation of the technologies. This is not, according to Goode, a simple binary of opposites, but a complex, multi-dimensional and as yet incomplete process.
It is worth taking an initial (and admittedly at this point sketchy) look at where the Arab region might fit in this modern-day core-periphery scenario and in the equations of subordination to information capitalism and cultural resistance through engagement in the public sphere. The Arab countries were initially slow to engage with the new ICT-led development paradigm, although it has to be said that the pace of engagement has accelerated dramatically in recent years. In 2003 the management consultancy firm Booz Allen Hamilton conducted a survey which showed that ICT spending in the Middle East was lower than in any other region of the world, accounting for a mere 0.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2001 compared with around 11% in the USA and Canada and 7% in Europe (Middle East Economic Digest 2003:33) and that industry analysts at the time placed the Middle East around 10 years behind Europe and the North Americas in acquisition of and access to ICTs. The wealthy Gulf Arab states were less behind but are still 2–3 years behind their Western counterparts (a lifetime in terms of technologies which double their capacities every year or so). In 2004, the United Nations (2004:98) declared that only 6.5% of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region’s population were active Internet users, compared with 68.8% of North Americans and 30.4% of Europeans. Of course, this reflected in part the subordinate status of Arabic as an Internet language (Arabic speakers represented 4.6% of the world’s population but only 1.4% of Internet users). The same report found that 68.4% of Web sites were in English, after which Japanese, German, and Chinese were the most widely used languages. There were too few sites in Arabic to be statistically relevant! As a set of data, this also has to be presented with a word of caution. In studies of Jordan and Kuwait and among other places, Deborah Wheeler (2000, 2004) found that connectivity statistics failed to represent the rapidly growing place of Internet cafés in Arab daily life, places in which large communities of users accessed the Internet through limited numbers of personal computers. Her observation is as true for satellite television: in the Arab region viewing cannot be measured in terms of television sets per capita or per household since the region has a café culture in which television sets are a staple part of the backdrop of public places.

Moreover, despite this apparent lag, the on-going windfall of oil rents and the pressures to enhance competitiveness as economies open to liberal trade and investment environments, has meant that the region is seeking to catch up at an accelerating speed, making the Middle East the fastest growing region for Internet connectivity. By 2007, Booz Allen (2007) asserted that ICT spending was now accounting for 4% of GDP (in 2006, compared with 8% in the developed countries). In 2007, 17.3% of the region’s population was Internet-connected and Arabic had become the tenth most used Internet language, albeit still only accounting for 2.5% of Internet usage (Internet World Statistics 2007). Between 2000 and 2007 usage had reportedly grown by 920.2% (compared with 221.5% in Europe, 117.2% in North America, and 540.7% in Latin America and the Caribbean). Total usage nonetheless still remains below North America (with a penetration rate of 70.2%), Europe (41.7%) Oceania/Australia (55.2%), and Latin America/Caribbean (20.8%). Usage is also differential across the Arab world, with the level of Internet penetration varying from 42.9% of the population in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to just 1.3% in Yemen (and not surprisingly just 0.1% in Iraq). Crucially, Arab governments have served as much to impede growth in Internet usage as to encourage or facilitate it. The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (HRINFO 2007) conducted a survey of 11 countries in 2004, concluding that government policies were largely to blame for usage that was typically low relative to other parts of the world, the only exceptions being Jordan, the UAE, and Qatar.

When it comes to telecoms infrastructure, the region is also lagging. A recent study forecast that “by the end of the decade more than half of European
homes will be connected to digital television services offering a combined package of television, telephone, and broadband. In contrast, broadband penetration in 2010 is expected to be no more than 7% in the UAE, 3% in Saudi Arabia, and 1% in Egypt (Middle East Economic Digest 2006a:30). While the region has opened up its mobile phone markets impressively since the early part of the decade, and partially privatized many state-owned telecoms companies, the fixed-line market (which requires much greater levels of investment, is more important to business development because of its role in conveying large amounts of data, and the strategic importance of which retains a political sensitivity) has been neglected. There have been some striking regional infrastructure developments, such as the collaboration between Etisalat, Saudi Telecom, and Iraqi Telecommunications and Post Company on a submarine fiber optic cable that links the three countries and the international consortium established to connect the region via a submarine cable system to Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Indian sub-continent. But while these will undoubtedly massively increase the capacity and interconnectedness of local networks, the development of the fixed-line sector remains in its infancy and regional variations are enormous. At the higher end of the fixed-line per 1,000 population scale come Qatar (30.8), the UAE (27.3), and Bahrain (25.9); at the lower end sit Morocco (4.4), Yemen (3.9), and Sudan (3.0) (Middle East Economic Digest 2006a:58).

Global System for Mobile (GSM) technology is perhaps the ICT success-story of the Arab region: it has been seized upon by local companies, and markets for mobile telephone services have been rapidly liberalized. By the end of 2005 there were 33 mobile operators based in the Arab countries, compared with 12 in 1999 (Middle East Economic Digest 2006b:29) and in 2008 the last national mobile phone market (Qatar) was opened up to competition. On the basis of the recent expansion, the eight largest regional telecoms companies accounted for just over 20% of the total capitalization of the top 100 Arab companies in 2004. In 2005 as markets became saturated and competition more intense, this was down to 18% of their share of total capitalization but overall growth had nonetheless been sharp, from around $73 billion to approximately $174 billion (ZAYWA 2008a,b). Among the top 100 Arab companies were regional giants like Saudi Telecom, Kuwait’s Mobile Telecommunications Company (MTC, which owns Zain), the Bahrain Telecommunications Company (Batelco) and the Dubai-based Etisalat, all of whom have based their growth on servicing the growing mobile telephones market.

Mobile usage penetration rates are high in the Gulf Arab countries but once again this is not replicated across the region: the percentage of the population who were GSM subscribers in Arab states in 2005 varied from 102.99% in Bahrain, 100.86% in the UAE and 92.15% in Qatar to 9.54% in Yemen, 5.48% in Sudan, and 4.15% in Libya compared to a world average of 31.90% (ZAYWA 2008a,b). One interesting feature of this rapid growth in the use of mobile telephone usage has been the development of regional telecoms companies; companies which are established in a particular Arab state but which are increasingly reaching into other Arab markets and even into African and Asian markets further afield. The oil-rich Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries may be said to have kick-started this process when they agreed in 2004 to give preference to one another’s telecoms companies in the liberalization process. Today companies like UAE-based Etisalat, Bahrain’s Batelco, and Kuwaiti-based Zain are not only extending their service provision into other Arab states, they are reaching into Africa and Southern Asia. The challenges of service provision in countries like Ivory Coast or Pakistan are very different to the Arab world. Operational costs in Africa are among the highest in the world due to the poor levels of infrastructure and the consequent investment requirements. In the meantime, and unlike the Arab world, most service usage is pre-paid demand for voice and
Short Messaging Services (SMS) (as opposed to post-paid third generation, multimedia, and video messaging). Incomes are lower, prices have to be low, and revenue is low. Thus, while the apparent diversification and geographic spread of Arab telecoms companies might at first seem evidence of an emerging global reach, in reality the Arab firms have yet to pass the test of sustainability or penetration of the high-revenue global markets.

Finally, if we briefly look at satellite television, we can also identify on-going weaknesses. Although there were 315 satellite TV channels serving the Middle East in 2007 (Middle East Economic Digest 2007:52), many of which offered a multi-media package, the penetration by Arab satellite companies of non-Arab markets has been restricted. Al-Jazeera is currently the only international brand Arab satellite company offering a fully English-language channel, although some of the North African stations like 2M Maroc or Tunis 7 offer mixed Arabic-French programming and many such as al-Arabiya offer English-language Web sites or pages. Al-Jazeera’s package is qualitatively the most superior, including news services available globally via Short Messaging Service (SMS), with the anticipated extension to Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS), and even landline news services. For the most part, the global reach of Arab satellite companies amounts to free-to-air services in Arabic targeting the Arab diaspora. (In the USA, for example, there are 36 Free-to-Air Arabic channels available). Thus, the “Arab voice” has a global reach but its audiences remain largely linguistically defined and its ability to shape broader audiences limited. Moreover, the “Arab message” becomes distorted in the translation, as the framing and language are filtered to please the critical Western eye (Uysal 2007).

If there is a primary characteristic of the Arab world’s participation in global informational capital networks, it is that the Arab approach has been to translate and provide services which take information from the core to the periphery, rather than to constitute the core themselves. For example, of the 100 top information technology industry firms in 2006 listed by Business Week (2007), 46 were based in North America, 16 in Europe and Russia, another 30 in East Asia, and five in India. There was not a single Arab firm (although one Turkish company was listed).

Some governments have been quicker off the mark in trying to accommodate the developmental benefits of ICTs. Tunisia, for example, established a state-led drive to modernize the ICT-base of national industry in its tenth development plan (2002–2006) in order to improve national competitiveness whilst liberalizing the economy (It now boasts the largest software development park in Africa). In the Gulf Arab states, and with the possible exception of Kuwait, the governments have largely confined themselves to providing an enabling environment in which private businesses can manage the penetration of local markets and infrastructure investments. Regimes have had to deal with the multiple challenges of political and regulatory leadership, the introduction of market competition, ICT access and affordability, infrastructure quality and availability, issues of awareness and universality, and the problems of Arabizing content. The result is a regional disparity in ICT sector maturity between Fast Track countries like Kuwait and the UAE, emerging countries like Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia; and developing countries such as Morocco, Oman, and Syria (Booz Allen 2003). Yet whether the government takes a leading role (as in Jordan and Egypt) or merely a facilitative one, they are all adjusting to a liberal international regulatory and trade regime for telecommunications. All have been constrained to some degree by pre-existing poor telecommunications infrastructure, the difficulties of privatizing privileged state monopolies, an absence of local R&D traditions or facilities, and domestic markets which are more leisure driven than business-oriented. Research has shown that Arab business managers tend to view ICTs as support platforms rather than strategic assets, that they prefer the “plus and play”
approach which, in the case of the Gulf Arab states utilizes imported high value labor, and that cultural preferences for, and trust in, personal over electronic relations prevail (Middle East Economic Digest 2004:4). If we add this to the arguments of the 2003 Arab Human Development Report (UNDP 2003), that the Arab world exhibits a string of political and cultural blocks that inhibit the development of a knowledge-based economy, then it can be argued that the Arab countries can be viewed as lying, albeit differentially, on the periphery of the informational capitalist system. They are certainly buying into the ICTs and consequently tapping into global ICT networks, and there is a growing element of local software production and “Arabization” of the networks (evident in both the translation or mimicry of Western cultural products and in the recent efforts to offer Arab-generated but English-language informational products for export) but the Arab region is not generating the core technologies, is only partially and differentially penetrated by them, and has little or no capacity to exert power within the global information networks.

Peripheral Status and the Public Sphere

This paper has proposed the following arguments: firstly that an Arab public sphere, comprising multiple publics, does appear to be emerging on the back of the embedding of new ICTs in the region. Although this new public sphere is not fully inclusive, and despite its tendency to filter cultural diversities, its nesting within its global counterpart offers opportunities for challenging local and global structures of power. Secondly, however, the structures of global ICT networks in which the Arab region occupies an essentially peripheral place, work to diminish this emerging public sphere and degrade the quality of rational debate which it engenders.

One can argue that ICTs offer the means for the further penetration of the periphery by the core, and that the hegemonic messaging of informational capitalism is thereby able to constantly subvert the opportunities presented by those ICTs for the assertion of a new public sphere. The public sphere(s) in the Arab region is not fully autonomous and has already been degraded, even though the multiple publics work simultaneously, individually and collectively, to challenge the state through their diological activities.

This proposition is not at odds with the important work done by Naomi Sakr (2001, 2007a) on Arab satellite television. She has demonstrated that Arab satellite channel ownership is concentrated in the hands of super-rich individuals, closely connected to national political elites. They have used their position to deepen and broaden links with capitalist groups elsewhere rather than to establish any kind of Arab media autonomy from them. Even the so-called “free” media zones in the Arab countries are, according to her, little more than efforts by the State to contain the media within controllable enclaves where they create jobs and facilitate technology transfer without developing a genuinely oppositional role. Sakr demonstrates that the Arab transnational media, specifically satellite television, could not operate without the consent of a whole range of international corporate, regulatory, political, and cultural institutions. They represent the domination of a powerful alliance of national and international institutions which are able to dominate precisely because they operate within a broad consensus, what she calls the spontaneous consent of audiences. Thus, even when the content or the message may be deemed, at times, to be counter-hegemonic the medium—at least in the Arab region—remains firmly tied into a network of hegemonic power.

Can one argue further, that the new Arab public sphere, such as it is, is already being colonized by capitalism as happened to Habermas’s European bourgeois public sphere? Has the symbolic form of an Arab arena for public debate
already become commodified? If we do argue so, then the replication of the al-Jazeera format by other television channels, in which political or cultural debate has become spectacle and sensational entertainment, might be viewed less as the emergence of a viable public sphere and instead as the commercialization of the symbol of newly emerging Arab identity. If that were true, then the era of spectacular capitalism, as outlined by Guy Debord (1994) and the French situationalists, would truly be upon the Arab region.

It does seem, however, that the Arab countries retain some protection from this onslaught which is allowing a degree of autonomy for the Arab public sphere from global capitalist structures such that it seems excessive to assume its early demise. Arguably this comes in the form of structural resistance (the on-going efforts of the state itself to retain some element of national definition to the local media-scape), cultural resistance, and even Arabization.

In the case of the first, there is of course a paradox. The censorial functions of the state certainly obstruct the inflow via the new ICTs of discourses which translate into effective challenges for power. The “fighting-back” strategies mentioned earlier were most recently evidenced by the Arab League’s collective adoption of a new Arab media charter that invites Arab broadcasters “not to damage social harmony, national unity, public order, or traditional values” (International Herald Tribune 2008:1). The charter was initiated by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the two Arab countries wherein most ownership of Arab satellite broadcasting is located, and empowers governments to make “necessary legislative measures to deal with violations.” Only Lebanon and Qatar (home to al-Jazeera) voted against the charter or abstained from approving it. However, one can equally argue that this type of collective action, by partitioning the nonetheless emergent Arab public from its global counterparts, creates a bubble in which specifically Arab discourses can emerge and which can better deploy their own cultural resistances. (According to its supporters, the charter includes a raft of provisions for preserving Arab cultural integrity whilst upholding—nominally at least—the rights and responsibilities common to regulatory codes for broadcasters elsewhere in the world (Guerraouï 2008). The process is one of “othering” what is outside the Arab public sphere and in framing this cultural resistance the consumers themselves play a role. This is not so much about demonstrating continuing preferences for locally authentic cultural products; it is also about the development of new forms of participatory behavior. Everything from calling in to Arab talk shows; blogging to protest a common Arab subordination to censorial regimes; using mobile telephones to meet and form relationships with the opposite sex; meeting in Internet cafés to formulate strategies to beat the latest regime efforts to block sites of interest; voting in television talent shows; and even making controversial news or interviews a subject for debate: these are all newly available activities which generate cultural transformations which challenge the subordinating impacts of informational capitalism as much as they entail engaging with them. It is possible that these equate with Goode’s notion of “unfinish,” the transitional, exploratory and challenging behaviors generated by usage of contemporary ICTs. There is, as it were, resistance in the fabric of the ICT-led public sphere, despite the native impact of acts such as the suspension of the Egyptian Al-Hiwar from the air by the authorities under the auspices of the Media Charter.

Finally, and ironically therefore, resistance also comes through the construction of new social identities through engagement with the global public sphere. The boundary between the Arab public sphere and its global counterpart is as porous as the webs connecting the Arab and global ICT networks are complex. Whilst the Arab public sphere might currently service the
construction of new specifically Arab identities and understandings of “other-ness,” its location within, and connectedness to, the global public sphere allows for progressive remediation of these identities and understandings. If the downside of this is the infiltration and embedding of consumer/lifestyle cultures concomitant with the deepening of the capitalist mode of informational production and exchange, the up-side is transmission of normative and emancipatory aspirations which can include resistance to the degradational aspects of un-restrained capitalist expansion. In short, through its nesting within a global public sphere, and the permeability of the boundaries between the two, the Arab region can become “communicado.” Being comunicado “is not just about the ability to tell one’s story but about the ability to tell it by using and translating one’s own terms of reference and cultural markers” (Constantinou et al. 2008:10). Al-Jazeera might be adapting the framing of its messages to the sensitivities of English-language audiences, but this could be understood as part of the educational process of public sphere participation (that is: the progressive embedding of argumentative rationality) rather than subordination to systemic structures. If this is the case, and if we accept that the global public sphere offered by ICTs does indeed offer a cosmopolitan space for communicative action, then there is hope yet that Arab identities and interests can contribute to the construction of a more genuinely universal normative story.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately we may then hypothesize that the Arab public sphere, including multiple and on occasion exclusionary publics, as it has emerged through the regional proliferation of the new ICTs, lies—albeit differentially—on the periphery of the informational capitalist core. The hegemony of that core, and of the consumerist, homogenized culture which it promotes, has permeated the Arab public sphere (or begun its colonization.) But the penetration of informational capitalism is still limited within the Arab region, both spatially and socially. Alternative modes of political socialization remain strong (a point that suggests further research needs to locate the impact of ICTs within a broader appreciation of the framework for socialization). The Arab state remains protective of its informational domain, the need to translate content and services into Arabic acts as a message filter, access is unequal and still effectively limited to social and economic elites, regional infrastructure is under-developed, all serving as obstacles or boundaries which inhibit the full-scale colonization of contemporary ICTs in the Arab region. Equally, the multiplicity of publics, the development of new modes of social behavior, the reflexive awareness of re-mediation by ICTs, and the sometimes seemingly desperately felt need to project Arab counter-hegemonic voices, wash against and resist the tidal wave of subordination. Add to this the very global nature of the ICT networks into which the Arab region is increasingly plugging in, and the engagement with and mobilization of transnational identities. The boundaries between colonization and resistance are consequently permeable and unfixed. Moreover, the nesting of the Arab public sphere within an ICT-based global public sphere, and the porousness of the boundary between the two, offers some hope that Arabs can engage in global forums of communicative action and thereby contribute to at least the unveiling of structural inequities and at best the construction of a (cosmopolitan) normative consensus on how the international network can be restructured more equitably. Thus the structures of international informational capitalism and the enacting of communicative action in public spheres interact at both the local Arab and the wider global levels in a profoundly complex manner.
References


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